

Communication Skills and Coaching

Actively Listening as a Coach

Communication is a primary skill for coaches at all levels. Just as important as drawing X's and O's is our ability to communicate what we mean when drawing such pictures. Oddly, this is the easy part of communication as it simply involves us detailing our thoughts. The other part of communication that tends to prove more challenging is our accepting of information from our players and learning to understand exactly what they are trying to tell us. When I write this I mean our understanding not only the words they speak, but the words they are afraid to speak. Further, picking up on their body language and tone may give those words a whole different meaning as well. A skilled coach needs to develop communication skills as both giver and receiver to truly excel and build strong relationships with the players. For today's coach, being a good listener is a more important skill than ever before.

Active Listening is a communication skill which involves both the sender (player) and the receiver (coach) in the communication process. In active listening, the receiver tries to understand what it is the sender is feeling or what his or her message means. The person puts their understanding into their own words and feeds it back for the sender's verification. The receiver does not send back a message of his or her own - such as an evaluation, opinion, advice, logic, or question. He or she feeds back only what they feel the sender's message meant--nothing more, nothing less. After doing this and agreeing that mutual understanding has occurred any efforts at problem solving are much better accepted and more likely seen as a mutual effort.

Whenever a player decides to communicate with a coach, they do so because they have a need. He or she wants something, feels discomfort or confusion, or has a feeling or thought about something they wish to share. In deciding to talk to the coach, the player selects words which they believe will deliver the message that they wish to communicate. When the coach receives this worded message, he/she must then go through a process of translating both the verbal message and nonverbal messages being shared into one unified understanding of meaning.

If the coach translates accurately, they will understand the message of the player. If the coach does not translate accurately, he will misunderstand the message and the communication process will have broken down. Very often neither the player nor the coach is aware the communication process has worked improperly! Both can walk away assuming their point is understood and yet have two completely different understandings of what they think is understood. It is for this reason that active listening is effective. If a misunderstanding has occurred, it will be known immediately and the communication can be clarified before any further misunderstanding occurs.

Active Listening:

- Helps players deal with and "defuse" strong feelings.
- Guarantees clear, mutually understood communication
- Facilitates problem solving.
- Makes the responsibility a shared process.
- Makes players more willing to talk to the coach.
- Promotes a closer, more meaningful relationship between coach and player.

Common Listening Pitfalls to Avoid

The reason I suggest Active Listening is important is that we all fall prey to common listening pitfalls that we may not even be aware of while we are listening. This may stem from the fact that WE THINK MUCH FASTER THAN WE SPEAK. Speech is usually up to 150 words per minute while we think at a minimum of 500 words per minute. In addition, our 'thoughts' are whole concepts which encompass many words. Consequently, since the words we listen to arrive so ...s...l...o...w...l...y..., our brain has lots of surplus time for other things.

In 'poor' listeners this surplus time often results in: 1) thinking up an argument to the player's position while the player is speaking, 2) constructing a question which can't be answered, 3) looking for hidden motives, 4) evaluating the player when the player is fragile, 5) paying attention to something other than what the player is saying (i.e. watching a game, playing with a ball, gathering equipment), 6) jumping to hasty conclusions, 7) letting our emotions rule our thoughts, and 8) not letting the player finish what he wishes to say.

'Good' listeners, on the other hand, pay full attention to the player's words and signal their attention to the player with small responses via their head and facial movements, low-key 'verbals', and body posture. There are 4 common pitfalls that lead to a communication break downs; 1) Bias; 2) Environmental Factors; 3) Rehearsing; 4) Hot Words.

1) Bias can take on many forms. Personal prejudice can affect how well we listen and how we perceive what the player is saying. Anger can also cause distortion of the message. As good communicators, personal bias and anger must be put aside in order to interpret the message. Be willing to listen to new ideas. Make eye contact with the player, use nonverbal communication, such as nodding your head or smiling, to show that you are interested. Even if you do not agree with the player's message, showing acceptance will let the player know that you have received their message.

2) Environmental factors, such as noise, temperature, and limited time after or during a game or practice, can cause us to focus our attention on other factors besides what the player is saying. Try to control environmental factors whenever possible and try to have the conversation when such factors can be controlled.

3) Rehearsing a response: Many times we catch the drift of what the player is saying and we begin to rehearse a response, thereby missing parts of the message. Other times we may be anticipating our turn to speak and will spend time mentally or physically reviewing thoughts and will miss what the speaker has said. Active listening will help avoid this as you will hear yourself re-state necessary points for further discussion afterwards.

4) Hot Words: We all have certain words that we react to such as "play favorites", "don't know what you're doing", or "stupid". Sometimes when a player uses a hot word in his/her message we will concentrate more on the emotion of the word, or its implications for us. Consequently, we tend to lose sight of what is being said by the player. Try to take the emotion out of any word you hear and accept it for its' meaning.

In summary, none of things listed above are extremely difficult or strenuous to do or learn to do. However, our habits may have us demonstrating the pitfalls more than we know. Today's players appreciate and expect open communication much more than those of decades ago. As coaches, building these skills and insuring we understand players is crucial in addressing their questions and quandaries. When players' feel you listen to them well and understand their thoughts and feelings you will likely find they are happier, more willing to try new things you ask of them, and more committed to the team. This could only serve to make your job as coach much easier!

From Actively Listening to Purposely Communicating

It is important that when we talk with players we are engaging in certain behaviors that facilitate openness and acceptance. When we actively use the recommendations listed below, players tend to be more willing to share their true thoughts, more receptive to listening, and are more likely to communicate with us.

1. Posture:

Try to make your posture mirror that of the players. It is helpful to have your shoulders squared with the player's and on about the same level so you are face-to-face. If sitting down, it is also helpful to have a slightly forward lean toward the player.

2. Eye Contact:

Eye contact with players shows that you are interested in what they have to say.

3. Facial Expression:

What is shown on your face should match what is on the player's. Smiling when the player is obviously sad would be an example of an incongruent facial expression. If a player is expressing distress it is appropriate to show a concerned yet assuring look.

4. Distance:

Distance from the player shouldn't be too close or too distant; about 3 to 4 feet is the average. Standing too close can make the player uncomfortable, while standing too far away can indicate that you are disinterested in what the player is saying.

5. Distracting Behaviors:

Distracting behaviors, such as playing with your hands, playing with a ball, or doing something else while listening should be eliminated when talking to players.

6. Voice Quality:

Your tone should match the player's. It would be inappropriate to be loud if the player is speaking calmly or show no emotion if a player is upset. It is appropriate and recommended to show emotion and use a lower tone to calm down a heated player.

Summary

As many top coaches/managers in our sport world attest to, a coaching job is a people management job. As such, we have to work to become the best listeners and communicators possible. Strong listening and communicating skills are vital skills when working with people and trying to unify groups of people... and that is what we must do every day with our teams.

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