

Communicating As a Coach



In chapter 1 you learned about the tools needed to COACH: Comprehension, Outlook, Affection, Character, and Humor. These tools are essentials for effective coaching; without them, you'd have a difficult time getting started. But none of the tools will work if you don't know how to use them with your athletes; doing so requires skillful communication. This chapter examines what communication is and how you as a coach can become a more effective communicator.

What Is Involved in Communication?

Coaches often mistakenly believe that communication involves only instructing players to do something, but verbal commands are only a small part of the communication process. In fact, more than half of communication is nonverbal. So, when you are coaching, remember that actions speak louder than words.

Communication in its simplest form involves two people: a sender and a receiver. The sender transmits the message verbally, through facial expressions, and possibly through body language. Once the message is sent, the receiver must assimilate it successfully. A receiver who fails to attend or listen will miss parts, if not all, of the message.

How Can I Send More Effective Messages?

Young athletes often have little understanding of the rules and skills of baseball and probably even less confidence in playing it. So, they need accurate, understandable, and supportive messages to help them along. That's why your verbal and nonverbal messages are so important.

Verbal Messages

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" isn't true. Spoken words can have a strong and long-lasting effect. Coaches' words are particularly influential, because youngsters place great importance on what coaches say. Perhaps you, like many former youth sport participants, have a difficult time remembering much of anything you were told by your elementary school teachers, but you can still recall several specific things your coaches at that level said to you. Such is the lasting effect of a coach's comments to a player.

Whether you are correcting misbehavior, teaching a player how to hit the ball, or praising a player for good effort, you should consider a number of things when sending a message verbally. They include the following:

- Be positive and honest.
- State it clearly and simply.

- Say it loud enough, and say it again.
- Be consistent.

Be Positive and Honest

Nothing turns people off like hearing someone nag all the time, and athletes react similarly to a coach who gripes constantly. Kids particularly need encouragement because they often doubt their ability to perform in a sport. So, look for and tell your players what they do well.

But don't cover up poor or incorrect play with rosy words of praise. Kids know all too well when they've erred, and no cheerfully expressed cliché can undo their mistakes. If you fail to acknowledge players' errors, your athletes will think you are a phony.

A good way to correct a performance error is to first point out what the athlete did correctly, then explain in a positive way what he or she is doing wrong and show him or her how to correct it. Finish by encouraging the athlete and emphasizing the correct performance.

Be sure not to follow a positive statement with the word *but*. For example, don't say, "Way to watch the ball into your glove, Jake. *But* when you throw to first, be sure to push off with your back leg so that you can get a little more zip on the ball." Saying it this way causes many kids to ignore the positive statement and focus on the negative one. Instead, say, "Way to watch the ball into your glove, Jake. And if you push off with your back leg, you'll get a little more zip on your throw to first. OK, let's go."

State It Clearly and Simply

Positive and honest messages are good, but only if expressed directly in words your players understand. Beating around the bush is ineffective and inefficient. And if you do ramble, your players will miss the point of your message and probably lose interest. Here are some tips for saying things clearly:

- Organize your thoughts before speaking to your athletes.
- Explain things thoroughly, but don't bore them with long-winded monologues.
- Use language your players can understand. However, avoid trying to be hip by using their age group's slang vocabulary.

Say It Loud Enough, and Say It Again

Talk to your team in a voice that all members can hear and interpret. A crisp, vigorous voice commands attention and respect; garbled and weak speech is tuned out. It's okay, in fact, appropriate, to soften your voice when speaking to a player individually about a personal problem. But most of the time your messages will be for all your players to hear, so make sure they can. An enthusiastic voice also motivates players and tells them you enjoy being their coach. A word of caution, however: Don't dominate the setting with a booming voice that distracts attention from players' performances.

Sometimes what you say, even if stated loudly and clearly, won't sink in the first time. It may be particularly true when young athletes hear words they don't understand. To avoid boring repetition and yet still get your message across, say the same thing in a slightly different way. For instance, when an opposing baserunner is on first base, you might first tell your players, "Okay, let's get the lead runner!" If they don't appear to understand, you might say, "On a ground ball, throw to second base for the force-out. Don't allow the runner to get to second base!" The second form of the message may get through to players who missed it the first time around. You will see different buzzwords and catch phrases that we have used to help young players remember our teachings. If you find that your players respond to different cues that get across the same instructional points, by all means use them and let us know about them. There are many different ways to communicate the same message. Find out what works best for you, and go with it.

Be Consistent

People often say things in ways that imply a different message. For example, a touch of sarcasm added to the words "Way to go!" sends an entirely different message than the words themselves suggest. Avoid sending such mixed messages. Keep the tone of your voice consistent with the words you use. And don't say something one day and contradict it the next; players will get their wires crossed.

Nonverbal Messages

Just as you should be consistent in the tone of voice and words you use, you should also keep your verbal and nonverbal messages consistent with each other. An extreme example of failing to do this would be shaking your head, indicating disapproval, while at the same time telling a player, "Nice try." Which message is the player to believe, your gesture or your words?

You can send nonverbal messages in a number of ways. Facial expressions and body language are just two of the more obvious forms of nonverbal signals that can help you when you coach.

Facial Expressions

The look on a person's face is the quickest clue to what he or she thinks or feels. Your players know this, so they will study your face, looking for any sign that will tell them more than the words you say. Don't try to fool them by putting on a happy or blank "mask." They'll see through it, and you'll lose credibility.

Serious, stone-faced expressions are no help to kids who need cues as to how they are performing. They will just assume you're unhappy or disinterested. Don't be afraid to smile. A smile from a coach can give a great boost to an unsure athlete. Plus, a smile lets your players know that you are happy coaching them. But don't overdo it, or your players won't be able to tell when you

are genuinely pleased by something they've done or when you are just putting on a smiling face.

Body Language

What would your players think you were feeling if you came to practice slouched over, with your head down and shoulders slumped? Tired? Bored? Unhappy? What would they think you were feeling if you watched them during a contest with your hands on your hips, your jaws clenched, and your face reddened? Upset with them? Disgusted with an umpire? Angry at a fan? Probably some or all of these things would enter your players' minds. And none of these impressions is the kind you want your players to have of you. That's why you should carry yourself in a pleasant, confident, and vigorous manner. Such a posture not only projects happiness with your coaching role, it also provides a good example for your young players, who may model your behavior.

Physical contact can also be a very important use of body language. A handshake, a pat on the head, an arm around the shoulder, or even a big hug are all effective ways of showing approval, concern, affection, and joy to your players. Youngsters are especially in need of this type of nonverbal message. Keep within the obvious moral and legal limits, of course, but don't be reluctant to touch your players, sending a message that can only truly be expressed in that way.

How Can I Improve My Receiving Skills?

Now, let's examine the other half of the communication process, receiving messages. Too often very good senders are very poor receivers of messages. But as a coach of young athletes, you must be able to fulfill both roles effectively.

The requirements for receiving messages are quite simple, but receiving skills are perhaps less satisfying and therefore underdeveloped compared to sending skills. People seem to naturally enjoy hearing themselves talk more than hearing others talk. But if you read about the keys to receiving messages and make a strong effort to use them with your players, you'll be surprised by what you've been missing.

Attention!

First, you must pay attention; you must want to hear what others have to communicate to you. That's not always easy when you're busy coaching and have many things competing for your attention. But in one-on-one situations or during team meetings with players, you must really focus on what they are telling you, both verbally and nonverbally. You'll be amazed at the little signals you pick up. Not only will such focused attention help you catch every word your players say, it will also provide cues to your players' moods and physical

states. In addition, you'll get an idea of your players' feelings toward you and other players on the team.

Listen Carefully

How we receive messages from others, perhaps more than anything else we do, demonstrates how much we care for the sender and what that person has to tell us. If you care little for your players or have little regard for what they have to say, it will show in how you attend and listen to them. Check yourself. Do you find your mind wandering to what you are going to do after practice while one of your players is talking to you? Do you frequently have to ask your players, "What did you say?" If so, you need to work on your receiving skills of attending and listening. Perhaps the most critical question you should ask yourself, if you find that you're missing the messages your players send, is this: Do I *care*?

Providing Feedback

So far we've discussed separately the sending and receiving of messages. But we all know that senders and receivers switch roles several times during an interaction. One person initiates a communication by sending a message to another person, who then receives the message. The receiver then switches roles and becomes the sender by responding to the person who sent the initial message. These verbal and nonverbal responses are called feedback.

Your players will be looking to you for feedback all the time. They will want to know how you think they are performing, what you think of their ideas, and whether their efforts please you. Obviously, you can respond in many different ways. How you respond will strongly affect your players. They will respond most favorably to positive feedback.

Praising players when they have performed or behaved well is an effective way of getting them to repeat (or try to repeat) that behavior in the future. And positive feedback for effort is an especially effective way to motivate youngsters to work on difficult skills. So, rather than shouting and providing negative feedback to players who have made mistakes, try offering players positive feedback by letting them know what they did correctly and how they can improve.

Sometimes just the way you word feedback can make it more positive than negative. For example, instead of saying, "Don't throw the ball that way," you might say, "Throw the ball this way." This positive approach will help your players focus on what to do instead of what not to do.

You can give positive feedback verbally and nonverbally. Telling a player, especially in front of teammates, that he or she has performed well, is a great way to boost the confidence of a youngster. And a pat on the back or a hand-

shake can be a tangible way of communicating your recognition of a player's performance.

Who Else Do I Need to Communicate With?

Coaching involves not only sending and receiving messages and providing proper feedback to players but also interacting with parents, spectators, game officials, and opposing coaches. If you don't communicate effectively with these groups of people, your coaching career will be unpleasant and short-lived. So, try the following suggestions for communicating with these groups.

Parents

One of the most frequent complaints that we hear from coaches is that parents aren't willing to help and it is impossible to run effective practices or coach effectively when flying solo. We feel that many times this problem is a simple issue of communication. A meeting with the team's parents before the season and an open line of communication during the season can eliminate this problem.

Before the season begins you should hold a meeting with all of the team's parents. In this meeting you should discuss what you hope to accomplish with the team during the season. This discussion should be in line with the age-appropriate goals we will discuss later in this guide. However, it is important for you to stress that in order to run efficient, fun, and effective practices and to make the experience as enjoyable as possible for the kids, parental assistance will be needed.

Most times a coach will ask for one or two volunteers to serve as assistant coaches. Trying to find one or two more people with the free time to be at every practice can be quite a challenge. What generally happens is that the assistants volunteer and have good intentions, but because they are not head coaches, they find it easier to miss a practice or a game when another commitment arises in their lives.

A more effective way to enlist support and ensure proper staffing of all practices is to explain that to run great practices and make the experience as enjoyable as possible for the kids, a certain level of support is needed. Explain the elements of a good practice (small groups or stations, a variety of activities, organization) and how those practices will benefit their kids. If you have a plan and are organized, most parents will see the value and try to figure out how to help.

At this point you should feel comfortable asking each parent to serve as a volunteer assistant for one or two weeks during the season while encouraging parents to come out and assist whenever they have free time. Or, perhaps, you can ask for two different parents to help at each practice and game. Many

youth leagues have no more than one practice and two games per week, so this is really not much to ask. The more organized you are and the more effectively you communicate in this meeting, the easier it will be to get additional help.

You also can make parents aware that you are organized and concerned by developing an e-mail list and sending out a short practice plan to all players and parents or sending out the batting order for the next game the night before. Keeping people informed increases your chances of enlisting their support. You should always be accessible to parents who have questions, and you should answer questions in a timely and polite manner no matter the circumstances.

This system may not be appropriate for older age groups or travel teams. Generally, as players get older or more advanced, a group of coaches emerges that will guide the team from year to year. At the high school level, the school designates head and assistant coaches. However, opening the lines of communication with the parents before and during the season is essential for all coaches. For coaches of older and more advanced teams, good communication will help parents understand and appreciate the time commitment the coach is making. It will also eliminate some of the questioning that often goes on during a season and can be demoralizing and frustrating to a coach.

Spectators

The stands probably won't be overflowing at your contests, but that only means that you'll more easily hear the few spectators who criticize your coaching. When you hear something negative said about the job you're doing, don't respond. Keep calm, consider whether the message has any value; and if it doesn't, forget it. Acknowledging critical, unwarranted comments from a fan during a contest will only encourage others to voice their opinions. So, put away your rabbit ears, and use your actions to communicate to fans that you are a confident, competent coach.

Prepare your players for spectators' comments. Tell them they should listen to you, not the spectators. If you notice that one of your players is rattled by a spectator's comment, reassure the player that your evaluation is more objective and favorable—and the one that counts.

Umpires

How you communicate with umpires will have a great influence on the way your players behave toward them. Therefore, you need to set an example. Greet umpires with a handshake, an introduction, and perhaps some casual conversation about the upcoming contest. Indicate your respect for umpires before, during, and after the contest. Don't make nasty remarks, shout, or use disrespectful body gestures. Your players will notice, and they'll get the idea

that such behavior is appropriate. Plus, if the umpire hears or sees you, the communication between the two of you will break down.

Opposing Players and Coaches

Make an effort to visit with the coach of the opposing team before the game. During the game, don't get into a personal feud with the opposing coach. Remember, it's the kids, not the coaches, who are competing. And by getting along well with the opposing coach, you'll show your players that competition involves cooperation and sportsmanship. After the game, make a point to look each opposing player and coach in the eye when shaking hands. Tell them that they did a good job, and wish them luck for the rest of their season. And, do it in such a manner that your players take notice.