



Changing the Dialogue

With the 08-09 season fast approaching it is a great time to think about how you are going to approach your team this fall and set up for the long season. One change that I encourage coaches to think about is to rethink how they talk to and communicate with their players. As coaches we are charged with sharing valuable information with our players and inspiring them to reach their potential. Maybe it is time to take a different approach with our players.

Coaching the kids of the ipod and video game generation takes different communication skills than we used in the past. This generation of players and their parents are more attuned to the entertainment value of youth sports and sports is a family affair. Youth coaches need to recognize this generational shift and change along with them.

The change we need to take is to start shifting the responsibility for individual player development from the coaches to the players. This is done by changing the dialogue and encouraging players to increase their on ice awareness and game understanding. If we want our players to be creative, and we say we so, then we must allow them the freedom to do so and a framework of dialogue that allows them to learn.

The process for changing the dialogue is to spend time talking with your players about the game, the decisions they make and the other options they could have chosen. You can begin by asking open ended questions rather than telling a player what he or she should have done. For example:

Instead of saying “you should have passed to your teammate in that situation” you would say “Tell me why you made that decision”. You could follow it up with “what other options did you have?” Then you need to listen to the answers. The answers will be short until they get used to the new approach but eventually they will open up and start seeing and articulating what they are observing. Encourage your players to watch the game when they are on the bench and try to analyze what the opponents strengths and weaknesses might be. This will help them as they learn to observe what is happening on the ice which in turn will help them when they enter the game.

In order to shift to this approach you will need to restructure your practices to make them more game like and to put your players into situations where they have to make decisions, not just follow the lines on the white board. Continuous flow drills like 2 on 1, 3 on 2 and 4-3 are great for this type of training. Lots of movement, decisions and very game like. Small area games with odd man situations that are ever changing are also good

for learning the game. Again, remember that your role is to encourage your players to see the options and understand what their choices might be before they execute.

It is also quite helpful to shot some video of games (we know they love videos) and let the team watch how they play. Again, the dialogue should be open ended questions regarding choices and options. A video of a couple practices to be viewed would also be useful. Each team seems to have a self designated video parent so they could be enlisted to help with this part.

All teams still need to spend part of their practice time on fundamental skills drills and these are just part of becoming a player. Be sure you have at least 50 pucks on the ice so the players can do fundamental drills and have pucks on their sticks as much as possible. For instance, if you elect to have them skate the circles to work on crossovers, be sure they do it with pucks and carry in it in the proper puck protection position. If they lose the puck keep going and grab another one without disrupting the drill.

Your players will take some time to adjust to this type of coaching. They are conditioned to direct feedback, most of it negative or corrective. The team may be a bit chaotic for a few weeks but once they and you get the hang of it they will make much more progress in the second half of the season.

Kids want to play hockey and have fun. If you change your dialogue your players will enjoy the game more, play with more enthusiasm and energy, and likely win more games. I would call that a winning strategy.

See you around the rink...

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September 2008