

Effective Communication Strategies

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### Effective Communication Strategies

Coaches using effective communication principles and strategies can better allow their team to reach its utmost potential. A coach can enhance communication by following the steps to deliver effective messages and by implementing the GROW model of questioning in their interactions with athletes. In both methods of communication, facilitating open communication between player and coach allows the player to become increasingly more engaged and motivated.

There are four parts in delivering effective communication, attention, retention, practice and motivation (Driska, 2015). Effective communication can often be exhibited in practice during and before drills. During the attention phase, a coach needs to first rationalize to the athlete the purpose of the training exercise. When an athlete understands the purpose of performing a drill they are more likely to be motivated to practice it. This leads to increased effort and overall improved skill. A coach must also describe the focus of training or the skill to be practiced. A coach must communicate any specific constraints to the exercise, often a distance or time in which the certain skill needs to be achieved and what, if any, the cost there is to not performing the skill as indicated. This could be as simple as repeating the drill until it is accomplished. Lastly, it is best to end with a continuous improvement phrase. This phrase connects the skill at practice to the overall goal of the team.

After the attention message, it is important that the athletes retain what the instructions and message were. During the retention phase, a coach can check with his or her players by simply asking them to repeat the instructions. A coach can also create a mnemonic device to help players remember a set of skill instructions.

After attention and retention, it is time for the practice phase. During practice a coach should refrain from long-winded communication, but effectively communicate with players with brief phrases of instruction and “Woodens”. A “Wooden” is a form of highly effective communication derived from the Hall of Fame Coach John Wooden, in which he would follow up a scold with a reinstruct statement (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004). Communication is kept brief during practice to keep things intense and the players interested.

The last step of delivering effective messages is to attend to player motivation. The previous steps are all designed to keep an athlete engaged. By keeping athletes moving and engaged in practice a coach can increase player motivation. In creating communication through effective messaging athletes know why they are performing the specific skill and are more likely to stay motivated.

The GROW model of questioning is another similar method of communication where its results can produce an increase of player motivation. With the GROW model, coaches can communicate with players by asking them specific questions designed to help generate personal self input on behalf of the athlete. Questions from the GROW model, consist of goal, reality, options, and will questions (Driska, 2015). Each category is designed to push the athlete into discovering their expectations, current situation, choices for improvement, and desire to pursue their options for their athletic development. By letting the athlete openly respond to the question, they feel more accountable while also building a trusting relationship with their coach. This feeling can lead to increased factors of motivation and performance.

### **Methods**

For the purpose of examining my own communication methods, I decided to interview Kyle. Kyle is currently a senior at the high school and is one of our most talented and respected

players on our baseball team. I chose to interview Kyle because he is one of our upperclassman and has been anointed our team captain for the upcoming season. Kyle was also a part of the team last year during my first year as assistant varsity coach. Last season, Kyle began the season unable to play due to an ACL injury he suffered during football season. He was cleared to DH shortly into the season, but was unable to pitch until nearly the end of the season. When Kyle is not pitching he is our starting centerfielder. I thought it would be more beneficial to talk with an athlete who shared the same experiences as I did last year as we reflect on the past season and talk about the upcoming one.

The program replaced our varsity head coach immediately after last season and I was curious to inquire about the mindset and pulse of the team as we approach a new season. I was eager to talk to Kyle about last year's results and his thoughts on how we could improve as coaches and our program as a whole. I was also curious about his individual goals as Kyle has a chance to play at the next level with a little more development.

On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, I stopped by the high school after school to talk with Kyle. We were able to sit in the empty bleachers of the empty gymnasium and chat about last season and the upcoming one. There I recorded the conversation between us on my iPhone. I had jotted down a few starter questions on my note pad and constructed other questions based on his responses. We talked for approximately 10-11 minutes. When I got home I was able to play back and analyze our conversation where I broke the conversation down into speaking parts and tallied the data. I also analyzed my questions to see whether I was able to keep in line with the GROW model of questioning. I compiled the results into the following table.

## Results

Table I – Conversation Breakdown

Time	Speaker	Summary of what this person said	Seconds (coach)	Seconds (athlete)
0:45-0:58	Coach	<i>What are your expectations of this upcoming season? (Goal Question)</i>	13	
1:00-1:45	Athlete	We should be more competitive this upcoming year. 5 wins are reasonable. Looking forward to having some fun with the other players and forming lasting friendships		45
1:45-1:53	Coach	<i>What else could be a measurable goal other than the amount of wins? (Goal Question)</i> Was looking for more measurable goals in previous response.	8	
1:55-2:23	Athlete	Getting everyone to prepare before the season and improving over the course of the season.		28
2:25-2:34	Coach	<i>What personal goals do you have for the upcoming season? (Goal Question)</i>	9	
2:36-3:00	Athlete	Hit .450, All-Conference Player, obtain college baseball scholarship (expresses some doubt the latter is realistic)		24
3:00-3:05	Coach	<i>How did you feel your role on the team was last year? (Reality Question)</i>	5	
3:07-3:20	Athlete	I was injured, but a leader on the bench for the beginning of the season. When I was cleared to play, I became more of a leader by example.		13
3:23-3:31	Coach	<i>On a scale 1-10, how would you rate yourself as a leader last season? (Reality Question)</i>	8	
3:34-4:00	Athlete	7 or 8, sometimes got frustrated and yelled at teammates, I realize my passion is in the right place, but need to express it differently sometimes		26
4:02-4:14	Coach	<i>Do you have any different expectations about your leadership this year as a senior captain? (Goal Question)</i>	12	
4:16-4:35	Athlete	More talking on the bench and field, try to encourage players more		19
4:37-4:43	Coach	<i>What duties in particular would change from last year to this year? (Reality Question)</i>	6	
4:44-5:14	Athlete	I will run captain's practice this year, talk throughout off season, try to keep everyone focused at practice and in the games		30
5:16-5:27	Coach	<i>What are some improvements you feel you could make to have a shot to play college baseball? (Goal Question)</i>	11	
5:30-5:55	Athlete	Strength and speed. Keep recovering from my ACL surgery as well.		25
5:58-6:18	Coach	<i>What have you done to work on those skills since the end of last season? (Reality Question)</i>	20	
6:20-6:45	Athlete	Worked with trainer for my knee last spring. I go to private speed training and lift to gain some muscle for power.		25
6:50-7:00	Coach	<i>What can I do (or our coaching staff) to help you improve those skills? (Option Question)</i>	10	
7:03-7:15	Athlete	(Pauses, doesn't really know what to say) Push me to be the best I can be.		12

Time	Speaker	Summary of what this person said	Seconds (coach)	Seconds (athlete)
7:16-7:25	Coach	(I ask him to elaborate) <i>Are there any drills or interactions with the staff that could help him?</i> (Option Question)	9	
7:27-7:40	Athlete	No, I'm okay. I get strength and speed training on my own through private training.		13
7:44-7:53	Coach	<i>What are some baseball specific skills you are looking to improve on this offseason?</i> (Reality Question)	9	
7:55-8:22	Athlete	Keep lifting and speed training on my own. Work on my hitting, identifying pitches. Work on my pitching.		27
8:22-8:32	Coach	<i>Do you think those things will produce the gains to make that jump and achieve your ultimate goal to play in college?</i> (Reality Question)	10	
8:33-8:35	Athlete	I hope so		2
8:37-8:45	Coach	<i>How can you make sure you stay committed to your offseason plan?</i> (Will Question)	8	
8:48-9:33	Athlete	I am signed up so, I have some financial responsibility to attend training. I also have the motivation of just getting better that drives me as well. My parents encourage me too.		45
9:35-9:41	Coach	<i>What obstacles may prevent you from achieving these off season plans and goals?</i> (Will Question)	6	
9:43-10:04	Athlete	Teenage stuff, friends, girls, homework		21
		<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>355</b>

### Quantitative Results

As indicated in the table above, I exchanged 15 questions and answers with Kyle for just over 10 minutes and assigned the speaking time accrued to each of us. Time between questions and answers was left unassigned. Any time that elapsed during pauses within the same speaking segment was tallied to that respective speaker. The first 45 seconds consisted of a brief introduction of the athlete and coach to the recording and were not transcribed to the table due to the fact zero questions were posed during that time period. Of the total 499 seconds of conversation the athlete spoke for 355 seconds and I (the coach) spoke for 144 seconds. I spoke for approximately 29% (71/29) of the conversation, a slightly higher ratio than the 80/20 (20%) optimum.

One thing that I noticed through the data table was that the length of my conversation did not seem to correlate with the length of Kyle's. If anything, it seemed to have almost an inverse correlation, the longer I talked, the shorter his response ended up being. Looking at my six longest speaking segments of 20, 13, 12, 11, 10 and 10 seconds. Kyle's responses to those questions were 25, 45, 19, 25, 12 and 2 seconds respectively. In total, my 66 seconds of asking questions translated into 118 seconds of response time (64/36). In my six shortest question segments of 5, 6, 6, 8, 8 and 8 seconds, Kyle's responses were 13, 21, 30, 28, 26 and 45 seconds respectively. These 41 seconds of questioning translated into 153 seconds of response time (79/21). In total, the shorter questions triggered an almost ideal 80/20 conversation ratio. This conclusion should be looked at more thoroughly with a larger sample size to help prove its validity, but the reasoning certainly makes sense. In general, the longer the question, the more likely that question is to be more detailed and specific, leaving out the possibility of the subject improvising and expanding on their response which results in an overall shorter response. When the question is left broad and shorter, the subject has freedom to engage the question how they see fit, which often leads to a lengthier response.

The table also helped indicate that I almost always jumped into a response the moment I thought Kyle was finished with his explanation. Out of the 14 times I spoke after Kyle, I interjected or started moving on to my next question in 2 seconds or less 11 times. Leaving some space can oftentimes encourage the athlete to add on to a response and continue elaborating.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

I really enjoyed talking to Kyle about his individual goals and the goals he thought were reachable for our team this upcoming year. As one of our most intense competitors Kyle was very unhappy with the direction the team went last year. With a change in head coach, I was

eager to see where he thought our team could get to this season. In my eyes, Kyle is also a fringe lower level college prospect at the moment. I am very interested in helping him reach that level and was curious in what his approach to getting there would be. The beginning of our conversation flowed freely when we addressed these individual goals and desires for the upcoming season. After the goal questions however, I feel like we labored through the back half of the meeting. I struggled somewhat formulating other GROW model questions throughout our conversation – particularly ‘options’ and ‘will’ questions. I went into the conversation with most of my goal questions written out, but struggled to adapt follow up questions seamlessly. The majority of my questions ended up being of the ‘goal’ or ‘reality’ variety.

In my meeting I made it a priority to focus on active listening strategies. In the early parts of our conversation I did a great job at creating eye contact and reaffirming Kyle’s statements. Later in the conversation, as I strayed away from my prepared questions, I became a little anxious and caught myself several times exhibiting poor body language by covering my mouth with my hand and touching my nose. These behaviors seemed to be triggered by being off my initial script, but also when I was dissatisfied with a response. I had to prod Kyle to elaborate more during several questions, often re-asking the question in a slightly different way. He also struggled with answering the ‘options’ and ‘will’ questions – the same questions I struggled to formulate in the moment.

### **Discussion**

This exercise was very informative to me. While I may not have gotten as deep into the discussion I was hoping for, I discovered a lot about my communication skills. Entering this unit I thought I was a decent communicator when it came to player-coach communication. I had never really done such as an exercise, but thought I could do a decent job if allowed. This



exercise allowed me to see my inexperience firsthand. I was naïve to think that things would run smoothly my first time attempting such a meeting. Due to my inexperience in these situations, coming into the meeting I was already somewhat anxious. I had been coaching Kyle in baseball since last March, but hadn't really seen him since the end of May and have yet to establish a strong relationship with him as we have only been together for one season so far. Due to my lack of coaching experience (9 months) I was diving into uncharted territory with newfound skills and knowledge with the GROW model. These factors contributed to my anxiousness and like doing most things the first time, I struggled.

**Reflection.** As I mentioned, my meeting did not go as I planned. I struggled to formulate questions that led the player to provide the type of in-depth response I was expecting. By not getting the elaborate answers I had expected, I was thrown off tremendously from my set of original questions. This caused me to panic and attempt to think of questions on the spot, which I was not very comfortable in doing. I think this contributed to Kyle's anxiety as well. I could tell he was nervous at the beginning, but he settled in during the first couple of goal questions. I felt his anxiety pick up towards the middle of our conversation, which happened to coincide with when I started to go unscripted and became anxious myself.

Looking back, I feel that I had a hard time making my way to the 'options' and 'will' questions, I spent a lot of time posing goal and reality questions and jumped around between multiple goals rather than just sticking to one. If I were to start over, I would make more of a conscious effort in attempting to make my way through the progression of the GROW model with one goal rather than bouncing back between a bunch of different goals.

**Future Implications.** Going forward, this is certainly a skill that I need to practice. I have already introduced the concept to our varsity coaching staff and am looking forward to having sit-down meetings with our players both pre-season and post-season in order to help them begin to take more ownership of their development, but also to allow me to improve my relationships with the players as well as practice my communication skills.

In the summer, when I reassume the head-coaching role of our younger high school team, I will continue to work at communicating with my players. The summer season is mostly a chance to get extended practice and games in while working on the development of potential future varsity players. Early in the season I would like to have conversations with every player to see what things they want to improve over the course of the season. These interactions can help me design practices better equipped to help achieve their goals and desired skill development. When players get a chance to offer input into their development their buy-in and motivation to participate is often much greater, leading to better individual and team results as well.

**Strengths & Weaknesses.** There are a lot of aspects I need to work on in my communication methods. Being comfortable talking with my players is an important thing that I need to continue to work at. I feel that as I hold more and more meetings my comfort level will begin to rise and positively effect my conversations. Gaining experience will also allow me to gather more knowledge on what questions allow for better responses. A couple of times during my meeting with Kyle, I asked a question and was given a short response. Perhaps my question was poorly worded or chosen for that moment, but I feel that as time goes on and I have more of these conversations my knack for asking the right questions at the right time will increase. During the times where things seemed to not go as planned, I got internally frustrated and this led to myself exhibiting some negative body language.

On a positive note, I feel that my demeanor at the beginning of our conversation was great. Kyle was at ease in a possible intimidating situation for a player and for a while I got some genuine free flowing feedback from him. I was using active listening techniques such as maintaining eye contact to let Kyle know I understood his points and was interested in what he had to say.

This exercise certainly allowed me a chance to evaluate my communication and find areas for improvement as I look to better my coaching skills. Effective communication between the coach and athlete is paramount in building a positive athletic environment that fosters learning, development and eventually, team success.

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