



“There are 4 fundamental steps a person usually goes through to achieve lasting change in their performance: to know, to understand, to believe and to act”

COACHING LEADERSHIP – TEACHING FUNDAMENTAL STEPS

A hockey coach is a teacher and a role model. So are parents and school teachers. But hockey coaches have an environment that makes it easier for them to impart learning because the players really like what they are doing, and on most teams they are having fun and learning at the same time.

On competitive teams, players are competing for ice time and status on the team, e.g. first, second or third lines, so they are more apt to listen to what the coaches are saying. Thus coaches can be quite influential in shaping the players’ thinking and values. Studies have shown players are more likely to listen to coaches than parents and school teachers.

This puts us coaches in a very responsible role model and leadership position that should make us take our role seriously. We are in a position of utmost good faith and trust. We to a large extent set the on ice and off ice standards. We have an obligation to learn as much as we can about the game of hockey, understand its technical elements and those aspects of “real winning” for the players. We need to learn to become better teachers. We all need to really believe it’s not just about winning games. Don’t get me wrong, we can win championships and fulfill “real winning” aspects at the same time. Winning games and “real winning” for the players are not mutually exclusive.

But most minor league hockey coaches are volunteers with little available time to learn new skills. Many are without any playing hockey experience at any high level, without leadership or teaching experience, except as parents and what they know innately.

Some go to intense weekend coaching clinics to get the basics but many do not at the lower levels of minor hockey.

A few read books on hockey drills and physical skills.

Some use available hockey web sites as a resource.

But very few of the available resources deal comprehensively with the physical and mental hockey fundamentals and with the leadership element of coaching, including teaching.

To be an exceptionally effective coach and teacher the players **individually** must respect you as a person, like you, believe in you personally and in your knowledge of the game. You need to establish player credibility. You need to demonstrate to the players that you will invest time and energy above and beyond the norm. When you do you will see player performance improve



because they will do the same. The players will want to do it for themselves and for you, because they know you care as much about them succeeding as they do.

We, as coaches must take the time to get to know the players individually, to understand their strengths and weaknesses as players and persons, so we can adapt our teaching techniques to each of them and understand how they can help the team and themselves the most.

Some players are said to be more “coachable” than others and in my experience this is certainly true. So those who are less “coachable” but potentially valuable team members are the real coaching challenge. Many times our ability to help them change will be the difference between your team playing very well or just mediocre.

We, as coaches need to understand that players at most ages will go through 4 mental steps in the process of learning or to put it another way to really accept what you are selling them. Make no mistake, as a coach you are selling not dictating, and not all the players may be buying.

These learning steps for the players are:

1. “To Know” the exact components of what it is you are trying to teach them in clear simple language (“in crayon”) whether it is a very technical cross over step, a body check technique or a new defensive system or a positioning change. They should then be able to tell you what you have told them in their own words. You need to explain it to them and reinforce the idea over and over. This piece is the relatively easy one
2. “To Understand” exactly why it is necessary to learn what you are teaching them, how it will benefit the team and them and why there is a need to change. Without this understanding they will not buy into why they should invest the time and effort to learn. This also needs to be reinforced over and over with feedback from the players
3. “To Believe” that it is necessary to learn the technique or change. I mean the players have to really believe so it becomes their technique or system or tactic. They own it and do not just pay lip service to the idea or follow it because you said so. It is insufficient to simply say “it will help the team” or “it will make you a better defencemen or forward” ... you have to convince them why your idea will do that and they must believe it
4. “To Act”. That is, the players need to actually and consistently do what you are teaching them. This is the true test especially under game situation pressure when there is a tendency for players to revert back to old comfortable ways. You see this all the time even in professional hockey and in other sports. Mistakes under pressure like unreasonable risk pinching at the other team’s blue line producing a two on one and a game winning goal for the opposition.

So, think about your players as your customers who are not necessarily going to buy everything you say just because you say it. Again, a coach is a salesperson in part.



Players who do not really believe or buy in will not probably resist you openly but their lack of buy in will be seen on the ice in their performance if they do not really know, understand and believe what you are selling.

One way to better understand who is buying in and who is not is to establish a completely open communications climate on the team so the players feel comfortable in voicing their concerns, questions or even their disagreement with your ideas so they can be fully discussed. If these issues are not addressed, their lack of understanding will be there anyway. And the players will respect you for asking for their views and for treating them with maturity. An added value is that they will come up with ideas you have never thought about that are useful.

If you use this approach with the players from the outset of the season, the players and the coaches will build a successful team together and team members will be very helpful with some of the non believers through the know, understand, believe and act learning process.

Don't always just communicate with the team. Speaking to players individually just socially or sitting down with them in the dressing room using a hockey board or demonstrating a system or technique to them personally is a very good way to show them you care about them as an individual, not just as a team member. They will notice and learn better.

Admit your mistakes in front of them. They will notice and learn.

Don't use fear and subtle intimidation as a tactic to get the players to do what you want. Don't yell at the players. It's destructive. You will lose their respect and trust. It won't work in the end anyway and more importantly, it teaches the players the wrong values.