



“If you are working with a knowledgeable and flexible head coach who will listen, your well-reasoned ideas as an assistant coach will flow through easily for the benefit of the team”

COACHING LEADERSHIP – LEADING FROM BEHIND

All coaches I have worked with over the years as a player, a head coach or an assistant coach have their ideas and philosophies about how the game should be played. Sometimes there is great alignment in the systems and tactics, and sometimes not.

No matter the degree of alignment, if the head coach is knowledgeable and flexible and willing to listen and the assistant coach is articulate, respectful and can demonstrate subjectively and objectively why his idea for change will probably work, the assistant coach can “lead from behind”.

That does not mean the assistant coach “outs” the head coach in front of the team or even presents the new idea to the team; all it means is that the idea gets implemented by the head coach with the support of the assistant coach. The primary objective is to improve the team and develop the players, not to feed the ego of the assistant coach.

Explaining the system or tactic on the white board slowly and in detail is key for the head coach’s buy-in as well as the other assistants. So is the need for the change, not just change for the sake of change. If analytics reports can support the need for change so much the better to establish objectivity rather than only subjectivity.

One example would be the success of the team’s forechecking system. If a team has a passive 1 – 2 – 2 as a standard and rarely wins the puck in the other team’s corners or even along the boards it’s a good idea to measure the results of the existing system over a few games against very good, average and poor teams to show the % of successful puck wins on pure dump and chase or generally on any forechecking attempt. If the % forechecking success is persistently below 30% say, this is a poor result that can be used to show the head coach that it’s the system that needs adjustment on better than 50-50 pucks down low for example. Then after the new more aggressive system is introduced suggest that the new system be measured to see if the results are better than the old system. Forechecking success in the offensive zone should be at least 40%.

A very important and additional advantage of measuring as outlined above is that the results can support buy-in from the players re the new system as well as the coaches.

I love analytics for this reason in almost all aspects of the game. The objective results over time don’t lie and diagnose the need for change, even if some accepted subjective thinking says otherwise. It is an essential tool for anyone who is an agent for change or best practices.

If you have too many suggestions for change over too short a timeframe, look out. Any head coach will become sensitive and resistant. Prioritize your provable suggestions and pick timeframes where buy-in will be most likely. For example, after a loss to a team we shouldn’t



have lost to when the head coach is actively seeking input and is psychologically ready for change because he can see the problem clearly.

I have spent many years lately as an assistant coach and Director of Analytics because I enjoy the pure hockey aspects of coaching players and coaches, not all the very necessary administrative aspects that go with the head coaching job.

It is very rewarding to see your ideas implemented for the team by the head coach as his ideas, and then see the team win more games, as long as you check your ego at the door!