

CATCH 'EM DOING SOMETHING RIGHT

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There are probably as many coaching styles as there are coaches, but it is possible to group coaches into two types. For the sake of simplicity, we'll call these two types positive and negative.

The Dark Side - Fear and Loathing as Coaching Tools

Many coaches, some of them famous, rule by fear and negativity. They are the screamers. This school of coaching teaches players to live up to the coach's standards, to follow the coach's rules. Each play will be run to perfection, each skill will be mastered to perfection, and each rule will be followed - or else. All the kids learn how to do is to obey.

In this fear-based model, teams lose games because the kids didn't follow the coach's rules. Losses, it seems, are always the players' fault, while coaching genius seems to account for all the wins. If only the kids had more perfectly followed the game plan (which is always perfect) "we" would have won. Fear-based coaches love teams that win and hate teams that lose.

Fear-based coaches talk about good kids and bad kids. Good kids are obedient, but they are not creative. Bad kids make mistakes because they don't follow orders. They try things. These coaches demand respect, based solely on their position of authority. They insist that their kids respect authority, not coincidentally because they, the coaches, are in the position of power. Ironically, however, these same coaches, when they get a call they don't like, scream profanities at officials and throw chairs across the floor, violating their own professed rule of respecting authority, in this case the referee. (Apparently, the only authority that these coaches want respected is their own.) Worse, their teams tend to spend so much time worrying about the officiating, they sometimes forget to play the game.

In other words, in my experience, fear-based coaches tend to be colossal hypocrites. How can they insist upon respect for their own authority, and then turn around and curse at the game officials? The message to the kids, of course, is that respect doesn't have to be earned; it can be taken as long as you have power.

Today's kids crave respect. There is no greater harm than to be "dissed." And they'll do almost anything to get it. So teaching kids how to gain respect is not a thing not to be taken lightly. Is it any wonder, in this world of punitive discipline, so many kids decide to seize respect at the point of a gun?

But, thank God, there is another school of coaching.

The Force - The Power of Positive Behavior

On the other side, there are coaches who don't try to break the free will of their kids. They rule with praise, encouragement, and love. Their teams may make more mistakes, but they are also more passionate, creative, and they win. These coaches do not demand respect, they teach kids how to earn it.

These coaches do not insist upon kids meeting their standards. Instead, they teach kids to set and reach high standards of their own.

Of course, one way to teach kids behavior is to model it for them. These coaches carry themselves with dignity. They harness their own competitive fire and focus their anger instead of spewing it on anyone in their path. They compete with grace and class, they don't cheat, and perhaps most importantly, they acknowledge, embrace, and learn from their own mistakes.

Principals of Human Behavior Change

Psychologists have learned a great deal about how to change human behavior. We have learned, for example, much about the value and limitations of punishment. Punishment, simply put, is a great way to change human behavior, but only in the very short run. The problem is that punishment as a teaching school doesn't seem to work for very long. Further, it requires almost constant scrutiny and feedback. In other words, people don't learn very much from being punished, except to avoid the the scrutiny of the people who punish them.

Perhaps even more importantly, even at its best, punishment only teaches people to obey, and the only decision they learn how to make is whether or not to obey the people who can punish them. Obviously, this is of very little help when there is no clear "right" answer to a question, such as which open man should get the ball. On the court, decisions often do not require obedience; they require judgment. Punishment does not teach judgment.

Studies in American workplaces have repeatedly shown that the most powerful reinforcer of human workplace behavior is not punishment, but praise. And the best coaches in America use praise like John Henry used his hammer - it is a very powerful tool.

Clearly, this model of behavior change is not for everyone, for it takes intelligence, skill, and self-control, qualities that the screamers seem to lack.

Perfection is the Enemy of Excellence

I have been very fortunate to spend time with Dean Smith, perhaps the foremost proponent of the positive school of success. Make no mistake about it, no one ever had higher standards than Coach Smith, and no one demanded excellence more passionately. But Coach Smith is a relentlessly positive person. His players were not taught to obey;

they were taught to make decisions. At North Carolina, mistakes were accepted if they were made within the team concept; indeed, they were embraced.

Why would a coach accept, even embrace mistakes? Because mistakes are how people learn new things. The best way to avoid mistakes, of course, is to do as little as possible, or to limit our efforts to things at which we are already proficient. The first time Earl Monroe tried a spin move, he probably lost the ball. If his coach had been a screamer, he might never have become the Pearl. But because he was willing to try, and perhaps fail, at a new skill, Earl Monroe changed the game of basketball.

Ervin Johnson, of course, was too big to play point guard according to the prevailing beliefs of coaches when he arrived at Michigan State. And I'm sure that along the way, at least once or twice, his 6'8" pocket got picked by smaller, quicker guards. But tolerating these failures allowed him to become Magic, maybe the best point guard ever, and to change the game of basketball.

Imagine visiting Thomas Edison's lab. He would have shown you countless examples of failed experiments: record players that didn't play, light bulbs that didn't light, and machines that didn't work. All of these would have lain in heaps all over the lab. Thank God Thomas Edison was willing and eager to fail.

The Secret to Successful Leadership - Catch 'Em Doing Something Right

Research shows that people do more of what gets gets them praised. Thus, the secret to great coaching lies in the use of positive reinforcement to effect behavior change. Here are a few rules that will help coaches to accomplish this method of achieving success.

1. Identify the behaviors you don't want to see, and stop rewarding them with your attention. Every coach knows that some kids would rather be screamed at than ignored.
2. Identify the skills and behaviors you want to see, especially ones that are incompatible with negative behaviors.
3. Pay careful attention to the behaviors of interest, and monitor them, preferably with data, and report the results back to your players.
4. Systematically praise those behaviors you wish to see more of.
5. The next time you want to scream, ask yourself what your tantrum is likely to teach your players, than shut up and get back to work.

By systematically praising desired behaviors, you will find that pretty soon, your players (or your employees) are spending so much time acting right that they have very little time to mess up. Of course, they will make mistakes, as will you, but they will make the right kind of mistakes, mistakes of creativity, passion, and effort. And if you are really good at what you do, they won't make the same mistake twice, because they will embrace and learn from their errors.

In other words, catch 'em doing something right.