



Coaching & Communication: Negotiations, Conflict Management & Persuasion

"Today I want to tell you three stories from my life..." Steve Jobs

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Who were the most impactful coaches in your professional development? What traits did they have in common? One trait many of us look for in leaders is effective communication. Our best mentors were able to reach and teach us through clear, concise and compelling communication.

How well we communicate plays a huge role in our career development – from convincing a cranky head coach to hire us as a rookie assistant, to mediating coaching staff conflicts as a seasoned veteran, to creating program “buy-in” when starting over at a school lacking a history of success. So at every stage of our careers we should develop three key skills to become better communicators: ***Negotiations, Conflict Management, & Persuasion.***

The goal below is to offer a brief overview of these three skills and provide resources for further practice.

NEGOTIATIONS: some are saying, “I’m a coach, not a sales person.” But we are all in sales. As a coach, parent, employee, or business owner we negotiate every day. And effective negotiators follow a three step outline: *Preparation; Process-Goals & Post-Mortem.*

Preparation – Do some work on the front end when preparing to negotiate. What is the relationship (is this a one-off situation or is the other party someone

you’ll deal with repeatedly?) What are the other party’s “interests” behind the positions they hold? *Positions* are typically negotiable but *Interests* are non-negotiables so it’s important to understand the difference. For example, when sports-mom DEMANDS her son play quarterback that is her *position*. Now you ask questions - you learn she wants him to play QB to develop leadership skills (that is the interest behind her position). Once we know the underlying interests behind the position we can brainstorm create alternatives.

Process Goals - just a few key points here. First, a big mistake coaches make is fixing problems on the move while walking off the field or before stepping into a meeting. We’re busy. We want to check off immediate problems and move on. That’s a mistake. When an assistant coach, parent, or AD approaches us with an issue that is important to them...we need to treat it as a material concern and listen. We need to develop trust before we can influence the other party. And the best way to create trust is to truly listen and accurately summarize the other side’s position and interests. This doesn’t mean agreeing or caving-in to move the conversation along. It means letting the other party know we understand their point of view.

Next, *how we communicate* plays a big role. The person we’re negotiating with

is evaluating whether our words match our tone of voice and body language... this is why we shouldn’t “rush” through the problem solving process. Let’s not “talk, walk and text” at the same time. Multi-tasking while listening to someone’s concerns is a bad idea. Find a time and place to truly hear what the other side is saying so they know we are focused, invested, and interested. Communication experts point to former President Clinton as a master communicator in this regard – Clinton was able to make other people feel like the “only person in the room” in conversations. That is a valuable career skill.

The last part of process-goals is dealing with “impasse” during negotiations. We’re rolling through the issues and then...no progress. Nobody budes. Impasse happens. The mistake at this stage is to force a quick fix. When impasse happens it’s time to step back, reflect, and recharge. An effective way to table the discussion is to summarize the points of agreement and disagreement and ask, “*what’s the best thing we can do right now?*” This simple phrase does two things – it reduces pressure and allows the other party to feel ownership over what comes next.

Post Mortem – Ah yes. The “unfun” stuff. But lack of follow up is a big reason “settled” negotiations fall apart. Use the “Triple R” program when ne-

negotiations are complete (*Reality Check; Revisit & Reciprocity*).

First, **Reality Check** – run hypos on negotiated agreements to ensure the stakeholders are on the same page. Second, **Revisit** – negotiated agreements are rarely final. Check back periodically on the “buy-in.” Whatever is agreed to won’t mean anything if people feel unfairly treated, or get passive aggressive to get their way. And third, **Reciprocity** – this goes back to the first point of negotiations of knowing the relationship. “Good, bad, and ugly” behavior comes back like karma. Sure, we’ll never see that car dealer again who we beat up for some free floor mats...but we will see athletes, parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators time and time again.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: Conflict is unavoidable. Every team, coaching staff, and athletic department deals with conflict routinely. We all come from different backgrounds with different communication styles so the healthy approach is to accept that conflict is inevitable. Communicate this fact early and often to staff, parents, and players. We also want to communicate that conflict provides opportunities for growth when channeled properly.

Is it “Conflict?” – we’re all busy with work, family, and coaching so it’s easy to confuse a misunderstanding or difference of opinion with “conflict.” Sometimes a simple misunderstanding (*coaching roles*) looks like conflict due to unclear communication. Ask clarifying questions to determine if there really is a conflict. And sometimes

a difference of opinion (*personnel decisions*) escalates into nasty conflict when not handled properly. Whenever possible, have difficult conversations in person or at least by phone/Skype. Use email and texts to summarize conversations but not to address festering problems.

Triggers from Small to Big – if we allow seemingly small problems to go unchecked they will escalate and creep into other areas of the relationship. What appears to us as a “non-issue” might be a huge issue to another person. It really depends on perspective and history. And this ties into the “position vs. interest” discussion above. Ask questions to discover why the issue is important. That AD who goes ballistic on you for canceling a meeting at the last minute may have unresolved issues about a prior coach’s lack of respect. The AD’s “position” is a 24-hour notice requirement to cancel meetings; the “interest” supporting that position is a need to feel valued.

Know Your Options (BATNA; WATNA & MRATNA) – understand your options in lieu of reaching an agreement. For example, after a tough season the AD expects you to fire the offensive and defensive coordinators. You, however, want to retain and develop the coordinators. The decision may cost your head coaching job. What are the alternatives if you don’t fire staff? Work through the “best,” “worst” and “most reasonable” alternatives to a negotiated agreement. Assess the pros and cons of the options available. And be realistic about the impact of those options.

PERSUASION: you accept a head coaching job at a program with no track record of success, no culture, traditions, or community involvement. How do you create positive momentum in such a toxic culture? Impactful leaders are clear and concise story tellers. When the late Steve Jobs returned to Apple the company was a dumpster fire with

low morale, infighting, and 90 days from bankruptcy. Jobs communicated the “why” behind Apple’s mission and led the company to become one of the most valuable brands in history. A great example of Jobs’ communication style is from his popular 2005 Stanford commencement speech on *You Tube*. Jobs starts off, “*Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That’s it. No big deal. Just three stories.*” Jobs knew the value of persuasion through story telling.

The Campfire – persuasive leaders are compelling story tellers. We’re hard-wired to gather around the campfire and listen to stories. Nobody likes a lecture...but everyone likes a good story! *TED Talks* is a great place to study persuasive story-telling. And the upside to *TED Talks* is that presenters only have 18 minutes to tell a clear, concise and compelling story.

TED Talk audience members routinely cite a few common themes for what makes a compelling story: first, tell a story in the first 30 seconds that drives home the central theme of your talk; second, effective stories are personal to the speaker; and third, effective stories use a mix of narrative and dialogue, and short, specific details that are multi-sensory (visual, auditory, touch and smell).

So we’ve briefly covered three key communication skills for coaching success (negotiations; conflict management & persuasion). Below are additional resources to continue this skill development:

- *Negotiations: Getting To Yes – Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Roger Fisher and William Ury
- *Conflict Management: 101 Ideas & Insights About Resolving Conflict*, Susan Fee
- *Persuasion & Story Telling: Talk Like TED – 9 Public Speaking Secrets*, Carmine Gallo ■

