

# COMMUNICATING WITH ATHLETES: TIMING IS EVERYTHING!

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As a coach, learn when and how to communicate best with your athletes. This United States Olympic Committee article will help you improve your communication skills.

**COMMUNICATING WITH ATHLETES: TIMING IS EVERYTHING!** By Robin S. Vealey, Ph.D, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio Olympian Magazine, March 2005 Mary Harvey, goalkeeper on the U.S. Women's Soccer Team, who won the 1991 World Cup, gave up an "easy" goal just before halftime of the championship game, which tied up the score 1-1. Instead of berating her or questioning her about what happened on the goal, Coach Tony DiCicco simply talked to her about the upcoming second half and what she should focus on to prepare for the next half of play. A year later, Harvey told her coach: "I never told you this, but at halftime, when you didn't mention the mistake I made and simply told me what I needed to do in the second half, well, that had an unbelievable impact on me. It gave me a lot of confidence and allowed me to focus on the second half" (DiCicco, Hacker, & Salzberg, 2002, p. 101).

Most coaches understand the importance of communication skills in interacting with their athletes. However, most articles written on communication talk about what to say and how to say it. But as veteran coaches know, choosing when to say it is perhaps the most important thing. Sending the right message in the right way at the right time is the most important communication skill for effective leadership. Coach DiCicco understood that halftime of a World Cup Championship game was not the time to criticize or even discuss an obvious mistake made by a veteran player. His choice of message at that time was brilliant, because it provided powerful motivation and confidence for Harvey, and allowed her to focus on what she needed to do in the second half.

Like me, you probably can remember times when you had the best intentions to communicate in a thoughtful way, only to have the situation blow up in your face! Because of the intensity and emotional highs and lows of sport competition, understanding when to communicate certain messages to athletes is a constant challenge. The four quadrants in Figure 1 represent what can happen in four different situations based on the message sent to athletes as well as the timing of the message (adapted from Maxwell, 1998).

## Wrong Message at the Wrong Time

The bottom left quadrant represents what can happen when a coach chooses the wrong message at the wrong time. Disaster! As a college basketball coach, I was once attempting to help a player learn a new offensive move. As she struggled in learning the move, I said in a glib attempt to motivate her, "Come on, Mary. You can do it. It's easy!" She looked at me with frustration, defeat, and tears in her eyes and replied softly, "It's easy for you." I realized I was wrong to infer that it should be easy for her to learn this skill, especially at a time when she was struggling and feeling incompetent. It took some time to gain back her trust due to my lack of empathy at a time when she needed reassurance instead of my attempt at lighthearted motivation. My intent was to be positive and motivational, but my timing was wrong.

## Right Message at the Wrong Time

Even the right message delivered effectively, but at the wrong time, still represents ineffective communication. The bottom right quadrant represents what can happen when a coach chooses the right message at the wrong time. Resistance! I learned quickly as a coach that talking to a team immediately after a heartbreaking loss requires great care. My mistake the first time this happened was to attempt to get my athletes to open up to discuss their feelings about a tough loss to our arch-rival. It wasn't a bad idea, but they just weren't ready for it. I met stiff resistance in the form of averted gazes and rolling eyes, which surprised me as they typically responded very openly to me about their thoughts and feelings. The next day at practice they were ready to discuss the loss, and they explained to me that the night before was just not a good time for them to think rationally and unemotionally about their performance. They needed some time to think through what had happened in the game. My athletes helped me learn the valuable lesson of timing, because although my actions were right, my timing was wrong.

## Wrong Message at the Right Time

The upper left quadrant represents what can happen when a coach chooses the wrong action at the right time. Mistake! With eight seconds left in a game in which we were down by one point, I called a time-out to set up a play for my team. Instead of telling them exactly what to do, I called for an offensive set in which they would then read the flow of the play to dictate who would take the last shot. I used a democratic leadership style, so often lauded in coaching books, to let them determine for themselves who should take the last shot. We failed to score because we turned the ball over due to a lack of execution. I immediately realized that I had chosen the wrong course of action for my team at that time. It was not what they needed from me, and it was a mistake. It was the right time to make a crucial decision, and I made the wrong one.

## Right Message at the Right Time

Fortunately, I was able to rectify my mistake in a game later that season. This situation represents the upper right quadrant in Figure 1, which is where the coach chooses the right action at the right time. Success! Our team found ourselves in the same last second situation we had faced earlier in the year. This time I was ready, as I had learned from my previous mistake. My leadership behavior was totally autocratic, which was the right action for this situation because autocratic decision-making is needed in stressful situations. I told each athlete exactly what they must do on the play, emphasized they each had one job to do, and made those jobs very clear and specific for them. The result was we got a great shot, it went in, and I learned a valuable lesson about choosing the right communication style to use depending on the timing of the situation.

## Improving Our Timing

Enhancing the timing of our communication requires a lot of practice, trials-and-errors, and critical self-reflection to learn from mistakes. Here are some suggestions for working on your timing in your messages to athletes:

1. Consider the emotional needs of your athletes based on the time of the season, the proximity of competition (upcoming or just completed), and the influence of good and bad performances (or wins or losses). In emotional moments, athletes are typically not effective listeners or able to engage in thoughtful and rational discussions. None of us are.
2. Consider your emotional state when communicating with athletes. If anger or frustration blocks your ability to communicate productively, wait until your emotions are under control before speaking with your athletes. Know yourself, and only deliver important messages when you are able to do so in a thoughtful, rational manner. And if you say things that you later regret, simply take the time to explain that to your athletes and apologize if necessary. By honestly and openly taking responsibility for mistakes, coaches gain credibility and the trust of their athletes. In fact, it's good timing to follow up your mistakes with an honest admission of fault and regret.
3. Realize that athletes respond better to concise messages as opposed to lengthy explanations or tirades during practice sessions and competitive events. A research study found that legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden rarely spoke more than 20 seconds at a time during practice, with his teaching comments being short, punctuated, and numerous (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004).
4. In tense situations, communicate in unexpected or lighthearted ways that help athletes loosen up and gain perspective. A high school baseball coach developed a unique (and a bit off color!) sign to give to his players from his position in the third base coaching box in pressure situations. As the batter watched, the coach would go through his sequence of signs and then finish up by touching his thumb and second finger together in the shape of a circle. The sign represented a key sphincter at the rear end of the player's body that the coach wanted the athlete to keep open and loose. The circle sign told each player to "be loose and take an aggressive cut." The coach told me that his players loved the sign, and always smiled no matter how pressurized the situation! In pressure situations, also avoid stating the obvious such as "just relax," "we really need this," or "it's all up to you." I had a well-meaning coach that had the habit of always telling me to "relax" in tense situations. The comment always caused me to wonder "Am I not relaxed?" and to become more tense as a result. Provide some concise instructions, give a verbal or nonverbal show of support, but don't state the obvious.
5. Similarly, avoid pointing out or dwelling on the obvious when athletes make dumb mistakes. It only focuses on the negative, so a better strategy is to ignore it or to develop a "mistake ritual," which is a common gesture coaches can communicate to athletes after mistakes to indicate that it's no big deal. Examples include "no sweat" by wiping two fingers across your brow as if wiping sweat away, "brush it off" by brushing your hand across your shoulder to brush away the mistake, and "wave goodbye" in softball and baseball by taking off your cap momentarily as if to wave away the mistake prior to putting the hat back on (Thompson, 2003). Ask your athletes to develop their own Mistake Ritual - it really works!
6. Avoid constantly using high intensity, rah-rah approaches to motivating your athletes. Why? They quickly learn that this is an act, and then in situations where you attempt to communicate intensity to them, they don't buy it.

Highly successful Duke men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (2000) talks about the importance of always telling athletes the truth to create trust in what the coach says, or what he calls "instant belief." Coach Krzyzewski credits the development of "instant belief" for his ability to help his players focus in the final 2.1 seconds of the 1992 NCCA Regional Final with a trip to the Final Four on the line.

After a Kentucky player scored on a miraculous shot, Duke called time out down by one point. Coach Krzyzewski knew that the message his athletes needed to hear at that moment was critical, because he saw in their eyes that they didn't believe they could win. As his athletes came to the bench, he shouted at them, "We're going to win! We're going to win!"

Could he guarantee this? Of course not. But because he had been an honest communicator all season, his players trusted him and believed him, and what was important at this moment was to create an "instant belief" that they could win. Of course, Duke went on to win the game on one of the most thrilling last-second shots in basketball history.

Coach Krzyzewski sent his team the one message they needed to hear and believe at exactly the right time. The key point to remember is that if he had constantly used this rah-rah ploy with his team, they would not have believed him at the critical time when it was needed. When coaches send the right message at the right time, communication flows, athletes learn, and teams flourish. Veteran coaches understand the crucial aspect of timing in attempting to enhance team cohesion, performance, and motivation in their athletes. Develop a file folder in your head of what you learn about timing and communicating with your athletes. Timing is everything in knowing not only what and how, but especially when to communicate with your athletes. Good luck, and good coaching.

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