

## **"Five tips towards more Effective Communication and thus Resolving Conflict in Sports"**

"Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it you can rapidly improve the quality of this very important part of your life."

Adopting even one of these will make a positive difference in improving your communication skills. Each will have an immediate positive effect. Adopting them all could transform your experience of conversation.

### TOP FIVE WAYS

#### 1. **Show interest in and be curious about those with whom you talk with.**

In conversation, to be curious is a definite plus. "Shift from Judgment to Curiosity" Being curious about another person helps to engage us and to validate that person as interesting. On the other hand, if we seem bored by or indifferent to the person, they feel invalidated, as if we are saying "You hold no interest for me. You are not interesting."

Not to be curious can be troublesome in life. As human relations speaker and author Dale Carnegie wrote: "It is the individual who is not interested in his fellow men who has the greatest difficulties in life and provides the greatest injury to others. It is from among such individuals that all human failures spring."

Consider the coach who shows no curiosity about what his players are thinking or feeling, or the parent who does not wonder about the thoughts and inner lives of the children. Consider the manager, thinking he knows everything about the game and who expresses no interest in the parents' ideas. We know the results: Distance and negative feelings between the people.

The good news is that we can choose to be interested or curious. This is an act of intention. For example, who has not taken a required course of study that "held" no interest at the outset but then, when you saw that being uninterested in the subject resulted in poor learning and understanding, you decided to be interested in order to learn better.

I notice that many people try to appear interesting themselves instead of being genuinely interested in others. When we show interest in others, they usually begin to show interest in us. However, when we try to be interesting, we often look self-conscious or even vain, whereas being genuinely interested in other people makes our conversations and life experience a rich adventure.

## **2. Balance the talking and listening. Take turns.**

Some of us tend mainly to be out-going, extraverts, talkative. That's probably a plus, because we are an optimistic, "can-do" society. However, for relationships, lots of talking and too much talking can be harmful to personal and sports relationships.

The scientific evidence suggests that balancing our conversation so that everyone gets a turn who wants a turn is supportive of social relations. In informal conversation, balance requires that speakers monitor themselves so that they do not dominate by talking too much. It is also important for more quiet people to speak up from time to time so that the talkative ones don't think you are giving up any interest in sharing your ideas.

Balancing the talk doesn't require a strict 50-50 distribution. The ratio can be 80-20 and still be balanced, as when one person is mainly interviewing the other who of course will do most of the talking. The key here is not so much the actual time each one talks. It is the taking turns that matters. One person may ask a brief question that requires a long, detailed answer.

Having balance in a conversation suggests safety and fairness and creates a supportive climate for honest ideas to be expressed and heard. In large groups, a chairperson or a facilitator can monitor and direct the talk and make certain everyone has a chance to speak fully. In casual conversation, we must manage ourselves to make sure we have balance.

## **3. Give genuine compliments and real praise when appropriate.**

Some people have trouble giving compliments. Others have trouble receiving compliments graciously. Most of these troubles are caused by upbringing and culture. All of these old habits can be eliminated and replaced with kinder and more generous behavior that fosters better relations between people.

The fact is such public and global praise is suspect, not helpful. And not only for children, but for adults as well. Writing in his landmark 1996 book, "Punished by Rewards," Alfie Kohn makes four solid points about giving compliments and praise:

"Don't praise people, only what people do. It's less likely that there will be a gap between what someone hears and what he thinks about himself if we don't make sweeping comments about what he is like as a person."

"Make praise as specific as possible. Even better than 'That's a really nice game' is 'That's neat at the end when you made that great pass to...'"

"Avoid phony praise. . . . One symptom of phony praise is a squeaky, voice that slides up and down the scale and bears little resemblance to the way we converse with our friends. A seven-year-old can usually tell the difference between a genuine expression of pleasure and phony praise, between a sincere smile and one that is manufactured and timed for best effect."

"Avoid praise that sets up competition. Phrases like 'You're the best on the team (or for adults, in this area),' whose "most harmful effects . . . encourage a view of others as rivals rather than as potential collaborators. What's more, they lead people to see their own worth in terms of whether they have beaten everyone else - a recipe for perpetual insecurity."

When I coach athletes on their performance, the specific compliments I give them on their behavior and the results they produce helps them grow and develop. Some time ago, a coach asked, "Whenever I compliment my players, they resist. How can I make my compliments stick?" Try this method: Add a question after your compliment:

"I think your efforts on this team are really great! How do you think we can everybody to work that hard?" Adding an open question at the end usually prevents the person from avoiding the compliment because they are responding to the follow-up. "The way you played last game was awesome. What made you perform so well?"

Finally, if you yourself tend to deflect compliments, try harder to accept them. A simple "Thank you" to the one offering the compliment will do. After you make that perfect shot or save, it's simply not appropriate to refuse a compliment. Nor is it genuine for the Lacrosse star who scores seven goals to say "It wasn't me; it was the other guys on the team." When you receive a genuine compliment, acknowledge it and let it in!

#### **4. Keep your positive energy up.**

When we interact with others, we exchange not only words and bodily expressions. We also give off - exchange - our vital energy. If our energy is high and vibrant, we lift the conversation. If it's low and sluggish, we sap energy from the encounter.

Many ways are available to increase and maintain our personal energy. Among them are well known methods, such as being well nourished and well rested. Also, keeping our interactions positive rather than negative, focusing on what's good and what works instead of griping and complaining. A fine resource to enable positive talk is the book, Encyclopedia of Positive Questions by Diana Whitney and others (2002). This approach of "Appreciative Inquiry" is now being widely used in organizations to make the energy more positive and motivating.

When we are energized, we are able to be responsive, alive to the situation and the person we are talking to. Our voice and body reflect our responses and add color and flavor to our talk.

When we don't have enough "gas in our tank," being responsive is difficult at best.

#### **5. Ask better questions**

A routine question will evoke a routine response. Thus, "How's it going?" will generally get a "Fine, thanks," or perhaps an "I can't complain." If the purpose of the question is only to acknowledge an acquaintance briefly and move on, your purpose is served. This is the social function of language that the anthropologist Malinowski called "phatic communion," which is nothing more than a brief and superficial verbal connection, the smallest of small talk.

However, if you'd prefer a more substantial conversation, you'll need to use a different question to evoke a different response. A deeper and more detailed conversation will certainly be less predictable and probably more interesting, and it will likely have the effect of enriching your relationship. Here are four suggestions for more productive questions:

1. Ask questions that elicit detail. These are often "What?" questions. For example, "What did you finally decide about the playing time of each player?" or

"What did you do different in the last game?" will usually stimulate detailed responses. Questions that don't require detail, such as "How are your plans coming along?" and "How was your last game?" can be answered with a mere "Good, thanks."

2. Ask open questions that require more than a Yes or No. These are the "Wh" and "H" questions beginning with What, Why, Where, and How. These work better than "closed questions" that limit the response, such as "Did you like the last game?" Instead, "What did you like about the last game?" draws out a more interesting and detailed response.

3. Ask some questions that are a little bit surprising or "edgy." These are not meant to put the person on the hot seat, or to make them uncomfortable, but to stimulate and get a lively response instead of a routine response. "What's the most exciting/challenging thing about playing on this team?" is such an edgy question.

Predictable questions usually evoke predictable responses, such as "What did you learn in practice today?" "Oh, not much."

4. Use some "If?" questions such as "If you had one thing you could change in practice, what would it be?" Or "If you could have dinner with a famous person, whom would you choose?" Such questions break out of the routine and add some fresh energy to the conversation. By the way, don't ask others any question you yourself would not want to be asked. Also, be prepared to answer the very "If?" questions you ask. The other converser may say, "Let me think about that for a minute. Meanwhile, you go first."