



Motivation, Inspiration and Communication

A bantam coach recently asked me how to inspire and motivate his team. He said that about one third of the players were coming to play every day and gave a consistent effort whenever they were on the ice. The rest of team was much less intense, seemed to quit early if the game was not going their way and at practice seemed to only be making a

"In a recent survey, 2000 athletes were asked about why they need a coach?"

They responded to inspire, guide, encourage, teach and help these athletes be their very best.

When asked how this is most effectively delivered? Most agreed that the coach needs to create an environment where listening is possible, an environment based on respect and understanding."

Jerry Lynch

moderate effort to improve. He had a team last year that was full of energy and enthusiasm and as a result performed above expectations and they had a great season. This year he is frustrated because of the lack of effort and a much different level of commitment from many of his players.

I am not sure that there is an answer to the problem that he is looking for. As I reflect back on the many teams I have coached over the past 36 years I have found that each team is different in skill, attitude, and commitment. Because of the community based "one size fits all" system we use in Minnesota, many kids continue on through their programs year after year because they are the big fish in a small pond and make the A teams each year without effort or commitment. They are there because they can be. To inspire or motivate these players as second year Bantams after 6 or 8 years of not having to compete to make a team is a daunting task. In fact, it is perhaps a multi year project in which you can only make a marginal difference in the 5 month season we play.

The standard approach to teams like this is to talk to them in the locker room, give the Vince Lombardi speeches, and convince them of your passion for the game and the need to compete on every play. Sometimes reducing game ice time for some is a strategy that is used. The common thread in all the approaches is that the coaches are communicating to the players. The missing element is actually letting the players communicate with the coaches.

Players do not communicate well with coaches or adults in general. They may not really have a firm grasp of what the coaches are trying to get across to them because much of what is being said is a concept or an attitude and many youth players do not grasp concepts very well until they are about 16 or 17 years old. Many of them actually think they are doing exactly what you are trying to get them to do and think it is the other guys that are the problem. Lastly, if you are having trouble motivating the team, chances are so did their coaches in prior years and the chances are good that the kids have heard all the speeches for many years and simply tune you out.

So what should you do?

“Coach the Team you have, not the one you wish you had”. I think this is pretty good advice. This approach requires the coach to evaluate the talents of each player and determine the commitment level, interest level, and competitive nature of each player. Collectively that is what you must deal with. Then spend some time with the team and review their performance levels in past years. Even though the rosters are somewhat different each year, the core group should be fairly consistent and the season outcomes should also be fairly consistent. Then let the team tell you what they want to achieve and what they are willing to do to get there. Together set goals and make a plan to achieve those goals. Hockey is supposed to be fun and players who have fun usually will play harder and with more enthusiasm. As their coach you may have to modify the practice plans you have and adjust your communications with the team to reflect the common team goals.

One of the great challenges of coaching is that every team is different and as a coach it is your responsibility to figure out the collective will of the team and coach to that rather than make each team fit your model of what a team should be. If you can master this approach your teams will always be successful, the players will have fun, and as a coach you will also have more fun.

By the time a player is a senior in high school, he or she has had as many as sixty coaches. They will remember the few good coaches and the bad coaches. The in-between coaches will likely be forgotten. Part of our role as coaches is to make a positive impact on all of the players we coach. Making a positive impact will put you into the group of the good coaches.

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