



Meaningful Talk
Mike MacKay
mmackay@basketball.ca



How do I get my team to talk? This is a question that I often hear from coaches. Very often we have lots of “noise”. This can be important to create a buzz in practice and enhance the energy level, often does not lead to meaningful communication.

There are four parts to meaningful communication:

- Sending a stimulus or signal – this is usually auditory, but could be visual or tactile
- Receive the stimulus – could the receiver see, hear or feel the stimulus
- Put meaning to the stimulus – does the receiver understand the signal
- Respond or act to the stimulus – does the receiver act upon the information in the way it which it was intended.

I recently read a book on children and play. It talked about the importance of play in helping children to learn vocabulary. When taught the words through play or activity children gain a deeper knowledge. When playing a game where the child has to fall down, such as *ring around the rosie*, when the child says “all fall down ” and actually falls down they learn to understand what down means in relation to up. When words were taught by a computer, or just repeated to be memorized without the action, the children do not grasp the deeper meaning and understanding of the word. They could not relate it to the word ‘up’. It is my contention that we often do not teach players the power of words. We give them a simple word like help, deny, shot and ask them to repeat it without a deeper grasp of the meaning and how they connect to other words and actions.

Sending a signal

- Do you allow your players the chance to talk in a leadership voice? Very often when I attend a practice and a coach tells me he/she is having troubles getting the players to talk the players never have a chance because the coach is doing all of the talking. Allow players opportunities to lead with a voice that is clear, and forceful and instills confidence.
- Does everyone give energy to the group? Very often we use drills where the player must count. Often the same two or three loud players do all of the talking. The quiet player never has to talk. Try allowing only the player you scored to call out the number. The others must be able to hear the leadership voice of the player.
- Can you be enthusiastic and give energy during the tough times. It is easy to talk when things are going well. Can you still be external after making a mistake or when the other team is on a run? Some players will get quiet; others will get negative and start barking at teammates, some will roll their eyes and have negative body language. As a coach you must monitor this type of communication and help the player to become aware of what signals he/she sends. Develop an action plan for how you can work to change this energy talking.
- What signals do you send as coach when you get frustrated? I have often found it amusing that in times of stress the adult is often the one who is allowed to lose control of his/her emotions. How will players learn to control their emotions in times of stress if the coach cannot?
- Encourage the use of visual and tactile signals. Dean Smith had players point at the player who made the assist. When switching on screens we often say to “touch it” to prevent the slip.

Receiving the signal

- You should know if your players can hear. If you have ever coached a player who is cannot hear out of one ear, you learn the importance of positioning when communicating.

- Demand their eyes and ears. Mike Krzyzewski, in his new book Beyond Basketball, talks about his one rule for communication; “when you talk to one another look each other in the eye”. He claims it enforces the most crucial element of communication; telling the truth.
- Many students have learned to tune out the teacher. Once the teacher is done talking they then ask what they are supposed to do. You cannot allow players to tune you the coach or teammates out when talking.
- Jack Donohue used to scans the eyes of his team when talking to them at the start of practice. Any player who did not look enthusiastic he would pull aside for a private chat, to find out how they were doing.

Putting meaning to the signal

- Do your players know your basketball vocabulary? I challenge you to do a little test to find out. Give the players a word and ask them to define what it means. You will be surprised by the results. Too often we use a term like “box out” and say “does everybody understand.” We take the silence of the group to mean yes or worse we ask the players to yell out even louder “yes coach” as if this will increase their understanding.
- Allow players the opportunity to express what they think, do or feel. They need to learn how to put into word their feeling, actions and thoughts. It takes time. At first players will often say; “I don’t know”, when asked what they are thinking. Be patience. This is often because they have not learned the vocabulary needed to express their thoughts. You may have to prod them with examples. Show empathy by paraphrasing their thoughts.
- Coaches that pick teams with short try out times or short training camps cannot assume that players will understand the coach’s basketball lingo. Players sometime get labeled falsely when it is lack of understanding that is causing the problem. One of the biggest benefits that the CP’s has brought to players is a comfort level with the vocabulary, drills and concepts being used at the national level. You can very quickly spot the athlete who has no background with the CP’s.

The ability to act

- Very often a player can handle the first three elements of communication, but does not act on the information. An offensive player is cutting through the zone defense. The back line defender calls the cutter. No one from the front line picks up the cutter, who catches the pass and scores. Why did this happen? When asked the front line player will often say; “I thought I should deny the pass to the top.” Players need to learn when to be followers and not leaders. This is something I am finding more and more prevalent.
 - Players are hesitant to give directions to a teammate in a strong confident tone. Many people see it as rude or being bossy. I have heard parents comment from the stands that they did not like the tone of the coach or player when using loud, short and concise communication. We have to teach players that in highly competitive situations we can not always use the pleasantries of daily societal talk. Messages must be done quickly and be heard over the noise. “Please” and “thank you” take too much time!
 - Players are also hesitant to follow the commands of others. We have developed a generation of young adults who are taught to question authority if you think it is impacting your individual rights. Telling someone to do something because you say so does not work like it did in the past. When it comes from a peer there can be a bigger delay in compliance.
- **Somebody and everybody is nobody.** Players and coaches often use phrases such as; “somebody take the ball”, or “everybody has to work harder”. In group situations this causes hesitation. The larger the group the more one can hide within the group. We need to communicate with names. Put a name on it! This makes somebody accountable for the action. If you are asking

your players to work harder look each player in the eye and ask them personally, not the whole group. When we speak in generalities we are avoiding the truth. I have always believed in the phrase, *truth over harmony*. We cannot be afraid to upset the short term harmony of a relationship or situation. As long as it is done with respect for the other person, the long term benefits are immeasurable.

- Some of the most motivational situations I have seen in sport are when a single player stands up in front of the team and makes a statement: "Today I am going to get 10 offensive boards, what are you going to do?" I have also seen where a respected player calls out the other players who are not playing up to their potential. As long as the player doing the talking is backing up his or her words with actions. Those of us old enough can remember Larry Bird calling out his teammates in the finals vs. the Lakers in 1984.

Meaningful communication does not happen by accident. You must plan for it, train it and debrief it.