



# COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

## COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

Everything you do as a coach, whether it is teaching skills, motivating players, listening to players, solving athletes' problems, having team parties, is done through communication with your players. To be a good coach, it is important to have effective communication skills.

### Chapter Overview:

- identify and understand the principles of effective communication with players on a group, sub-group, and individual basis, and in a parent (coach) – child relationship,
- realize that effective communication is both verbal and non-verbal,
- recognize the use of the voice and body in developing effective communication skills,
- identify and practice listening techniques as one component of effective communication
- Effective Feedback

### Principles of Effective Communication

As a hockey coach, it will be necessary to communicate with your players as one group, as a sub-group of players (e.g., the forward lines that play together) and as individuals. Regardless of the number of players you are communicating with at any one time, to communicate effectively the same principles apply.

#### Be an Enthusiastic Coach

Establish your role as an enthusiastic leader of your team. Your enthusiasm will affect your athletes' enjoyment of hockey.

#### Be a Positive Coach

Interact with your athletes in a positive manner. Set a good example of desired behaviour. Constant criticism and yelling at your players will decrease their motivation to participate, so give sincere praise and encouragement to your players frequently.

#### Be Demanding but Considerate

Clearly establish what is expected of the players. Your expectations should be based on their abilities and experiences. Don't expect more than is reasonable and realistic.

## **Be Consistent in Communicating with your Athletes**

Communicate in a consistent manner from one situation to another (e.g., practice to practice, game to game, practice to game) and with all of your athletes. Communicating in an inconsistent manner will leave your athletes confused as to what it is you mean and what is expected of them and will also reduce their respect for you.

## **Be a Good Listener**

Good listening is an important component of effective communication. Demonstrate a willingness to listen and your players will express their feelings, concerns, and suggestions to you.

## **Provide Effective Feedback in Identifying and Correcting Skill Errors**

Give feedback in a positive, informative manner. Be clear and concise in the feedback you provide. When correcting an error, first tell the player what is being done well. The athlete then knows which parts of the skill are being performed correctly. Then tell the player what needs to be done to correct the error. Always end on a positive note by encouraging the player to spend more time on the skill. It is important to separate the athlete's worth as an individual from the athlete's ability to perform the skill. For example, a player's feelings of self-worth should not be negatively affected because the player demonstrates an improper passing technique.

## **Explain the Contribution of Each Player to the Team**

All players are part of the team and the coach should demonstrate confidence in each player's ability to contribute to the team. You and your athletes should value the contribution of each player to the team. Players should be encouraged by the coach to be supportive of each other's contribution to the team.

## **Treat All Players as Individuals**

It is important to be sensitive to individual needs and to show all players that you care about them as individuals. Make an effort to talk with them all individually at every practise and game. Greet players by their first names.

Maintain a file on each player and discuss what is in that file with the player. You may include suggested solutions on specific problems the player is having.

## **Communicate in the Same Manner with your Child as with other Players**

Parents who coach their own children often put unrealistic expectations on them. If you coach your child, remember to treat them as you do the other players on the team and don't demand more of them than you do of the others.

As well, if you coach your children, avoid showing favouritism toward them. It is important for you to treat your children as individuals, the same as you would do for all the other players, but do not show any particular favouritism toward them.



### Non-Verbal Communication

Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal. “The coach is in a good mood today.” “The coach is angry because we lost.” How do your athletes know that? How did you communicate that? Coaches communicate many messages to players by their actions, facial expressions, use of arms and hands, body position, overall posture, touching behaviours and voice characteristics.

How do you behave before a game? What do you do during a game? How do you behave when your team wins/loses? What do you do when an athlete makes a mistake in a practice/game? The coach’s non-verbal behaviour should reflect what is verbally communicated to the athletes. Act in a way which shows that you are consistent with what you say. For example, if you request that your players be punctual for team events, then your behaviour should reflect this request.

What you communicate non-verbally to your players can be as important as what you verbally communicate. For example, a player slashes an opposing player but is not penalized. The coach, by not verbally expressing disapproval of this infraction, is giving approval to this player and other athletes for such unsportsmanlike conduct.

A positive example of non-verbal communication is illustrated by a coach greeting a player who has made a good play with friendly eye contact, a smile and a pat on the back. A negative example may be illustrated by an angry coach, feet wide apart, mouth set, eyes narrowed, arms tightly folded and head shaking from side to side. It is important to be aware of the messages you are sending to your athletes by your behaviour. Make sure you communicate both verbally and non-verbally the messages you want your players to receive.

It is also important to examine the non-verbal behaviour of others as it is easy to be misled or confused by this form of communication. For example, a player laughs during some instructions: is the player laughing at the coach; amused with the idea just presented; or thinking of something funny that happened in school? The manner in which you interpret the player’s actions will determine your reaction.

Often, when verbal and non-verbal communication transmit different messages, we tend to believe the non-verbal, primarily because we realize that most non-verbal behaviour is unconscious, difficult to control and, therefore, displays the true feeling.

#### For the Coach

Thinking of the player that laughed or frowned during instruction, list below the different reactions the coach might have depending how this player’s actions were interpreted:

---



---



---



---



---



---

## Effective Use of Voice and Body

Effective verbal and non-verbal communication with your players is affected by how well you use your voice and body.

### Effective Use of Voice

The following are suggestions for using your voice effectively:

- Speak clearly and make eye contact with the players as you speak.
- Periodically, look carefully at the athletes who are farthest away from you. Can you see clear indications that they can hear? If there is any doubt, ask them.
- Use a voice that is only slightly louder than a normal speaking voice, except for the few times it is necessary to project your voice over a long distance (e.g., in an arena). Speaking unnecessarily loud encourages athletes to make noise themselves. Many coaches are able to settle players down by lowering their voices so that close attention is required to hear. Try it!
- Use inflections or change the tone of your voice to communicate varying moods (e.g., energetic, patient, serious, concerned).
- Take a maximum of three minutes to demonstrate and explain a skill. Demonstrate the skill first, then explain it.
- When explaining a skill, use language that is easily understood by the age and level of the players you are coaching. Watch for reactions from the athletes that they are or, are not understanding, your explanation.

### Effective Use of Body

The following are suggestions for using your body effectively:

- Move amongst your athletes so that they feel you are spending some time with each of them.
- Vary the distance and position you maintain between yourself and your athletes to communicate the extent of personal interaction you wish to have with them. For example, standing very close and facing your athletes rather than standing further away suggests a desire for more direct interaction.
- Make regular eye contact with all players. This not only reassures them, but can provide you with valuable feedback as to who is listening and understanding.
- A hand or pat on the back or shoulder, a firm grip on an arm, or an arm around the shoulder are powerful ways of conveying concern and support. Remember though, that a pat on the head reminds an individual of one of the ways one was touched as a very young child and, when used with players, can be interpreted as being demeaning or belittling.

- Face all of the players whenever possible. Turning your back may be perceived as a sign of disrespect. Also, by turning your back, you lose the impact of facial expression, which is a valuable non-verbal communication tool.
- Be aware of the message your body expression is sending to your athletes (e.g., facial, use of arms and legs, eye movement).

## How To Gain Attention

You can use your voice and body to gain the attention of your athletes with the following:

- Designate a specific area to gather at the beginning of each practice.
- Use a signal (e.g., whistle, raised stick) to indicate attention is desired. If a whistle is used, blow just loud enough and long enough to gain initial attention.
- Gather the players in a group and make an effort to make eye contact with all of them.
- If one or two athletes are not paying attention, look directly at them and ask for their attention by using their name(s). If a player is constantly disruptive, it may be best to remove the athlete from the rest of group, continue with the practice, and talk later with the specific athlete.

If you suddenly begin to lose the attention of your athletes, ask yourself the following:

- Am I communicating in a clear and direct manner?
- Can all players see and hear well? If not, rearrange them.
- Have I been taking too much time to provide a demonstration and/or explanation?

## For the Coach

Using the following chart, assess how effectively you communicate with your players. For each statement, circle the letter which best describes you.

|    |   | Always | Often | Sometimes | Never |
|----|---|--------|-------|-----------|-------|
| 1  | Show enthusiasm   | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 2  | Act in a positive manner  | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 3  | Am not too demanding  | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 4  | Communicate in a consistent manner                              | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 5  | Listen well to my players                                       | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 6  | Provide effective feedback                                      | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 7  | Recognise the contribution of each player                       | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 8  | Treat all players as individuals                                | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 9  | Coach my child the same as the other players                    | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 10 | Know what messages my non-verbal behaviour communicates         | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 11 | Ensure my body language and words communicate the same messages | A      | O     | S         | N     |
| 12 | Use my voice and body effectively                               | A      | O     | S         | N     |

## Exercise

What methods, other than self-evaluation as outlined in the preceding chart, could be used to evaluate how well you communicate with your players? To begin the list, the methods could include:

- Feedback from assistant coaches, players, and parents.
- Use of video tape and recorder.

---



---



---



---



---



---



## Listening Techniques

One important component of effective communication is listening. How good a listener are you? How much of what your athletes say to you do you actually hear? Listening to players tells them that you care about them and are genuinely interested in their feelings, thoughts, and suggestions.

Good listening is a difficult communication skill to learn well. Like all skills, it takes practise to be a good listener. The following techniques can be used to improve your listening skills.

### Attentive Listening

Listening starts by the coach being attentive to the athlete, which can be demonstrated by your facial expressions and gestures, and by remaining quiet while the player is speaking. Eye-to-eye contact with the player at the same level is important. These actions all indicate to the athlete that you, as the coach, are ready to listen.

### Paraphrasing

Repeat in your own words what it is you think a player said to see if that is what the player meant. Paraphrasing allows you to see if you have a complete understanding of what was said and provides the player with feedback on whether the coach interpreted the information correctly. Any areas of misunderstanding can then be explained by the athlete.

### Bridging

You verbally indicate that you are following and understanding what the player is saying by the use of bridging words such as, "I see" and "yes".

### Restating

Repeats the last phrase or few words of what the athlete said without changing anything.

### Inviting Clarification

Request that the athlete clarifies or expands on something that the athlete has said. In seeking clarification, question a specific comment made by the player that you did not understand. Inviting clarification shows interest in the athlete by the coach.

Spend a few minutes listening to your athletes after a practice or game. Get some feedback on areas that went well and areas that the players and/or coach work on.

Questions that could be asked are:

- What did you do that you really enjoyed?
- What is one thing you learned today?
- What did you do well?
- Did you encourage each other?
- What is one thing that you want to do at the next practice/game?
- What was one good thing that happened today?

### Example of Ineffective Listening



Athlete: "Coach, I'm a bit worried about competing today."  
Coach: "Okay guys, let's get ready for warm-up."



Athlete: "I'd like to talk"  
Coach: "Okay guys, let's go."



Athlete: "Coach, could I..."  
Coach: "What is it?"



Athlete: "I'm worried about competing with..."  
Coach: "Don't worry Johnny..."



Athlete: Silence  
Coach: "Okay guys, let's get out there."

## Example of Effective Listening



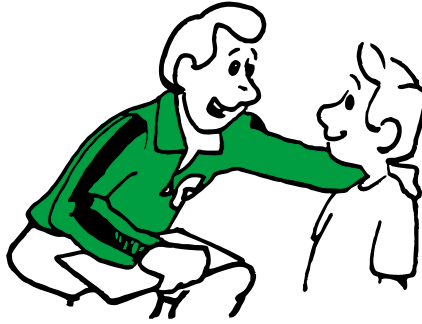
Athlete: "Coach,, I'm a bit worried about competing today."  
Coach: "I see" (bridging).



Athlete: "Yes, I got this scary feeling since I talked to the guys."  
Coach: "The guys?" (restating)

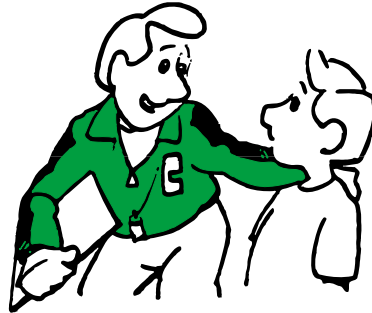


Athlete: "Yes, the guys told me the other team is pretty good."  
Coach: "So you're worried because the other team is good. Is that right?"(paraphrasing).



Athlete: "Yes, that's it."

Coach: "Why do you think that's worrying you?" (inviting clarification).



Athlete: "I don't know ... I guess because I might not be good enough."

Coach: "John, do you remember when we talked about your goals? We agreed that what was most important was for you to try to reach your own goals. Well, your goal tonight is to play as well as you can. It doesn't really matter to me what anyone else does. All you can do is give it your best shot ... no one can do more than that."



Athlete: "Okay, coach. I feel a bit better now."

Coach: "Good, I know you'll be okay John ... Okay guys, let's get ready for warm-up."



## EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Verbal feedback (talking to the players about how and what they are doing) gives information which can help them learn and develop in a positive and effective way. Effective feedback is essential for your players' motivation, learning and self image. It is an important key to successful instruction, as your feedback can turn a player off or on.

### Six aspects of effective feedback

|   |     |                    |
|---|-----|--------------------|
| Specific                                  | NOT | General            |
| Constructive                              | NOT | Destructive        |
| Sooner                                    | NOT | Later              |
| Check for Clarity                         | NOT | Left Misunderstood |
| Positive                                  | NOT | Negative           |
| Directed at behaviour which is changeable |     |                    |

### Specific not General

Specific feedback contains precise information about what the player should try to do in order to solve or correct a problem.

#### Example:

*Specific (and effective)*

"When you turn to your left, you seem to be out of control. Try to lean more toward the centre of the turn and bend your inside leg more,"

*General (and ineffective)*

"You are not turning correctly."

### Constructive not Destructive

Constructive feedback recognizes aspects of your players' behaviour and suggest positive steps for improvement. It should deal with observable behaviours. It should not deal with inferences about the player's personal characteristics.

#### Example:

*Constructive (and effective)*

"When you pass the puck, you are doing everything correctly, however, when you receive a pass you are letting the puck hit your stick. As the puck arrives, try to draw your stick back a bit to cushion it."

*Destructive (and ineffective)*

"You pass the puck okay, but you can't receive a pass worth a darn! You're terrible!"

## **Sooner not Later**

Effective feedback is given sooner not later. It is given as soon as possible after the player does something. Your player then has a clearer memory or "feeling" of what has taken place and is in a better position to learn from your feed back.

### **Example:**

If you want to encourage shooting the puck in a certain way, you should say something positive immediately after the individual performs the skill. And if your players can "try out" your constructive, corrective feedback immediately after you have given it, they are much more likely to be able to perform the skill correctly the next time they try.

## **Check out for Clarity not Left Misunderstood**

To make sure that your feedback has been clearly understood, check it out with the player.

### **Example:**

Ask your players to tell you what they think you said or what they think you want them to do. If they have it right you can reinforce the message ("Yes, that's right"). If they have it wrong, you can clarify the message (That's not what I meant. What I meant was ...")

## **Positive and Informative not Negative and Useless**

Effective feedback has two main components. It is generally positive and informative. It reassures the player. It also gives the information needed to correct a problem or error. Negative feedback in itself provides little, if any, precise information on how to correct a problem.

## **Directed at Changeable Behaviour**

Feedback based on this principle helps the player focus on a change which is within reach. It does the player absolutely no good at all to be told by the coach that he or she is "too small" or not strong enough since this is something the player cannot usually change. Rather, the feedback must focus on some aspect of the skill being performed that can be improved.