

PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOK



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Communicating With Athletes and Their Readiness to Change

BRENT STEUERWALD, M.A., is the head football coach at Shenendehowa High School (Clifton Park, N.Y.) and the 1995 National Coach of the Year.

The success of any coach, at perhaps every level of competition, is determined by his ability to effectively communicate with athletes in a mutually supporting manner. Coaches may be knowledgeable and highly organized, but without open communication skills, these attributes may never be reflected in the performance of their athletes. The following points of consideration may help coaches develop their capacity to effect desired change.

- 1. Role Definition** - Give every athlete a sense of how he or she fits into the big picture. By recognizing the role each player contributes to the team, coaches can give an athlete a sense of worth and achievement. A coach should instill in every team member a sense that they can improve their status by hard work and commitment.
 - 2. Set Goals** - Encourage athletes to set realistic and measurable goals, and communicate how to achieve them. Discuss the differences between individual and team goals and the need to sometimes sacrifice personal goals for team objectives. The ability to set goals with a sense of purpose is a life skill that will help athletes beyond their sport.
 - 3. Mutual Trust** - Positive relationships are built on mutual respect and trust. Athletes must know that they can depend on their coach to be fair and positive, even in intense competition. Coaches can criticize but must leave personality out of it. Criticism must be constructive, positive, consistent, and oriented around improving performance. No player improves when made to feel worse about himself.
 - 4. Empower Athletes** - Within the context of a disciplined and structured environment, coaches should empower their athletes to make decisions and control various aspects of a contest. Coaches should thoroughly teach concepts with each athlete understanding his part. Then, charge athletes to execute their part by making adjustments on the run and communicating problems with the coaches. Responsibility and authority must go hand in hand.
 - 5. Fuel Athletes** - Athletes will not be able to perform mentally and physically without the proper foods and fluids. Coaches should team up with registered dietitians and athletic trainers to educate their athletes about food and fluid selections that focus on carbohydrates, because carbohydrates are the primary fuel for athletes. Fluids, such as sports drinks, offer athletes more than water. Sports drinks replace fluids and electrolytes lost in sweat and put back carbohydrate energy. Properly fueled athletes are able to perform at a higher level mentally.
 - 6. Develop a Plan** - Coaches must plan for communication opportunities just as they plan for game structure. Opportunities for communication can be as simple as searching out an athlete after a difficult practice and asking if he understands the reasons for the criticisms given. Athletes can only apply coaching guidance insofar as they understand what is desired of them. An excellent technique for developing lines of communication is a season-end interview of all returning athletes. A coach can engage an athlete in 20 questions in a quiet environment so that the athlete feels that the coach is interested in him as a person. The coach should be willing to accept and evaluate dissent when appropriate.
 - 7. Caring and Approval** - Coaches must consistently remind athletes that caring isn't conditional, approval is. Caring about athletes as individuals creates confidence in the coaches' support that allows them to grow as athletes and as people. Coaches must avoid coaching a fear of failure into their methods of communication, and encourage risk-taking as an integral part of athletic competition.
- Overall, effective communication skills can have a dramatic impact on coach-player relationships. Creating the atmosphere in which positive changes can be attained can pay great dividends for coaches and athletes alike.

