

Mike MacKay - Manager of Coach Education and Development

Coach Donohue



I was able to watch a lot of high level basketball this summer at world and national championships. Since only one team can win the championship, I often found myself talking with coaches and players after the teams had been eliminated. Many players and coaches often feel discouraged at this point in the season. So much energy goes into preparing to win the championship. Players and coaches alike often feel totally drained physical and mental. Anyone who is competitive wants to win. What surprised me was the number of players and coaches who did they not feel that they had learned or grew from the experience. Some even questioned if this was a worthwhile use of their time and energy. This floored me! How could someone, who had just represented their province or country, not feel that it was a worthwhile experience? It started me to pondering; What can we do to help athletes feel inspired to continue to compete and learn after losing. If they don't learn this lesson their life expectancy in sport will be short lived.

I spent a good part of the fall thinking, talking and reflecting on this issue. It was a conversation I had with Coach Steve Knochalski (former National team coach and current head coach of St. FX University in Antigonish, N.S.) that strated to help me think of ways to help coaches on how to address this issue. Coach K was the assistant coach with Jack Donohue, our long time national team coach. He knew coach Donohue better than most. I asked Coach K, "What was the best thing that Coach Donohue did, that made him special as a coach."

He thought for a while and replied; "The long walks."

My first thought was that these walks allowed Coach Donohue to reflect or spend quiet time alone, but this was not the case.

Coach K. filled in the blank; "Coach would take a player with him and they would go on these long walks and talk. Things always seemed to be better for the player after these walks."

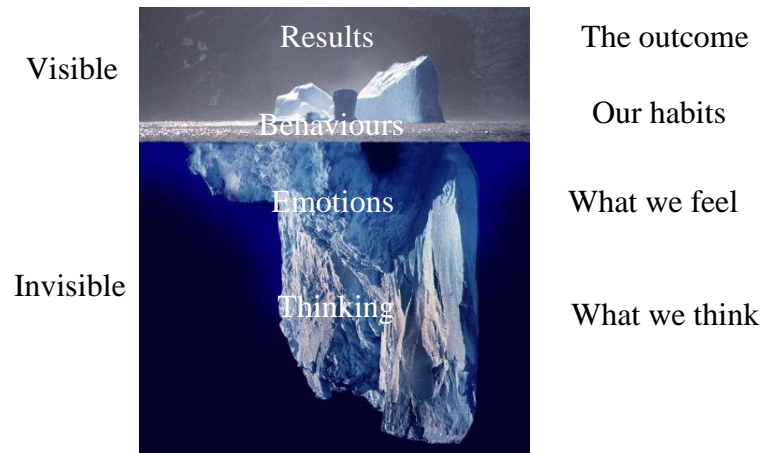
Having known Coach Donohue myself I remembered that it was never about the offensive or defensive systems. It wasn't his ability to scout and break down tape, it was about his relationship with his players. He got to know what they were thinking or feeling, he understood them.

This lead me to review my vast library of books on leadership. One I came across was called Quiet Leadership by David Rock. In it he used two models that can help us understand people;

- Iceberg model
- The Ask/Tell quadrants

The Iceberg

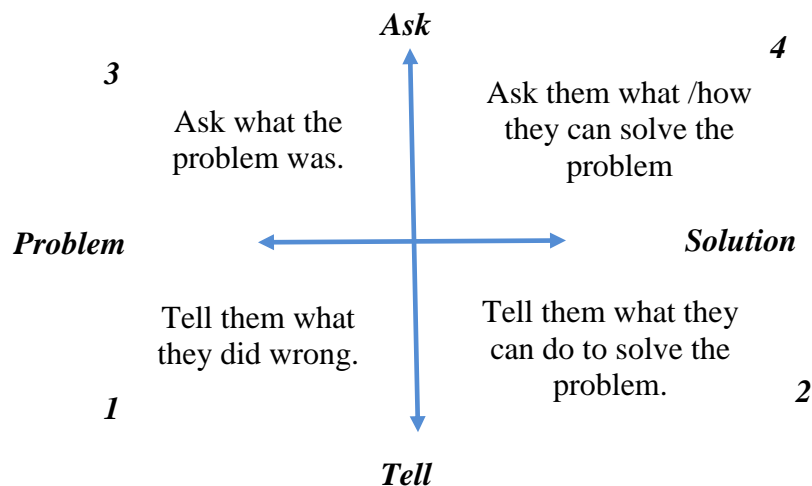
There is a **visible** part of the iceberg above the waterline, but the greater mass of an iceberg is below the water line and therefore **invisible**. When coaching athletes we often fall into the trap of directing our energies to what is visible. What we see are the players behaviours and the results of these behaviours (outcome). What remains invisible to us is what the player is thinking and feeling.



The problem with focusing all of our energies on the visible, is that it is the invisible that controls the visible. In order to positively change the outcome we need to help the athlete change what they are thinking and feeling first.

The Ask-Tell Quadrants

The only way to find out what someone is thinking or feeling is by asking.



High level coaching usually takes place in (quadrant #4), this is where we ask the athlete about how to solve the problem. There are times when we need to be in the other quadrants. When an athlete has little experience you may need to tell them a solution (quadrant #2). Asking what the problem is can help find out what an athlete is thinking or feeling (quadrant #3). This should be converted into solution thinking where we allow them to take ownership and learn to think for themselves. Telling players what they are doing wrong (quadrant#1) is one we have to be careful not to dominate with our coaching, especially if we do not supply a solution with it.

Example:

Tell the problem - "You're not hustling!"

Tell the solution - "You need to sprint back on defense!"

Ask the problem - "What's wrong with you?"

Ask the solution - "What can we do to help you get back and stop your check in transition?"

The problem for coaches is that we often tend to dominate in the one quadrant. Like athletes, it is when we are under pressure that we revert back to our comfort zones. If your comfort zone is telling you, will do this most often in the heat of the battle. Now remember, no one is perfect! The key is awareness of what style you use and making a conscious effort to improve.

How does all of this relate to motivating players to work hard and continue to grow and learn after facing adversity? When we complete in the big games or the big tournaments we too often focus on the outcome. As coaches we fall into the trap of not taking into account what the players are thinking or feeling. A turnover is made, a player is not playing good defense we make a sub. During the heat of the battle we often do not have time to ask questions. We start to dominate with telling. After the game, we often need personal time to recovery from the stress of the game. The last thing we want to do is go and talk to a player who performed poorly. Especially if emotions are involved. It becomes easy to isolate ourselves from the players. We assume we know what the players are thinking and feeling. We go and spend countless hours watching tape or scouting the next opponent. We tell our players all about the tendencies of the opponent, but we have ignore the most important people, our own players. Over time this can have a decimating affect on a player. Young players especially, need to learn how to express their feeling and emotions in a positive way to enable them to grow. When we do not allow this to happen we are missing out on a valuable life lesson.

Like most lessons, I had to learn this the hard way. Early in my coaching career I was frustrated with the play of my team. My body language showed this to everyone in the gym. After the game I was approached by the mother of one of the players. Luckily I respected her and her knowledge. She told me that she could sense my frustration. I told her that I didn't think the players wanted it bad enough. I told them I had an open door policy and they should come to talk to me. Not one of them did. This just proved my point. She looked me in the eye and told me " Mike, these young ladies do not know how to talk to you. They so much want to do the right thing, but are afraid of you." I was flabbergasted! but knew she was right. I immediate knew that it was me that had to change, not them. I had to learn how to become approachable and learn how to listen. I was the teacher, they were the student. I could not expect them to make the first step, I had to approach them.

Getting back to Coach Donohue. The art of his coaching came from how to ask, when to ask and where to ask. He could sense the right time and place for having a talk with an athlete. One of the best pieces of advice I ever got from him was to watch the players eyes when you first talk to them before practice. Try to sense what they are thinking or feeling. If you see someone who looks out of sorts talk to them right away. These talks could occur in a bus, in a hotel, at a restaurant or in the corner of a gym. Most often they were done in private. Often, to save time we try to cover off on issues by discussing them with the entire team. "Some of us are not hustling, we need to do a better job of getting back on defense." Sometimes we try to get to the team by calling a player out in front of his/her teammates. "John, if you don't start hustling back on defense you can just sit yourself down on the bench."

If you know how your players think or feel this strategy can work. If you don't it can explode in your face.

The key is to take the time to get to know what your players are thinking and feeling. This usually occurs by asking questions. Think about how you ask, when you ask and where you ask. The more caring and candor you show, the more sincere and effective you will be.