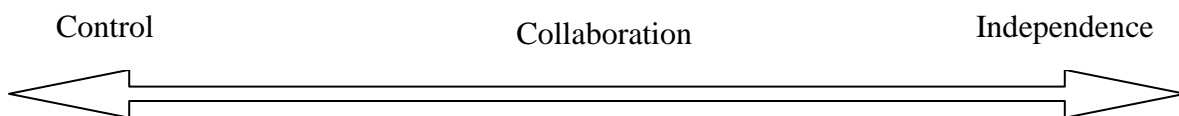




Collaborative Coaching

Recently a friend suggested I try playing a basketball video game. I was told it was like playing the real game. This must have been because after every score the players went into their victory dance or celebration. When a foul was called the players were very life like in showing their frustration (I often wondered who was teaching young players these habits, now I know). Maybe it was like the real game because the graphics were awesome, but I was frustrated with the way the game was designed. I could only control one player at a time. The design of the game was basically a series of 1 on 1 games chained together. Maybe this is what my friend meant by a real game (inset sarcasm). One player goes 1 on 1 while the others stand and watch. Why could it not be like the real game where I could control the actions of the other players? How could I set up a backdoor when the defender overplayed? This is when it dawned on me; I wanted to play the video game like how I started out coaching. I wanted to control the actions of the players. If I could just get the players to move around like I wanted we would win. As I grew as a coach I came to realize that it is impossible for one person to control the movements and actions of five people at one time. There are too many decisions that need to be made at any given time.

This led me to consider the continuum that we go through in coaching. At one extreme is control where we as coaches dictate all actions. At the other extreme is independence. Here players do what they want individually with no thought for the others on the team. In the middle is collaboration where we teach the players to work together to achieve their goal.



Upon reflection of my own coaching I realized that so often I fluctuate between control and independence without ever practicing collaboration. And yet when we get to the game I expected the players to collaborate to win the game.

So often I taught skills independently in what Joan Vickers calls **blocked practice**. I isolated skills into building blocks such as shooting, passing etc. Once they mastered each building block it was assumed that the athlete could then place each block in its appropriate place in order to produce a spectacular performance. We did the same thing in fitness training when we used to isolate muscles to train. We trained the quads and glutes in an isolated fashion to make them larger. We then expected the athlete to be able to perform a more powerful squat. We now realize that you train the movement not individual muscles.

When I turned to team play I would give the players a pattern that I expected everyone to memorize or I would give restrictive roles to players. Only the point guard could dribble, each player was assigned specific shots some were even told never to shoot or dribble. When did I practice collaboration where I allowed the players who were on the floor to scan their surroundings and make decisions that were best for the teams? The decisions needed to be more than regurgitating the right answer as desired by me. I needed to provide a safe learning environment where mistakes were encouraged. My greatest growth as a coach came when I shifted the focus from me to them. I started to teach collaboration. Have I mastered this skill? Not by a long shot! It is something I am constantly striving to improve. As we always say if it were available in a book we would all be doing it right. It is the blended of the various components that makes coaching difficult. There are still times when we use control and times when we need independent actions from the players, but by far the most important role is teaching players how to collaborate.

In the book Punished by Rewards, author Alfie Kohn makes the case for the use of collaborative teaching vs. the more traditional behavioural approach. The behavioural approach is about getting children to behave in a certain way. If the behaviour is acceptable the child gets a reward. If it is wrong there is a punishment. In the short term this may work, but it is extrinsic in nature. In short it is about control. How can I get this person to do what I want? To truly teach a child we need to assist them to think about the decisions they have made and learn from them for the future. We need to find intrinsic methods. He also suggested the teacher go through three steps in teaching collaboratively:

- Step 1: Talk about the action the child has just taken and decide if it really is a problem or not. If so why?
- Step 2: Come up with plan together. What do you think we can do about this problem?
- Step 3: Check back later to see how it is going. Let the players reflect on the process and decides on whether it is working.

This process is very similar to what is promoted in the games approach to teaching. The players are presented with the whole game first. Joan Vickers would call this the hard first approach. Maybe for this example it is three on three. The coach starts by letting the players play three on three. After awhile the coach stops the athletes and asks if there are any problems, Step 1. It is important to remember at this time that young players very often cannot verbalize their thoughts and feelings. The coach may have to guide the discussion. Don't act like the trial lawyer where you only ask questions where you know the answer. This is still control. Honour all answers to your questions. The explanation should be part of the conversation with the child involved, not listening to a lecture by the coach. Thinking together out loud is part of a child's development. In this example the problem is they cannot score. Everyone agrees this is a problem. We can now move to Step 2, develop a plan, what can we do about it? The solutions may be to go back and work on certain skills or it may have to do with a certain concept such as spacing. The key is that you came up with the solution together. The final step is to continue to check

back to see how it is going, Step 3. Use how and what questions to have the players reflect during little debriefs.

Another collaborative approach that we are promoting comes from Rick Majerus. We ask players to constantly ask the flowing questions when playing:

- Who am I
- Who is guarding me?
- Who are my team mates?
- Who is guarding them?

Players need to understand how their actions or decision affects other people. Again by discussing these questions players start to develop a deeper understanding of the roles and responsibilities that each player has within a team. Too often as coaches we have tried to speed up the process by designating roles and responsibilities without the explanation. Again this may work for the short term, but not in the long term.

In the book Made to Stick authors Chip and Dan Heath talk about the military concept of **Commander's Intent**. In the past great amounts on time, thought and training went into planning a military campaign. The problem was once the battle started very often the plan went out the window. They often became useless. With this in mind the concept of commander's intent was born. In brief, it was about aligning the intent of the plan with out getting bogged down in the details. If you know the destination, improvise a way to get there when the main road is blocked. Two key questions are asked:

1. If we do nothing else during tomorrow's mission, we must _____
2. The single most important thing that we must do tomorrow is _____

To me this is what we must work towards in coaching. One of our main jobs is to help define the key elements of the plan into **simple intents**. I would suggest that the players are involved in the decision on what these should be. A good time to practice this is in drills. Ask the players; "What the single most important thing we accomplish in this drill?" For example, in a defensive drill it may be no uncontested lay ups. Some players achieve this intent by not getting beat off the dribble. Others may think about being ready to help. Some might think it means fouling. By stopping the players and discussing the actions to the intent you can guide the learning. The players must be given flexibility because in the heat of the battle one never knows what will happen. As long as we all work together or collaborate with the same intent team's success will be more likely to occur.