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### Paint a Picture



One of my travels this summer took me to London, England. I was lucky enough to have one day in which I could enjoy the many sights of the city. I decided to visit the National Gallery of Art, which is at Trafalgar Square. I asked at the information desk, which was the most popular painting to view in the entire gallery. Without hesitation I was told that Van Gogh's Sunflowers were not only the most popular, but the most expensive. One of the set of seven had recently sold for \$40 million dollars. Normally I am into realistic art, but on seeing the painting I had a whole new appreciation for the artistry of the post-impressionist painting. Many people can paint a picture of a pot of flowers, but few can capture the textures and variations on the colour yellow that were on display in this picture. There are many artists who know **WHAT** subject to paint. It is **HOW** the artist paints that defines his/her greatness. The same is true in coaching. Coaching is an art and a science. The art is the 'how' and the science is the 'what'. Most coaches know 'what' to coach. They know they need an offense and a defense. They also know that the players need to work on certain fundamentals. It is the 'how' where most coaches need help. One reason is that most coaching clinics and resources stress 'what' to coach. Very few show the coach the 'how'. The beginning coach is often left to figure out for him/herself how to teach the strategies presented to him/her. What I try to do is help coaches become aware of the 'how'. Many coaches do great things subconsciously. By highlighting some of the how's of coaching, and giving a name to the action, it brings to light various techniques for those who are unaware. Coaches can now pay more attention to these coaching techniques and monitor their effectiveness.

To become a great artist in teaching the "how", the coach needs the ability to paint pictures. If you were a coach from Southern Ontario and asked a player from Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan and British Columbia to draw a picture of a mountain, the pictures would look quite different. In Nova Scotia it would be a round hill, in Saskatchewan it would be the slope on the side of a river bank and in British Columbia it would be sharp peaks with snow caps. Which one is correct? The answer is none of them. A mountain to you looks like the Niagara escarpment. It depends from whose perspective you are judging the drawings. When we as coaches use generalizations we are likely to have players paint different pictures in their minds. This is based on their previous experiences. Two examples of generalizations are as follows:

- Using words like, tough, hard and focus. What does tough look like? Each player will paint their own picture until we as coaches clearly define it.

- Speak to the collective group rather than the individual – “**WE** are not hustling.” Is it the whole group or does the coach not want to single out one player? There are always two sides to the coin. If you only speak to the individual often the other players will tune you out since they do not think it applies to them. When you coach one you coach them all. I have also found that when you generalize with a statement like; “Some of you are not hustling.” a team of females has a tendency to think the coach is talking about each and every one of them. A male team tends to think that the coach must be talking about someone else, because “I know I hustle.”

What follows are some examples of coaches painting pictures.

The coach is not pleased with the team’s defense and calls a time out.

Coach #1: “**WE** are not playing **TOUGH** enough.” *If **WE** do not get **TOUGHER**, **WE** are going to lose this game. Now let’s smarten up and get **TOUGH**.*”

You can sense the coach’s frustration. The picture the players get is that every one of them is not tough. The coach has brought the focus to the outcome by mentioning losing. This is not the place we want the players mind. They should be focusing on the process, the things they can control in the moment.

Coaches often speak like this because they do not know what that actual cause of the problem is. They know the defense is not stopping the opponent, but what is the detail? It is important that the coach make use of all available eyes during the game to see the detail. When everyone on the bench watches the same thing details often get missed. Assistant coaches especially need to be trained to watch for detail off the ball. If something is considered important it should also be charted by someone on the bench. This helps provide the detail to the players.

Coach #2: *Our defense is terrible right now. **WE** have got to get back on defense. **THEY** are just sprinting down the floor and scoring lay ups. Now! Everybody understand? Get back!*

This coach has started to paint a picture. At least the players know that getting back is part of playing better defense. He still has not identified who and where they need to get back too. This coach needs to work on increasing the clarity of the picture. The rhetorical question; Everybody understand? Is a common closing remark we make as coaches. Very rarely do the players respond to this type of questioning. In the coaches mind he/she has explained the problem now the players should be able to fix it.

Coach #3: *“#12, the blond guard, is not boxing out when we shoot. He is sprint down the floor. When #15 rebounds for them he is throwing the long outlet so #12 can score a layup. Sam, you need to sprint back to the centre circle as our long safety. Read the eyes of the rebounder and drift over to #12’s side. Bill, #15 is guarding you; if he gets the rebound you jam him. Remember how we did that to the player from the Warriors in our last game. Now, Pete, George and Steve you have to sprint back to get in front*

*of the ball, turn and face the ball and stay between your check and the basket. “*

This coach has given the players a detailed picture of what has happened. He uses names and specific actions in the description. By bringing up a past performance he is helping the players make use of their personal highlight reel. This is an effective technique in building and maintaining confidence. He has also used very specific words to describe the solution. The problem is that it is very verbal. The coach is making the assumption that everyone understands.

Coach #4: *“Ok, everybody take a centered breathe right now.” The head coach pauses while getting a coaching board. “Coach Bill, what has happened the last three possessions on defense?” the head coach asks the assistant coach.*

*“Coach according to the defensive possession chart it says that #12 has run out and scored a fastbreak lay up the last three possessions.”*

*“Well boys the stats don’t lie. Now, remember our plan? We knew that “#12, the blond guard, is not boxing out when we shoot.” as the coach draws on the coaching board exactly what is happening. “He is sprinting down the floor. When #15 rebounds for them he is throwing the long outlet so #12 can score a layup.” What do you think we can do can do to stop this?”(Pause) “Sam, What can you do to help stop #12 going long?”*

*“Coach I can get back as deep as him when we shoot.”*

*“That’s great, Sam you’re the long safety. Bill, How can you help us out?”*

*“Coach, the guy guarding me is the one throwing the ball long. If I put pressure on him he won’t be able to make that pass.”*

*“That is right, we call that jamming, and it gives Sam and our other three players’ time to get back in position. Now remember you guys on the bench, especially Chuck and Tom, you will have to be long safety and jammer when you sub in for Sam and Bill.”*

First, this coach recognizes the frustration in the players. By asking the players to take a centred breathe he is helping the players control their anxiety. It also gives him time to collect his thoughts.

Secondly, by asking the assistant coach about the stats he is giving the players an accurate picture of what is actually happening. It is not a **mirage**, something that we assume is happening. You often see mirages when you are frustrated as a coach. Your mind plays tricks on you when your emotional level rises. Also by engaging the assistant coach he is validating his position on the team. The players and the assistant coach both now know that the role he plays in the game is important. The head coach has trained the assistant coach to watch for specific things that are important to the success of the team.

Thirdly, the coach refers the players back to the plan. This helps their concentration and can build confidence because it is something they know they have practiced.

Next he paints a picture of what is actually happening. He uses specific player's names rather than generalities. He uses a white board for those who are visual learners. Be careful of using a white board with player in the FUNdamental Stage of development. They do not know that the circle on the board represents them. Notice that he is not making any comments at this stage. He is just painting a picture for the players.

Finally, by asking the players what they think he is empowering the athletes to think for themselves. By pausing he allows all the players to think. He is testing their knowledge of how to solve this particular problem. He also gives the proper name to the action. This helps all of the players understand what that action looks like for the future. The word should create the picture. This method cannot be used all of the time, especially with a 50 second time out, but is very effective at  $\frac{1}{4}$  time,  $\frac{1}{2}$  time or when debriefing a player or team on the bench. It is also one of the main ways we can teach in practice. The pictures are created for actions in practice. Now the coach can use the word as a short cut in the game.

Each day in practice a coach must work to clarify for the players what the final picture should look like. Vince Lombardi, the former great football coach of the Green Bay Packers once said that a coach had to see in his mind eye what the final version of his team or play should look like. His job each day, whether in a practice or game was to continue to add the details that would help the team reach this vision. That is true artistry in coaching.