

Empowerment and Influencing Lessons from Coaching Youth Sports

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As leaders, we have great responsibility to develop the next generation.

During the last few years while delivering global business partnering programs, I've experienced what empowerment means to different organizations, leaders, and teams — and the importance of influencing skills.

However, it was while recently coaching a U10-U13 co-ed soccer team at my local YMCA, that it dawned on me how much influence we can have as leaders — and the importance of using it wisely!

The team I was given to coach was typical of many an inherited team (be it at work, school, or an extracurricular group) — a wide range of experience, abilities and interest levels, and a lot of potential!

My goal is always to try and inspire team members — to set high standards, help each person to develop, have fun, and experience what it's like to be part of a great team.

As in business, developing a youth sports team isn't a one-size-fits-all process. You experience a wide range of personalities, styles, skills, ambitions, and confidence levels. For example, some players who are currently less skilled may exhibit self-confidence, others who are more skilled may not.

During the fall and spring seasons that I was fortunate enough to be their coach, I came to realize the importance to the team of my tone and choice of words.

For all the licensing, soccer skills and experience I bring to coaching, the most valuable skill I could bring was emotional intelligence — being aware of, and managing, my own feelings and emotions, and those of others (players and parents).

During our weekly practices, I spent a lot of time on skill and technical development, but in games it was all about managing team and parent expectations — reactions to playing well (or not), to making mistakes, to winning/being dominant or losing a game.

Some things I heard during practices and games:

“Coach, I find this difficult” or “Coach, this is too easy”

“Coach, I feel I've become a worse/better player”

“Coach, I'm more tired than I was last year”

“Coach, when we work hard as a team, we do much better”

“Coach, ABC doesn't know the rules and cost us a goal”

“Coach, I’m no good in goal”

“Coach, can I play striker (again)?”

“Coach, we were really tired, but we really pulled though in that game”

I sense that in all walks of life, people who are learning and growing will have similar feelings — but in business they are much less likely to tell you. Kids often do, and it really made me think, and feel, a greater sense of responsibility for my actions and reactions.

On reflection, the most valuable attributes I was able to bring to help my team were courtesy, empathy, acceptance of failure (or learning as I call it), and genuinely caring about them.

Your team will know whether you care — and it makes a huge difference to them.

In the end, it all made sense — my responsibilities were to uphold and promote the values of the YMCA <https://www.stpeteymca.org/membership/faq-s/>, build character, and create the conditions for the team to flourish.

I hope that they became stronger and more confident in the process – and in our final gathering it was important for us all to celebrate!

Happy spring, and thanks to the YMCA!

<https://www.oxbridgeacademy.edu.za/blog/what-does-empowerment-mean-to-you-our-students-have-their-say/>