



As the Games Based Approach gains popularity, it is evident that other coaching activities complement the approach. The way a coach communicates is one of those activities. By far the best method to communicate in a Games Based Approach is in a cooperative style, using questioning techniques. This makes a coach's communication "Learner-centered". Although it is easier for a coach to simply tell a student what, when and how to do something (Coach-centered), it is not an effective way to help students learn.

Questioning is a coaching art that requires development and practice. Questions have the advantage of involving the student in learning, which helps motivation, stimulates problem solving and decision making, builds agreement, and increases the quality of relationship and communication. Often, corrective feedback isn't even required after a good question.

Questioning effectively does not have to take long. A coach must be able to ask questions in a way that gets to the point quickly. There are three basic levels of questioning a coach can use.

1. Binary Questioning

This is the easiest form, where the coach lays out two possibilities. It is a good place to start with players since many are used to being told what to do and feel pressure and anxiety when asked a question. Binary questions come in a few different possibilities.

YES or NO - Lay out only the correct option. (E.g. "To hit the ball higher over the net, would you like to hit the ball from low to high like I demonstrated?") The student here is free to answer "yes" or "no", however, the weight is on agreement.

CORRECT or INCORRECT - Lay out two options, one being the correct answer and the other the incorrect performance of the player. For example, after the player hits the net due to an incorrect racquet path, the coach could ask, "Which would've produced the net clearance you need, that level stroke, or more low to high?" This reinforces correct performance and gives a contrast of the incorrect performance as a reference.

A or B - Here the coach lays out two possibilities, both could be correct (e.g., "Should you put it at the opponent's feet at the net, or lob over their head?") This gives the student a sense of control and involvement in problem solving.

Note: Binary questions are a good way to ease students into the questioning process.

Using Questions During Coaching

by Wayne Elderton

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2. Leading Questions

This next level of questioning allows the player more options to answer. This type of questioning helps develop problem solving more than Binary questions because it lays out the whole thought process. For example:

SITUATION - In a rally drill, the player hits a weak backhand from the center of the court when they could have run around and taken the advantage with a forehand.

Coach "Which shot do you prefer to attack with, your forehand or backhand?"

Player "My forehand."

Coach "Then what could you have done to attack the ball?"

Player "I could have run around it and hit a forehand."

Coach "Where would you hit it to put your opponent in more trouble?"

Player "Inside out, to their backhand."

Coach "Great choice, can you try it on this turn?"

Player "Yes."

Make sure the same type of questions are asked when the player does the correct performance as well.

Coach "What made you run around your backhand?"

Player "I thought I could attack better with my forehand."

Coach "Great! That's the way to use your strength, keep doing it when you see the opportunity."

Player "Thanks, Coach!"

3. Open-ended Questions

This is the ultimate level of questioning. An Open-ended question is one that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no". For example, "What makes a crosscourt shot more effective in this situation?" Here the player can answer anything. Open-ended questions are exceptionally good for stimulating a player to see the cause and effect of tactical choices.

With Open-ended questions, the challenge is not to get taken off track by the player's answer. The other challenge is that, in this form of questioning, the coach may not fully know the answer. It takes a very self-assured coach to engage in a cooperative journey of investigation with a player to find what works best for them. Regarding this type of adventure, Canadian Head National Coach, Louis Cayer has said, "I have learned more about coaching from the players I have taught than from any course or book on coaching." Coaches who take the time to master this form of advanced communication build a great sense of team and trust between themselves and their students.

QUESTIONING TIPS

The benefits of the questioning approach far outweigh the perceived simplicity and quickness of just telling players what to do. Here are a few additional tips:

- Question when they do it correctly, not just when they perform incorrectly. Don't let your questions become just another form of criticism. Questioning when they do it right is an excellent opportunity to reinforce good problem solving.
- Use "How" and "What" questions more than "Why" questions. "Why" questions can give the impression the coach is judging them and may make them emotionally defensive. For example, "Why did you hit that shot?" may sound like "What's wrong with you?" In contrast, "What made you hit that shot?" invites an honest answer.
- Get to the point quickly. As a general rule, any questioning exchange during a drill should be fewer than 30 seconds long.
- Listen to the answers! Avoid the trap of your questions being a form of disguised demands (you ask the question but don't really care what they answer). You will get valuable clues on how to help your students learn by listening to their answers and building from there.

Questioning doesn't waste time, it saves time in long term development. I used to think that using questions squandered precious hitting time, until I saw the results in competition. The coaches who believed it was a waste were the same ones who constantly complained about poor decisions their students made during match play. Training a player's mind is as important as training their body.

Questioning is like a flashlight that illuminates a "dark understanding" a player may have. It builds awareness. Without awareness, players don't really learn. Your goal as a coach is not to teach (download information to a student), your goal is to have them learn (take information and transform their actions). A player who "discovered" something (through a coach's questioning) will retain it longer than if they were simply told to do it.

Coaching Exercise

To practice the art and skill of questioning, give a lesson where you cannot just tell students what to do. Every interaction has to be in the form of a question. For example, instead of saying "turn your hips", ask the question, "What can your hips do to add more power to the shot?" Reward students for good answers.

Conclusion

Players who are trained with this approach tend to compete smarter and with more confidence. Uncertainty creates fear. If a player has been trained by questions to problem solve, they have a library of solutions on which to draw. Confidence is the result since when they encounter a problem in a match, they have already experienced solving that situation (or one very much like it).