

FEEDBACK: A COACHING “POWER TOOL”

Feedback is when a coach observes what a student is doing and communicates it back to them. Often coaches get caught being unsure of what to say, or how to say it. This leads to either being silent for long periods of time or engaging in ineffective ‘coaching babble’ (e.g. *Good!, Good!, well done!, great shot!*). Although some coaches would say this is motivational, anyone who actually takes lessons knows that this kind of feedback makes students ‘tune-out’ to the coaches words. Another common coaching behavior is to jump in with feedback only when students are doing things wrong (we will explore this later).

By understanding different categories and purposes of feedback, a coach can prepare better and have a healthier framework to know what to say. Two key feedback “Laws” that can improve a coach’s feedback are:

- 1. Feedback must always have a purpose**
- 2. Positive feedback works positively**

1. Feedback must always have a purpose:

The reason you are speaking as a coach is to produce a particular response. If a coach has a specific purpose for opening their mouth, their feedback will be more effective. There are two main reasons a coach will give feedback, for motivation or correction (“prescriptive” feedback).

- **Motivational feedback:** This is when a coach helps students focus and maintain good effort and attitude in the lesson. For example, when a student needs to be reminded to clear a ball away from their feet or continue to keep their feet moving in a drill.
- **Prescriptive feedback:** This is when a coach helps a student change current behavior. It could be on the **drill** (e.g. correcting a student when they are not doing the drill in the way it was set-up). Drill feedback helps keep things on track. Drill management ensures maximum repetition and a smooth, safe transition from activity to activity. The feedback could also be on the **skill** (e.g. the student does not perform the correct racquet path to clear the net). Learning anything new is often not an easy process whether it is a new way of moving, a grip, or a new footwork pattern.

The skill is for a coach to know why they are giving feedback. This will help them place the feedback in the right place, at the best time possible, for the greatest effect. A coach who masters this helps student’s learn much faster.

2. Positive Feedback works positively:

It is a common belief that coaching is simply telling people what they do wrong. This couldn't be further from the truth. Error detection and correction is only a small part of the feedback process. If a coach has this as their primary feedback, they are short-changing their students! Coaching is an interactive communication process that requires building trust and rapport with the student. I am not sure if you have noticed, but telling people what they are doing wrong does not usually win any relational points with people, even if the advice is technically correct. *How* one says something is every bit as important as what is said, this is true in any relationship whether a friend, spouse, or tennis student.

It is important that coaches become “success seekers” rather than “fault finders”. This is critical because positive feedback (as opposed to negative), builds up a better long-term psychology. Negative feedback often builds a “fear of failure” mentality. This can lead to players ‘choking’ badly in matchplay. How well do people hit shots when the words “Please don't miss!” are running through their minds? Positive feedback builds a “go for the goal” mentality. Imagine hitting a second serve in a third set tie-breaker and thinking “Spin-it hard!” Going for a goal creates more confident play.

If positive feedback is so powerful, why don't more coaches embrace it? The answer is that positive feedback is very misunderstood. What positive coaching feedback does not mean is calling poor performance good. This is called “flattery”. Telling little Johnny “*Great shot!*” when he sends a ball into the side fence does no one any good. This kind of feedback will often even have a negative effect as Johnny starts to expect emotional rewards no matter how poor his performance.

Positive feedback is a communication tool, to change specific behaviors. It is reflecting the performance back to the student. No matter what the performance (good or bad), a coach can remember the key words “**Praise**” and “**Encourage**”.

Praising is what a coach should do when a student performs correctly. **Coaches should constantly try to catch their student's doing things right!** By reinforcing good performance the student will repeat it over and over and start to develop confidence.

Encouraging is what a coach should do when the student performs incorrectly. Telling them they “stink” is of no use to a student since they don't have any idea of the right thing to do. Always link the correction to the result that can be expected. For example, “*Johnny, your preparation was fine, you will need to change your racquet angle a bit to keep the ball in the court*”. Here the coach praises any good performance and encourages any bad performance. In this way good performance gets highlighted making it easier to remember and repeat. Poor performances are corrected without the emotional impact of negative feedback and, most importantly, students learn how to be problem solvers, rather than learning the coach thinks they are awful.

By maintaining purposeful, positive feedback, a coach can help players love the game, have more fun, and improve to their personal level of excellence.

If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:
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