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HOW TO AVOID COACHING FROM THE SIDELINES

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If you've been to a youth sports competition, you've inevitably been or come across that parent. You know the one, screaming at the top of their lungs, "Shoot it!" "Pass the ball!" or some other sports-themed colloquialism akin to winning at all costs. No doubt, it was with the best intentions; they only want the best for the kids. Unfortunately, as we all know, coaching from the sidelines is one of the worst things a parent can do, as it:

- Confuses players with conflicting instructions.
- Takes authority away from the coach.

And most importantly:

- Steals the opportunity for children to perform on their own.

SIDELINE COACHES IN THE WORKPLACE

But the youth sports world isn't the only place we find coaching from the sideline. It can also be found in the workplace, although it may be more veiled when it happens. Often, it can be driven by hidden agendas that disrupt business growth and leadership. Sometimes it can be disguised as working towards consensus.

However, when working to reach a group decision, we have to be careful that we aren't stymying ideas, perspectives, and differences of opinion. When we attempt to reach consensus, it's crucial that people feel comfortable sharing opposing viewpoints and are aware that sometimes consensus is unachievable. An important part of leadership is the skillset to make a decision, even if it's unpopular.

Most importantly, we must be aware when we are, in fact, the sideline coach. We all have opinions on the direction of our organizations. Different perspectives should be celebrated, developed, and brought forward. However, there is a fine line between creating an environment that fosters ideas, and intentionally sabotaging or undermining that effort, or creating a space in which your thoughts are the only ones heard.

Similar to the soccer field version, the workplace sideline coach tends to be overly critical, speaks over others, and doesn't fully understand how their emotions and behavior affect others. It's essential to understand the right and wrong time to interject ideas. I speak from experience, having been the sideline coach myself.

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I spoke with [Piper Strick](#), Parker, Smith & Feek's vice president and organizational development specialist about her run-ins with sideline coaches in the workplace. She explained that she has seen it several times in her career. Sometimes it can involve leaders telling other leaders how to manage their people without having all the information. Other times, brainstorming sessions, designed to come up with ideas, can devolve into a forum for simple critical feedback.

SHIFTING MINDSETS TO ENCOURAGE INNOVATION

Strick mentioned how she enjoys a system commonly used in leadership training, where participants are encouraged to develop an inquiry mindset, as opposed to a solutions-based one. [Susan Brock](#), a vice president, account manager, and supervisor in the commercial insurance department at Parker, Smith & Feek, is an excellent example. She intentionally allows people to work through their own ideas and asks if they need help developing a strategy or not. Often, those employees are able to come up with their own solutions.

Strick offered a couple of additional key points.

- Ask only questions. Stay curious for as long as possible to prevent yourself from providing advice, as that may not provide a learning opportunity.
- Make space for mistakes. People learn through trial and error, so leave room for them to try something new or different without your guidance. Use the question, "What have you tried so far?" to help others know it is okay to explore.

Instead of breaking out the coaching shorts (you know the ones), here are some tips to keeping the sideline coaching to a minimum when working with your team.

1. Facilitate open and safe communication – Work purposefully to provide open and safe opportunities for people to share ideas and perspectives. People are less

inclined to push hidden agendas when they feel that their input is being heard, and there won't be negative repercussions when sharing ideas. Encourage, solicit, and applaud those who share ideas in the appropriate settings. When employees struggle to find the right time and place to share ideas, don't embarrass them or try to use those individuals as an example. Instead, have a one-on-one discussion with them and coach them on when to share ideas and opinions.

2. Create a collaborative environment – Check in regularly with your teams, encourage idea flow, and allow the team to pursue those concepts even when you feel yours might be better. Similarly to children's sports, the coach checks in with the team regularly – at half time, as kids are coming off the field, and at the beginning and end of the game. But the quarterback has the option to [call an audible](#) if they feel another play might work better than the coach's call.

Work environments are constantly changing, and the expectation should be that the team will take feedback from the ever-changing atmosphere and supplement the plan. A change in circumstances also presents an ideal opportunity for team members to grow and demonstrate leadership skills.

3. Simplify the objective – It's hard for the team to get on the same page when they don't understand the end goal. It will be even more challenging if they don't agree with the objective. Make sure your game plan isn't too complex. Refer to the [K.I.S.S.](#) principle and [S.M.A.R.T.](#) goals when evaluating your objectives, and check in with your team to ensure they understand and feel their contributions are in line with the group.

4. Set clear expectations – Strick also points out that nothing invites the sideline coach more than poor direction or a team that doesn't understand the expected

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result. Make sure that you are setting clear expectations, and write them down. The sideline coach is going to have a field day if you can't clearly articulate expectations on paper or verbally.

Superstar tip: If you haven't already, read "[Start with Why by Simon Sinek.](#)" The book discusses people's intrinsic need to understand the path they are on and why meeting expectations is essential. Start with the result in mind, and let your team express themselves in finding creative ways to achieve their goals.

5. Be honest in everything you do – Sounds simple, right? You may feel you are protecting your employees by not sharing. However, people can often sense a hidden agenda is being pushed. Further, your team will speculate and often give credence to the worst possible outcomes. If the news is bad, deliver the bad news. Allow employees to digest, come up with ideas, and be part of the solution. Nothing fuels the fire of a sideline coach more than a lack of trust.

Next time you are on the sideline at a child's sporting event and a parent next to you feels obligated to provide instructions while the kids are competing, do everyone a favor and ask them to please stop. "But, they aren't hurting anyone," you may justify. "Maybe the kids aren't really listening to them."

Regardless, who should the kids listen to, the actual coach, or the parent screaming instructions from the sideline? When they should be focused on the objective at hand, they are being disrupted by an individual who believes what they have to say is more important than the goals of the team.

Whether on the field, the court, or at work, everyone is impacted by the sideline coach. Let's all do our part to eliminate that role and instead foster open collaboration and teamwork.