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How the Coaching Up Model Works

“Whether the manager likes it or not, creating great relationships is how careers are built, how businesses are built, and how great teams are built.”

—Steve Chandler and Scott Richardson,
*100 Ways to Motivate Others: How Great
Leaders Can Produce Insane Results
Without Driving People Crazy*

The world is awash in clutter. Our brains are being shaped by the media. Attention spans are shrinking. Videos are getting shorter. Nobody wants to read a long e-mail message, let alone write one. Fewer and fewer people even communicate in whole sentences. (Noticed that? Right!) There's a lot of noise out there. How do you cut through the noise to deliver a critically important message—fast? How do you reach somebody with a transformative, inspiring message in a crunch?

The answer—based on my broad and deep experience as a basketball player who has had many coaches at the high school, collegiate, and professional levels, and as a coach who has coached teams and worked one-on-one and in small groups with basketball players for over a decade—is the very simple process I am calling the Coaching Up Model. Sometimes that model encompasses the full span of an ongoing relationship; at other times, it takes the form of a compact conversation. Here's an example of the conversation.

An Actual Coaching Up Conversation

Let's imagine that you are the trainer/coach for a young heavyweight boxer, who, after just a few months of training, has signed up for his first real match. The match begins. At the end of the first round your boxer emerges from a slugfest in which neither he nor his opponent has

gained the upper hand. He returns to his corner for a 1-minute rest before heading out for the second round. He's winded, his legs are tired, the crowd is hostile, his left wrist is throbbing, and he isn't sure whether he will survive the next round. You have 1 minute to communicate with him—what do you do?

The clock is ticking. Your fighter sits down; the assistant trainer slips a towel around his neck. The fighter takes a sip of water, kicks out his legs, and relaxes his arms at his sides, as you've taught him to do for maximum rest. The assistant trainer is applying Vaseline to his face to cover the cuts and prevent future abrasions. Fifty-five seconds. Fifty seconds. You hover over him. He looks up to you for answers. You know your fighter's thoughts: "tell me what to do (quick!). Tell me how to win this thing—or help me get me out of here!" You've got to say something! What do you say?

Well, the boxer in this scenario was actually me. I had been training with a CoachUp boxing coach, Tommy Duquette, a former U.S. Olympic team finalist, to prepare for the one and only heavyweight USA Boxing-sanctioned match in which I would ever participate. It was part of a long evening of matches put on at Boston's House of Blues by Haymakers for Hope—an organization that raises money for cancer research by matching up amateur fighters, whose friends and family members donate money and come to watch the fights.

I don't like fighting. But having lost a grandfather to cancer, as well as several other members of my extended family, I wholeheartedly wanted to support this cause. Besides, I love any opportunity to get close with top coaches and learn from them.

So, to prepare for the fight, I put my trust in Coach Tommy. He is not only one of CoachUp's top boxing trainers but also one of the best, most naturally expert practitioners I have ever known of what I would later come to understand as the heart of the Coaching Up Model.

My opponent and I were about the same size, but his conditioning was superior to mine—he had been training far longer and harder, and belonged to a famous boxing gym. I, on the other hand, rarely trained, had not gone for a run in months (thanks to Achilles tendonitis), and did not belong to a boxing gym. But I had one, and only one, major advantage: I had great private coaching.

In this 1-minute break after the first round, Tommy went to work. There were a million things I'd done wrong in that first round. Moreover, he could tell I was totally gassed. In sparring against the same opponent for practice just four weeks earlier, I had lost in two rounds—and sprained my left wrist in the process. Tommy had considered pulling me from the official match, but I was committed to going through with it. Sitting on the stool

and looking up at Tommy, I felt my wrist throbbing. I didn't think I could hit hard with it. Tommy hovered above me, studying me benevolently. The assistant trainer kept applying Vaseline. Forty-five seconds dwindled to 40.

Finally, rather than critiquing my first-round performance (or lack of same), Tommy asked me a question: "J, that has to be your dad in the first row over there, right? I love that he's wearing a suit to this thing. You got to introduce us afterward, yeah? Look how proud he is of you! Has he ever been to a boxing match before?"

Thirty-five seconds remaining, and I said, "I see him. Happy to intro you guys afterward. He definitely hasn't been to a match before, nor does he know anything about boxing. What does this have to do with anything anyway? Tommy, I can't feel my left hand."

Twenty-five seconds left. Tommy leaned in. "Don't worry about that, you did a great job jabbing with it and just keeping him honest. Plus he's scared of your right uppercut. Even though you didn't connect with it, I know he's thinking about it. You totally crushed that round, he's all mentally messed up right now."

Eighteen seconds remaining. "Yeah?" I said, encouraged. "You got any advice for this round?"

Ten seconds remaining. "No, man, you know what you're doing. Oh, when you go out there, give him that 'down up' we worked on . . . You know, bend your knees and give that left jab to the body. Don't worry about connecting. Then do it again right away. Bend

your knees and fake the left jab to the body just like before, but shoot that right hand to his chin. He'll drop his hands to protect the body and won't see it coming. Let's go. You got this, bro!"

Two seconds. I stood up, stepped back into the fight, gave my opponent the "down up," and landed my right hand with force, knocking him back across the ring. I won by a technical knockout in the second round, in what turned out to be the single most dominating fight of the evening.

What did Coach Tommy do that made all the difference? He made a *connection* with me as a person, not a function, while temporarily distracting me from the high-pressure situation; provided *support* for my flagging self-esteem after my performance in the first round; and offered me one simple pointer—a concise, concrete *direction* that I could easily follow.

That's the Coaching Up Model:

- Build an authentic *connection*.
- Provide genuine *support*.
- Offer concise *direction*.

It's that simple. Tommy *connected* with me not just as a function—a pitiable fledgling boxer experiencing heavy distress—but as a whole real person, a person who had a dad and indeed an entire actual life that would almost certainly extend into the future after this fight.

Strange though it may seem, an athlete—or anybody, really—can lose sight of solid facts like those in a moment of intense stress. When Tommy had me look at my father, even if only for seconds, it gave me a mental break from thinking about the next round, which, of course, helped me relax. It's incredibly helpful to be lifted out of your current self-focus and into a larger, more heartening reality.

Second, Tommy put a positive spin on that first round that I had been feeling so bad about. He *supported* me by pointing out aspects of my performance—and my opponent's responses—that I was too short-term focused to be able to observe. His observations restored my self-confidence and my sense of at least cautious optimism.

Because Tommy had both connected with me and supported me, I was able to take a deep breath and be sufficiently relaxed, confident, and open to listen eagerly to his *direction*. And because he gave me that direction concisely and at the last possible moment, it stayed fresh in my mind and active in my short-term memory. I didn't have time to second-guess or overthink it. I just acted, and my training took over and made my action effective.

Time spent on each component of this minute-long Coaching Up Conversation:

- Building an authentic *connection*: 35 seconds
- Providing genuine *support*: 15 seconds
- Offering concise *direction*: 10 seconds

And that's important to note. As a coach, you need to make the largest investment in building an authentic connection. Without that, the genuine support you provide won't seem so genuine, and your player may very well second-guess your direction.

Over time, as you invest again and again in building that connection and providing support, you not only earn the ability to offer direction—much of which is at the request of your player, now that trust has been formed—but also position yourself to communicate effectively in time-sensitive conversations.

If you've ever been fortunate enough to have a player, employee, or friend say to you something along the lines of "Don't sugarcoat the truth. I know you have my best interests in mind, so just give it to me straight—what should I do about XYZ?" you know that you have built an authentic connection with that person. You don't need to spend the first 30 minutes of an hour-long one-on-one conversation reinforcing the connection, then supporting the person, before you can get into the meat of the topic and your actual thoughts about what course of action should be taken. You can skip over steps 1 and 2 and jump right into the direction. Furthermore, you can make that direction concise. What's concise direction? Here are two ways of saying the same thing, concisely and verbosely:

Concise Direction: "Oh, when you go out there, give him that 'down up' we worked on."

Verbose Direction: “I think it would be really good if you could land a big punch at the start of this match. I noticed that you haven’t thrown anything to his body, so if you start out by throwing a body shot, he will think it’s for real and will drop his left arm to cover the ribs. Then, probably, after he blocks your first punch, you can throw the same exact left to the body again, which will cause him to think because you are an amateur boxer you are trying the same thing again, and he will drop his left arm again to block it. So, if you fake that second punch, and instead bring it back and shoot a right hand over the top of his left hand, you may catch his chin. He probably won’t tuck his chin, because he isn’t very experienced either, and if you can catch him with a strong right at the start of the match, you can get the upper hand and jump all over him and maybe earn a few points that will carry the round for you. On the other hand, if he doesn’t go for your fake, you will be exposed to his right hand over the top and he may hurt you with it. But I still think it’s probably a risk we should take to start the round. Okay, cool. Let’s do this . . .”

Why didn’t Tommy have to explain that whole thing to me? Why was he able to keep his direction concise, and why was I so able to take it in and follow it? It’s simple.

First, I trust Tommy. I trust him because we have an authentic connection and he genuinely supports me—not just as a boxer but as a person who has a life, a family (“Look at your dad in the front row!”), and multiple

interests outside the ring. So when Tommy says to do something, I'm going to do it.

Second, it was the last thing Tommy said to me as I stood up to enter the next round, so it was fresh in my mind.

Third, it was superconcise; there was no way I could forget his direction.

Fourth, I knew what he meant by the “down up” fake, because he had taught it to me and I had practiced it hundreds of times.

And fifth, I *knew* it would work in this situation. I knew it because I knew that Tommy knew me—my strengths, my weaknesses, my mental state—and that he also knew those aspects of my opponent. Tommy was literally in that ring with me. For instance, he knew that my left hand was killing me, so all I could do was fake with it. And he knew that my legs were tired, so if I didn't do that “down up” fake to start the round, I probably wouldn't have the strength to do it at the end of the round. Tommy's vast knowledge of boxing enables him to be a great fighter; his ability to communicate through the Coaching Up Model enables him to be a great coach.

In Contrast, the Showboat Approach

The above anecdote is a prime example of a Coaching Up Conversation. We may find it instructive to take a look at its polar opposite approach—what we might think of as

the Coaching Down or Showboat approach. This is the coaching model we've all seen and heard far too often on school playgrounds and in gyms and even on professional playing fields everywhere. Whether during a 60-second timeout in basketball or a 60-second break between rounds in a boxing match, a Showboat coach will jump right into the lesson—pouring forth as much criticism, advice, observation, and information as possible into a short period.

A Showboat coach believes that good coaching involves:

1. Actively packing verbal communication into every available second
2. Providing as much criticism and as many orders as possible before the referees call the players back into the game, before the bell rings, or until the players' water break is over
3. Trying to pump players up by shouting, arm waving, fist pumping, and so on

How does a Showboat coach criticize a player? As frequently, loudly, and passionately as possible. He or she pulls the player aside, yells into the player's face, and waves his or her arms, broadcasting extreme dissatisfaction with the previous play or the player's overall performance. The coach makes sure that not only the player but also the rest of the team, and even the player's

friends, family members, and other fans in the stands, can feel the humiliation.

This coach appears to be “really coaching”—often sweating, red in the face, clapping his or her hands aggressively, and using dominating/authoritative gestures. If you were to draw a cartoon or choose a stock online image of a coach, you would very likely base it on a Showboat coach. And that’s exactly the point. How unfortunate that this conception of coaching is so prevalent in our society. The fact that this image leaps to mind as familiar demonstrates the extent of the problem. Many coaches fail to heed Sam Walton’s simple yet profound advice from his decades of experience founding and running Wal-Mart: “outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it’s amazing what they can accomplish.”

Before we come down too hard on the Showboat coach, let us freely admit that all of us—myself certainly included—have been there to some extent at one time or another. It’s easy, in the heat of battle, given the pressures and challenges that coaches, business leaders, and parents face with time constraints, overwhelming demands, and limited resources, to focus on going for quick results. It’s only natural that we tend to fall back on the old models of coaching that we’ve all been exposed to. Even the most masterful and apparently natural practitioners of the Coaching Up Model will likely admit that it took

them years to get to where they are. It takes time to shed bad habits and learn the key principles of great coaching: that it's never about the coach but about the relationship, and that when it comes to communicating effectively, less is more.

From the perspective of Showboat coaches, any coaches who are not broadcasting their thoughts as frequently, passionately, and vigorously as possible just aren't doing their job. After all, in every play, attentive coaches notice so many mistakes and flaws that it's their duty to point them all out and make sure the players correct them, right?

Oh so wrong. The Showboat coaches are in fact undercutting their own effectiveness.

If you stopped a Showboat coach in the moment and asked, "What do you hope to achieve by criticizing your player so passionately?" the coach would likely respond that "This is tough love" or "This is the only way to get through to my players, so that they can learn from their mistakes" or "Gosh darn it, I've told him a thousand times not to do it that way, and he just won't listen, so I have to try something else."

But the underlying truth—which the Showboat coach is *not* saying here — is that the player's bad play or performance reflects poorly on the coach. The Showboat coach's real motivation is not to improve the player's performance, but to make it clear to everyone—the player, the team, the fans, and whoever else may be

watching and blaming the coach—that “it’s not my fault. The athlete just won’t listen to me and is not doing what I told him or her to do.”

Most important, how would you feel if you were the athlete in this situation?

If you’ve ever played Little League baseball, Pop Warner football, or any other youth or high school sport, you’ve probably witnessed coaching like this. Maybe you’ve even felt the brunt of it. I’ve been there, and it’s a horrible feeling. You’re already feeling bad enough about making a mistake. Now you’ve been pulled from the game and humiliated in front of your teammates, the opposition, maybe even scouts and the press, and likely both friends and family members in the stands. You were already angry with yourself, and you’re still feeling that way. But now, in addition, you’re even angrier with your coach.

Fortunately, people are becoming more aware of the negative effects this type of coaching has on young athletes. Entire organizations, such as the Positive Coaching Alliance, have formed to preach an alternative, more positive style to coaches, parents, and athletes around the country. As Joe Ehrmann notes in *InSideOut Coaching*, “I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly faces of the coaching vocation. I am certain of one thing: coaches can either break young people’s psyches or build their souls.”

But I’ve found that the problem is not limited to athletic playing fields at the youth, collegiate, and even

professional levels. In fact, most businesses—from start-ups to Fortune 500 companies—suffer from “managers” who practice the Showboat coaching style. They quite literally coach down their employees in a variety of contexts—both in one-on-one weekly sessions and in public in front of other colleagues. In behaving this way, Showboat coach/managers broadcast their position of authority, highlight their vast knowledge and experience, and express anger or disappointment in work that is less than what they could have produced or expect any competent person to produce.

When you find yourself at the receiving end of direction from a Showboat coach, what happens to you? Very likely, you are no better positioned to avoid the mistake you just made or to get back into the game mentally. Instead, your coach has done a disservice to you, and to your entire team, from his or her self-interested goal of wanting to heap blame onto your shoulders. You’ve ended up demoralized and dejected. The coach has coached you *down*, not *up*.

Showboat coaches—and Showboat managers and Showboat parents—are not necessarily bad people. They’re just misguided. They don’t understand the underlying truth behind all communication: force-feeding doesn’t nourish; shouting doesn’t communicate; humiliation doesn’t inspire.

The fundamental distinction between the Showboat approach to coaching and the Coaching Up approach is

that *the Showboat approach is all about the coach, and the Coaching Up approach is all about the player*. Unfortunately, the problem is widespread not only in sports but also in the corporate world.

The Rewards of Coaching Up Conversations

By learning to engage the people we care about in Coaching Up Conversations, we can all become better communicators with our colleagues, parents, partners, children, and friends. Through understanding the underlying reasons why this model works, and then coming up with our own authentic ways of using it, we can get really good at motivating others to achieve breakthrough performance. Plus, engaging in this kind of conversation feels terrific.

One of the common objections I frequently hear from overworked and overstressed executives and coaches is that “I simply don’t have the time for building relationships—I need to get fast results!” On the basis of my experience using the Coaching Up Model as an athlete, a coach, and a business leader at CoachUp, I believe that this objection is shortsighted. *The Coaching Up Model is an investment in an instrument that allows you to communicate with maximum efficiency, at those times when it matters most.* Precisely because you have built an authentic relationship, you are able to communicate efficiently and

effectively at those critical moments when it counts most, whether the game is on the line or your organization is at an inflection point. To those coaches and executives who say, “I don’t have the time to invest in this kind of relationship building,” I respond, how can you afford not to? It’s an investment in your ultimate success that pays countless dividends.

So now let’s explore, one by one, the three basic elements of a Coaching Up Conversation and the broader Coaching Up Model: *building an authentic connection*, *providing genuine support*, and *offering concise direction*.