

SPEAK UP! 12 Techniques to Get Your Athletes to Talk

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Frustrated because your athletes are not more vocal during competition and practices?

Seems like many of them can chat for hours on their cell phones, or talk non-stop before, (during), and after practice about the latest happenings, gossip, movies, YouTube clips, and other trivial matters off the field/court/track.



So why then is it so hard to get them to talk to their teammates during practices and competition to share highly relevant and critical performance-related information?

Sadly, many games have been lost simply because of a lack of communication between teammates. Getting athletes, and especially leaders, to be more vocal on the court and field is a challenging and ongoing problem for many coaches.

Further, you absolutely need certain athletes at specific positions like point guard, catcher, setter, and quarterback to be vocal for your team to be successful.

One of our primary goals with our Leadership Academies is to develop athletes into strong, effective, and vocal leaders. As 22-time national champion North Carolina women's soccer coach Anson Dorrance says, "The best type of leadership to me is the student-athlete who is a coach on the field. I want a driving, verbal force who won't let standards slip. That's how teams with ordinary talent win championships."

So if your lone voice is the only one heard at your practices, you've got a problem. As Duke men's basketball Coach K says, "*On our Duke Basketball teams, I never want to be the only communicator. In order for a message to get across, it must be echoed by every member of the group. I constantly look for the members of my team who can help convey the message.*"

We train emerging student-athlete leaders to be vocal in working with the coaches to co-lead the team. We want them leading vocally by setting the tone, reminding people about their responsibilities, reinforcing the positives, refocusing distracted teammates, calling out those who are falling below the team's standards, and being the voice in the locker room when the coach is not around. Getting them to this point though is often a process that takes time, training, practice, and coaching. Helping an athlete to find their voice takes time - but pays off in a multitude of ways for you and your program.

This article features 12 proven techniques you can use to help your athletes, and especially your leaders, become a more vocal presence for your team.



Why won't they talk?

Before getting to the strategies however, it is important to examine why athletes are not more vocal on the field/court. In working closely with thousands of student-athlete leaders, we have discovered five primary reasons why they are reluctant to speak up. In an effort to get your athletes to be more vocal, try to determine which of the five reasons listed below might be the greatest inhibitors for your individual players.

1. Lack confidence in their status and legitimacy.

By far the biggest obstacle that many student-athletes report is that they feel it is not their place to be vocal. Many of them defer to other teammates who they feel have much more legitimacy to lead the team. We often hear things like, "I don't say much because I don't want to step on the seniors' toes." Or, "I'm not the best guy on the team so I'm not sure if my teammates would even listen to me." They often defer to those who are older or better than them to be the vocal ones.



2. Don't understand the importance of being vocal.

Some athletes don't fully comprehend the value of them being vocal on the field/court. They don't understand how influential they can be as a leader in guiding the team. They wait for the coaches to do most of the talking, putting most of the onus of team leadership on them.

3. Not in their nature.

Some more shy and introverted athletes say that being vocal just doesn't come naturally to them. They are much more comfortable leading by example than being a vocal leader for the team. While this is true, there are still simple things that they can say without transforming themselves into an extrovert. And, if your leaders are passionate, competitive, and want to win badly enough, they will find it within themselves to speak up in competition - or else their reluctance to speak will be a contributing factor in losses.

4. Don't know what to say.

There are some athletes who understand the importance of being vocal and feel they have the legitimacy to speak up, they just aren't sure of what to say or how to say. These are ones that need some suggestions and coaching on what to say and how to say it.

5. Not a habit.

Finally, being vocal and saying the right things in the right tone of voice is a skill and habit that needs to be cultivated, coached, rewarded, and maintained. If having vocal athletes is an important part of your program's philosophy and team's success, you must dedicate the time and effort to build it into your program. You must emphasize talking often enough that it becomes an expectation and habit for your athletes.

12 TECHNIQUES TO GET YOUR ATHLETES TO TALK!

Without resorting to torture, here are a dozen techniques that you can use to get your athletes to talk.

1. Stress the Importance of Talking with the Wastebasketball Activity

A great way to help your athletes understand the importance of being vocal is to set up a short activity where talking is an absolute must. We use an activity I created called Wastebasketball, where a blindfolded person tosses wads of paper into a clean wastebasket with the help of their team. It is up to the blindfolded person's teammates to communicate with them so that their throws from roughly 10 feet away are as accurate as possible since the person can't see the target. You can make the activity competitive by creating different groups within your team, timing them for four quarters, and keeping score. After the activity, discuss how challenging it is for the blindfolded person to succeed without the vocal assistance of their teammates. Then relate the activity back to how your team needs to communicate on the court/field to help each other better see what is happening.

2. Anson Dorrance Uses the Smoke Jumpers Story

In training his leaders to be the driving verbal force he wants them to be, Carolina women's soccer coach Anson Dorrance uses a real-life story about forest fire smoke jumpers in a great book called *The Leadership Moment* by Michael Useem. The story tells about the tragic deaths of 12 smoke jumpers who were trying to put out a forest fire. Because their leader, Wagner Dodge, did not vocally communicate with them about the changing conditions and how they should adjust, 12 fire fighters lost their lives due to their leader's lack of communication.

While obviously your sport is not a life or death situation, the story vividly and memorably communicates what happens when leaders fail to communicate. Dorrance has his leaders read the Smoke Jumpers chapter out of *The Leadership Moment* and they discuss it as a leadership team. The book also includes several other real-life stories on leadership situations and their consequences. For more info on the stories in [The Leadership Moment click here.](#)



3. Coach K and Duke's Verbosity

One of the first things you will notice if you attend one of Coach K's practices at Duke is how vocal his guys are. This is all by design because Coach K values communication so much. From the start of practice to the end, Duke players are highly vocal in stretching as they count loudly and in unison for each of their stretches. Once practice starts, they are highly vocal in calling out screens and switches on defense. They are also vocal on offense in calling for the ball and outlet passes.



Coach K says in his book, *Beyond Basketball*, "On the basketball court, there is very little time to get your message across. In the heat of a game, a basketball team speaks a different language; it is not a language based on long sentences, but it is a language nonetheless. To acclimate our team to speaking this language, we do not merely drill defensive stances and positioning in our practices, we drill talking. When you talk, your body reacts, your hands get ready, and your mind becomes prepared to respond, even under pressure."

You too can insist upon your players being vocal in virtually any aspect of practice. Work with your leaders to set the tone and have them help you get and keep everyone else on board.

4. Teach Them a Simple Vocabulary to Use

To help your athletes become more vocal, it is wise to teach them a common vocabulary that you would like them to use. The specific vocabulary terms are able to quickly and clearly convey messages in the heat of battle. The terms also provide a consistency so that your athletes know exactly what is meant and expected. Create a glossary of typical terms you want your athletes and staff to use in describing various techniques, drills, and strategies. You can go through the terms with your team and include a copy of the glossary in your athletes' notebooks. Then, of course, have your staff and team practice using the terms during your drills.

5. Provide Them with 360-degree Feedback

The biggest jumps we see in athletes becoming more vocal most often occur after receiving 360-degree Feedback from their teammates and coaches. 360 Feedback is a process which allows teammates and coaches to anonymously provide input on the strengths and areas of improvement for each leader. It's called 360-degree feedback because the leader receives input from those all around him/her. The leader gets a comprehensive numerical report on their leadership strengths and areas to improve - as well as helpful comments from their teammates and coaches. Many times leaders will notice a consistent theme that their teammates and coaches are asking (and sometimes begging) them to be more vocal in practices and competitions. Combined with their leadership scores, these tangible comments provide leaders with the confidence and legitimacy they need to become more vocal leaders for the team.



6. Teach them the 6 R's of Respected Vocal Leaders

The 6 R's of Respected Vocal Leaders are perfect for those athletes who know they need to be more vocal but aren't exactly sure what to say. These six simple suggestions, all beginning with the letter R, provide athletes with a checklist of easy yet effective things that they can do and say throughout practices and competition to be more vocal.

Remind

Vocal leaders continually remind their teammates about what is important - the common goal, the game plan, and their roles. They remind people of the specific responsibilities that need to be done to achieve their goal. Reminding includes simple phrases like, "We've got two outs, let's get the last out at first base," or "Be sure to block out the shooter on this free throw."

Reinforce

Vocal leaders also spend a lot of time reinforcing the positive strides made by the team. They compliment people often as a way to build their confidence and fuel a positive momentum and environment on the team. "I see you! That's great effort in pushing through that difficult set."

Re-energize

There will be many times during practices and competition when vocal leaders need to pick up the team's energy level and enthusiasm. They provide a spark of inspiration and help turn a passive team into a passionate team. "Hey, let's pick it up. We've got a chance to have a special season. Now's the time to earn it."

Reassure

Because there are so many obstacles, setbacks, and adversities involved in every season, vocal leaders need to reassure their teammates when they are feeling nervous, scared, frustrated, helpless, and hopeless. They preserve a sense of hope and optimism. *"We're okay. We've got a lot of time to get back into this game. Take it one step at a time and we'll be okay."*

Refocus

Vocal leaders spend a lot of time helping teammates refocus their negative thoughts on to something more positive and productive. They effectively shift teammates' minds from the distractions and problems to workable solutions. *"Yes, the officiating is horrendous but we can't control it. Focus on our game plan and let's make the adjustment."*



Reprimand

Last but not least, vocal leaders must have the ability to constructively confront and reprimand their teammates when necessary. They must hold them accountable to live up to and maintain the team's rules and standards. *"I know you're tired but giving up on that last sprint is not what we're all about. We need you to push through this next one. Let's go!"*

7. Execute the Two Minute Drill

A great way to help your athletes practice being more vocal and refocus the team is to encourage them to run the Two Minute Drill, originated by sport psychology guru Ken Ravizza. When practices and workouts are getting sloppy, encourage your leaders to quickly call the team together. Have them get the team refocused by learning from the recent mistakes and putting their full focus on having a solid practice for the next two minute span. Breaking the practice down into a short, two minute segments helps them let go of the past and get focused on the present moment. The Two Minute Drill, initiated by your athletes, is usually enough to clear the cobwebs, right the ship, and have your team practicing at the high level of intensity and focus you need and expect.



Not only will the Two Minute Drill greatly enhance the quality and consistency of your practices, it also teaches your team to quickly self-correct, rather than you having to continually go off on them as a coach or make them run for their lack of focus and leadership.

8. Echo the call.

In the heat of battle, it is often hard for your athletes to communicate, concentrate, and hear your plays, strategies, and adjustments. A simple yet effective rule to get them to be more vocal is to have your athletes echo the calls that are given. By having each athlete vocally repeat the offense or defense you are in or the play you are running, you help ensure that everyone is on the same page and clear up any potential confusion. Get your athletes to echo the calls to each other in the practice setting and it will become a habit for them in pressure-packed game situations.

9. Coaching Your Leaders Behind the Scenes

We encourage coaches and captains to meet weekly to check in, discuss the state of the team, and prepare for the upcoming week. During these meetings, your leaders will likely come up with some messages and insights that would be highly beneficial for the rest of the team to hear. Rather than you sharing their observations with the team as a coach, encourage your leaders to bring them up themselves with the team before or after a practice. Or if the situation is more serious, allow them to call and lead a team meeting.

Provided that they are ready for it, encouraging your athletes to help you co-lead the team has many advantages including empowering them and enhancing their responsibility and commitment. It also provides your team with another voice to share and reinforce messages that are good for the team. Unfortunately, some athletes get tired of hearing their coach's voices telling them to do the same things over and over again. You can vary the voice and message subtly by empowering your athletes to speak up and deliver it.

10. Work on tone of voice.

Another important and more advanced thing to keep in mind is the tone of voice that your athletes use when they communicate. Once you start to get them to speak up, it is also good to provide them with individual and private as well as 360-degree feedback on the tone they are using. Some athletes may say the right things, but their panicked, disgusted, or

condescending tone of voice overshadows their message. You obviously want your athletes to communicate in a commanding yet calm and confident tone. Give your athletes feedback and coaching on how to say things and when to say things as well. They need to choose their communication wisely as they find their voice.



11. Build confidence in their ability to communicate and lead.

As mentioned originally, many athletes are reluctant to speak up because they do not feel they have the confidence or respect of the team and/or coaches. Invest the time to talk with them behind the scenes to show and tell them you support them as a leader. You must convince them that their voice is needed and valued by the coaching staff, and hopefully the rest of the team. Having your clear support and endorsement of them as leader, as well as that of their team, can instill them with the confidence necessary to be more vocal. Further, many athletes will often stop leading vocally when they aren't performing well. You'll need to remind them that they still need to lead, even when they don't have their "A" game.

12. Praise the behavior you want to see repeated.

Finally, invest the time to praise your athletes when they are vocal. Take time to mention their contribution to the team after games - and with the media if you are fortunate to be covered by them. Also take the time in your individual meetings to thank them for being a vocal presence for your team. These simple gestures will communicate to them how much they are appreciated.

In summary, remember that finding one's voice is a process that takes time. Getting your athletes to be more vocal is an ongoing process - but one that is worth the effort. Not only will it help your team in the short term, but ultimately you will help your athletes develop critical leadership skills and life skills in the long term.