

“Open to Feedback, Not Pushback” - Coaching Culture Through Effective Communication

By: Joe Bogard

On a long bus ride that often comes with ACHA hockey, I recently found myself reflecting on a discussion about communication and input from both players and parents. It reinforced for me how delicate that balance really is, especially in today's hockey culture. As a coach, an important lesson I've learned is that communication drives our team culture. How a team talks to one another and the staff, listens, and responds to direction can be an indicator of future success. Thinking back on that conversation, a phrase came to me that I think captures what I expect from my players, staff, and even parents of players in my charge: “I'm open to feedback, not pushback.”

To me, this means I value open discussion, that is sometimes direct but also challenges me to step outside my comfort zone and check my ego at the door. I want input, and despite years of experience, I'm not perfect, and I'm hell-bent on personal improvement. Healthy conversation, questions, and ideas that make us better will always be welcome and a staple in how I choose to operate my teams.

On the flip side, what is not welcome and difficult to peacefully navigate is argument, defensiveness, or resistance when I'm trying to coach or hold players accountable. As I think more on what this phrase means to me, I keep coming back to the point that there is a fine line between feedback that helps, and pushback that restricts. In my opinion, at all levels of hockey, that distinction is one of many factors that can impact whether a team stumbles or soars.

Feedback is forward-facing. It's when a player or parent says, “Coach, would you be open to trying this?” or “I noticed something during that game and wanted to get your opinion.” It's rooted in curiosity, collaboration, and the desire to grow. Pushback, on the other hand, comes from ego or emotion, and in a fast, emotion-filled game like hockey, often both. Comments like, “That's not how we should do this,” or “Coach has no idea what he's doing,” don't move the team forward. Pushback closes off the opportunity for progress because it prioritizes being right over improvement. In a sport where emotion and competitiveness are a fan to the flame, that differentiation is critical. Feedback builds trust and understanding; pushback builds walls.

In youth hockey, the dynamic is complex because parents and perhaps even players are, in my eyes, the customer. They're investing time, money, and emotion into their experience and development. As such, I feel that means they should have a voice, but not necessarily a vote. This can be a slippery slope for many coaches. Parents and players at this level deserve communication, transparency, and a sense of partnership with the coaches. But too much influence from parents or youth players can undermine the team's growth or derail it entirely because of a singular agenda or opinion. I firmly believe our game is meant to prepare players for higher levels of competition and, more importantly, for life. It teaches discipline, teamwork, and accountability. When parents/players cross the line from feedback to pushback by questioning every decision, ice time, or strategy, it sends the wrong message to the player and the team. It teaches deflection of responsibility rather than ownership of it.

As coaches, we must walk that tightrope by respecting that parents have a stake while protecting the integrity of the team and our ability to coach effectively. That's why I tell parents we welcome feedback on communication, safety, or player development trajectory. But once it becomes about playing time or game strategy, that's pushback and it's not usually helpful. This isn't about silencing that opinion, it's about aligning everyone with the teams' overall goals. When parents understand why we do what we do, most are supportive. It's when they feel unheard that conflict tends to grow, and the same can be said for players.

Shifting focus to the higher levels of play, in my case the ACHA level, our culture and communication is imperative to our success. These athletes have been playing for a decade or more, under different coaches and cultures. So naturally, many believe they've seen it all. That experience can be both a gift and a challenge. At this level, you're not only teaching skills, but you're also managing personalities, egos, academics, and the pressure of transitioning into careers. Some players believe they know better than the coach and at times they're right. After all, they're highly intelligent and experienced athletes. But even when they are right, how they (and us as coaches) handle it makes all the difference.

If a player disagrees with a system, drill, or idea, I welcome that conversation, but at the right time and in the right way. That's feedback, but when that disagreement turns into visible frustration, apathy or undermining in the locker room or on the bench, that's pushback and it's toxic. I tell my players that even if I'm wrong, we still need to make sure we're pulling the rope in the same direction. Trust the process in the moment, and we'll discuss things in depth afterward. It's our job to model respect and unity, and teams that understand this distinction are the ones that tend to thrive.

This isn't a free pass for coaches to ignore their own blind spots. In fact, it challenges us to be just as disciplined in how we receive feedback. It forces us to show composure, humility, and consistency. That means explaining our decisions when asked, admitting when something didn't work, and making players or parents feel heard. "I'm open to feedback, not pushback" isn't about authority it's about alignment. It's about building a culture where communication fuels progress, not conflict. Whether I'm coaching a 10-year-old learning to forecheck or a 21-year-old fighting for a lineup spot, the message is the same: be coachable, stay curious, and don't let pride get in the way of progress. Pushback halts our momentum, but feedback moves us forward.