



“Players in every sport perform at their highest level when they are able to find the right balance for them among feeling focused, intense and loose, all at the same time”

COACHING LEADERSHIP – INTENSE, FOCUSED AND LOOSE

Some players are so intense and focused during games and so full of tension that they can't execute at the levels their physical and mental talent would ordinarily permit. Their muscles feel tight, they can't skate as fast, the puck bounces off their stick because they are gripping their stick too hard, they pass the puck off target more than normal, they hesitate and they miss the net on more shots than usual, they feel tired, they don't follow the team's tactics and systems they know well and have executed in the past. They feel tight and lose confidence in their ability to perform. They stop thinking. They don't really want the puck. In hockey terms, they fight the puck.

Studies have shown in many sports that the mind needs to be in the right mental state to create the right level of looseness in the body to in turn create optimum strength, coordination and fluid muscle motion. You know it when you've got it, everything feels right. You are calm, not nervous but excited and full of energy and confidence. Your head is clear. It's easy to pass the puck tape to tape or over sticks and to shoot accurately and take passes or pick up the puck along the boards at full speed. Visually, you see the whole ice better, you anticipate plays developing well, you feel you have more time and space to execute. You believe you can execute so you do.

Being loose does not mean you are not focused on the task at hand, not at all. In fact it's the opposite. You are so focused you feel like you are in your own little game world, without stress but with intensity.

It is very important for coaches to understand the anxiety profile of the players on the team as many players will have higher or lower levels of self esteem, confidence in their game, success or failure expectations, parental pressures, talent, comfort they have teammate support, pressure game experience and other factors that will influence whether they can achieve the right balance for them of focus, looseness and intensity. You can then help them achieve their optimum level of performance by helping them to manage their anxiety influencing factors. Remember, the more important the game the more likely intensity levels may rise above their optimal level.

Observe players' behaviours on and off the ice, particularly on the ice to see whether their performance meets their usual talent level. For those who you know may be more nervous or tight than others, encourage them to have fun and enjoy the game, praise their abilities and be very positive when trying to help them improve their game. Ask them to focus on their contribution to the team and to their line mates and to do the best they can not worried about the outcome. Try to loosen them up with humor.

Some things to consider:

- As a coach demonstrate focus, looseness and intensity in your coaching style and lead by example



- Find a way to teach without criticizing all the time and showing too much displeasure – calmly find the good areas of individual performance and suggest different things to try to improve in other areas and explain why the suggestions should work
- Develop pre-game routines, warm ups, in dressing room free time with the boom box to allow relaxation and trash talk, time for the pre-game talk, and don't spend too much time reviewing too many things they should remember to do just before a game, this raises tension levels. Focus on a few fundamentals and on motivation
- Organize off ice team building activities where the players will have fun together, develop friendships and feel more comfortable with their team mates (e.g. out-of-town tournaments). This will lessen the players' fear of failure and loss of face in front of the team if they don't perform well, and is particularly important for new players coming to successful teams
- Don't set unrealistic goals or expectations for the players to perform and don't make them feel you are watching their every move
- Make sure they know that you will still like them even if they lose
- Make sure the players know you know it's only a game and that you want to see them do their best and have fun at the same time
- Listen to the players in their dressing room before a game by themselves and see if it's too quiet. If it is there is tension somewhere
- Watch and listen to the players just before they go out on the ice and you will very quickly see if they are too focused and intense
- Make sure the players have a good warm up, get a good sweat going and get used to the feel of the puck on their sticks – this helps release tension
- During a game if a player is playing too tight reinforce system and tactic routines you have been teaching to return to better play – players who are too tense have a tendency under pressure to revert back to old styles of undisciplined hockey and to play on instincts which cause breakdowns in systems e.g. unreasonable risk pinching, passing up the middle in our own end , last man stickhandling in our own end, not playing their positions
- Reward trying hard with praise