

Soccer as Metaphor in Coaching

The first time I came across the use of soccer as a metaphor was at the 4th Clarity Conference in Mexico City in 2008. The keynote speaker was the Chilean Judge Luis Bates, former Minister of Justice and then Chairman of Transparency International for Chile. Luis Bates is a wonderful person and a naturally-gifted orator who speaks from the heart. A humanist, he tells stories in such a way that you wish you could listen to him all afternoon. That day, at the ITAM in Mexico D.F. he told us of his idea to reform the Chilean Penal Code, using soccer to teach prison inmates that there were rules that had to be obeyed on and off the pitch.

The next time I thought of using soccer in the classroom was five years later, in Buenos Aires where I was coaching a self-confessedly introverted CFO of a multi-national company on public-speaking and interpersonal skills. He, let's call him Federico, is a very smart young guy with a good position in the company, highly-regarded, but who suffers tremendously whenever he has to speak in public and also has a lot of difficulty intervening at meetings as he doesn't like to speak up. More confident on paper than in person, Federico would write extensive mails after meetings but needed to improve his interpersonal skills and become a more confident public speaker.

We only met three times. At our first session we started off with an ice-breaker that most coaches are probably familiar with: an exercise from neuro linguistic programming called Miscommunication, a Body Language exercise. Here, two people sit opposite each other: Person 1 has to talk about his/her hobby while Person 2 listens actively, nodding, smiling and asking interested questions. Then they swap roles and Person 2 talks about his/her hobby but this time Person 1 looks away and shows no interest. The point of the exercise is to demonstrate how important active listening is in communication.

In this particular case my coachee talked about his hobby: Soccer. It turned out he was a very keen soccer player and indeed, had almost played soccer professionally but then had decided against it. The really interesting thing was the position he played: Defense. So the first thing I did when I got home was to look up the position of defender. As defined by Wikipedia "a defender is an outfield player whose primary role is to prevent the opposition from attacking." From what I had observed, Federico was translating his role as defender on the pitch to the board room, blocking and defending, rather than attacking and taking a more central and pro-active role.

Now, while I am an experienced instructor and coach, I have no experience in the field of soccer but am lucky enough to have a son, like most Argentines, who is a keen soccer fan and has also participated in International Public Speaking Competitions. When I described my coachee to my son, he said "Mum, you are not going to change him from being a defender to being a striker, but you can get him up to mid-field." So that is what I set out to do.

Using assertiveness-training exercises and being explicit about the metaphor of soccer, over the next two meetings Federico came to realize exactly what he was doing and how he could change. We used the metaphor of meeting room as a pitch. As a defender, Fred had a good overview of the whole pitch, but he had a tendency to block any questions that came his way, responding negatively as a defense mechanism and sometimes not getting his boss's back when he reacted negatively to his superior's suggestions. Once Federico came to understand that this was like blocking a ball on a pitch, and that he had to pass it back to someone, using a number of techniques, like open questions, rephrasing of questions and turning negative comments into positive ones, he was away, and could run with the ball!

We even used a ball in class to brainstorm an activity and to get him to respond quickly and positively to situations. Someone as sporty as Federico needed to learn by playing both inside and outside the classroom. Regarding the public speaking, he found that using warm-up and also breathing exercises to slow down his heart rate helped him to calm down before taking the stage. Also, I was able to show him that just as nerves before a match are useful, he should not fear the adrenalin rush that public speaking gave him but use it to give him extra gravitas at the moment of presentation-giving, when he had earned his place on the podium. He no longer had to take a back seat defending role. Federico responded very quickly and rapidly became much more confident and assured. With the new techniques he had acquired he was able to participate more pro-actively and positively at meetings and own his place on stage.

While the soccer metaphor will not fit every coachee try and find out the personal interests of your coachee and adapt training techniques to them. The coachee will understand and incorporate new learnings much faster when it is through a medium that they are passionate about. So next time you have a new coachee, find out what their hobby is and use it as a metaphor, unless it's sky-diving!

