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Fixing "Broken Windows"

by Tina Syer

Malcolm Gladwell's book, The Tipping Point, describes the "Broken Windows" theory of crime reduction. Would-be criminals enter a neighborhood to find broken windows, graffiti and trash on the streets. What do they conclude? "This is a place we can do business!" They enter a well-maintained neighborhood and conclude that they are more likely to be arrested than successful, so they avoid that neighborhood. New York City used this theory to reduce record-breaking levels of crime by painting over graffiti, picking up trash, and fixing broken windows (rather than adding more law enforcement).

Right now you might be wondering how this relates to you. What is the broken-windows equivalent in your ice arena?

For ice skating and hockey, the "broken window" occurs when someone dishonors the sport (by assailing an official for a call, by disrespecting an opponent, or by humiliating a skater who fails to execute the move or play). If the culprit is allowed to get away with this behavior, people conclude that this is the way people act in the arena, and more and more "windows" are broken.

As arena managers and leaders, it is up to you to fix broken windows with swift intervention. There are two levels of intervention: informal and formal. You can tell if you have a healthy "Honoring the Game" culture in your arena if most broken windows are fixed with informal intervention.

Steps for "informal" intervention:

1) Nonverbal (handouts) — Hand an "Honor the Game" card or sticker (found at www.positivecoach.org/store/index.html) to the person. Handing over a copy of a "Parent Pledge" can be equally effective. Often this low-key reminder is all that is needed.

2) Gentle Reminder — Sometimes the handout doesn't suffice. Now dialogue is required. "You seem pretty upset." This will often get the "window-breaker" talking to you, rather than yelling at the official. Remind her how things are done in your arena. "You may be right about that call being incorrect, but please remember in this arena, we 'Honor the Game. Let's set a good example for the kids and other parents.'"

3) Assertive — Sometimes a person will not respond to subtle interventions. In these cases, be clear about this person's bad behavior and what is expected. You can say:

"That's not the way we do things here!"

"It's not okay to act like that in this arena."

When you say this, stand back from the person. You don't want to appear threatening by invading the person's personal space. If the person becomes abusive or continues to act inappropriately, do not retaliate (physically or verbally). Withdraw and move on to formal intervention.

Steps for "formal" intervention:

4) Official Warnings — Many arenas have a system in place to deal with unruly fans. Do you? If not, as leaders, you need to get one in place ASAP, and then publicize your policies. PCA suggests the following— Consult with the game's head official. The official (or you) should issue a warning

to the head coach of the team whose fan is misbehaving. Remind the coach that he is responsible for controlling his fans, or the game will not continue. The coach should talk with the misbehaving adult, explaining that his actions are unacceptable (and what the potential consequences are).

5) Physical Removal — If you do get to this unlikely point, make sure this kind of misbehavior doesn't spread. People watch to see how leaders respond to misbehavior, and they re-shape their behavior if they see the leaders mean business.

At this point, if the offending adult has continued his misbehavior, It's time to stop the game and to tell him the game will not continue until he leaves the premises. This should be done in conjunction with the head official. If the misbehaving adult refuses to leave, stop the game, and call the police to have him removed.

6) Publicize Action Taken — When people hear that bad behavior leads to getting thrown out, this sends a powerful message about what is and isn't tolerated. Let people know that misbehavior has consequences. For example, you might send a memo to coaches and parents alerting them that inappropriate behavior led to an ejection (no names mentioned), and you want their help in talking with their parents to make sure it doesn't happen with their team.

Having these steps of intervention in place and committing to use them will create an environment in your arena that athletes, coaches, instructors, parents, officials, judges and fans all look forward to. Commit to fixing the first "broken window," so others don't follow.

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