

Kid-Friendly Criticism - Part 1

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by Jim Thompson

At Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a frequent topic of conversation is the extent to which "feedback is the breakfast of champions." Feedback, both positive and negative - if it is seen as intended to help a player improve - can fill "emotional tanks." But criticism, even the constructive kind, can drain e-tanks. And too much criticism over a period of time can destroy an athlete's love of skating.

Yet we all need criticism to improve. Without hearing what we're doing wrong, we're never going to make the kind of improvement that is possible. We need to be able to give criticism to our athletes for the simple reason that they don't know as much about the sport as we do (in most cases!).

I once heard Bill Sweetenham, the Australian swim coach, explain why athletes and coaches need each other: "The swimmer feels the water. The coach sees the stroke," he said. The coach has a different perspective than the athlete and is able to give her some information that she doesn't have.

So, if we need to criticize our skaters, but if criticism drains emotional tanks, what are we to do? PCA knows that the answer to this question is "Kid-Friendly Criticism."

The challenge for a Double-Goal Coach™ is to give criticism that does its job - leads to improvement. Too often, athletes become defensive when someone criticizes them. They automatically begin to lay out in their heads why the criticism isn't fair rather than trying to figure out how to use the criticism to get better.

So how can a coach give Kid-Friendly Criticism?

A first step to mastering the art of Kid-Friendly Criticism is to consider criticism a gift. Let's say you get the ugliest pair of socks you've ever seen from a friend for your birthday. You might be disappointed because you really wanted something else. You also can't believe how clueless your friend is to give you such an awful gift. You might bristle when you open the present and make some less than grateful comment. If so, this will probably be the last gift you receive from this particular friend.

A better way to deal with gifts that we don't like is to simply accept them graciously, thank the giver and then later put them in the attic and never, ever wear them. This makes it much more likely that we will remain friends with the gift giver. And, maybe, just maybe we will find at some later time that we need a pair of outrageously ugly socks as the perfect complement to a Halloween costume.

If we are able to see criticism as we would a gift of socks, then we can simply thank the giver, metaphorically put the criticism in our pocket and take it out later to consider whether it might be worth thinking about.

I recognize that this is not usually easy, especially if we already are trying really hard to do our best. But we can take the corrosiveness out of criticism by saying out loud (regardless of what we are thinking), "Thank you for that suggestion. I will think about it." And then, later, away from the hustle and bustle of daily struggles, we can consider the criticism to see if we think it's valid, if it might benefit us to accept it. We can even ask someone whose judgment we trust, "What do you think of this criticism? Do you think it fits?" just as we might ask a friend, "Do you think these

socks look good on me?"

If we can see criticism as a gift, we can teach our skaters to see it the same way. We can say to them early in the season: "I want you to be the best you can be. That means that I will offer suggestions on how you can become a better skater on and off the ice. Sometimes this may seem like I am criticizing you, but I encourage you to think about criticism as a gift. Don't reject it right away. Think about what is said, and remember that your goal to become the best skater and person you can be. And then, if you think it will help you improve, use the criticism."

And it works the other way also. As a coach, I will learn things that can help my athletes perform better if I am open to receiving gifts of criticism from my skaters: "And I want to be open to receiving criticism from you. If you have ideas for how I can do a better job of coaching you, I want you to talk with me about your thoughts. I will try to take your criticism as a gift, just as I want you to take my criticism of you. If you take the time to offer a criticism, it means that you care about the person you are giving it to."

And if we can learn to offer and receive criticism in the spirit of a gift, athletes are going to be much more likely to seriously think about it and consider it. And that means they are more likely to apply the criticism to becoming a better athlete and person.

Jim Thompson is the founder and executive director of Positive Coaching Alliance. Watch for "Kid-Friendly Criticism - Part 2" in the next issue of ISI EDGE. To learn more about the ISI-PCA Partnership, or to bring the advantages of Double-Goal Coaching to your community, visit PositiveCoach.org or send e-mail to PCA@PositiveCoach.org.