

My children have been playing competitive sports for over 20 years. I remember that it started with my oldest daughter Emily playing soccer through an organization in Davenport called "Dad's Club". Dad's Club was a cross between a PTA and an elementary school booster club. One of my greatest pleasures is to watch my kids compete. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they fail and that is beauty of sports. All 5 of the kids have played sports at the high school level (except Ben who is just about to enter high school) and have had the privilege of coached by some very good coaches. And I have coached all 5 of the kids at one level or another.

A couple truths that I have noticed about virtually all the coaches that had my kids - they all had the kids' best interest at heart and almost all of them gave pre-game speeches emphasizing the plays and actions that the team will have to do to win the contest. When I was the head coach of one of the boys' basketball teams, I used to have "Tom's keys to the game." If the kids were paying attention, the keys were almost always the same and related to the fundamentals of the game. Another truth among almost all of the coaches was the post-game speech.

There were times that I waited for over 45 minutes after a game for a child while a coach gave his or her speech. Most of the time these long speeches happened after the team took a nasty loss. Of course the parents were getting antsy during these times, wondering when the coach would be done and how many different things he or she could possibly be talking about for that long. It was inevitable that after these long speeches I would ask my child "what did the coach have to say after the game?"

Without fail they would say something to the effect of "we need to play better." And I would wonder to myself why it took 45 minutes to say that the team needed to play better? Sometimes the coach would address individual players during these meetings, telling them what mistakes they made. I admit that sometimes as a coach I wanted to do the same, hoping it would motivate the player who made the mistake to avoid the same mistake the next time, and for the rest of the team to learn from that mistake.

Saying the right words, or at least the right amount of words, at the right time is critical. It is critical in the sales process, critical when you are counseling with employees and for this particular column, critical in post-game speeches. I have come to the conclusion that people only want to absorb 2-3 main points. Too much more than that and their eyes start to glaze over, they lose interest in what you are saying and the speaker might be doing more harm than good.

If I continue to coach youth sports, I will have to keep reminding myself of this lesson. Because like a lot of people, I do like to hear the sound of my own voice and I know that I have valuable words others are longing to hear. So I will take my own advice, and end my little bi-weekly "post-game speech" now.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*