

How to deal with hockey players who don't "battle" and "compete"

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There's a better way to get your message through.

The uncoachables. The damn players who won't "battle" and "compete." The ones that you see doing skillful stuff in practice. They're on their Instagram and on their Snapchat...but who just WON'T increase their intensity and battle in a game. Ugh!

You've talked to them, you threatened them, you moved them down to the fourth line, you sat them on the bench. Nothing changes...

You can probably *feel* the frustration, even right now, as you think about this player who just won't respond to your commands for "battle" and "compete." What the hell do you do with that player? Your only choice is to bench them, right?

Maybe not.

What if there was a way to solve this problem? What if you stood on the bench and watched a previously low-intensity player charge through the gate and into their shift with confidence and

right into a battle situation? How would it feel to watch that player winning battles and competing with the intensity of a wolverine on bath salts? Wouldn't that feel fantastic? Wouldn't that be best for you, for the team, and for that individual player? Wouldn't the parents be excited to see their kid being used in a game again because they were battling?

Isn't it true that if you could find a tried and true method to achieve this, you would use it consistently – even if it meant a bit more work for you?

Let me tell you something: the lack of battle and compete is a big problem – for players too. I constantly hear players telling me “my coach says I was benched because I need to compete and battle.” So I ask them: “what will you do differently?”

And they'll say something like, “I'm gonna win battles on the boards and move my feet as hard as I can.”

Problem solved, right?

Wrong.

Here's what is missing: *clarity*.

This is the part of this article where I'm going to set up some [cognitive dissonance](#) for some of you. Since I am doing this, you will perceive that I am able to read your mind, which makes me seem more credible to you, which will increase the likelihood of you using the information presented here.

Most coaches (I estimate 80%) will read this and agree with most of what I'm writing, then say to themselves, “I am already pretty clear about what I want,” and then continue coaching the way they were coaching to begin with. That's fine. But if I've predicted your response to yourself, you may want to evaluate the type of coach you'd like to be. I'll leave it at that.

For the 20% that will read this article and immediately apply the information by asking themselves “how can I become *more* clear to my players?” and then change how they communicate, they will see almost immediate results.

Now that some of you are angry that I have read your mind in a slightly disapproving way, I will continue.

Deliver a message your players will understand

Let me tell you a story about a time I inherited a bunch of (supposed) Bantam AAA players. The defence kept turning the puck over in the neutral zone and giving up breakaway after breakaway. It

was apparent they didn't know how to support each other in the neutral zone and establish correct gaps, so their turnovers just resulted in breakaways.

In between periods, I yelled at them: "Stop giving up breakaways! It is completely unacceptable at this level! Manage the puck and support your partner!!"

To my utter shock, this had the exact opposite effect I wanted. They started turning the puck over *more* and gave up another three breakaways that period. Great coaching, Jason!

Completely bewildered, I asked some of the defencemen why they weren't supporting each other. They said to me: "We don't know what you mean. We were never taught that."

What the heck? These Bantam AAA players haven't been taught how to support each other in the neutral zone?

Regardless of the travesty of their previous coaching, here's what happened:

1. The players were not given clear instruction on how to support each other in the neutral zone when they had possession.
2. I raised the expectations on them and made them feel a bit more pressure to carry out the task of "not giving up breakaways."
3. They didn't know how to position themselves in a way that would "not give up breakaways," so they were unclear on what they should do.
4. In response to my feedback, they "tried harder" to "not give up breakaways."
5. They ended up giving up more breakaways because they didn't know specifically what to do and "trying harder" only led them to make more mistakes.

When I realized that this was happening, it was clear that they needed to be shown what exactly to do. So we sat down with video, and I showed them how to support their partner in the neutral zone when they had the puck. I gave them some simple, clear and specific rules to follow.

This is how it went down:

1. The players were given simple, clear and specific rules to follow.
2. They tried out the rules, making a few mistakes along the way.
3. Players began to understand and apply the rules all the time, and began playing better in the neutral zone. They were able to keep possession and not turn the puck over as much. As a result, there were no more breakaways the rest of the tournament.

The key here is *clarity*.

Without *clear* instructions, yelling and asking them to do something they didn't know how to do literally made the problem worse.

Be specific

How does this relate to the player who isn't battling and competing?

Well, like I said, when I talk to players about what they need to do to "battle" and "compete," they give pretty vague answers. For example, exactly how hard is "moving my feet as hard as I can"? Wouldn't you agree that people might move their feet "as hard as they can" at different speeds depending on motivation, situation and energy level? How many steps should they take as "hard as they can"? The average number of strides that a player will take at a time is between 3-5 before they start moving laterally. So does it really make sense for them to just "move their feet as hard as they can?"

Likewise, what is "winning a battle on the wall?" Is it winning the race to the puck? Is it getting the puck and chipping it? Is it getting the puck and making a play? Is it holding off a player?

You might now notice how a vague command or cue like "move your feet harder" and "win more battles" isn't actually useful to a player. Essentially, if a player has a vague understanding of what "battle" and "compete" is, wouldn't you agree that they will have a hard time increasing their "battle" and "compete level?" Wouldn't you also agree that if you could give the player more clear instructions on what you'd like to see, you would see the player doing exactly what you want?

The argument here isn't to get you to overload your players with specifics and details. Rather, as a coach, it makes sense to improve your communication to get exactly what you want.

Just like you wouldn't walk into the dressing room before a game and say to your team, "let's go and win this game" and expect it to work, you wouldn't expect "battle harder" to automatically work. Doesn't it make sense to clearly tell your player what they need to do to improve their "battle" level?

Here are some common things that high-level coaches want to see from their players that indicate a high "battle" and "compete" level:

- Blocking shots
- Take a hit to make a play
- Getting stick on puck
- Demonstrating aggression in front of the net to protect the space
- Making a hit and pinning in the defensive zone
- Stopping and starting in the defensive zone
- Taking three hard steps on the back check through the dots

- Beating your man back to the net on the defensive side
- Tying up sticks in front
- Giving bumps to slow down opposing players
- Winning possession on the wall and making a play to a teammate
- Winning races to loose pucks

As a coach, you might find that you can look at what your players are doing and give them *specific* and *clear* feedback that is on this list. You might even have your own list of things to tell them. The point is, vagueness doesn't work. Clarity gives players confidence. Clarity tells players exactly what to do. And guess what, most players who know what to do will go and do it. They want to! They want to please you. They want to do what you say. Some just don't know how.

You can get more from your players by telling them exactly what you want with *clarity* instead of using catchall phrases like "battle," "compete" and "work harder." You're better off telling players specifically and clearly what they can do to demonstrate "battle" and "compete."

- See also:
 - [How elite coaches communicate \(FULL VIDEO\)](#)
 - [Using data to better understand backchecking in hockey](#)
 - [Using data to define good gap control for defencemen](#)