

Creativity & Leadership

Encourage players to expand what is possible

My friend Andy Higgins explains that part of his motivation for coaching is to expand what is possible. Problem solving, breaking down boundaries, and thinking outside the box are all methods to expand what is possible.

Historically, basketball - and all sports - has always been fueled by creativity.

IN THE PAST

Problem solving: James Naismith created the sport to provide a sport based on skill that could be played indoors. In the early part of the twentieth century, teams like the Original Celtics and the New York Renaissance developed offensive and defensive systems to achieve tremendous winning streaks.

Breaking down boundaries: Innovation flourished on the concrete too; Earl “The Goat” Manigault was as legendary in Rucker Park as Earl “The Pearl” Monroe was in Madison Square Garden. Driving, shooting, passing, and dunking, their groundbreaking moves opened up the game.

Thinking outside the box: When Dean Smith was first building the North Carolina Tarheels, the shot-clock had not yet been adopted. Faced with mediocre talent but excellent ballhandlers such as Phil Ford, he conceived the Four Corners offence to preserve a lead (or even mount a comeback) late in games.

TODAY

Those who have solved problems by looking at them from a different perspective have benefited from successful seasons while others have remained stuck in the mud. For example, The Detroit Pistons have a great team but it is hardly built on a foundation of great players. In order to win, the team **has** made defensive intensity their identity.

The Argentina National Team plays a flowing, offensive game based on movement to maximize the talents of their skilled perimeter players, like Manu Ginobili. When Amare Stoudamire was injured for the entire 2006-07 season, the Phoenix Suns started former guard Boris Diaw in his place, using Diaw with new acquisitions Raja Bell, Kurt Thomas, James Jones, Brian Grant, Tim Thomas, and Eddie House as part of an eclectic rotation that maximized everyone’s skills in a non-traditional capacity.

THE ROLE OF COACHES

All of the above coaches used creative thinking to design a new solution to their obstacles and won by changing the conditions under which they were operating. The players bought into the process and executed without fearing failure. After the initial success, the teams continued to improve themselves, employing creativity to stay ahead of the pack.

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by Coach Brock Bourgase

Nurturing and inspiring the creative process is essential to develop the problem-solving abilities of student-athletes, on and off the court. It is a skill that does not come naturally but a coach can undertake a few critical steps to help all team members improve their ability to create:

Foster a creative environment: The coaching staff should value and model creativity. Show players how a play can be tweaked to open their minds to new possibilities. Recognize creative efforts, even if they end in failure.

Value creative team members and use them to better the team. In Game 5 of the 1970 N.B.A. Finals, the New York Knicks lost centre Willis Reed to injury. Needing to stop Wilt Chamberlain at both ends of the court, Bill Bradley suggested a 1-3-1 offensive set with the small forward in the in high post. The Knicks won the game but coach Red Holzman said that it would have been worthwhile to try nevertheless in order to show the team that he valued their input.

One may argue that a coach employing this approach abdicates a duty they have to their team. It is definitely a stark contrast to the coach who micro-manages all that falls within their fiefdom. In that case, when a team's efforts are directed towards something that falls within the coach's Ideal Quality World, where do the athletes find significance?

Challenge the status quo: Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Business, suggests that a key element to a creative environment is eliminating the fear of failure: players shouldn't "trade-off" experimenting, on the chance that they will be blamed if it fails, for taking the safe route and settling for less.

School administration and the athletics department should also support innovation. In the long term, it will improve the experience of students throughout the school. In the short term, they should tolerate bumps in the road. The point of education is self-improvement, one of the most difficult tasks in the world.



Earl Monroe, Bill Bradley, and Coach Red Holzman were all members of the New York Knicks in the 1970s, a team known for innovation and teamwork.



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Understand Different Perspectives: Managing designers is a challenge because they usually have separate mindsets. But like coaches and athletic directors, leaders and designers have many of the same common goals so it is important to put effort into maintaining the relationship when there are differences in opinions.

Teach Student-Athletes How to Think: First of all, coaches need to teach themselves how to think creatively. Keeping a coaching journal can help organize all sorts of ideas (good, bad, half-baked, exceptional). Fooling around with different plays and systems stimulates special visualization.

Secondly, coaches can pass these skills on to players. Mental sets, different drills, or stopping practice for a detailed explanation are all excellent opportunities to communicate creativity to the team. When someone does make a suggestion, their idea should be respected and considered honestly.

Sell innovation: Coaches need to get buy-in from their players. Malcolm Gladwell believes you need to identify the connectors, mavens, and salespeople for any idea to truly take hold. In a small setting like a basketball team, the coach is the ultimate salesperson and team members fill Gladwell's roles. The thoughtful coach will identify them and make them part of the process.

Execute: Communicate what needs to be done and do it. When the game starts, creativity yields to performance on demand, under stress. When a crisis occurs during the year, the players are ultimately responsible for the resolution. Coaches can recommend actions but players must execute these actions. Sometimes, the players must pull themselves together and move forward on their own.

Evaluate, Adjust, and Improve: The process of innovation never stops. It's not necessary to go back to the drawing board to get new ideas. Many successes in basketball have come from adjustments to winning ideas. Seven-game series are won by adjustments. Many teams have gone small, such as when the Lakers started Magic Johnson at the Centre position in the 1980 Finals. There are countless ways to defend screen and rolls plays or double team and surprise inventions can be very effective.

"All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

- Pablo Picasso

Selfishly, coaches should nurture innovators because they can truly drive a team at times. Altruistically, coaches should nurture innovators because the economy will need a lot more free-thinking ideas to flourish in the twenty-first century, among other reasons.