



Why Coaching Makes A Difference And Why High Performers Always Use It.

(Philip Belove, Ed.D., Robert E. Schrull)

Arkady Burdan coaches the U.S. Olympic fencing team. He came to the U.S from Uzbekistan in 1990. He says that fencing is “physical chess” which means that it involves a lot of concentration, thought and focus. He also says that a fencer without a coach “is nothing.” At the Olympics in Beijing, fencer Sada Jacobson was behind and at the compulsory pause, halfway through the tournament, she went to Burdan for advice. They spoke for 30 seconds and she returned to the match and won 15 to 11. What did he say? Speaking to reporter, Anthony Lane, after the bout, Burdan said, “She was tight and working too hard. I did not tell her strategy or technical advice. I say, have fun. Play.”

When Pat Riley, who coached several championship NBA teams, speaks to his teams in the closing minutes of a tight game, he says the same thing, “Loosen up. Find your own game. Do what you do.”

Why does this work? Good coaching breaks the spell that pressure can put on a player and puts them back in touch with their strong grace. They can do this with a few words, a joke or a smile, because they have a powerful coaching relationship already developed. It’s not the coach’s words that make a difference. It’s the coaching relationship. That’s why people have coaches.

There are two ways people fail to play their best. They panic or they choke. Coaching corrects for both.

When people panic they stop observing and start throwing solutions at problems. They don’t wait to see what works or doesn’t. They just react. The connection with the coach calms them down and gives them perspective.

When people choke, it’s the opposite. They imagine that they don’t know anything. They act as if they are figuring it all out for the first time. Coaching helps them loosen up and trust their instincts.

The reason coaching is able to do this is that the coach and the performer have worked together. The performer knows that the coach knows him or her. The coach knows his or her goals and strengths and weak spots. A coaching relationship works by taking the person out of their own head, out of their own inevitable mind-traps.

The challenge of being excellent always involves being on good terms with yourself and the right coaching relationship helps you do that. Your job as a performer is to figure out how to make your own strengths work together.

A teacher may teach a skill. A coach helps a person make the skill his own. One man who was learning classical guitar spoke to five different teachers asking each of them how to execute a certain technical maneuver. He said each of the teachers had a completely different answer. But at the end of it all, he was able to do it well. When asked, “How could you get so many different answers and still learn?” He said, “Because they could only tell me how they did it and what I had to know was how to make my own hands do it. In the end, my coach, or main teacher said to me, “Don’t ask why your playing is not more like mine. Ask why your playing is not more like yours.

The coach helps the performer profit from his own experience.

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