

The Importance of Humility and Openness in the Learning Process

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I had the pleasure of speaking at the 2016 Physical Preparation Summit in Indianapolis this Fall hosted by Mike Robertson and Bill Hartman of iFAST. The quality of character, wisdom and enthusiasm of both speakers and audience members was top notch, and I left the event encouraged to continue working on my own knowledge base and shortcomings. In my presentations, I have always made a point of identifying the individuals who have made a difference in my growth and development as not only a coach and professional, but also a human being. Ambitious people do not reach the top of Everest on their own. It takes lots of careful planning, skilled team members and, in many cases, lots of luck.

More recently, I have also incorporated a slide that I feel is important in conveying my philosophy regarding the teaching and learning process. The slide basically says, "Don't be afraid to say... I don't know." My intent is to let audience members know that I am only speaking on my experience - including the knowledge passed on to me by others - and that I don't presume to know everything on the subject matter I am presenting. By positioning myself in this manner and letting down my guard, it also allows attendees to open their minds to the information I am presenting, with no one feeling threatened by my message. An attitude of, "I'm going to teach all of you everything that I know!" is not only egotistical, but does not encourage people to think for themselves. I make no bones about it that, "We are all here to learn, discuss and share information. The difference between you and me is that someone asked me to speak and I just made up some slides for the occasion."

Don't be afraid to say...

I don't know!

After the presentations concluded, while we were all debriefing in the local tavern, I was overwhelmed by the number of attendees that remarked on my admission of ignorance and my humble nature of presenting advanced concepts in training. My intent was not to elicit compliments, engage in self-deprecating behavior or draw attention to myself, but rather put others at ease and extend a hand in manner that allows everyone to share ideas in a "safe"

environment. In a world saturated with so-called “experts” and completely concerned with acquiring “shares, likes and followers,” at some point we have to disengage from behaviors that dwell on our own insecurities.

It is also important to note that the comments from attendees also drew my attention to the fact that there are a lot of narcissistic, arrogant people out there on the presentation circuit, which is very discouraging to me. On the one hand, it makes perfect sense. People who have the confidence to put their ideas out there and stand in front of an audience typically have to possess a strong personality and, to some degree, an inflated sense of self. But there is a definitely a big difference between having a significant amount of self-confidence and coming off like an asshole.

My experience at the iFAST Summit encouraged me to continue along the path of being overtly inclusive in my presentation approach. As such, I have identified some key aspects of my presentation philosophy that have guided my professional development engagements. These guidelines have helped to make these events extremely valuable experiences for everyone involved, including myself.

- **Encourage questions throughout your session.** I have attended presentations where speakers commonly wait until the end to allow questions to be asked by attendees. I am a big fan of allowing questions to be asked when the iron is hot. If I say something that ignites an idea or query from someone in the audience, by all means I would like them to put up their hand and share it with all of us. At the iFAST Physical Preparation Summit, I was fortunate to have Pat Davidson in the audience and he contributed some excellent questions and ideas for discussion. From my perspective, Pat’s questions not only stimulated beneficial discussion for the group, but also gave me some ideas on how I could better articulate my ideas for future presentations. Questions also break up the “monotony of me.” I was speaking for two 3-hour sessions in Indianapolis and, frankly, I was getting tired of hearing my own voice. Having others chime in was refreshing and made the entire experience much more valuable for everyone involved.
- **Present your ideas as concepts, experiences and theories, not absolutes.** I make a point of introducing many of my ideas as the product of my experiences and observations, not facts. In most cases, I will present an observation based on what I have seen with the athletes and teams that I have worked with over many years. These are by no means scientific truths, but simply a documentation of my own experience. Where possible, I try to share research papers that support my own observations. But in many cases, the research hasn’t yet been done. In the world of physical preparation, there are not many absolutes. Conditions and circumstances are changing constantly, and individual responses to training can vary so widely that we cannot predict outcomes so readily. Additionally, the constraints of scientific research studies couldn’t hope to duplicate the many variables and synergistic relationships involved in a training scenario. However, we can better prepare ourselves for the many possibilities by sharing our experiences with others and collectively improving our ability to adapt to change and circumstances with the best possible approach. Individuals who want to apply “one-size fits all” template or assume that they have all of the answers at their fingertips will not be successful in the long run.

- **Allow people to ask questions between breaks, but also mention any good questions when you return to your presentation.** It is not uncommon for conference attendees to approach a speaker during breaks to ask questions. Some speakers and conference hosts dissuade attendees from asking private questions during breaks or at the end of a presentation. I am of the mind that everyone deserves some personal time to offer a question and connect with the presenter. Many of these people may not get another chance to ask their question because of the hectic schedule of many professional development events. Additionally, these individual questions can often encourage me to address issues that I haven't prepared for in my own presentation. Often, I will begin the subsequent session with, "Someone asked me a great question during the break and I would like to discuss that topic with all of you to see if we can arrive at a reasonable answer." Again, people will appreciate you taking the time to meet their needs and share more ideas to the larger group.
- **If anyone questions or opposes your ideas or concepts, turn the situation into an opportunity, not a confrontation.** It is not often that an audience member puts up his or her hand during a presentation to openly disagree with the presenter. Conference and workshop etiquette usually encourages questions and positive comments, but not necessarily conflict. In cases where audience members have disagreed with my material, I have always tried to consider their point-of-view and integrate our opposing thoughts – however divergent – as valuable observations. As an example, I will often discuss the use of the upper extremities as a means of managing other issues in sprinting – such as posture and stride rate. I have been questioned about my focus on the arms, with some individuals saying that focusing too much on the arms can be a distraction, as it is too far away from the action of the legs. My response has been, "You are exactly right! By getting the athletes to think away from the legs, it allows them to relax and execute their mechanics more naturally and more efficiently." By positively acknowledging that they had the right idea, I was able to bring them on board to examine the issue collectively and productively without either of us getting offended or put off.
- **Create opportunities to extend the discussion beyond your session.** Regardless of how fatigued you are from preparing and delivering your presentation, engage others about their thoughts, questions and ideas in the bar, over a meal or in the hotel lobby. The "real" learning and relationship-building occurs outside of the presentation environment, and continues well beyond the weekend. I value the connections and relationships I establish at all of these events, and look forward to sharing thoughts with many of the attendees for years to come. Just because I was the presenter and someone else was simply in the audience does not mean I cannot learn from that particular individual. We can all be mentors for each other regardless of titles, degrees and certifications.

The take-home message for me following an event like the 2016 iFAST Physical Preparation Summit is that everyone deserves a chance to be heard. Some of us will stand up behind a lectern and deliver a presentation, while others may be quietly seated in the audience. Yet beyond that arena, we all have stories to tell, successes to share and failures to reveal. All of this information when divulged in a safe learning environment will collectively make us all better people. I am looking forward to meeting more mentors of all ages, experiences and backgrounds.