

## Yes, No and the Bus Leaves at 4 p.m. -- Guidelines for Communications in the Electronic Age

Every year new coaches are added to our athletic staffs. One of the first questions we get from these new hires is about the protocol for interacting with parents, players and the media. The most common form of communication today has become the internet. The number and variety of chat rooms, message boards and e-mail communications has skyrocketed. With this major increase in the possibilities of communication, the chance for problems to arise has also grown at an alarming rate. The use of personal meetings and phone calls has decreased and the number of new problems we face has increased in large part because of the change in our communications culture and the lack of the personal touch that once existed.

Many of our parents want to e-mail coaches and either vent, compliment or criticize. Coaches are often tempted to respond in a quick and abrupt manner without thinking about any short term or long term problems that might be created. Most of the responses by both parties in such an exchange are both harsh and negative in nature. When a coach asks how to respond to an e-mail from a parent, the title of this article is the short answer I always give first. It may seem flippant, but it highlights the need to caution and restraint when responding to anyone in a written manner. My standard advice to all coaches is to refrain from responding in a written manner to the vast majority of such inquiries. Once words are written and transmitted electronically, they remain part of the public domain forever. No subtext is included. No explanation for background is given and any type of interpretation can be given to words printed on a page. Statements that were written innocently and with the proper intent are often twisted into a verbal assault that was never intended by the author.

When communicating with parents, patrons, players and the media, several guidelines should be followed. It is vital that the athletic director discuss these guidelines every year with every member of the coaching staff. Reinforcement of the basic principles on a regular basis must be maintained. A proactive approach to the protocols of electronic communications might prevent a major problem from growing out of a simple case of poor communication between a coach and parent. Simple rules and protocols that are established early and communicated to all stakeholders in a firm and consistent manner are the keys to prevention.

I keep a notepad by my phone. Any time I receive a call from a parent, patron or the media, I document the call and file away any type of communication that could be deemed serious on a flash drive near my computer. The major points of the discussion are highlighted and the responses given are summarized. If it is an inquiry about game time or procedural details, I respond quickly. Usually no further documentation is necessary. If the phone call requires a lengthy conversation, I try to schedule a personal meeting. All of my coaches are encouraged to use the same or a similar system to keep track of communications. Any personal meetings in my office are documented in the same manner and filed away. Documentation of all types of verbal and electronic communications is vital to protect the integrity of every form of interaction with parents, players and coaches.

If a similar contact is made via e-mail the e-mail is stored in a file on the computer and a hard copy is printed and kept in a three ring binder. This gives a back up and a secondary storage mode to keep the information available. If the response is about simple logistical information, no record is kept and the e-mail is answered. If the e-mail is of a personal or professional nature, the response is minimal, but professional. Any call that requires personal or professional response is answered by a phone call or a personal meeting is arranged. It is very important not to put too much in writing in the vacuum of cyberspace. Too much room is allowed for interpretation and too many facts can be misconstrued. Once it is written, it is there forever.

Parents will attempt to use e-mail to discuss playing time, coaching strategy, personnel and many other items that are under the supervision of the coach. It is imperative that coaches do not respond to such inquiries via e-mail. Long and drawn out e-mails from upset parties that are answered in kind by upset and irritated coaches never produce a positive outcome for either party. All coaches should be counseled to respond to such inquiries by using a very brief and polite reply. A response that indicates the need for a phone call or face to face meeting is always the best. If a parent does not want to talk on the phone or be a part of a personal meeting, they should not be given the option of an electronic war of words with the coach using e-mail. Coaches and athletic administrators should always attempt to hold the line on any such electronic responses.

Another area of concern should be the vast number of chat rooms and discussion boards. Coaches should be encouraged not to be a part of any such discussions or interactions. Your coaches are adults and cannot be told what to do and not do on their free time and in the privacy of their homes. But it should be stressed to them that the same problems that can arise from e-mail are prevalent in these settings. As before, once the words are written, they cannot be taken back. What is written as a compliment to one person can be viewed as an attack by another. As before, once something appears in writing in such a venue, it is there forever and can never be taken back by the original author.

All staff members should be encouraged to avoid maintaining accounts in My Space or Face Book groups. Any pictures or statements posted on these sites often find their way to the wrong people. Access by students, parents, and the media can often result in very negative outcomes for the individual who posts such information. It is becoming quite commonplace for personnel directors from school districts to access these sites and attempt to begin background checks on possible hires. Members of professional staffs are often checked by their superiors for possible behaviors that could bring discredit to the school or district.

Interaction with students using all internet sources should be kept to an absolute minimum. Simple responses to times, locations and basic information might be permissible. But any discussions of topics deemed off limits to parents should also be discouraged with students. By the same token, interaction with students using My Space or Face Book accounts should *never* take place. The sharing of pictures or personal information that is of a sexual or improper nature could be grounds for dismissal in most school districts. Possible criminal charges could also be generated from several types of interactions.

We live in a communication age. Electronic communications have made our jobs much easier. But, at the same time, the speed and amount of information that can be shared brings a unique set of problems. It is imperative that we counsel our coaches on the proper use of electronic communication. What to say as well as what not to say should be addressed early and often with every staff member. Additionally, it is vital that we never forget the importance of human contact and interaction. Mass communication spreads information, but personal contact is quite often the best format for dealing with many of the emotional issues that arise in relationships between coaches, athletes and parents. When in doubt, talk it out is a great motto to live by for all coaches, parents and administrators.