

## What I Think You Should Do Is . . .

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Many of us who have been coaching for more than a few years have undoubtedly felt the effects of a lack of formal training for both coaches and judges. In fact, many of us have probably commented about that situation as we bemoan the poor choices of material that we hear from others' students, or try to explain why a judge has written particular kinds of comments on a ballot. At the same time that we decry the sad state of affairs with those new coaches and judges, we overlook the fact that we may have come through the same kind of process. It is easy for us to point accusing fingers at coaches and judges who are recent participants in forensic activities and assert that they have not been well trained, that they are not properly prepared for what they are doing. There may be an assumption that new coaches and judges are the ones who lack formal training. That assumption may not be accurate.

Apparently, the old adage is true: we learn by doing. Those of us who are fondly regarded as the "old buffaloes" among coaches may feel that we are the exception. If we can remember back as far as the days when we were receiving our coaching training, we may be able to recall that our training may have been relatively informal. There probably are not very many who were fortunate enough to have a teacher or mentor who took us by the hand and led us down the path to wisdom and understanding. Whatever amounts of wisdom and understanding are occasionally apparent may be the result of experience, observation, drawing

conclusions, and putting together a lot of related educational experiences. New coaches and judges may be faced with the same kind of situation.

If we conclude that veteran coaches and judges have had little or no formal training, and novice coaches and judges have had little or no formal training, then a number of implications begin to develop. For the sake of clarity, and to follow forensic conventions, let us examine several of those implications, first from the perspective of coaches, then from the perspective of judges, and finally from the perspective of the students. Then we may be able to draw some final conclusions for the forensic community as a whole.

### Implication #1

There are no coaches or judges out there who have benefitted from formal training. At this point, it should become apparent that no definitions have been presented for either "formal" or "informal" training. Most of us have a pretty clear idea of what those words mean to us. If there are no coaches or judges who have had formal training, then we are all operating under the influence of informal training. So far, the reasoning process here is pretty basic. But if we are all operating under the influence of informal training, where did all the rules come from? Where did we find the authority figure to give credence to the need for standardized rules and to determine the content of those rules? It's not necessary to isolate a particular individual, but it may be helpful to remember that all of us have basically the same level of formal training. Individual experience may be helpful in giving us some guidance and direction, but anyone's experience can be just as helpful as anyone else's.

### Implication #2

Novice coaches can provide some stimulating educational challenges for veteran coaches. If experience becomes a substitute for formal training, then

veteran coaches have a wonderful opportunity to share their experiential knowledge and expertise with novice coaches. It may be helpful to remember that education is for everyone, not necessarily just the students. Helping novice coaches to develop some effective techniques can be a rewarding experience for veteran coaches who may be needing a little intellectual challenge and stimulation. Of course, an underlying implication here is that the veteran coaches will be willing to share their ideas with the novice coaches, if they are not too possessive of their knowledge.

#### **Implication #3**

"Untrained" coaches, who probably are novice coaches, will likely approach performances without preconceived ideas about what is "right" or "wrong." Without those preconceptions, students and audiences may be subjected to some refreshing approaches to the communication process and the performance situation. Of course, there will probably be some resistance to methods that do not clearly follow the norms established, but that does not mean that the methods are not effective or appropriate. Viewing performances that are not part of the established stereotypes may help to stimulate the thinking processes of coaches and students alike, and perhaps can lead them to acceptance of differing ideas and concepts or to reinforce and justify previously held ideas and concepts. Either scenario can be beneficial. Novice coaches may be able to present some challenges that will lead veteran coaches to reflect on their own methodology and their reliance on some of the basic tenets of communication. While oversight functions might be appropriate for governmental agencies, in the training of effective communicators it can be an unfortunate mistake. Novice coaches, while being apologetic for their lack of formal training, may inadvertently direct others to some important considerations of basic skills and concepts that can improve the quality of communication for everyone.

#### **Implication #4**

Judges who lack formal training can prove to be relatively uncontaminated. Many of us have commiserated about having "lay" judges, those who have little or no background in forensics. We report that they cause us problems because they don't follow normal procedures in evaluating student performances and their comments frequently need to be interpreted for the students. These judges may very likely approach performance situations without preconceived ideas and will respond to the performances they actually hear and see, not what they expect to hear and see. A perceived need to translate or justify these comments and reactions suggests that students may be unable to adapt to varying audiences and reactions. Coaches may then need to work on helping the students to develop greater adaptability during their rehearsal sessions.

#### **Implication #5**

Judges who are untrained sometimes really do respond negatively to student performances. Judges who are "trained," or at least have several years of experience, sometimes respond negatively to student performances. While students and coaches alike have to be prepared for those situations, judges may need some reminders that students are trying to learn to improve their communication skills. It is more beneficial to offer some positive responses and to be able to provide some positive suggestions for the students. Students may need to be prepared in advance for the concept that not everyone will respond positively to their performances. It isn't possible to please every member of every audience with every performance. But it will be possible to learn from all of those responses.

#### **Implication #6**

Judges who are untrained may be able to provide some new insights and perspectives on student performances. Unfortunately, in order for those

perspectives to be useful, the students and their coaches need to be receptive to new insights and perspectives. As we are all aware, new ideas don't always agree with previously held ones, and that usually means the new ones aren't good. If we are willing to listen, coaches and students alike can learn from those judges who are frequently excused from credibility because they aren't trained.

#### **Implication #7**

Veteran students may feel some frustration working with novice coaches.

#### **Implication #8**

Veteran students may feel some frustration being judged by untrained judges.

Veteran students may have to learn to accept these two circumstances. In other words, they may have to learn to "deal with it." If a novice coach is the only resource available to them, they have little recourse: they can adapt to the coach's ideas; they can try to work out a compromise; they can quit. With untrained judges, compromising may not be an option.

With the previously listed implications in mind, let us now look at some concluding implications -- the "bottom line." We'll go a little beyond the problem/solution process and try to discover some underlying implications for the forensic community.

#### **Implication #9**

Novice students are a rare and unpopular commodity. They're hard to find, and when they do show up, they are hard to work with because they don't understand our language, they demand a lot of time and energy, and they seek constant approval.

#### **Implication #10**

Veteran students are a treasured commodity because they're easier and more rewarding. They also make us look better.

#### **Implication #11**

There seems to be a lack of definition for "trained." There seems to be a desire for coaches to be trained to coach and for judges to be trained to judge. But there seems to be no consistent definition for what that means. Coaches probably should be trained to teach, to educate. Judges probably should be trained to teach, to educate. Then the challenge is figuring out how to accomplish that.

#### **Implication #12**

The forensic community must remain adaptable, flexible. It's not possible to rely solely on trained/veteran coaches. It's not wise to rely solely on trained/veteran judges. If we are training students to be effective communicators, they need to be trained to be adaptable.

#### **Implication #13**

Goals need to be re-established, or confirmed. If there are valid implications and a feeling of frustration or concern about the field of forensics, it may occur because of a lack of firm, clearly established goals for coaches, judges and students.

#### **Implication #14**

Coaches aren't educating students. Many coaches don't know how to educate students. Many coaches have no background (training) in education or education curriculum. In responding to the perceived demands of colleagues, students, administrators and ourselves, we tend to train competitors. Society and life can do that. We need to be training communicators. That is an educational process that

requires knowledge and understanding of basic principles of communication that may be lacking for many coaches.

***Implication #15***

There seems to be a need for coaches to be strong leaders and teachers. A colleague once indicated that a coach should be all things to all people. The catch is figuring out what that is. It is time consuming. It is mentally, physically and emotionally draining. It is stressful. It is rewarding.

***Implication #16***

Coaches need a break. Occasionally, a coach will take a rare "weekend off." That usually means either sending the students out with an "untrained" novice coach and worrying all the time they are gone, or it means keeping the students home and spending additional hours in rehearsal or at least feeling slightly guilty because the students (and coach) are missing a tournament somewhere. There is no "break" in that scenario. Coaches need a real break, with no pressures from the coaching and no sense of guilt. Perhaps a week or two would be appropriate. Perhaps a month would be good.

***Implication #17***

The forensic community is becoming a closed, self-centered society. While this may sound like a prediction, it may be a reasonable implication of some of the concerns that are implied in the notion of having untrained coaches and judges. If there are those individuals who really are untrained, that may simply cause the veterans a little uncertainty. Frequently, we tend to isolate those who are untrained and rely more heavily on those whom we can count on to follow the normal patterns of responses. This practice does not allow students opportunities

to experience new and different responses, and it does not allow veteran coaches to experience new ideas and have an opportunity to reinforce basic concepts.

***Implication #18***

In order to overcome what may be perceived as problems, the forensic community may need to establish a system of utilizing veteran coaches and judges to provide some training for novice coaches and judges. Care would need to be exercised in order to encourage the sharing of new ideas and responses, instead of perpetuating previously established norms. That brings us back to the educational process again.

These are not purported to be an inclusive series of implications. Hopefully, they will stimulate some thinking and discussion. If the bottom line of the forensic activity is to educate students and help them to become more effective communicators, then we must start by reinforcing our own educational goals and communication skills.