

Consistency Is One Key to Managerial Success

Few things are better than a night at the ballpark. I usually try to arrive early enough to watch pregame warm-ups. But an odd thought occurred to me when I visited the ballpark recently to watch our hometown Redlegs take on the Pittsburgh Pirates.

As the game was about to begin, the PA announcer introduced the Pirate line-up. After announcing the Reds line-up, he mentioned that the Reds were led by manager Dusty Baker. That got me thinking. Why are most sports teams led by coaches, but baseball teams are led by *managers*?

The answer may lie in the nature of the game. Baseball is the quintessential team game that relies heavily on the individual talents of its players. A baseball game can be won or lost on a clutch base hit or an ill-timed error. With so much riding on the performance of each individual player, baseball managers must balance the personalities (and egos) of their team members against the team's ultimate goal of winning the game. If the manager is too harsh on an underperforming player, he risks hurting that player's confidence. If a manager is too soft on a headstrong player, he risks losing the team. What separates an average manager from a truly great one is simple. It's the manager's ability to make the right decisions that put his team in the best position to win. Does this sound familiar? It should. Good business managers do the exact same thing.

Successful baseball and business managers know how to push the right buttons to get the most out of their team members. But consistency is the key. Florida Marlins manager Fredi Gonzalez found this out the hard way when his All-Star shortstop, Hanley Ramirez, criticized him after a recent game. The criticism came after Gonzalez benched Ramirez in the middle of the game for not hustling on the field. Ramirez reacted by arguing that the Marlins had 24 other guys on the roster who didn't hustle, but that Gonzalez never benched those players. In the shortstop's mind, his manager lacked consistency. This lack of consistency, whether real or imagined, threatened to undermine the manager's authority.

Of course, even the most consistent and evenhanded manager can expect to encounter conflict with members of his or her team. But conflict can often be avoided if managers follow the "Four C's" – Being Consistent, Clear, Concise and Constructive.

Be Consistent - Discipline and direction need to be consistent. This sounds self-evident. But it is often tempting to look the other way when your star team member needs to be disciplined. On the other hand, you may harshly discipline your star while not disciplining other team members as a way of motivating your star performer. Don't do it. Just remember what happened to manager Fredi Gonzalez. Inconsistent discipline not only undermines your authority as a manager, it may invite allegations of discrimination. You don't want to be charged with that error.

Be Clear - You should always strive to provide clear discipline and direction. Team members cannot

adequately correct their behavior if they don't know exactly what is expected of them. It's important to remember that the timing of the direction you give is just as important as the message itself. Make sure that all of the members of your team understand what you expect of them. And don't wait until the annual performance evaluation to provide clear discipline or direction. That's like a baseball manager waiting until the end of the season to help his star pitcher correct a hitch in his delivery. Sure, it might be helpful information at the end of the season, but your pitcher just lost 20 games for you in the meantime.

Be Concise - Discipline and direction should also be concise. You should give meaningful, concrete examples of how the team member has performed well and how the team member has fallen short. Simply saying that a team member is "doing a good job" or that she "needs to improve" does not communicate exactly how that team member is meeting or falling short of the standard. The use of concise, concrete examples can help. It's like the bunt sign - short, to the point and unambiguous.

Be Constructive - No one likes to be criticized. But criticism is especially hard to take when it's not constructive. You should strive to provide constructive criticism so that members of your team know exactly how they can improve their performance. Using criticism that is constructive (and not destructive) helps show that you are part of the team and that you truly want to help each team member succeed. A simple "keep your eye on the ball" is better than a tirade after a strikeout.

Of course, the Four C's aren't a panacea. They won't totally remove conflict from your workplace. But using them should help you put your team in the best position to win. And really, that's what great managers do.