



Stanford eCorner

Using Soft Skills on the Field

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Young explains how he used soft skills as a quarterback to motivate his team. He learned to assess a situation through the perspective of his teammates and to understand their personal incentives. In this manner, he was able to inspire them individually and improve their communication and coordination on the field.



Transcript

You've got to be careful with soft skills. For example, I want to be champion. I want to be a great player. How great can I be if that's my goal? Well, you've got to be with great people because there's no way a great quarterback's going to do anything without a great team. No one ever says "The losing quarterback? Oh, he's super. The team stinks but he's super." We're in this together. When you talk about those soft skills about understanding the other person, to me the element - I'll call it love or respect - is getting to know somebody. I used to joke with Jerry Rice's wife, Jackie, that I knew him better than she did. She's like "Come on. That's stupid." "Jackie, I've seen him under pressure.

I've seen him when he's tired. I've seen him when he wants to quit. I've seen him in all these extended places." She would say "That's not true." That's probably right. I did it for effect for Jerry, to make Jerry appreciate his quarterback. That's part of it too. Every weekend, you get into a football game, especially in front of 80,000 or 90,000 people. The noise alone is enough to make you crazy. You get tired, you make mistakes and you get behind. Human nature is like "I want to quit. I can't wait to get to the bus." You start smelling the fumes of the bus like it's this beautiful aroma.

"I just want to get to the bus so I can get out of here." That's when you really know the guys around you. You have to, as a quarterback, use those soft skills to make sure that, individually, you can start to corral your guys. For Jerry Rice, you have to be careful about how you got him motivated. He was super-motivated, but it had to be his idea to be motivated. You couldn't say to Jerry "Damn Jerry, you son of a bitch!" He would bristle. He would say "You can't make me." He's demand-resistant, probably like most of the people in this building or room. But if you can make him look at it in a way that inspired him, he was like a rocket. One of my great tactics was to say "The guy who's over there in the third row says that you've never been good since you were in college and you've been overrated." He would be angry. Other guys like Terrell Owens come to mind. I played three years with him.

Now he's world famous for his different antics but when I played with him, he was very "Yes, sir. No sir. I want to be a great football player. I'm willing to work extra hard." We got into a playoff game where he dropped a bunch of passes. He was a young kid in a big football game, dropping passes and he came to me. "Please don't give up on me." He was saying to himself "Here's this old quarterback, a veteran guy. He knows better." I'm not going to put up with that, some guy dropping passes in our biggest game. Fool me once, shame on you. That was the Dan Quail thing, wasn't it? He messed it up. And George Bush followed it as well.

Potato? Potato? Tomato? Yeah. I'm a perfect politician. It could be your future career. Yeah. He knew better. He was this kid that was young and impressionable and wanted to do really well. I said "Look, you are the best football player here. You're the most talented and the strongest. I'm looking for guys that open up when they're down or in a tough situation. That's you.

You're my guy. I'm throwing you the ball. If you're open, I'm throwing you the ball. Not to make your head big, Terrell, but if my mom were open, I'd throw it to her. You're going to get open. You're going to get the football." "Okay, okay." Out he went. I could have said anything that would have demoralized him. He was on the tips of my fingers. I could've done anything with him. I could have ruined him for weeks or I could have made it all about me.

"Screw you. I'm not here about being a champion player. If you can't be a champion, forget you." You could do whatever you wanted to him. At that moment, I kind of owned him. That's the kind of a soft skill. The talent is really about stepping into the other guy's shoes, that selfless way of looking at it. "Look, if I'm going to be successful and I'm going to be on the headline tomorrow, it's going to say "Steve Young something" or "was great.?" That being the fact, making my play, my pecking order to Terrell Owens in the middle of the game let him know that I'm the king is certainly going to help me with the headline. That's my incentive. It's not really my incentive. I'm just giving an example.

Those soft skills are really about standing up in people's shoes and inspiring them in individual ways. The only way you can do that is to spend time with them. The only way to do that is to get to know them. That's why in the locker room, on the road, in the planes, in the bus, at the hotel, the training camps and the dorms, I enjoyed - maybe that's why it was easier for me - going room to room in the dorms in the middle of summer camp when everyone's tired and just talk to people. "How are you doing?" Get to know their wives? names. Get to know a little bit about their kids and where they're from. Now you have rapport. Now you can use that rapport in the next day of practice. When something funny happens, you say "I bet that wouldn't happen back in Knoxville." Now they know you know them. You're involved with their lives and the interaction starts to build and build and build and it gets more layered.

Over time, like how I've been with Jerry Rice for fifteen years, it gets to a point where he would be running down the field. Very obviously, when the crowd was screaming as loud as it could, a lot of times you had to break the huddle and everyone would be like "What? What's the play?" "I can't explain it to everybody. We've got to go." A lot of time, I'd be in the center yelling as loud as I could. I'd look out at Jerry and he'd be like "What? What am I supposed to do?" I would be like this and he would be like this. We would snap the ball and we'd start and he would start running. I'd drop back and I'd throw him the ball. He'd catch it and we go back. The game goes so fast you don't have time to really appreciate those moments but later you say to yourself that neither of you know what you were doing. We had no plan, yet here he was running on the field. Because I've been with him so long, I could see where he was going.

I could tell what he was going to do by his body language. To me, that's an element of that soft skill.