



I've written before about the lessons leaders and managers can learn from the Little League World Series. The tournament is filled with examples of teamwork, role flexibility, sportsmanship, opportunity, and outstanding performance by 11- and 12-year-old players from around the world.

This year, however, I found myself watching something different. Not just the games. The conversations between the plays. More specifically, I started paying attention to the mound visits.

A young pitcher gives up a hit. Maybe he walks a batter. An infielder makes an error. The opposing team is suddenly threatening to score. Or it's the bottom of the seventh inning (extra innings in Little League). There are two outs and the opposition's best hitter is coming to the plate. The pitcher's team has a one-run lead.

The manager walks slowly from the dugout to the mound. The infielders gather around.

And something fascinating happens. In dozens of these mound visits, I have heard very little criticism. Instead, the message is overwhelmingly positive.

The manager may remind the pitcher of something he is doing well. He may point out that a particular pitch is working. He may remind him that his teammates are behind him. He may reinforce something they practiced. He may tell him to trust his catcher.

And almost always, somewhere in the conversation, there is some version of: **Relax and have fun.** That is not insignificant.

More Than “You Can Do It”

There is certainly encouragement. But what makes many of these conversations impressive is that the encouragement is more specific than the familiar: “You can do it.”

Instead, the manager gives the player something concrete to build on:

- Your fastball is working.
- Stay with what you’ve been doing.
- Trust your defense.
- Make your pitch.
- We’re with you.
- Get the next hitter.

The manager is not pretending that the previous pitch didn’t happen. He is not ignoring a mistake. He is simply refusing to allow the mistake to become the definition of what happens next. That is an important distinction.

It reflects several ideas that are frequently discussed in leadership and performance development: growth mindset, positive expectations, confidence, focus, resilience, and constructive feedback.

But on a Little League mound, those ideas are not theories. They are being practiced in real time.

The Leader’s Job Is the Next Pitch

One of the most important lessons from these mound visits may be this:

***Great coaching isn’t primarily about explaining the last pitch.
It’s about preparing someone for the next one.***

That has enormous implications beyond baseball. Consider what happens in many workplaces after someone makes a mistake. The manager wants to review what happened:

- Why did you do that?
- What went wrong?
- Didn’t we discuss this before?
- What were you thinking?

There may be a legitimate time for some of those questions. But timing matters. If someone is still “in the game,” the leader’s first responsibility may not be conducting a postmortem. It may be helping that person perform the next task successfully.

The Little League manager walking to the mound understands something important: the pitcher cannot change the previous pitch. But he can throw the next one.

- A customer service representative cannot undo the last difficult call.
- A salesperson cannot change the presentation that just went poorly.
- A manager cannot erase a mistake made in yesterday's meeting.
- A job candidate cannot redo an answer from five minutes earlier in an interview.

The question is: **What happens next?**

And what does the leader do to improve the chances that “next” goes well?

Positive Expectations Matter

There is another message embedded in these mound visits. The manager's presence communicates an expectation.

I still believe you can do this.

That expectation matters. We have known for years that expectations can influence performance. People respond differently when leaders communicate confidence in their ability. But there is an enormous difference between unsupported optimism and credible positive expectations.

“You're the greatest pitcher ever!” is probably not useful.

“You've been hitting your spots all game. Trust what you've practiced,” is.

One is praise. The other is coaching.

The best Little League mound conversations often combine encouragement with evidence. The player is reminded of what he already knows, what he has already demonstrated, and what he can control. That is a much stronger foundation for confidence. It is also a useful reminder for managers who believe they are giving positive feedback simply because they occasionally tell employees: “Good job.” Positive feedback becomes more powerful when it is specific.

- What was good?
- What behavior should continue?
- What strength did the person demonstrate?
- What did they do that contributed to success?

Specific feedback teaches. Generic praise merely feels good for a moment.

Growth Mindset in About 30 Seconds

These interactions are also excellent demonstrations of a growth mindset. A mistake is treated as an event. Not an identity. *The message is not: “You failed.” It is: “That didn’t work. Now let’s make the next pitch.”*

That difference sounds simple, but it can be enormous. One approach focuses attention backward. The other directs attention forward.

One can increase fear of another mistake. The other encourages learning and another attempt.

This does not mean leaders should ignore poor performance. Nor does it mean accountability disappears. Quite the opposite. The objective is improved performance. But effective leaders understand that embarrassment, humiliation, or excessive criticism are rarely the best tools for producing immediate improvement. Particularly when someone is already under pressure.

Then I Learned Something About Panama

Another observation from this year’s Little League World Series made these mound visits even more interesting. The team representing Panama has a Ph.D. Psychologist on staff who has attended every game, met with the team individually, in groups – and with coaches and managers.

That caught my attention immediately. Here are young athletes competing on an international stage, and their preparation is not limited to hitting, pitching, fielding, conditioning, and strategy. Attention is also being given to the psychological side of performance.

- Confidence.
- Pressure.
- Focus.
- Emotional control.
- Resilience.
- Communication.
- Preparation for difficult moments.

That raises an interesting question for organizations. Companies invest heavily in technical training. They train employees to use systems. They teach procedures. They develop product knowledge. They provide sales training. They teach managers processes, policies, and metrics.

But how much deliberate preparation is given to performing under pressure?

- How much training is provided on recovering from mistakes?
- Maintaining focus?
- Managing emotions?
- Responding to setbacks?
- Building confidence?
- Helping teammates regain confidence?

Little League players may be receiving more intentional preparation in some of these areas than many adults receive in their workplaces. ***That should make leaders think.***

“Relax and Have Fun”

Perhaps the most surprising leadership lesson is also the simplest. Relax. Have fun.

Think about the circumstances in which Little League managers are saying this. These young players have worked for months—and often years—to reach Williamsport.

- They are playing in front of large crowds.
- Their games are televised.
- Their families are watching.
- Their communities and countries are watching.
- They desperately want to win.
- There is real pressure.

Yet at one of the most pressure-filled moments in the game, the manager may walk onto the field and remind a player to have fun. That is not a suggestion that winning doesn't matter. Of course it matters. It is a reminder about ***how people perform best.***

A tense pitcher does not necessarily throw better because someone reminds him how important the situation is. He already knows. Adding more pressure may accomplish nothing. Reducing some of that pressure may accomplish a great deal.

There is another workplace lesson here. Managers sometimes believe they improve performance by constantly reminding employees how important everything is.

- This customer is critical.
- This presentation is critical.
- This deadline is critical.
- This quarter is critical.
- This meeting is critical.

Eventually, everything becomes critical. And when everything feels critical, performance can suffer. The Little League manager sometimes does exactly the opposite. He walks into a high-pressure situation and lowers the temperature.

- Relax.
- Trust yourself.
- Have fun.
- Now make the next pitch.

What Kind of Mound Visit Do You Make?

Every leader has mound visits. They simply don't happen on a baseball field. They happen after an employee makes a mistake.

- After a presentation falls apart.
- After a customer complains.
- After a project misses a milestone.
- After someone receives disappointing results.
- After a new employee struggles.
- After a normally strong performer suddenly loses confidence.

Those moments reveal a great deal about leadership. Does the leader increase the pressure? Replay the mistake? Demonstrate frustration?

Or does the leader help the person regain focus, remember what is working, learn what is necessary, and prepare for what happens next?

The Little League World Series continues to provide remarkable examples of teamwork and sportsmanship. The rules themselves create opportunities for players to contribute, take on different roles, and excel.

But some of the most valuable lessons may occur when the game temporarily stops. A manager walks toward the mound. A group of young players gathers around. ***And for 30 seconds, leadership becomes very visible.***

The message is positive. The expectations are positive. The coaching is specific. The mistake is acknowledged, but it is not allowed to take over the moment. Then the manager walks back to the dugout. And the player turns toward home plate.

Because ultimately, leadership is not about changing the last pitch. It is about helping someone be ready for the next one.

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