

Play Ball!

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“Time,” Chris called to the umpire. Johnny looked at Chris and slowly walked over to the coach standing between the dug-out and batter’s box. “OK, Johnny, we’re going to get you on base. This pitcher can’t get the ball over the plate. You’re going to get on base. Johnny... listen to me...,” Chris looked Johnny squarely in the eyes, “Don’t swing. Do you understand, he can’t get the ball over the plate. Just don’t swing, he’ll walk you, and you’ll get on base. OK?” Johnny nodded and walked slowly back to the batter’s box.

This was the fifth game of the season for the team of first-year ‘Kid Pitch’ Little League. Johnny had been up to bat nine times so far this season, had struck out all nine times, and never even came close to his current 3-2 count; and the two came from Johnny swiping at bad pitches. But, here they were, a moment for all of history, Chris was going to get Johnny on base. The pitch was thrown, Chris was correct, the ball came in a foot and a half above Johnny’s head. Just as the ball got to the catcher’s glove, Johnny swiped at it! “Strike three?” Murmured the umpire, more question than statement. Johnny walked slowly back to the bench, a perplexed Chris patting him on the shoulder, “Good cut, Johnny, you gave it a good swing.” In Chris’ mind, there was a different conversation going on.

“John, thanks for meeting with me. I want to give you a heads-up on some budgetary changes to the golf course.” John’s jovial smile vanished at GM Chris’ reference to “budgetary cuts” and “golf course.” “We’re experiencing some weakening in revenues and I need to adjust the budget so that we don’t get into the red.”

“You can’t be cutting the course budget, Chris. It’s our pride and joy. Without the course, we’d be... well, out of business. Take away from food and beverage, it’s been a loser since I can remember. Get that thing straightened out”

Motivation is a difficult task. Chris’ desperate goal was for Johnny to get on base, and there were good reasons: Chris’ own personal sense of accomplishment, a positive experience for Johnny, pleasing Johnny’s parents, the pull of the crowd, and many other deep secretive reasons. What Chris didn’t grasp was Johnny’s goal. Chris wanted Johnny to get on base; Johnny wanted to get back on the bench.

Club GMs face very similar challenges. Chris thought that Board Director John would support cost cutting measures to keep a balanced budget. It is the Board’s fiduciary responsibility, and John is certainly very responsible. What Chris didn’t consider was the fierce peer pressure that John, as chair of the Green and Grounds Committee, was under from his fellow golfers to maintain the highest standards.

Cornell University Professor Samuel Bacharach suggests in his book, *Get Them on Your Side*, that, “You want others to see your idea as you see it. In order to do this, you begin ... by viewing your proposed change from the perspective of those people you want to buy-in.” Perhaps Chris couldn’t solve young Johnny’s problem of playing baseball, when he didn’t want to play baseball. But, Chris might have prepared Director John by talking with John about his goals and what was important to him. Rather than diving right into the cuts, Chris could have started by assuring John that the high course standards are vitally important to Chris and the club members. Once Chris clearly showed recognition of the importance of the course, common ground is established, Chris may have described the cuts throughout other departments and then talked about what was planned for the course. Cuts needed to be made, but sharing the cost concern with John, along with club-wide remedial action, might have allowed John to get on board with the measures.

Gaining another’s perspective can only come from talking openly and listening carefully with the other person. Understanding the other’s perspective is helpful in crafting an argument and it is particularly important when trying to persuade someone of equal or greater power.

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