

The Most Challenging Event in Speech and Debate: PEER COACHING

by Erik Dominguez

I will confess something many coaches have a hard time confessing, which also took me a long time to admit to myself: I like control. Over everything. I want to coach every student in every event, every time, before every tournament. Sure, I know I need other coaches, and I know they will add good aspects to the performance, but every performance needs my stamp of approval.

Not only is that an egotistical thought, but it also is one that can be severely detrimental to a coach's longevity. Logistically, we cannot put our stamp of approval on everything. So we learn to trust the coaches around us. It can be difficult, but we learn to do it.

Then another challenge comes our way:

Trusting students.

To coach.

Whoa.

At first, peer coaching became a useful form of busy

work while I was occupied with all the other responsibilities coaches tend to take on. "I have to [insert your least favorite task] right now—hey, [name of senior], go coach [name of freshman]."

Then something odd happened. Students started to embrace the role of student coach and take initiative to work with novice members. At first, it was a bit chaotic and tapped into many of my worst fears of losing control of performative standards for the team. Yet, my intentional busy work had created a monster I could not stop—and one that ended up being one of the most effective tools for team unity, teaching, and success.

Below are a few lessons I learned to develop student leadership and peer coaching relationships, and why they are critical to your team, regardless of roster length or goals.

Fostering student leadership can be critical to your team, regardless of roster length or goals. Here's how.

Advantages of having a peer coaching structure

Fundamentals for all.

Not everyone is a born educator or coach. There are some performers who are naturally gifted, have tremendous instincts, but cannot explain any of the fundamentals to our activity. Peer coaching creates a culture in which all performers must articulate how to approach an event. This articulation often corners these students to evaluate their own foundations in performance. I found this was especially beneficial at the start of the season where students want to skip the part where they work for the state/national championship and simply show up!

Team, team, team.

One of the most difficult challenges for students today is that they can sit in a class with someone for an entire year, not know

their name, who they are, what they are like, and miss a connection. Student leadership and peer coaching structures connect students who might not otherwise connect on their own. How wonderful is it for a freshman to have a senior looking after them? How empowering is it for a senior to be able to brag that they are mentoring someone?

Competitive success.

Do you know who watches more rounds than you do? Your students. Do you know who reads more ballots than you do? Your students. Do you know who experiences speech and debate more than you do? Your students. They are watching, observing, and analyzing at a much higher capacity than you are. They understand the regional and national norms, standards, and trends that are working and those that are not. When you put students in the



position of leadership and coaching, you are also empowering some pretty amazing minds. Some of the best jokes, arguments, movements, characterizations, and moments came from students—not seasoned coaches.

Recruiting and training coaches.

Everyone wants to see success and growth in what they do. When you empower, even second-year competitors to mentor, you are training them to be assistant coaches. If they stay in your town upon graduation, you have someone who knows your team, your standards, and has coaching and teaching tools to help others be successful. Even if these alumni only come in once or twice a year for practice, it is a powerful moment for you knowing that whatever novice you pair them with, they are in good hands!

Pitfalls of having a peer coaching culture

Not everyone is a natural coach or teacher. The biggest mistake I made early on is assuming that great competitors who had been taught well had gone to camps, had experienced high-pressure situations. They would certainly know what was acceptable and what was not in a coaching session.

Wrong.

Many times our highest performers crave that constant attention and make the coaching sessions about themselves and what they have experienced or the accomplishments they have reached. (And, gut check—some coaches do, too. Do you?)

These norms fluctuate from team to team, school to school, culture to culture. But here are some that I have kept as hard, fast rules:

- Coaching sessions are not about you; you can share experiences as examples, but only if it benefits the situation.
- All of your comments are *suggestions*. While you can encourage a teammate to try something in practice, you cannot force them to do anything in actual competition.
- Get to know the person you are coaching before you coach them. Why are they on the team? What are their goals? What are their performance fears?
- Embrace the following phrases: “I don’t know, let’s ask.” “Let’s try...” “What are you going to try next?” “How do you feel about...” and many others. Teach your peer coaches to check in with their teammate.
- Follow up. Always follow up. Even if it is just a quick question or high five during the next practice, remind

your teammate that they are important to you and the team.

You have a responsibility to help the team... and sometimes that means not helping.

You will get students who SHINE at coaching. They love helping others and thrive in that environment—to the detriment of their own goals and performance standards. I have seen students invest so much in their peers that they forgo their own responsibilities to the team. Keep a cap on the time that students peer coach so they also work on their own journey, not just others.

Nuts and bolts of student leadership and peer coaching

Choose captains and leaders. You should have a captain for each genre of our activity that your team participates in. So you should have

a captain for PF, CX, LD, Congress, interpretation, public address, and limited preparation. Your best competitor is not always your best captain. This is a hard lesson I had to learn! Competitive success does not always equal leadership success. Choose someone who has the time and motivation to handle the logistics of being a captain.

Have a varsity and captain camp, before the novices show up.

This should be before school begins, or before you launch your recruiting kick-off. Spend some intentional time with the varsity/returning members of your team and train your captains and peer coaches like you would any other event. Assign reading, discussions, and activities.

Have varsity members/captains lead novice lectures.

Yes. You read that correctly. Writing it admittedly puts a pit in my stomach, thinking about some of the cringeworthy things certain sophomores would say during their lesson! But it also fills me with pride, thinking of some of the amazing things other sophomores would share.

I was transparent with everyone and explained they were going to be taught by a returning member to help that student articulate fundamentals, but that I would be there to clarify anything as needed. Not everyone is a natural born teacher—but this is real-world public speaking. Empowering these team members to lead activities is what they will be doing once they leave your team!

Establish consistent groups. Follow camp lab structure and have

a leader for every three or four students. This gives novices a first point of contact for the team and event-related questions (and watch your email count suddenly plummet!). Empower student leaders to establish their own culture of a team. You will quickly see some natural born leaders!

Have coaching sessions with and for your coaches.

Just like you have meetings and coaching sessions with all of your events, you should have them for all of your captains and student leaders/coaches. Assign them weekly readings, discussions, and questions to pose. Check in with what is going well and what is not going well. Have them share their coaching successes and struggles with each other to learn from one another and coach them how to improve.


Have them observe your coaching sessions, and observe theirs.

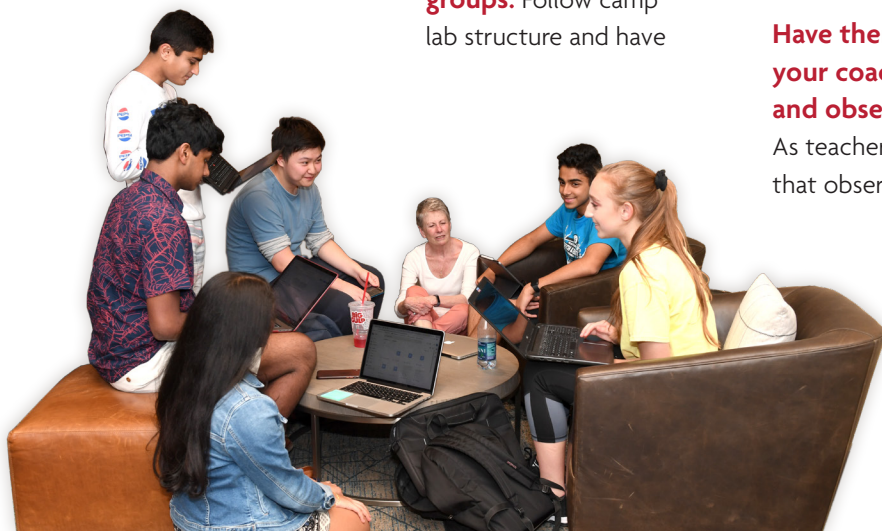
As teachers, we know that observing others is

one of the most effective ways to improve our instruction. It is the same way with our peer coaches! Experiencing a coaching session is not the same as observing one. Coach the way you would, but point out after the fact how you helped that student improve and how you navigated any potential conflicts.

Final Thoughts

If you are anything like me, the idea of setting up these systems gives you two fears: loss of control, and loss of time. And, honestly, you will lose both. There will be times when a peer coach will lead an unsuspecting novice astray, and all of this requires an additional workload on your already packed work week. It truly is like taking on another event to coach.

The first few years are incredibly challenging and time-consuming, as you work out the kinks in the systems you create. However, think of this time as an investment. You will find the joys of peer coaching to be immeasurable as your students form deeper connections and improve the competitive success of your team well beyond what you thought you could control. 



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