

Chapter 17: Tape Your Mouth Shut



Winning Strategy

The assignment as chief of the Exposure Investigations and Consultations Branch of the CDC/ATSDR was my most rewarding tour of duty. I had the pleasure of working with talented and passionate people who took the responsibilities of addressing exposure to environmental contaminants from hazardous waste sites very seriously. Of course, there was a downside. They were high-energy and high-maintenance. I remember hiring someone to supervise one of the three sections in the branch. She thanked me for the selection. A couple of days later, she came into my office with her assessment of the staff. “This is the most dysfunctional group of people I have ever worked with. In fact, I worry how they are going to get home safely every night!”

There are times as a manager when your subordinates come to you with suggestions for improving a variety of processes and products. Kathy, the administrative assistant extraordinaire for my branch, would enter my office and ask matter-of-factly and to the point, “Sir, are you in a listening mood?” The question always had that mother/son tone. Sometimes she would just look me up and down and decide I wasn’t in a listening mood before I could respond. She would then tell the requestors of the meeting that today would not be the day. During those occurrences when she determined that I was in a listening mood, she turned and flashed the all-clear sign to the requestors of the meeting. A few seconds before they entered, I heard her mumble something about the duct tape she kept in her desk drawer in case she had misjudged my countenance.

I developed a habit of covering my mouth when listening. It stems from the fear of interrupting the person by saying something that would not be conducive to a meaningful interaction. I am reminded of one situation in particular:

One of the industrial hygienists and an environmental-sampling expert suggested that we convert one of our physician positions for someone with expertise in assessing toxic contaminants in the air. It was very difficult to find physicians with the needed expertise and experience to recruit to government service. Moreover, trying to convince the higher-ups that we didn’t need the existing physician position was not an enhancement to our careers. “No” was the answer, and it was a defensible answer. However, it was not an acceptable answer to the industrial hygienist. She was persistent and came to my office repeatedly until I finally was able to see the benefits of her logic.

After several attempts at convincing the division director, who happened to be my immediate supervisor, that converting a physician’s position to an environmental scientist’s was in the best interests of the division’s mission. He reluctantly acquiesced

and we finally recruited an air sampling and modeling expert. He was also a meteorologist!

About a year later, we received a call from a county health department about a foam-manufacturing plant exhausting potentially hazardous chemicals in the community air. Area residents complained about the off-site migration of these chemicals and reported significant health concerns with regard to the effluent from the plant. We sent a team to evaluate whether the area residents' exposure to exhaust from the plant was valid.

It took some time to understand how something so reactive could cause community exposure. Our newly-hired air modeler/meteorologist developed a defensible answer that gave the evidence the enforcement officials needed to evacuate the residents until the exposure could be better understood. Moreover, I was able to keep the position to hire a physician as well.

Don't impress me! I am already impressed. That's why you were hired. Do the job you were hired for.

🙏🙏 John E. Abraham

The Day The Little Boy Vanished

One of our team's highlight travels was playing in the annual baseball tournament in Ellijay, Georgia. Ellijay is located in the north central part of Georgia, up I-575 from Marietta, and it's a beautiful spot for a baseball tournament. The people who put on this tournament, from the concessionaires to the umpires, are wonderful. The park is along the river and there are big shade trees. Baseball was meant to be played there. We always looked forward to this tournament and renewing old acquaintances.

If there was one game that forever changed how I viewed Michael, it was played during this tournament. Michael shared the catching duties with his friend, Josh. On a beautiful sunny day in north Georgia, they were the battery; Josh was the pitcher and Michael was the catcher. We gave a lot of responsibility to our catchers. They called the game. In other words, the catcher signaled to the pitcher what pitch (fastball, change-up, curve, slider, etc.) to throw and where to throw it—inside and low, outside and away, etc.). The pitcher nods his head and throws the ball, or he can shake his head, signaling that he wants to throw another pitch. This ritual continues until they come to agreement on a pitch and where it will be, and eventually the pitch is thrown.

Throwing a pitch that a catcher is not anticipating is unhealthy for a pitcher's growth and development. For the most part, the pitcher trusts the catcher's judgment. On occasion, we would suggest pitches or remind the catcher what the batter did at his last at-bat, but the decision was the catcher's. The only exception was a brush-back pitch. Larry and I had to consent to that, and consent was rarely given. At the end of the game, we would discuss the events of the day and give feedback.

It was one of those postcard days in North Georgia. We were the home team. The game began when the first batter hit a roller-back to Josh. Josh (or Pumpkin, as his mom calls him), is an intelligent and creative person. Sometimes that imagination interferes with his baseball artistry. During practice, Coach Larry, Josh's father, would drill and drill about what to do when the ball is hit back to the pitcher and the steps necessary to execute a successful play to first base. The pitcher has all this time to think while the batter is reluctantly running to first base wondering why he hit the first pitch. I didn't want them to *think*. The practice drills were intended for the pitchers to react, field the ball, wait for the first baseman to be in position, step with the left foot (for a right hander), and throw the ball.

Josh fielded the ball cleanly, but then I saw that starry gaze in his eyes. Oh no, I thought. He's floating and frolicking on the wispy clouds overlooking Ellijay. Josh failed to take that first step with his left foot, resulting in a floater above and beyond the first baseman's head, and sending a beautiful cotton towel into his manager's mouth to silence the invectives that were about to surface. I can't tell you how many times we ran this drill so daydreaming didn't happen.

The next couple of batters hit the ball solidly everywhere. Are we ever going to finish this inning? My first impression was to call time and put in another pitcher. We were playing in a tournament, and I would need Josh to pitch more during the weekend. Taking him out might have damaged his confidence, however; it was one of those things he just had to work through. Besides, I didn't want to embarrass him in front of his teammates and the onlookers. So I was content to let my blood pressure rise to astronomical proportions and maybe luck would find a landing spot in an outfielder's glove or a first baseman's glove three times that inning.

Eventually the raining of baseballs subsided. There were two outs and two strikes on the last batter in the lineup. Three runs had already crossed the plate. Larry and I had agreed earlier to remove Josh from the game and save him for later that day when we might have to call on him to pitch in relief. I had, for all practical purposes, conceded the game, and I was looking ahead to the loser's bracket. Then something unusual caught my attention.

Michael Takes Over

Throughout the inning, Michael was unfazed by what was happening; I found that odd. His dad was doing backward bunny flips and Michael was calm! Fine, it's nice to have that kind of diversity in the family. During the barrage of baseballs, Michael asked the umpire for time so he could settle Josh down. Michael had a good relationship with his pitchers; they trusted him. The meeting was concluded, and he walked back to his position without as much as a glance to his coaches on the sideline. Then, during the pitching sequence on what was to be the last batter, Michael looked over toward me. It was a look that almost disrupted my self-absorbed pity party. What could he possibly tell me? Pumpkin doesn't have it this morning—what was your first clue? No, it was something else, but I didn't understand what it was. That look proved to be a defining moment in Michael's growth and development and, more importantly, in his father-son

relationship.

The batter must have grown up to be a kind young man. He took pity on us and took a called strike to end the inning. Three runs scored. Michael was at the rallying point ahead of everyone else. With his catcher's helmet off, he looked directly at me and said, "Dad, don't do it! Don't take Josh out! I know what's wrong and I can get him to fix it."

A few seconds went by and the rest of players were at the rallying point, where they were used to a pep talk before they got ready to bat. My comments to them were hollow, as I was thinking about what Michael had just said, knowing full well that the conversation hadn't ended. As we broke the huddle, Michael's eyes were focused on mine. I was right; our discussion was not finished. He was doing all the talking while I stared and listened to him. I wanted to ask a number of questions, but he stopped me, looked at me directly and, with a calm but firm voice, said, "Dad, trust me. I know what's wrong. Don't take him out!"

So many things unrelated to the game were flying through my mind. This was the eighth year I had coached my son, and the boy saw something that his daddy didn't see. How could that be? The change should be more gradual, but it happened so fast! Where did that little boy go? Is he gone?

I simply nodded OK and, satisfied with my response, he walked to the dugout for his conversation with Josh. My heavy eyes stayed with him. I was still analyzing what had just happened. OK. I never say OK! Why did I say OK? What was I thinking? He's just a kid! Is he ever coming back? What am I going to tell his mother? Missing this moment will upset her.

The opposing team let us get back into the game. We scored two runs that inning resulting from their errors, but it narrowed their lead to one run. As we took the field, my eyes were focused on Michael walking to his position with the catcher's equipment. He took some throws from Josh and then motioned for him to meet him halfway. Michael had been transformed. The umpire broke up the meeting between Michael and Josh and signaled that it was time to play ball. They smiled, nodded to each other, and went back to their respective positions. Michael walked deliberately back to his position and donned his catcher's mask without as much as a sidewise glance to us in the dugout.

Coach Larry was surprised to see his son take the mound. "What is Josh doing? I thought you were going to pull him." He was animated and loud enough for the parents in the stands to hear.

"Michael saw something and asked me to keep him in," I said, as my voiced dropped off. I was saying goodbye to my baby son, knowing that he couldn't hear me.

"Michael saw something? What did he see?" Larry's voice was more measured and noticeably quieter. Our eyes never made contact.

"I don't know, Larry; he said he saw something." Larry seemed satisfied and somewhat confident with my answer. We watched the game separately; attempting to decipher Michael's *something*.

Josh retired the next three batters in a row. He was uncharacteristically smiling. The team hustled to the rallying point in the usual order while the battery strolled over, as is

customary. The next inning and the one after that were much the same. Josh scattered a few hits here and there, and none of the opposing base runners went past second base for the remainder of the game. Meanwhile, our team started hitting and scoring in bunches. From then on, the game was never in doubt.

Michael saw that our opponents were a solid fast-ball-hitting team. Furthermore, he knew his battery mate well enough not to change him until after the inning. Between innings, they talked and changed their strategy to off-speed pitches such as change-ups and sliders. The fastballs would be used sparingly but strategically. Michael would set up for them off the plate, tempting the opponents, whose timing was a little awry and who were frustrated and off balance. The change-ups would set up the fastball, especially lower in the batting order and therefore make it appear faster. Josh's pitching selection, orchestrated by Michael, threw off the opposing batters' timing.

Josh pitched the whole game. He was simply marvelous—giving his team rising confidence. They made great plays behind him, leaving no doubt as to the outcome of the game. The last opposing batter struck out to end the game. We ended up winning the game 8-3, greatly foiling my attempts at being a prognosticator.

The team rushed to congratulate Josh on a well-pitched game, everyone except Coach Larry. As is customary, the teams go to first and third respectively to begin the diagonal walk to meet and shake hands with each other. However, Coach Larry walked over to Michael, shook his hand, and congratulated him on a well-called game. Then together they walked to the mound to participate in the post-game congratulatory meeting with the teams.

The post-game evaluation by the boys praised Josh's pitching and discussed their fielding, hitting and running heroics. All the while, Michael looked at me and smiled at our secret. He knew what he had accomplished and it was too special to share. Neither Larry nor I brought up what we thought was the key to the game. It felt good to keep it inside.

I smiled. It was a nostalgic smile nonetheless, knowing that the little boy is never to come back unless he has boys of his own.