

COACHING CONFIDENCE

by

Joseph P. Zoppetti

It has been said with some frequency that debaters are typically the most egotistical students. Perhaps this is true. Debate, unlike most activities, encourages people to disclose to the rest of the world some of the most personal and important elements that constitute a person — their intellect and their ability to support positions of advocacy. Once one masters the use of their intellect and advocacy skills, they no doubt will appear “egotistical” to those who have not. However, there is also something else at work here. Debaters may “seem” to be conceited, but what lies underneath is often something that is extremely fragile, unrefined, and even unstable. The often touted “egotistical” nature of a debater, then, might actually be a sign or outward defense of a much larger self-confidence problem, rather than the other way around. In my years of coaching, it has become obvious to me that we need to spend more time increasing debaters’ confidence, and less time trying to deflate their egos.

This brief essay is about combating this problem, a problem that is seemingly more pervasive today than ever. Confidence is a vital element for any debater, as well as any person. Confidence is necessary to win rounds, but it is also necessary as people venture out into other areas of the world. Confidence, in short, is a requirement for people to gain understanding, to become more respectful and tolerant, and to become more mature. So, the question then becomes: How can coaches help improve the confidence in their debaters?

I want to approach this issue by providing practical suggestions that coaches can utilize before, during and after tournaments to improve all of their debaters’ confidence. Before I do that, however, I want to discuss a few caveats. The first is that a coach should not assume that what works for one debater will work for all of their debaters. While it is true that, in general, praising someone publicly will tend to increase their confidence, such strategies are not universally successful. In fact, I have coached one debater who had such a low self-esteem that praising her in public made her feel worse because she felt that there

were others more deserving of praise than she. In her case, I had to try a different approach first, and then use some of the strategies I outline here. Second, while I have no intention of essentializing difference, I do want to point out that men and women in our activity confront different challenges and obstacles which tend to impact self-confidence in different ways. As a result, strategies to boost the confidence of women debaters may differ, even radically, from the strategies used on men debaters. The same could be said for minority debaters.

In other words, people come from different experiences and face different problems; hence, they may deal with problems — especially problems regarding self-confidence — differently as well. At the outset, one thing a coach can always do with their debaters is simply ask them what they want or what they like. A coach can ask a debater, particularly at the beginning of the season, how they want to be praised or criticized. I suggest that this be done in a non-threatening situation, such as on a walk or during a meal. The purpose is to see how the individual debater deals with their confidence issues. Another simple thing a coach can do, as one of my debaters has suggested, is simply to show the debaters that the coach cares — about the debater’s academics, debate work, or life in general. In conjunction with an individual approach or even separate from it, there are some things coaches can do to help boost the confidence of their debaters. With this in mind, the following suggestions are intended to get coaches thinking and are not intended to provide an absolute blueprint to help with confidence issues in a universal way.

Dealing With Confidence Before the Tournament

One way of addressing confidence issues before they erupt into nightmares is to boost confidence before tournament time. If a coach can help a debater long before the actual competition begins, chances are that the debate rounds and the judges’ decisions will be easier to handle. There are

several things a coach can do to help a debater’s confidence before attending a tournament.

First, scheduling a sufficient number of practice drills and debates before a tournament can do wonders for a debater’s confidence. It will help them to feel more prepared, as they explore their best and weakest arguments. Perhaps more importantly, the constructive comments that a coach can give will aid in alleviating anxiety. In addition, the presence of a coach during these practices will offer a sense of care and appreciation for the debater, since they will know that attendance during such drills requires much time and energy from their coach. Related to this issue is a point worth mentioning. When meeting with debaters and teams before a tournament, it is extremely important to try to meet with teams and debaters equally, or at least as equitably as possible. Debaters are very perceptive when it concerns equity issues. The last thing a coach should want to do is to exacerbate team tensions, rivalries or confidence problems because there is perceived inequity with the amount of time the coach spends with certain debaters. Therefore, a coach should try their best to balance their time with teams and individual debaters.

Second, a general feeling of preparedness will help a debater’s confidence. Of course, practice drills and debates will help with this. Moreover, topic discussions with coaches and fellow debaters, file drills (ensuring that a team has their important files before a tournament), cross-examination drills, and coach-team meetings can help alleviate debater anxiety. In addition, sincere yet constructive comments from the coach regarding one’s debate delivery, style and/or arguments can help to reduce confidence issues. Another way to assist debaters in this regard is to project an aura of confidence as well. If a coach makes comments indicating that he or she feels prepared for a tournament, then it is likely that the team will feel prepared as well.

In a related way, the coach can also help to reduce confidence anxiety by telling debaters that they are able to win or do well at a tournament. Notice that I do not

suggest that a coach instruct her or his debaters to tell their debaters that they will actually win. If one gives the impression that a debater will win, and then they do not, that may have a serious, albeit counterproductive, implication on the debater's self-confidence. If, however, a debater feels like they possess the skills and talents necessary to win debate rounds, then they may feel more confident going into those rounds of competition.

Dealing With Confidence During the Tournament

Debaters will no doubt experience confidence issues before and after tournaments, but one of the most intense times that confidence problems become acute is during a debate tournament. This can become particularly trying on a coach, who also has to deal with fiscal, judging and other coaching responsibilities. Despite these other roles a coach must play, it is imperative that a coach try to remain patient and understanding when a debater has confidence issues during a tournament. Problems at a tournament could very well determine a debater's success, or even their long-term mental health.

As I mentioned during practice times, it is important that a coach try to coach their teams evenly and equitably during a tournament as well. Of course, logistically this might be impossible. Having assistants can help. Another strategy is to set times when a coach can meet with her or his debaters, such as in-between rounds or during lunch breaks. Also, a coach may want to emphasize his or her teams who are scheduled to debate on the negative, since they may require more coaching advice. Regardless of the technique, a coach should be conscientious of the time they spend with their debaters at tournaments. Failure to do so could cause (mis)perceptions of favorites or just a general lack of care which could reinforce confidence problems.

When coaching a team or individual debater who suffers from low self-esteem, it is important that a coach never presume that they need help. Avoid assuming that they could use coaching. Instead, ask them if they need help or special coaching. This will empower them to make the decision and reduce potentially patronizing actions by the coach. While some coaches may read this and think that I am undermining their coaching roles, it should be remembered that some debaters are extremely sensitive, especially where confidence is involved. The

question must be continually asked, "What is more important, the win or the debater's interests?"

Furthermore, there are several strategies a coach can utilize if they surmise that a debater needs help, particularly with confidence issues. A coach should try to listen to their debaters, instead of forcing coach-driven strategies and ideas into the debate context. A debater-driven strategy should be applauded, even if it requires re-vamping. A coach should give additional words of encouragement if they are needed. In addition, a coach should never feel demeaned if a debater requests that evidence be high-lighted or if they need water, etc. A coach should remember that their role is one of guidance and support, not just a tactician. In this way, and perhaps the most important thing I could say in this essay, a coach should never feel that saying "you're awesome" or "I have faith in you" could ever be said enough. Such statements can mean a great deal to a debater, whether it is before or after a debate, for a win or a loss. Knowing that a coach cares about them can make all the difference.

If a debater loses (and they will), it can be very frustrating, especially if the debater is also wrestling with self-confidence issues. If a coach shows them that they care, that will help. In addition, coaches should be prepared to briefly console their debaters after losses, but this should not be overdone. Too much emphasis placed on consoling can give the impression that a coach also feels this is a major problem and/or that it was the debater's fault. Too much consoling may also risk beating the proverbial dead horse, thereby encouraging the debater to repress his or her feelings in the future. Nevertheless, a coach should console after losses, focusing on elements that were out of the debater's control. Furthermore, the coach can use the loss as, what Melissa Wade, the director of debate at Emory University, calls, a "teaching moment," when the coach can ask the debater questions that lead to an ultimate conclusion that the debater can learn from.

One last suggestion I have regarding confidence issues at tournaments is to reward debaters. Even if they have lost every round, reward them with something for their courage and for the elements that they learned while debating. A coach could tell a special story to the whole squad about the debater that highlights a moment that expresses the coach's pride in them from the tournament, or they could treat them to

candy or even to a special team "reward" dinner. Coaches can come up with their own special ways of rewarding their debaters. The point is, coaches should express their pride in their debaters at the tournament. This will definitely support their debaters who are struggling with confidence issues.

Dealing With Confidence After the Tournament

Post-tournament management of confidence is generally an extension of what a coach can do during the actual tournament. A coach should congratulate their debaters, both privately and publicly (assuming the debaters do not have confidence issues with group praise). If a debater lost some or all of their debates, the coach should emphasize the learning aspects of those rounds. A coach can discuss how the debater has progressed, even if the debater lost some or all of their rounds (speaker points can be very helpful in this regard, especially if there has been no progress in the win/loss record).

One final suggestion for post-tournament confidence issues is something that has worked extremely well in my coaching experience. After every tournament, regardless of how successful or unsuccessful the debaters were, I write a "press release" that details the achievements (a coach can always find something) of the debaters at the previous tournament. I mention each debater by name, so that even if a team lost all of their debates, they are associated with the larger squad's success. I then circulate this press release via email to the entire school. Each individual debater's professor receives the email, which typically gets translated into a recognition of the debater's extra-curricular performance and success during their class. It takes little time for the news to spread across the campus. The overall aura of the squad as well as the individual initiatives of the debaters becomes recognized and applauded. Seeing one's name in such a press release gives the debaters a sense of pride and achievement, and it lets them know that I genuinely care about them. There is no question that such a simple technique goes a long way in helping their confidence.

Concluding Remarks

There are, of course, many more things a coach can do to help improve his or her debaters' confidence, for example, special announcements focusing on individual debaters, special awards at the end

of the year (maybe at a team banquet), notes to parents or counselors, etc. The number one thing a coach can do, however, is simply to show their debaters that they care. Kind comments, constructive criticism, meaningful rewards, equitable coaching time, etc., all can help foster an environment that is conducive to confidence-building. A coach often needs to devote a great deal of energy to what Carrie Crenshaw, the director of debate at University of Alabama, calls “intellectual capital,” or maybe a coach needs to devote very little energy. What matters is that they do it.

I would like to thank my debaters for their help over the years.

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