

The Power of Words: Coaches' Handout

Oct 6, 2026 · @Kyle Pappas

You'll forget you said it. They never will. Athletes coached by trained, encouraging coaches quit at 5%, compared with 26% for untrained coaches, and the records were similar. It wasn't the wins. It was the words (Barnett, Smoll & Smith, 1992).

The six keys

Key	In a line	Try this
Before you speak (what · who · where)		
1. Stay on vision, stay on message	Know the why. Say it the same way, every time.	Before a talk, ask: "How is this relevant to us?"
2. Read the room	Energy, timing, spacing, volume.	Ask: "What do they need from me right now?"
3. Choose the room	One-on-one, small group or whole team.	Personal = one-on-one. Standards and praise = whole team.
When you speak (how · how much)		
4. Control yourself	Composure first. Your mood becomes their mood.	Breathe. Speak once you're calm.
5. Present yourself	When words and face disagree, athletes believe your face.	Film a team talk. Watch it with the sound off.
6. Say less	About 3-4 things at once. First and last words stick.	"If they remember one thing, it's ____."

The four moments that matter

Every moment uses all six keys. Key 6 is the words you actually say.

1. Everyday training

Where most of your words happen: every rep, cue and correction.

Key	Do this
1. Stay on vision	Tell them why: "I expect a lot because I know you can do it."
2. Read the room	Tired or frustrated? Fewer corrections, more encouragement.
3. Choose the room	Correct one-on-one. Praise in front of the team.
4. Control yourself	Encourage, then correct. Instruction, never punishment.
5. Present yourself	No sighs or eye-rolls after a fall. Your face coaches too.
6. Say less	Be specific. "Squeeze and lock," not "Don't drop it."

This week: turn your three most-used "don't" cues into "do" cues.

2. After a setback

A stunt section falls apart in team training, one week out.

Key	Do this
1. Stay on vision	Point to the next step: what we fix before we leave tonight.
2. Read the room	WAIT, unless it's unsafe. Then acknowledge the frustration.
3. Choose the room	The standard goes to the whole team. Fixes go to each group.
4. Control yourself	No sarcasm. One week out, your panic becomes theirs.
5. Present yourself	Calm voice, steady face. No "it's fine" when it isn't.
6. Say less	"The section failed. You didn't. One fix each, then we run it."

The skill failed. The coaching failed. The athlete didn't.

3. Before competition

The formula: Remind · Focus · Release. Under two minutes.

Key	Do this
1. Stay on vision	Remind: who we are and what we've prepared.
2. Read the room	Fierce rival: more emotion. Unknown opponent: more game plan.
3. Choose the room	Whole team in the huddle. Nervous athletes get a word earlier.
4. Control yourself	Your nerves become theirs. So does your confidence.
5. Present yourself	Still, grounded, eye contact around the circle.
6. Say less	Focus: one or two cues. Release: one line. Then trust them.

Example: "We've done this a hundred times. Tight and loud. Go have fun."

4. After competition

Win or lose, the whole team is listening, and so are the parents.

Key	Do this
1. Stay on vision	Point it back to the vision: what this season is building.
2. Read the room	Right after a loss is NOT the time for a technical breakdown.
3. Choose the room	Team talk is about the team. Individual notes come Monday.
4. Control yourself	Same language after a win or a loss.
5. Present yourself	Same face after a win or a loss. Parents are watching.
6. Say less	"What did we do well? What did we learn? What's next?"

Reframe failure as learning, and you build confidence. Treat it as a verdict, and you take it away.

Your turn: Cut It in Half (3 minutes)

Here is a real-sounding end-of-practice talk. Cut it to ONE sentence.

“OK everyone, bring it in. So, today was... OK. Some good, some not so good. Stunts were a little shaky in the second half, and I know we were tired, but we need to push through that. Pyramid was better, but the transitions are still slow, so let's think about that. Also, a few of you were late again, and that needs to stop. Oh, and remember, uniforms are due Friday, and parents need to sign the travel form. Anyway, good energy at the start. Let's keep working. Anything else? No? OK, hands in.”

My one sentence: _____

Short isn't less. Short is memorable. Lead with the point, stop at three, plan your last line, then stop.

My Monday commitment

One sentence I'll say differently this week:

Say what you'll do. Do what you said. **Authentic words last.**

Sources: Ambady & Rosenthal (1993); Barnett, Smoll & Smith (1992); Barsade (2002); Cowan (2001); Owens & Hekman (2012); Simons (2002); Smith & Smoll, coach effectiveness training; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli (2013); Vargas-Tonsing & Short (2011); Wegner, ironic processes; Willis & Todorov (2006); Yeager and colleagues (2014).