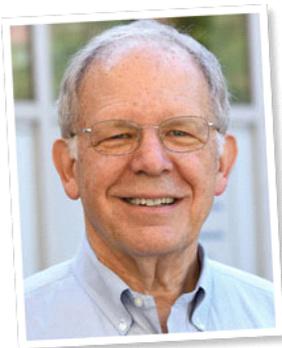


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## Gap-On-Over-Away

*Bill McCurry*



*Bill McCurry*

Are there times you wonder, “Why is that employee doing that?” One junior high school football coach can observe many mysterious actions by players. Another coach can observe six league championships in a row. The difference is the effectiveness of each team member under the coach’s direction.

A garden center manager handles unique personalities, usually with a diverse mix of age groups and maturities. Imagine trying to train junior high school kids, yet there are huge similarities if you evaluate what Coach Pete Passe (Hillsborough, New Jersey) accomplished.

For those who don’t follow football, the purpose of players lining up at the front of a play (on the line of scrimmage) is to stop the other team from moving in their direction. The people on the line (called tackles, guards, centers or ends) must either invade the other team’s space or keep the opponent team’s players out of their area.

Many coaches found it easier to tell each player, “You take out player #XY.” The coach would watch as the opposing player shifted before the play started, making it harder, if not impossible, for the coach’s player to impact his target.

Instead, Pete assigned responsibilities to his players—simple and brilliant directions everyone could understand with a little mantra: “Gap-On-Over-Away.” When the play started, in order to accomplish their objective, each player was responsible for eliminating the opposing team’s players. Who did they go after? Knowing their mantra, they first made a GAP in front of them, then looked ON the sides of the gap for players who could impact their team, then looked OVER the area of the gap. If they couldn’t find a target, they looked AWAY to where the play was likely to be and then got there to help their team mates.

Why did the opposition coaches continually shake their heads wondering what just happened to their perfectly designed and well-practiced plays? Simple. Pete’s mantra gave his team the POWER and AUTHORITY to continually adjust to the conditions they saw on the field as they were happening.

Pete empowered his players by putting the priorities in words that everyone understood. Most importantly, each player knew what their job was and how it fit into the needs of the team. Don’t worry about how the other guys on your team are doing their jobs—just know they’re all thinking like you’re thinking. It’s up to you to do what’s needed as

the play continues to unfold.

While watering, an east coast garden center employee saw an elderly customer struggle loading a bag of plant food onto a metal cart. The bag slipped on the corner of the cart, ripping, spreading food all over the pathway. The young employee who witnessed this was asked, "Why didn't you help the customer?" The answer was perfect from the employee's perspective, "I'm supposed to water. I'm not supposed to help customers." Yes, this employee literally said, "I'm not supposed to help customers."

How have you instructed your employees to respond when a unique situation is unfolding and common decency causes most people to help? How can you take your values and put them into a broad, but simple, sentence (or mantra) that gives employees the POWER and AUTHORITY to respond to the changing conditions on your playing field? **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 731-8389.*

### **A Call for Woodworkers**

I met Coach Pete as an advisor to a startup not-for-profit organization that intends to match volunteer woodworkers with their local homeless support organizations. Homeless kids have minimal contact with the natural (not plastic) world. Their few possessions are often limited by how much they can carry.

The volunteer woodworkers are asked to annually make a dozen simple wooden toys, no moving parts, less than 6-in. x 6-in., for donation to children without toys. This takes the average woodworker 45 to 90 minutes annually.

If you're a woodworker and/or want more information on this worthwhile endeavor, my contact information is on this page. Or let's meet at TPIE.