

# Coaching Words: You Don't, You Didn't, You Must, We Will

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I found myself thinking about language when I recently heard some coaching interactions on the youth sports field but these points are applicable, I think, to the classroom too.

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Think for a moment about the phrase **you don't** — as in: “You don't work hard to regain possession when you lose the ball.” Compare it to the same phrase using didn't instead of don't: “You didn't work hard to regain possession when you lost the ball.”

(This could just as well be, “You don't support your argument with evidence form the text” versus “You didn't support your argument with evidence form the text.” Or “You don't clear up after yourself” versus “You didn't clean up after yourself.”)

**Don't** implies permanence. This thing that you did is something you always do. The language globalizes a mistake. Makes it part of you—a flaw. Maybe even hints at deliberateness. You don't even care. You just do it.

**Didn't** describes one time, an event. Could be that it is an exception, even. You probably always do but you didn't there. It's a comment that expresses much more faith and belief in the person you are talking to.

But even didn't talks focuses on the past—on what went wrong. While that can be useful it's often not as useful as focusing on the solution. It reminds me of something Seahawks coach Pete Carroll says in describing his practice philosophy:

*“We're really disciplined as coaches to always talk about what we want to see, the desired outcome, not about what went wrong or what the mistake was. We have to be disciplined about how we use our language. We always talk about the next thing you can do right. It's always about what we want to have happen.”*





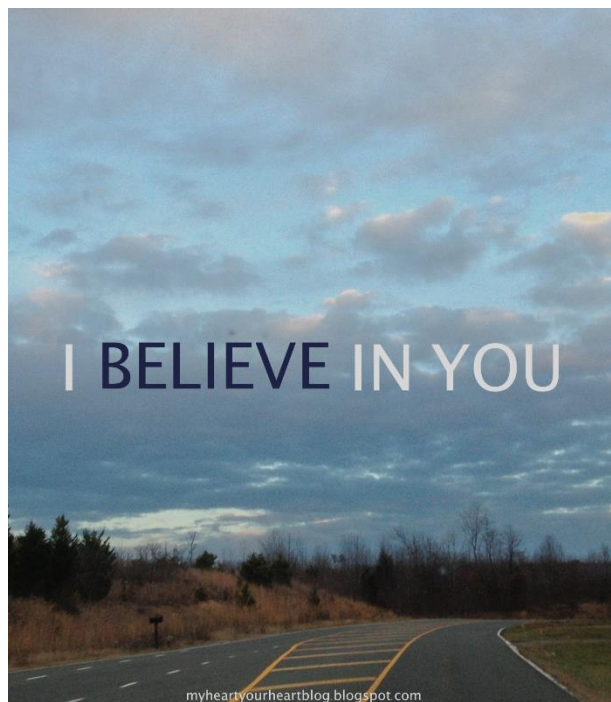
So compare: “You don’t/didn’t work hard to regain possession when you lost the ball.”

To: “You must always work hard to regain possession when you’ve lost the ball.”

Or: “We must work hard to regain possession when we’ve lost the ball.”

Or even: “Every single one of us must work hard to regain possession when we’ve lost the ball.”

These are not statements that lack urgency or accountability. They are not “soft.” But they avoid globalizing a mistake into a flaw and they focus on the future. They answer the question: What is the next step on the path up the mountain?



Now think about how you could upgrade even a bit more, to phrases that are deliberately aspirational or motivating:

“A player of your quality must work hard to regain possession when you’ve lost the ball. Every time.”

Now I am giving a player constructive or even critical feedback but in a way that expresses my faith in him or her.

There are other ways to do this:

“Where you’re going you must always work hard to regain possession. Every time you’ve lost the ball.”

Or: “Where we’re going we must always, everyone of us, work hard to regain possession when any one of us has lost the ball. We cannot cheat our teammates or ourselves. Start again from where you lost that ball...”

Or: “Where we’re going we will always work hard to regain possession. That will be part of how we get there so we are going to start now.”

To TLAC readers these observations will probably recall the **Positive Framing** technique—the idea that it’s not so much about balancing critical feedback with praise so much as it is about using language that makes it clear that our critical feedback is an act of faith and respect for a person we think is worthy of it. The more we can remind recipients of our feedback of this, the better they will get, and the more we will build relationships. In the short run (by making people feel respected) and in the long run, because, as James Clear recently put it, “The most effective form of motivation is progress”. When people hear our words free from the distraction of judgment and doubt and can focus exclusively on what they tell them about how to get better... when they feel the faith we express in them and their efforts to improve, then they use our advice better and more quickly. They improve and see the difference, and they come back asking for more.