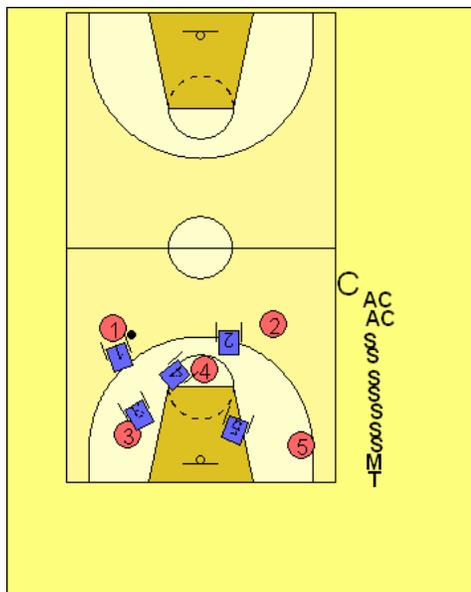


Competition Coaching

The Coaching Team

The following article comes from observations done at the recent U15, U17 Nationals held in Sherbrooke Quebec. I had the unique opportunity to video tape coaches while wearing a microphone during a highly competitive situation. What I observed some very effective coaches who displayed a variety of techniques that increased the on-court performance of their teams. I also observed behaviors that coaches could work on that could dramatically improve their player's performance. On reflection I realized that very little information has been given to coaches on bench coaching. I could not recall anything in the old NCCP. In the over two hundred coaching video I have in my personal collection not one dealt with this very important area. The coaching books give little concrete information. It is something we are just supposed to discover on our own from watching other coaches. What follows are some thoughts that I hope will assist coaches in planning and thinking more productively about how to develop, what I am calling, the coach team. I like this better than the word staff. It implies working together rather than a classic hierarchical structure.



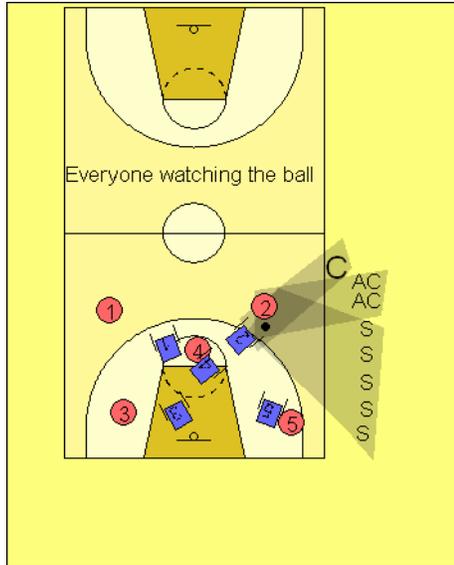
Team bench

The typical set up for most team benches in the FIBA game is as follows:

- the head coach stands, although he/she usually has a chair reserved nearest the score table.
- two assistant coaches
- seven subs
- manager
- trainer

In the FIBA game only the head coach may stand

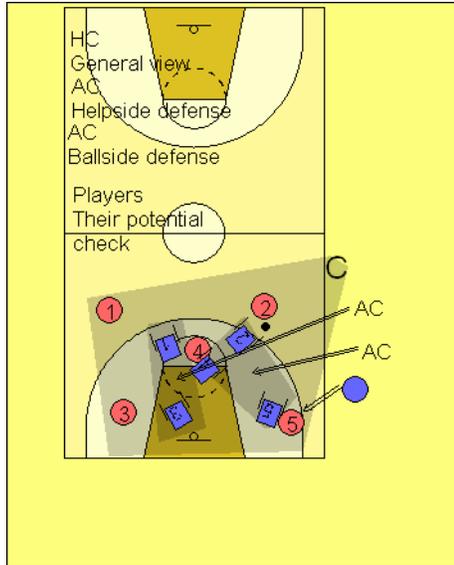
In total there can be 14 chairs available on the FIBA bench. Counting the 5 court players this makes for 19 people in the official team. In the situation described above there is still room for two more people. These are usually a team doctor, another coach or a team delegate.



Where are your bench's eyes?

The days of one head coach out coaching another head coach are gone. There is too much information available to all coaches, the use of video tape and the speed, pace of the game make it impossible for one individual to see and know everything that is going on. Problems with observation occur when the following happens:

- Teams allow only one set of eyes to make all the decisions. The game is viewed through only one person's perspective. Usually this is the head coach. No one else is consulted for their opinion.
- Teams where all eyes are observing the same thing, usually the ball. Who watches the other team, who watches the offense, who watches the defense?
- No one watches the other team
- No flow of information between the observers to allow the team to make use of the information. There is little or no communication.
- No information is gained from the most important people - the players on the floor or bench
- No plan for each group's role in observation.
- No mechanism to help individuals refocus to the plan if distractions occur. Very often it is the most important person who gets the most distracted, the head coach. When this person starts watching the officials, the other game as I call it, the team suffers dramatically.
- Other people on the team must adjust to the moods and emotions of the head coach. The head coach often assumes that the smooth flow of information will occur even if the coach has threatened a player, used aggressive body language, used inappropriate touching, invaded person space, made harmful person remarks and failed to communicate clearly. Coaches often claim that in the heat of the battle players must understand and accept this as part of the game.

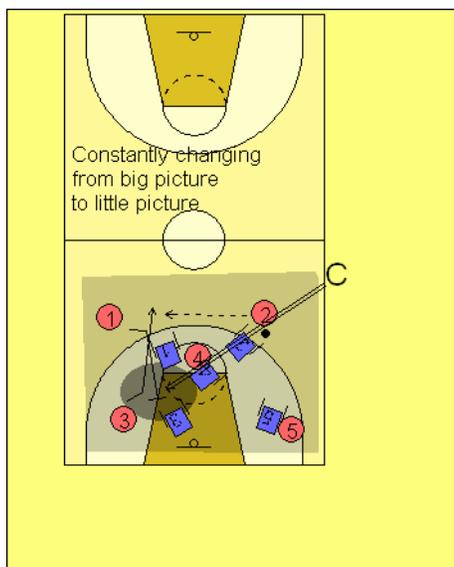


Delegating roles

It is imperative that the team trains itself to scan the floor to watch different aspects of the game. If no specific assignments are given everyone will watch the ball. Players on the bench will often watch the stands. This means valuable information can be lost. It also means players coming off the bench do not have access to valuable information that will assist them in their decision making. The days of playing strictly five players are gone.

Preparing bench players is a crucial component of the coaching team's job. Many coaches claim that this is covered in practice and in the pre game talk. That is an important part of the process, but no game plan ever goes exactly as planned. There are too many situations that constantly change. Keeping everyone informed of these subtle changes is key for the team to play as a unit. It starts with the head coach delegating to each person within the teams their observation roles as to what to watch. Some examples might be:

- One assistant watches offense other defense
- One assistant watches perimeter players other watches posts
- One assistant watches what the other team is doing the other watches or monitors the team bench
- The bench players watch the player they might guard if they go in
- The bench players watch for how the other team is defending certain plays



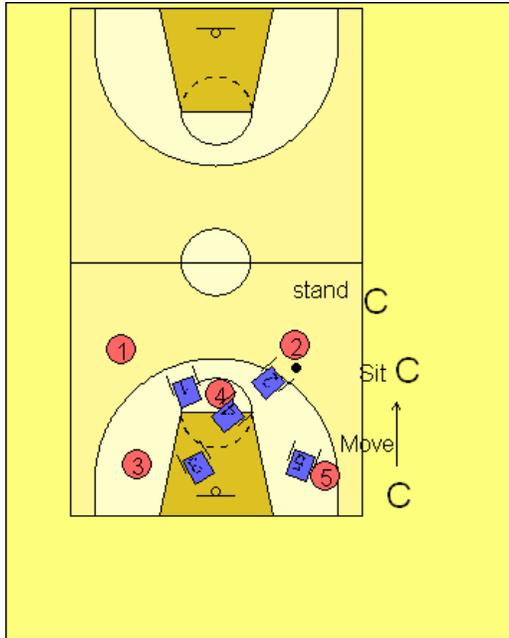
What does the head coach watch?

Most beginning coaches watch the ball or their own team. It takes practice to learn to watch for other things. It starts with making plan. If the coach has had the luxury of scouting an opponent he/she can compile a list of cues that indicate action he/she wants to take. For example:

- When I see that no one follows my cutter I know the other team is in a zone
- When I see their best ball handler go off the floor we will put on our press

- When I see that the other team helps off the ball side post we will drive the ball and look to pass to the post

It is important to share the most important points with your players and assistant coaches. It helps them understand why you are doing certain things and they can remind you when you forget. As coaches we often get caught up in the flow of the game and forget the big picture items we discussed in the calm of preparation.



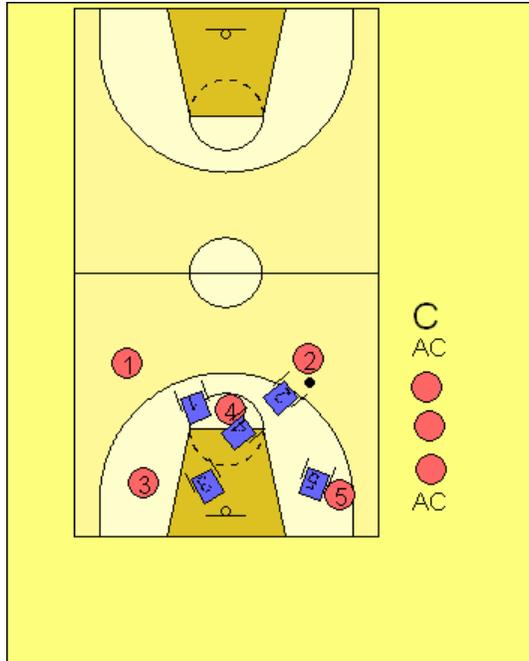
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Position of the coach

Where the head coach positions him/her self is a major contributor to the flow of information with a team. The coaching team should think through where everyone will be positioned so the observation roles and flow of information works effectively.

A coach can stand, sit or move constantly between these different positions. It is my opinion that coaches should understand the advantages and disadvantages of each position. Also understand how your positioning can impact:

- the dynamics of the team on the floor
- the players on the bench
- the flow of information between the coaching team
- the interaction with the referees and minor officials



Sitting

This is one of the common. The chair closest to the scorer's table is usually used by the head coach.

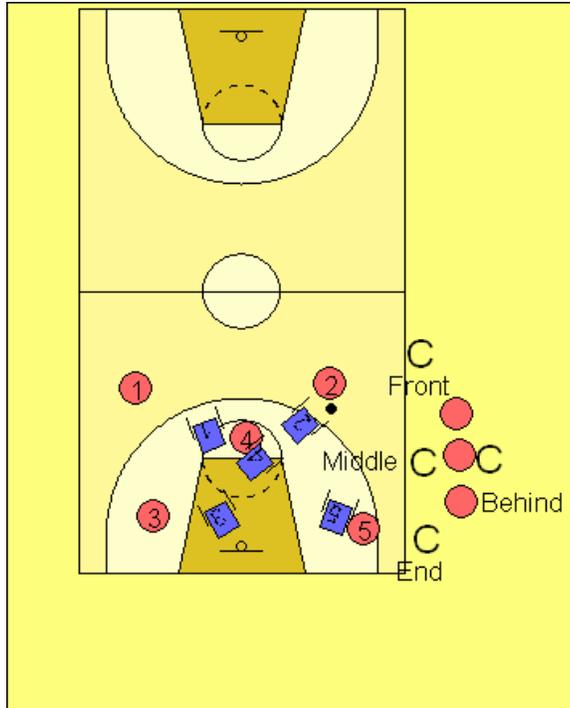
Advantages

- This allows the coach to communicate with the minor officials for timeouts and subs. The coach also hears the referee when addressing the table with fouls.
- The coaches can talk with assistant coaches without the bench players hearing.
- Can prepare and debrief subs as they walk on and off the court.
- It gives the impression that the coach is well prepared and trusts the players.

Disadvantages

- Often unaware of the bench dynamics
- Often cannot be heard by the players
- Often difficult to coach on the fly or during stoppages
- If a coach who stands sits, it often gives the impression that the coach has given up.

Other coaches will surround themselves with their assistants. Some head coaches sit in the middle of the team to keep the bench focused and to assist in teaching. Some teams place one assistant at the end of the bench to contain all of the players between the coaching staff. This helps the bench keep its focus and prevents the bench from developing gaps that can lead to poor body language and disharmony.



Standing

Coaches who stand must remember that only the head coach will stand. Often the officials will ask before the game who is going to stand. If you say it is the assistant this is the person that they will talk to during the game.

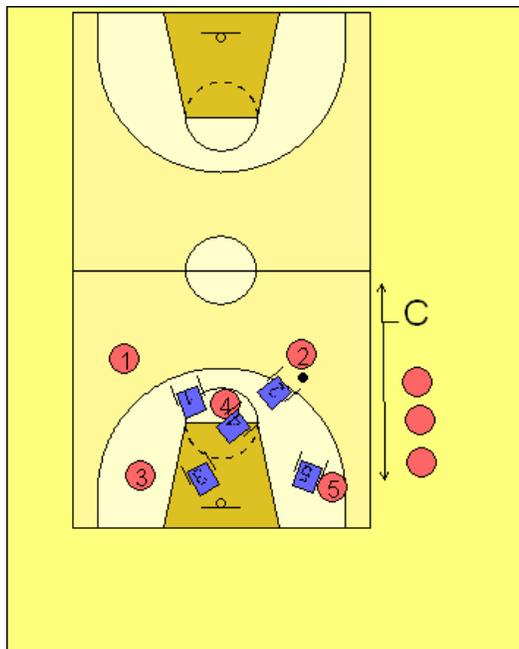
Advantages

- Visible for the players
- Easier to coach on the fly
- Can be heard by the players
- Often gives the appearance that the coach is 'into' the game

Disadvantages

- Harder for the bench to communicate with the head coach
- Can become isolated from the bench
- Often get caught up in the "other game" (working the officials)

There are different places to stand. Know how each positions impacts your view and ability to communicate.



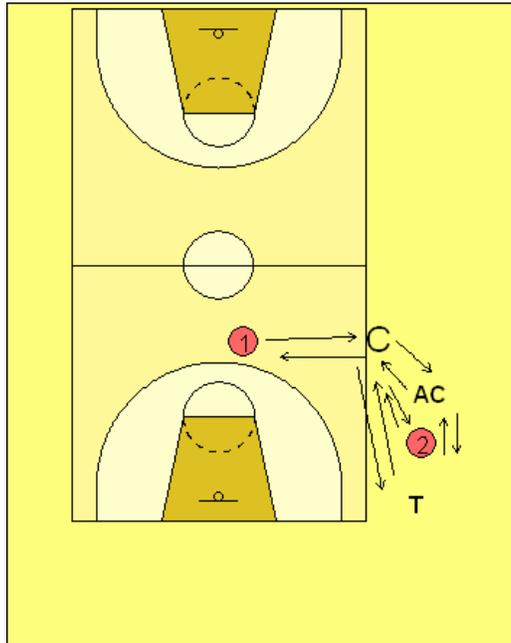
Moving

Advantages

- Allows the coach to position him/her self in the proper position to take advantage of what is needed by the team. If you need to talk to a player you can move to talk.
- Can be easier to observe various aspect of the games

Disadvantages

- Can be hard for communication if you are inconsistent in your movements
- It can be distracting
- It can fatigue you
- If you stop moving it is often seen by the team that you have given up



Information flow

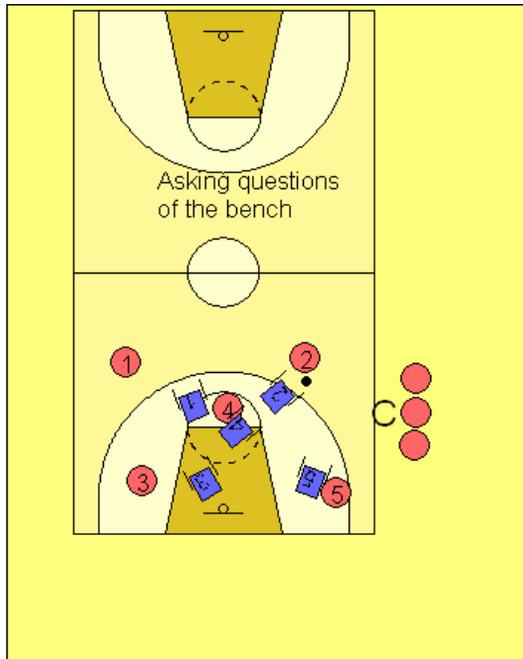
It is important that there is a constant flow of information between all people on the team. These do not have to be long discussions, but pertinent information that impacts the decision making.

The head coaches needs to be involved in all of this information. If the trainer has a player who is injured and cannot play the coach must know. If a court player subs and is debriefed by an assistant, the head coach needs a heads up on any information that came out of that debrief? Is the player ready to go or does he/she need a little time.

Coaches must remember that there are major differences between coaching a school /club team and a provincial team. One of the biggest challenges is the short time frame under which summer programs operate. Also you are dealing with players who are used to being the stars on their own teams. This means they usually have positive relationships with their own coach. Coaches do not often have the time to build this relationships with every player that they could over the course of a long season. Very often the coach has never had the opportunity to have a personal one on one meeting. Coaches don't have the time to experiment with which buttons to push with a player. This is why debriefs are crucial.

Often coaches assume that the player knows why he/she has been subbed. If a player is used to playing 40 minutes a game and responsible for shooting every time he/she has the ball that player might not understand why he/she has now been subbed after four minutes and asked to pass to other teammates. There is a big difference between telling players roles and responsibilities and teaching these players to accept them. It does not have to be the head coach. Any coach on the staff can do this job.

These do not have to be long drawn out discussions. It works best when the player is asked what they think first. "What are you seeing?" is a good question to ask. Attention should be drawn to what he/she did well. Accurately **describe in detail** what the player did well. "You were making hard cuts to the front of the rim, at the right time and sealing your check inside" is a much better statement than "You're doing a good job on offense". You communicated the who, what, when, where, why and how. This now allows you to come back with something that they can focus on for next time. Again give it descriptive details. "Now you need to take three strong strides when your running back on transition defense, protect the basket if you see a perimeter player back. Shadow the ball at half if the other big has got the basket." This is better than saying; "You're not working hard enough in transition defense".



Keeping people on task

The head coach must ask questions of his players and assistants. What are you seeing?

Positive things can happen from this:

- You make sure the people are staying on task and paying attention to their roles
- You gain valuable information that aids you in your and others decision making
- You enable others to feel like they are part of the game. Their input has value.

Failure to share information is one of the biggest problems. Great coaches are constant giving their team information. A beginning coach calls a play, "blue" and expects the players to properly execute the play. A more experienced coach would be sure to prepare his/her players as to why they want to run "blue" and making sure the players understand what to look for when the play is being run. A great coach reminds his/her players on the bench why they are running blue and "lets watch to see how the team is defending it". The master coach would ask the players for their input on what the players saw. Knowing this gives him/her input into their understanding and observation skills and therefore the basketball smarts of the players. When we tell we never know what is comprehended.

Age appropriate

Younger or more inexperienced players may not have the visual skills or the verbal lingo to describe what they see. It is important that the coaching team helps these players develop these important skills. Just telling somebody something is not enough.

For example:

A coach observes that the opponent is running a ball screen. He/she informs his team, "When we see the ball screen we will switch. Does everybody understand?" No one answers. The first time the screen occurs no switch takes place and the opponent scores. The coach gets mad and yells at his team for being so stupid for not doing what he told them to do. Who is the stupid one

here? Even at the professional level this happens. Players do not make the proper observation quick enough and react slowly. This coach made some huge assumptions:

- that players knew what a ball screen looked like
- the players knew when and why a ball screen would be used
- the player knew what a switch meant
- that the players could properly execute the complex maneuver at the proper time

This begins in the practice environment. Teach the players what to watch for and what language is used to describe this action. Ask the players questions to confirm their knowledge. These questions should not be of a yes and no nature. "Does everyone understand?" is not a good question. Ask questions like; "What is the reason that the other team would use a ball screen? What does the person guarding the ball need to know? What is the job of the person guarding the screener?"

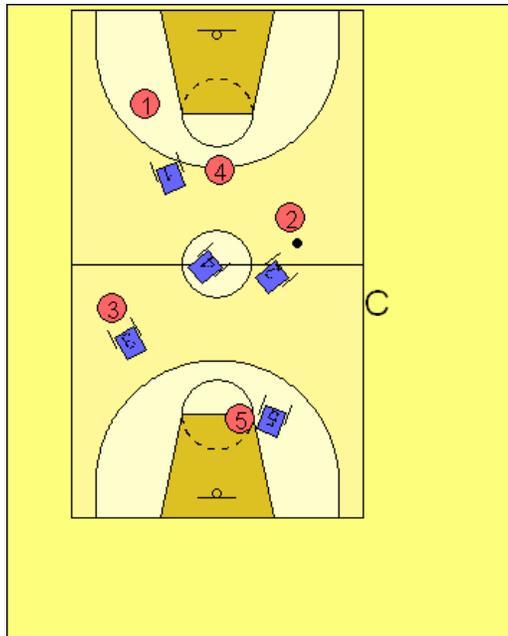
If this is not done you will get a lot of, "I don't know answers". This frustrates coaches who cannot believe that a player could not know what just happened. It is not that the player did not see what happen; the player does not have the verbal skills to describe it.

In games coaches of younger players,(I would content that this is just as important with older players) needs to be constantly teaching players by describing what is happening and putting words to it. Be careful to communicate these to players on the floor at times that does not distract them. The coach who acts like a radio play by play announcer is very distracting for players. Coach during stoppages by calling over a player or getting their attention and alerting them to a situation.

Be very careful with younger players not to label them. Saying things like;

- You not supposed to dribble
- Why did you shoot that shot, you can't shoot
- Only our point guard can make that pass
- Why are you always forgetting the plays

Players pick up on these subtle phrases and will fulfill your prophecy.



Coaching on the fly

As players are running up and down the floor you can alert players to observations you or your coaching team have made. These need to be short descriptive comments that aid the player in improving performance.

"Look to go under the ball screen if the player is not a shooter."

"Read the switch on the fare screen"

These allow the player to improve their performance the next time.

Also catch the players doing things right. Point out movements and decisions that the players have done that you want repeated.

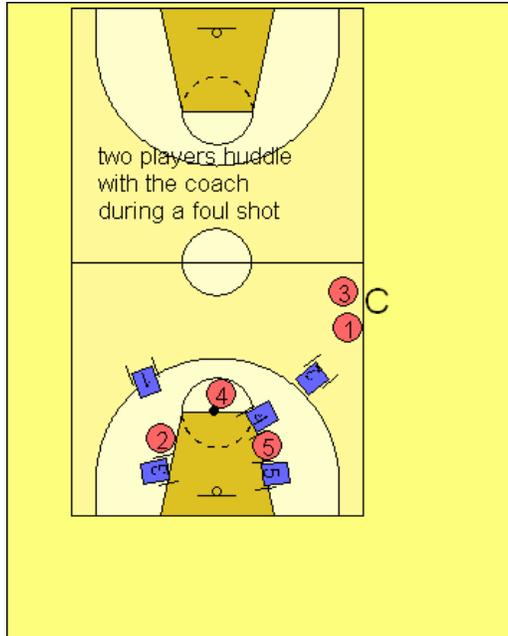
"Great cut". "

"That screen set up the shot, keep doing that."

This is probably one of the biggest weaknesses in our coaches today. Most of our praise tends to be of a general nature; Great job, way to work hard, your really shooting well." It is very easy for a player to shrug this kind of praise off. Descriptively describe what the player just did. "you had your hands ready and your feet set on that shot, great job". The player is much more likely to agree with the coach and will begin feel better about his/her shot. The amazing thing is that the player will also begin to talk about other areas that they may need to improve. This is especially important when your team is struggling. Too many coaches get quiet or upset and focus on the negative things.

Great coaches repeat to the bench the key points told to the players on the floor. This allows the bench players access to information that will assist them when it is their turn to play. "I just told our guards to keep looking to push the ball. That is what we want and we will get rewarded for that as the game goes on"

Too often coaches tell the bench the negative things. "Why are we continually turning the ball over? Too much of this can lead to the bench questioning the coach internally with thoughts like; "Why does he/she keep telling us that, were not on the floor" or "What's the sense of telling us, you never let us play."



Coaching during stoppages

During dead ball situation is a time to you can gain players attention and communicate. Longer stoppages such as foul shots allow a coach to call players over. Train players to sprint as to not waste time. You have to decide to call one or more over. Many teams like to huddle during these times. In FIBA you will not be given leeway in allowing the players time to return to the floor. They must be ready to return immediately to their positions. It is not the official responsibility to wait. Coaches cannot be upset with the officials; they will not disrupt the flow of the game.

Define level of authority

With you assistant coaches you need to define the level of authority the coach has to use the observed information.

- Observation - at this level the assistant tells the head coach what he/she saw. Often with beginning coaches the head coach may have to prompt the assistant with a question. What did you see?
- Recommend - What did you see and give me a recommendation as to what to do with the information. if you see certain things recommend to a coach or teammate and action. This is a great step in mentoring assistant coaches. It gets them to start to think of adjustments. "I see that they have gone to a zone. I suggest we try the 'Blue' offense because it gets our shooters open on the wing. "
- Initiate – the assistant has observed something and therefore is going to take the following action. It allows for the head coach to veto the proposal if he/she wants. The assistant coach has seen the other team put a particular player back in the game; therefore he/she is going to sub someone back to check this player. In these situations the head coach wants to be reminded of what was usually discussed ahead of time.
- Take action - see something and do it. In these situations there is full trust that the assistant coach will act according to the plan for the team. The head coach has complete trust. Often this is things like talking to a player, Some teams delegate roles such as offense and defense. Some do this with subs and match ups. When teams have co-coaches all areas of philosophy must be discussed ahead of time. The biggest problems arise when co-coaches have different philosophies on things like playing time.