



Scott Anderson

Co-author, 'Reignite: How to Rekindle Your Passion for Selling'

I Will Give You Something to Cry About

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"Life is 10 percent what you make it and 90 percent how you take it" – Irving Berlin

As one of the coaches of my ten-year-old son Cole's baseball team, I usually find baseball exhilarating. But after a recent weekend tournament, I was wiped out from dealing with the number of emotions these fifth-grade kids were dishing out.

We have one player who cries—when he strikes out, when he grounds out, when he makes a bad play in the field or a mistake running the bases. You get the picture. And this attitude has started to permeate the dugout. Now we have two more kids with the same problem. We know as coaches that we must nip this behavior in the bud. But we are only coaches and not their parents, who may be fostering their behavior.

In baseball and especially when batting, you are going to fail more than 66% of the time. It is part of the game.

During most of the tournament (we played six games in three days), my son Cole pitched lights out, not giving up any runs. When we eventually needed a relief pitcher to finish an inning for him, I was shocked to see tears well up in his eyes as he sat on the bench. Having never seen my son cry in all the years of baseball or any sport, I sat down beside him, put my arm around him, and told him that he had pitched great (there were numerous errors that prolonged the inning, but that is what baseball is all about, even in a travel league, when you are ten years old). My son normally has the mind-set of a friendly dog—always smiling, laughing, and able to forget about setbacks quickly. Did he think this meltdown was perfectly fine because the other kids were doing the same thing?

During Cole's next at bat, he let a third strike go by and was loudly called out by the ump. We have always taught the kids to run back to the dugout after a strike out and to show an attitude of "I will get you next time." Cole came back to the dugout slowly, and his eyes welled up again. Keep in mind that at the time he was leading the team in hitting with an over-400 batting average. This time he and I had a different conversation.

I am responsible for developing a man, not just a baseball player. In life, everyone has ups and downs. We all must learn to be resilient. As a salesperson and business owner, I really can't count the number of setbacks, and outright failures, I have experienced in my lifetime. After a failure, you have to be defiant with yourself and loudly exclaim, "NEXT" or "Bring it on"! Embrace your failures as learning experiences and let them motivate you to win the next time.

Cole complained that the pitch was outside and a ball. I immediately told him that he was responsible for guarding the plate, and if he let a close one that could be called a strike go by, it was his issue and not the ump's. I then looked him directly in his teary eyes and told him that if I see him cry again after a minor setback in baseball, he would be sitting on the bench the rest of the game. And if it continues after that, I would pull him from the baseball team.

See, baseball is a microcosm of life: it's fun to play, it's competitive, it can be hard, and no matter if you win or lose, there is always another at bat, another play to be made, or another game to play. My son will learn to be accountable for his actions, but I also want him to enjoy the overall experience. That is hard to do if you are crying all the time.

Why are kids today so upset with a little failure? I believe society hasn't done them any favors by trying to make everyone a winner and claiming everyone deserves a trophy. This doesn't build character. Instead, it atrophies resilience so that our children can't overcome their setbacks.

My dad was the great modern-day motivator. I confess that I didn't always have a positive attitude, and Dad's great motivational advice to me was, "I will give you something to cry about." Here's the beauty of my dad's strategy: while I was busy outwardly appearing happy (or face my punishment), I actually became happy. I learned I could control my attitude. Thanks, Dad!

We need to help mold the character of our kids by helping them understand that they control both their attitude and effort. If they have given their best effort, then they will accept setbacks as part of life. Let them struggle and experience failure so when they succeed they will feel that much better.

What are some strategies you can employ to keep your attitude positive when experiencing setbacks?

Scott Anderson is a founding principal at Diamond Performance Solutions LLC. He is co-author of the book Reignite- How to Rekindle Your Passion for Selling. Scott spent his entire career-more than twenty-five years selling, managing salespeople, and providing sales consulting, training, and coaching to some of the biggest and best sales organizations in the world. He has worked with leading organizations including 3M, IBM, Cargill, UnitedHealth Group, Carlson Companies, Andersen Windows, Wells Fargo and The Hartford. He has authored numerous articles on sales effectiveness. He resides in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Office Number 952-942-3362 email: sanderson@diamondpg.com