

Tips on Coaching Odyssey of the Mind Teams

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Following are some tips I've picked up over nine years of coaching, five of coordinating, from other coaches, including Danny Burk, and from coaches guides. I've used them all – to resolve issues that arise during team sessions and to stay sane. These can be applied to almost any age. Don't forget the MANY resources online, especially at www.va.odysseyofthemind.org – coaches guides and spontaneous guides, and more.

1. Retain perspective.

Before anything else, remember **this is about the process and having fun**. Kids – and their adults – often focus on the tournament (which is not called a “competition” for a reason). This can be a motivator, but you must remind yourself frequently that this is about kids “competing” with themselves to be creative, learn how to be a team, and do stuff themselves. Your Number One job as a coach is to – coach this!

2. Invest in a flipchart and easel.

Use this every meeting for generating and recording ideas. This is the single most useful item my teams have used. Even little kids benefit. Let them take the lead and use it whenever possible. They love it! “Post-It” pads are best, but expensive. More on uses below.

3. Use the time before teams solidify.

This is a good time to identify rules, skills, desires, personality types, etc. Outside assistance is not a danger at this point. **Personalities are not at issue** because everyone is new, or the season is new.

Establish skills. Use the flipchart to go around the room like a spontaneous problem and have kids **list their OWN strengths and weaknesses**, likes, dislikes (technical ability, artistic, good writer, dislikes singing, etc.). On another page, have them identify the skills and abilities and likes of their PARENTS. This flipchart page becomes a reference for later, and it hasn't been colored by events later on.

Establish rules. Use this early on to **identify THEIR rules and YOUR rules**. Ask them to figure out what YOUR rules might be. Write it down and post it. They will have buy-in if they develop their own rules, and you can point to it throughout the year – as something THEY decided.

Discuss excellence. What makes events memorable? What have the kids witnessed that sticks with them, and why? Encourage the kids to remember that the difference between good solutions and excellent ones is in the details and embellishments, and in the way everything hangs together.

Discuss teams. What is a team? What are their experiences with teams? What makes teamwork good, or bad? What tools have they used with teamwork so far? What others are available. What are the characteristics they'd like in their own team?

Discuss commitment. What does it mean? Why do we want it? Who's involved? (Parents, coaches, kids).

Discuss food. While food is always a good motivator, depending on the time of day, snacks can take up time or ruin meals. It's surprising how many kids decide not to have snacks when given the choice.

Plan on disappointments and disagreements. Decide early how you and the team will handle them.

4. Use spontaneous problems (brainstorming) to solve challenges and generate ideas.

Questioning techniques can help teams past blockades. Ask open-ended and broad questions of the team in a Socratic manner so ideas are the team's.

Spontaneous problems are a good tool. Use the flipchart to record everything, and have it available for later reference. Remember, there is no such thing as outside assistance with spontaneous problems! (Unless you relate it directly to their long-term problem.) The idea is to get them thinking about ways to overcome obstacles, such as using general supplies/ideas, without the hindrance of having to relate them to the problem at hand. Go as fast as you can around the room for these. Revisit as needed.

Examples:

- List things that can be used to **connect** one thing to another. (Duct tape now becomes only one option!)
- List **places you can get information** about geography/vehicles/structures/costumes/props (name something

general but applicable to long-term problem). (Parents, library, parents' companies, store managers, internet, books around the house, teachers, aunts, siblings, drama teacher, going to a play, etc. should end up on this list!)

- List all the ways you can **build a** (some item they want to make but can't figure out how or are on unproductive track). What materials would you need?
- List ways you can **propel an object** weighing less than 50 pounds; more than 50 pounds.
- What **treasures do you have at home** that could be used for a play? (They should list costumes, props, etc.)
- List ways to use stuff to make things (especially useful when the team is stuck):
 - Using these Legos/Knex/Erector Set/Bunch Of Stuff, **make a vehicle** that can be rolled three feet. (Teaches mechanics of creating vehicles).
 - Using this (bunch of stuff), **make a hat**.
 - Figure out how many things you can make with this **paper**, and what you can use it for. (Supply with a ream of scrap paper. Let them rip into it and make things from rope to stairs to towers to Origami boxes).
 - What can you do with this large **cardboard box/chair/pvc pipe/etc.**?

5. Common problem 1: Consensus vs. majority rule.

Learning how to reach consensus when majority rule is not desired is one of the most common challenges teams and coaches face. In fact, **voting rarely works** well.

Example: Team can't choose a long-term problem by consensus. This is a classic case of a team-building exercise! (All these techniques work with any dispute – whose script is “better,” who should play what role, etc.)

Use techniques one might use in a work environment, involving reviewing what underlies the reasons for desiring one kind of problem over the other and then breaking the bond to the desire. Get out that flipchart! Is it a power/control issue? (No kid is too young for that one!) Is it an aversion toward having to do an activity called for in the problem? Get into Jimmy Carter mode and do some negotiation work.

- **Get the team to use listening skills.** Ask: **What is the outcome desired?** Take turns writing desires on flipchart (having fun, working together to solve a problem, presenting something everyone can be involved in, doing a drama, building stuff). The desires are discussed, apart from the problems themselves, and are ranked in order of importance to each kid or the team or both. Now there is a basis for negotiation. In the case where kids can't agree on a problem, **two problems might meet the top three desires, for example**. They can see objectively that maybe both problems will address their needs.
- **Have all the kids read through both problems** – it's often a perception issue (kids can be like some pundits who don't read books before opining about them). Or have the ones who don't like problem 1 (or role 1 or idea 1) read through that and vice versa. Have them list what they like about each and don't like about each -- or about the one they didn't want.
- **Use a classic debate technique** – have them **argue in favor of the opposing side**. (I did this with very amusing results and lots of laughter – and kids saw the benefits of BOTH problems and then had trouble picking which they liked MOST. This was a much easier one to solve.)
- **Have a mini-longterm or related spontaneous** where the kids **take one aspect of one problem and present it with 15 minute's prep time** (a mini-long-term), and then do the same with the other. Again, this divorces the kids from taking sides since all are working together on each problem. Have kids brainstorm as many possible ways to present one aspect of one problem, and then one aspect of another. They can realize their creativity is leading them all in one direction. Combined with other activities noted above, the kids can all come to realize one problem is best suited to the overall team than another.
- Remember that **every single problem, no matter the category, has room for both technical and dramatic content**. Engineers and thespians will, in fact, find a home in each of them. Have the kids look at the different problems and identify how their own desires could be met.
- **Sleep on it.** There is no greater resolution to conflict than the perspective rest can supply.

The idea is to help them become somewhat neutral about the problem itself, step out of their hard-held stands, and become more invested in the fun of the process of creating a solution. Once anyone is more neutral and

“begins with the end in mind,” he or is more willing to give ground. In my experience, kids as young as 1st-graders can go through this process.

In the end, it is no longer “his or her” decision or desire, it was the team’s desire.

6. Common problem 2: Pushy vs. quiet kids (and unproductive vs. do-it-all-myself).

- All personalities have great ideas. **One set has a brain directly connected to the mouth, the other takes an indirect (but often substantive) route.** Unfortunately, verbal communication is our main mode as humans, so kids have to be encouraged to talk/listen when they want to not-talk/jabber.
- In spontaneous problems, **have verbal/pushy kids be judges** and then make observations about teamwork. Have quiet kids be the “talkers” in problems that require talkers and doers. I.e., move kids out of comfort zones where you aren’t guiding, but “the rules” are. Make up problems that get these groups using other skills. Charades is a great way.
- In general, have talkers write ideas on flipchart – not allowed to talk, only ask questions.
- **Split group into talkers/quiet ones to generate solutions.** Quiet group will come up with just as many ideas, to many a kids’ surprise!
- **Leave the room.** If the kids are old enough, this can be a powerful way to empower them. Often, a natural leader among kids will emerge when adults are not there.
- If there is a kid who is really unproductive, have the team find something he/she likes to do and be prepared to have that kid complete only that task. **Sometimes it’s best to call it like it is.**

7. Common problem 3: Staying focused and managing time.

- **As a coach, make managing time a priority.** Learn to say no when you have to. Make teams and parents stick to schedules.
- **Make sure you leave yourself enough time.** Time for meetings (younger kids can have longer meetings than many coaches expect). Time to prepare. Time to communicate. Time to recover. Most coaches get discouraged because expectations don’t match reality. So keep it real.
- **Get help.** Spontaneous problems take time and thought to put together, so outsource this task! Kids adore these and you can never do too many. Have one coach for long-term, another for spontaneous problems. This is one of the most beneficial leadership reliefs. Rotate kids responsible for two spontaneous problems at each meeting. Other areas to outsource: parent for snacks or benign supervision. A parent to manage t-shirts, parties, overnights, pizza dinners, etc. Carpools.
- Coach the team early on **what goals are**, what priorities are and why they’re needed, on what time management is, and on common pitfalls. **Have the team set goals** and write them down in clear view.
- **Get a big desk calendar** to put up on the wall so kids can SEE schedules and dates, then work backward. Communicate schedules and events to parents routinely.
- **Have teams divide tasks** into “must do” and “maybe do.” This helps them with priorities.
- **Have an “endless” meeting.** This can be very productive. It might be an overnight after a long day, a long weekend, holiday afternoon, a snow day, or several. (A few years ago when I coached two teams at once, they met in my house for five straight full snow days. They had a blast and the parents were ecstatic!)
- **Change it up.** Meet somewhere else now and then for a new vision. Maybe a parent has a garage with lots of tools, or a big space for practicing theatrical skills.
- Let kids **separate into teams** and work at different times and locations to do things like write scripts and build props. This notion should come from them, but you can have them reach this conclusion by asking them for ways to get teamwork done faster. Use their school experiences to help them generate ideas. (E.g., “On Friday, a teacher has assigned six of you to build a doghouse, write a song, and bake dog biscuits, all due Monday. Two of you have sports all day Saturday and two others have music all day Sunday. What do you do?”).
- **Make use of time out.** Don’t call it that, but find something to do for the kid who distracts everyone else.
- **Make use of time home.** Encourage the kids to divide up tasks so some are done at home, individually or with others.

- **Teamwork timelines are fluid and scary.** Teams spend many meetings just getting organized and bonded. Real work often doesn't begin until mid or late January – don't worry about this. Their creative juices have been flowing and they've been taking measure of each other and of their own abilities. This is much like putting on a play – **the last few weeks are hectic and time-crunchy.**
- **Make sure the kids – and especially parents – understand the time commitment, especially toward the end.** Have a meeting early in the season and again in late February with the parents to gain their support, make sure they provide no outside assistance, make this a priority the week or two before the tournament. You will probably be flexible all the months leading up to this – kids can't make meetings because of lessons and sports and family activities. But the two weeks before the tournament should be for OotM first and foremost.
- **Cleanup is part of the meeting.** Ownership of this is part of the problem solution. Make it fun by having a competition, or inventing a spontaneous problem associated with it. Have "cleanup" music – maybe not Barney's. But even if that's a stretch, kids need to learn that the not-so-fun stuff is part of life's responsibilities.
- **Don't spend 80% of your time on 20% of the kids.** This is common in our daily lives: The few "high-maintenance" kids/employees/bosses/parents we work with seem to suck up most of our attention and energy. This is not fair to the others who may deserve you more. Learn to cut them off and move on. Use parenting/teaching techniques like, "I hear you have an issue with this [reiterate issue], and it deserves attention, so let's plan on revisiting it [give a time]. I hope that works for you." Follow up! Or "I understand your concern [repeat back the concern]. This is outside the scope of what we're trying to accomplish today, so we need to shelve it for now and move on." You may consider having a flipchart page where kids can capture their concerns, but be sure to revisit them alone with the kid or with the team, as appropriate.

Sometimes you just have to address these situations with parents. Example, "Your child often comes to meetings with very high/unfocused energy that can be distracting. For example, [be straightforward here.] We need to figure out how to address this for the benefit of the team. What suggestions do you have?" Notice: You are not brooking disputes over the fact that there is this issue. This does not allow the parent to deny your reality.

- **Be ok with not being Martha Stewart.** Your house will NOT be featured in *Architectural Digest*, and you will NOT let yourself be judged for it. Remind yourself frequently that it is far better to have a houseful of engaged, messy kids than lonesome orphans holding their breath in a dust-free vacuum.
- **Recognize burnout** – in you and in the kids. If they're still on your clock, end the activity and do something else. If you're burning out, you are probably not delegating – so get parents to help out with things like supervision and administration. Leave the room (see below) and give yourself a time out. Shorten the next meeting or cancel it if you need a break.
- **Chaos is ok sometimes.** Enormous creativity may emerge from what seems like randomness.

8. Miscellaneous

- Help your team really **understand the long-term problem and the program guide** inside out and backward. Create a trivia contest, or create a quiz – multiple choice, T/F – based on the problem and guide, with prizes. Have the kids read the problem in turn (even the youngest who can read). Refer them to the problem or program guide frequently when they get stuck.
- Have the kids continually **verify** that they are following the requirements in the problem, remembering the importance of style, and meeting the spirit of the problem.
- **Practice mistakes.** Teach contingency planning. Encourage the team to think about backup materials, tool kits, and how to recover from unexpected problems.
- Get the kids to figure out **checklists are good** (including for tournament tasks such as loading, staging, fix-it box, etc.)
- **Get parents and kids doing spontaneous problems at home.** Have them do spontaneous problems during the first parent meeting, with the parents. Use spontaneous practice to break up meetings. Keep a boxful of "spontaneous stuff" like deck of cards, timer, paper, pencils, straws, clay, toothpicks, scissors, tape, marshmallows, coins, paper cups, string – you get the picture!
- Teams function best when they **bond during unpressurized time.** Create opportunities, such as going to a local play, having pizza, having an overnight, playing a game (that helps with creativity maybe), making

snacks together, writing wacky scripts for a skit to be delivered at the end of the meeting. This can make actual work go faster. Take breaks during meetings for totally unrelated fun.

- **Simulate** every aspect of competition, and practice this frequently. Get the kids to figure out that they should play to the audience, not the judges. Decide what to do if space is smaller or larger than where they practiced, or if the entrance is on the left, right, or behind the stage.
- **Use teacher tools** like flashing lights or a signal to gain quiet.
- **Watch “Who’s Line Is It Anyway?”** and do that stuff with the team! Consult with your school’s drama teacher or older drama students about having a mini-workshop after school.
- Have the kids **go to local or school plays** – with notebooks – to write down what they observe in props, costumes, scene changes, scripts, etc. Have them read short scripts (lots of skit stuff on web – try Scouting sites) to see how it’s done and how scenes work.
- **Create a “junk” box** in the garage or basement to throw miscellaneous stuff kids find at home. Let kids drop stuff off between meetings.
- Once ideas for the long-term are jelling, plan a **field trip to wander around hardware stores, craft stores, thrift stores, fabric stores**.
- Take advantage of the many **hobby-type shops** around. Home Depot used to offer once-a-month Saturday classes to build stuff out of wood, free. One hobby shop allows you to build cars. Others give free sewing lessons. Craft stores have sessions all the time.
- **Engage parents** so they aren’t tempted to provide “outside assistance.” **Parents are harder to manage than kids.** They can provide food, transportation, skill-training, etc. Give them the synopses to allay their curiosity, but not the long-term problem itself. Discourage them from reviewing problems with their children. A good hint from Danny Burk: “Invite the children, in front of the parents, to use the phrase, “Thanks Dad/Mom, that’s another great idea we can’t use.” (This is training for parents in “letting go!”) Let the kids rehearse in front of them – but maybe make them put duct tape over their mouths first. Don’t let them take kids shopping unless you’re sure they “get” No Outside Assistance.
- **Do not have parents stay for each meeting, even with young children.** They can be distracting, the kids respond very differently (often unproductively) when parents are around, and you’ll often end up coaching both kids and parents. One of the purposes of OotM is to teach independence – and that includes from parents. Instead, as noted elsewhere, have one parent be an assistant coach or a spontaneous coach, or rotate so one or two stay for each meeting to help supervise. In cases where there is a special-needs child, perhaps another parent would be willing to work with that parent and child. Even they need to learn to work apart from their folks.
- **Skill training is invaluable. Have the kids make use of team parents or other adults for skill-teaching!!** Kids as young as eight can use sewing machines and power tools safely. Really! Parents/adults who have skills in engineering, woodworking, sewing, building, writing, oral presentations, dancing, musicianship, etc., can help with “workshops.” BE SURE these are presented outside the scope of the long-term problem so the kids learn the skill, then apply it themselves to their problem. This is not outside assistance.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** With parents and kids, both. If the kids are old enough, let them know clearly that you will be communicating to THEM directly via email (or texting), and they will be expected to communicate with each other. Establish a FaceBook page. If the kids are young, make sure parents understand they are the conduits for your communique’s so they take responsibility for passing information along.
- **Don’t ask yourself:** “What if I know the idea won’t work? What if I know a better way?” It doesn’t matter because it’s their problem. “That won’t work.” Just because you can’t do a problem, doesn’t mean they can’t do it. You will be surprised what they come up with when you let go. **When in doubt, do nothing.**

9. Improving spontaneous problem-solving.

All problems:

- **Practice**, of course. All the time, from the first meeting. Make problems up. Use all the tips in the coaches handbook.
- Kids almost always need to speak up. Have them **YELL** answers to someone “across the football field.” (This works in drama too.) Make them really yell from their diaphragm!
- Some teams completely miss the point of the problem. They need to **listen** for the words “your problem is…”

and pay attention! Key words: “can discuss,” “can only use the materials...” etc.

- Suggest: Assume you can do something if you aren’t told you can’t.
- Suggest: **Ask questions** to clarify if there is any doubt! And everyone should listen to the answer.
- **Start with everyone on the team doing practice problems.** Move it to five later. Various decision tools can be used to pick teams of five. (One is blind voting, not allowed to vote for self, top five chosen, but only coach sees results at first in case kid is chosen for none.)
- **Rotate everyone through V/VHO/HO.** Quiet ones can be surprisingly good at verbal!
- Keep track of **scores.** Modify times so they can be compared (1 min. thinking, 2 response, even when different).
- **Animate your answer.** Just because it’s verbal or hands-on doesn’t mean you can’t add a little zip. Creative points here.
- Practice with all the **slow-down tools** – dice, cards, etc. – these really are used in meets to slow kids down!
- **Cheat on the time.** Call time, but let the kids take as long as they want to “solve” the problem. This really helps them absorb tips on being more efficient.

Verbal/Verbal-Hands-On:

- Suggest: **Don’t expand** on verbal answers. If a quick answer is required, keep it quick. If it takes a second to say “this can be used for,” you have lost 20 seconds for each 20 answers in 2 minutes. That adds up!
- Suggest: **Manipulate objects!** Don’t be afraid to pick them up and use them in your answer unless told otherwise.
- Suggest: **Use common answers** to keep moving along. It is ok to use an example given by a judge as your answer, for a common point.
- Suggest: There is no such thing as a **wrong** answer.

Hands-On:

- Teams should consider **having leaders** – not necessarily strong personalities but someone who can take charge if there are disagreements or a decision must be made. Judges have a head judge to break ties, so should the teams.
- Some teams suffer from **group think.** When one kid starts on a session, they might focus only on one/some of the objects and leave all of the others alone, limiting creativity. Consider using everything available.
- Suggest: **Use planning time** wisely. Give yourself time to create prototypes, test, etc.
- Suggest: Someone should keep an **eye on the time.** Judges don’t always give you warnings.
- It’s often good to **split into two** groups to tackle a problem – not everyone needs to focus on everything, depending on the problem.
- Suggest: Pay attention to the **scoring!** Height might be worth less than quantity. Maximize time spent on scoring potential.

10. Know when good enough is good enough.

One of the most basic requirements of any person in real life is **making good decisions with too little information.** We ALWAYS have too little information. Knowing when it’s decision time is a key skill. This is something you will be teaching your teams.

A sense of humor will keep you and the team happy. But if you don’t want your rug or the dog painted blue, lay down expectations, and if you have to, **lay down the law.**

“Good enough” is the fact that this is **one of the best educations you will ever get for being a good coach/parent/boss/leader.** And it’s free!

As the coach, you have the right to be respected by parents and kids alike. Use your authority kindly but firmly. Parents and kids count on it.

Relax! This isn't your problem to solve. If the kids are working and having fun, you're doing fine.