# Employing Principles vs. Tactics

by Mike Hawkins
[mike@alpinelink.com](mailto:mike@alpinelink.com)

As a parent, I've been to my share of youth sporting events. While being a spectator has been mostly an enjoyable experience, I can recall several games that were not. The reason was that the coaches didn't coach. In particular, they missed opportunities to impart core principles. Instead, they directed the players in tactics. Rather than coaching an offensive soccer player on the principle of pulling the defense away from the opposing team's goal or spreading the field, they would tell the player to simply stand in a particular position. As a result, the players had little idea why they were standing in that spot. They were not only unable to reliably employ this tactic again without instruction; they weren't learning the strategy of the game. It reminds me of the old Chinese proverb, "give a man a fish and feed him for a day, but teach him to fish and feed him for a lifetime." Great leaders employ and teach principles, not merely tactics.

When you direct others through the use of tactics, you miss opportunities to ensure the best tactic is used in a given situation. You miss opportunities to build their self-sufficiency. You waste your and others' time in repetitive instruction.

Tactics provide the "how" and the "what", but leave out the "why" behind them. In a sales environment, a common tactic is to give your prospect a company logo item when you make your first sales call or to give them valuable information at no-charge. Both demonstrate the what or the how, but not the why. On the other hand, the principle behind both these tactics, *give first*, teaches a core principle that goes much deeper. If you understand and employ the principle *give first*, then you are more likely to come up with the most appropriate tactic in real time based on the specific situation.

Long term success doesn't come from memorizing tactics. It comes from applying core principles. Great leaders know that if they and their employees understand the right core underlying principles, the right tactics will naturally follow.

Think about the instructions you are giving your employees. Do the instructions include the why and not just the what or the how behind them? Are your instructions broad enough to encompass a variety of situations? Do your instructions explain your underlying strategy? If not, you are too focused on tactics.

To turn your tactics into core principles:

1. Identify the most effective tactics you use.
2. Ask "why" you use those tactics.
3. Repeat asking "why" until you reach the core principle on which you want to focus.
4. Phrase the principle in a way that is easy to understand and apply.

Focus and guide your employees on these core principles. It will enable them to better respond to the situations they face. It will make you a more productive and effective manager.

Mike Hawkins is president of Alpine Link Corporation, a consulting firm specializing in helping individuals and organizations reach their peak potential. For this and other Alpine Link business articles, visit: [http://www.alpinelink.com/Leadership_Sales_Management_Consulting_Papers_Tools_Templates.aspx](http://www.alpinelink.com/Leadership_Sales_Management_Consulting_Papers_Tools_Templates.aspx).