

Ask Sam a question!



Do you have a question related to speech and debate? Send Sam the query using the question box below and he will do his best to answer you straight away. Sam will also put up selected questions and answers onto this page so that all the readers can benefit from the exchange. If you wish to have your question kept private, please indicate accordingly when sending the question in.

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Previously Asked Questions

Question 4: Debate Coaches

Dear Sam. I am the teacher in charge of debate but our team has not had a debate coach before. How do I make sure that I get a good coach?

Getting a good debate coach is not easy in Singapore. Many of the coaches in Singapore are ex-debaters who take the opportunity to coach during their pre-university or university days. As such, the window for them to coach debating is small. For the debaters who go on to study overseas, this window is even smaller.

Therefore, teachers often do not have many options to choose from and some end up selecting any coach that they can find. However, in some of these cases, they end up hiring completely inappropriate coaches. Here are a few things to keep in mind when selecting a coach:

Know the type of coach needed: Different coaches bring different skill sets. Some coaches are firm and energetic and maintains a close control over the team's training. These coaches may be a good fit for debaters who require discipline and firm guidance. However, they may end up clashing with debaters who require more freedom of action and independent thought. Such debaters require a coach who is willing to let the students take the initiative and come in to assist only when necessary.

In hiring a coach, a teacher should therefore scrutinise the coach's resume carefully and consider if the teams coached in the past by this coach would be the same as the teacher's team. For instance, a coach who had won championships with strong teams may not have contributed much to those teams' victories. When this coach takes over a weaker team, he or she may be at a loss on how to control and guide the weaker speakers

Focus on Club or Team: The teacher should also make it clear to the coach on what the scope of coaching would be. Some coaches are excellent in handling a small team of debaters but have difficulty running programmes for a large debating club. Other may be more comfortable with a large student group. Thus, if a teacher is looking for a coach to improve debating skills in the whole debate club, it would be better if the coach has some experience in running programmes for a large debate club.

Checking CVs: It is important to check on the validity of the claims being made by the coach on his CV to better ascertain the qualifications. Some coaches have stretched the truth in order to create a false reputation for themselves. For instance, even though someone may have only been involved in some training sessions for a championship debate team, he may still write that he was a "trainer" or even "coach" of this team. Or he may claim that he was a championship debater for a university even though he only had limited participation in these university tournaments. To expose such lies, the teacher may wish to contact the officials from that debate team to get the full picture. It may not always be possible to get references from everyone but it is generally a good idea not to take the CV at face value and do some cross-checking.

Trial system: Before hiring a coach on a permanent basis, teachers may wish to consider having trial sessions. This means that the coach will be brought in for one to two sessions to run workshops or seminars. Based on the performance of the coach in these sessions, the teacher may make a decision on whether to proceed. The feedback from the students may also be a useful indication as to whether the coach needs to be hired. It is also useful for the teacher to monitor the coaching sessions to see how the students are responding to the coach.

The missing coach: It is important for the teacher to make it clear to the coach on what his or her responsibilities would be, including the coach's involvement in the debate teams' involvement in tournaments. For instance, some coaches don't bother to turn up to watch their teams in tournaments because they are not paid for these hours, even though it is critical for the coach to be able to see how their charges are faring in a tournament. Teachers should try to ensure that the coaches do come to tournaments to observe matches and provide feedback. A variation of this problem occurs when the coach under contract often "farms" out the team to a friend or a colleague. This is clearly unethical and the teacher should keep track of the training sessions to ensure that this "bait and switch" technique does not succeed.

Conflict of interest: Some coaches often decide to coach more than one team over the course of the year. There is nothing wrong with this but the teacher should try to ascertain that having multiples teams would not compromise the coaching that is being offered to teacher's team. This is especially the case for the rare instances when the coach is handling two teams taking part in the same tournament.

Unethical conduct: There are some rare instances where the coach could engage in unethical conduct and drag the students into the picture. For instance, a coach may ask the team to lie and spread vicious rumours about their opponents. The coach may falsify the age of debaters to allow for easier qualification. The coach may cheat by communicating directly with the team during a preparation round. The coach may even charge money to hold exhibition matches involving the team. It is important for the teacher to keep track of what is happening with the students and stop these activities from happening.

Question 3: Improving Debating Skills

Dear Sam. I believe that my debating skills have reached a plateau. How can my bring my debating skills to the next level so that I will stand a better chance at selection trials and competitions?

Feedback

It is critical to get feedback from the selectors or coaches in order to bring your debating skills to the next level. This can be done in two ways:

You can ask for direct feedback on your own debating: The advantage of this is that the feedback will be specific to the debater and will highlight the areas that you need to improve on. Using the feedback to correct any perceived weaknesses already go a long way in improving your debating skills. To complement this, you can also ask for feedback from your peers.

Feedback on what the selectors/coaches are looking for in their team: The advantage of this feedback is that the selectors/coaches will be able to indicate which qualities they are looking for when selecting their teams. This will give you a picture of the “ideal” debater that they are looking for and allow you to alter your training regimen to attain these qualities.

Training

Every debater is different and it is difficult to prescribe a specific training regimen that will work well for all debaters. However, these following steps may help in providing new challenges for debaters and getting their debating skills to the next level.

Learning from WSDC speakers: Learn Analysing traits of good debaters and see how you can develop similar traits. This does not mean that you try to mimic these debaters blindly, which could lead to an unnatural style of debate. Rather, you can look out for certain traits, both

in the argumentation used and the style of delivery, which could be used as models for your own debate development. One option is to look at the videos of WSDC matches (you can find a selection at the Videos section of Debateable.org) and pick up the traits of these debaters.

Variety in training: Sometimes, debaters often find themselves in a rut due to a lack of variety in their training regimens. They often practise against the same set of opponents and generally use the same set of motions. Thus, changing this up would allow the debaters to take on new challenges and expand the envelope with regards to their debating skills. For instance, you can try to arrange for friendly matches with teams you rarely meet. You can also use motions which are not likely to be used in actual tournaments but are challenging nonetheless.

Taking on stronger opponents: In order to bring your debating skills to the next level, you may also wish to debate stronger opponents for practice or for competition. This could include debating against older and more experienced debaters and taking part in competitions (if possible) one tier above your standard level. For instance, as a high school student, you can take part in university level tournaments. You can even “debate” the videos of the WSDC teams, by rebutting the substantive material they bring up.

Changing the intensity of training: If you are preparing for a particular trial or tournament, you may wish to plan your training schedule so that the intensity of training increases as these events approach. By the time these events come around, you should be getting some debate and delivery practice every day and be in peak form. At the same time, you may also have to guard against fatigue and becoming burnt out mentally by the training regimen.

Creating differentiation: When it comes to a trial or competition, you may find that the debaters are all good and competent. As such, the trick to being successful may be to find an area where you can differentiate yourself from the rest. This will allow you to stand out from the crowd and improve your chances of being noticed. There are two approaches to consider:

You can differentiate yourself by becoming a subject matter expert, by becoming very knowledgeable on certain topics. This will in turn make it clear to everyone that you will be a very difficult opponent to face on these topics. You can also work on improving your knowledge in general so that you will assist greatly in expanding the example-base for the team.

You can also differentiate yourself by developing a debating style that is different from the other speakers. Note that you should not try to adopt a style that is unnatural and fake. Rather, it should be about developing the aspects of your delivery and style that would allow for greater differentiations. For instance, if most of the speakers tend to speak quickly and loudly, you may try delivering the speech in a more measured and controlled tone. If the speakers are generally slow in delivery, you may wish to add some energy and pace to the delivery.

Good luck and all the best for future trials and competitions!

Question 2: Starting Debate Clubs

Dear Sam. I wish to find out how I may start up debate activities here in Zambia. Debate is currently developing with keen participants from Primary schools, Basic Schools, High Schools, Universities and the community at large. However, we do not have a fixed debate format yet. - Shuko from Zambia

Dear Shuko,

Thank you for sending this question in! I am very glad to hear from Debate enthusiasts who are working hard to establish and develop debating programmes! I am also heartened to hear that a large cross section of society in Zambia are interested in Debate!

Here are a few steps that you can take in developing debate activities in your town and in Zambia.

Train the Trainers

The first steps to take would be to make sure that you and other volunteers acquire the skills to teach debate. The following measures will help:

Focus on one debate format

You need to start by deciding on the main debate format that you wish to use during training and competitions. This will allow you to do focused research on one particular type of debate format instead of trying to master too many different styles. You may always try out other debate formats once the Debaters become more proficient in their first debate format.

I recommend that you start with the World Schools Debating Championships (WSDC) format. It is an easy format to learn and allows for a high degree of interaction and clash. It is also a format which puts emphasis on engaging the audience through sound argumentation, good strategy and strong delivery. Using this style will also provide a platform for students in Zambia to eventually take part in regional and international debating tournaments at the schools level. It will also provide a solid foundation for students who wish to continue debating in university.

Acquire debate resources

Next, you will need to acquire the materials on the debate format. These materials will include

The rules of the format (<http://www.schoolsdebate.com/guides.asp>)

Training tools and guides (<http://debateable.org>)

Resource and information (<http://idebate.org>)

I encourage you to view videos of debate matches so that you can get an idea of what the debate looks like and what you are expected to do in WSDC debates. You can refer to this page for some debate videos. (<http://debateable.org/media-gallery>)

Training of coaches

You may also wish to contact organisations that can come to Zambia train local coaches. These organisations could include the English Speaking Union (<http://www.esu.org/>) or the British Council (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/new/>). You may also consider contacting the International Debate Education Association (<http://www.idebate.org/>).

Train the Debaters

Form a debate club

A useful step to take is to form a debate club or association, which will serve as the focal point for debate education in your town or region. This will provide a proper structure for debate instruction and also help in creating a lively debate community in your locality.

Work with local schools/ universities

Another useful step is to approach the schools and universities in the region and work with the teachers and faculty in creating debate programmes within the schools. These debate activities can include:

- i. Debating in classes as part of curriculum (English, History, Civics, etc)
- ii. Debating as an extra-curricular activity in schools
- iii. Intra-class and Inter-class debate competitions

Organise tournaments

You may also wish to organise tournaments in your locality, particularly for the schools. Debating competitively is one of the best ways to improve and learn.

Bring trainers to Zambia

To further improve and refine the skills of the debaters, you may wish to bring in external trainers again, but this time, to work directly with the debaters to improve their debating ability.

Funding

Debate at a basic level does not require many resources except for the Debaters, the judges and suitable venues. However, for organising training workshops or tournaments, it may be necessary to seek funding for these projects, either in the form of grants from the government and also possibly from the international community or NGOs or sponsorship from major companies.

Debating Internationally

Bring Debaters overseas

If you feel that the Debaters in Zambia have attained sufficient debating experience, you may consider bringing selected Debaters to other countries in Africa or the rest of the world on debate tours. This will provide valuable learning experiences for the Debaters without the added pressure of competitive debate. They may also be sent to take part in regional debating competitions, such as the African Schools Debating Championships (<http://www.asdc.co.za/>).

Register and take part at WSDC

Eventually, Zambia may wish to become a member of the WSDC Council so as to allow a Zambian team to be entered for the World School Debating Championships. The details for this process may be found here (<http://www.schoolsdebate.com/council.asp>). I hope that Zambia will be able to join the likes of South Africa, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Botswana in attending the WSDC.

Question 1: Preparing for Trials

I have been selected to take part in a trial for a school/national debate team. How should I prepare?



Answer: Congratulations! Your selection is a reflection of the potential you have as a Debater and I wish you the best of luck for the trials. Let's see what steps could be taken to help you in the trials. I have tried to make the tips as general as possible so that they may apply to any type of trial you may face.

Learn the Format: Trials will always be different based on the coaches running them and the circumstances surrounding them. However, you can get an edge by finding out what the components of the trial will be. If these components are not announced ahead of time, you can try to learn what activities the coaches usually prefer to use in trials. Try to be prepared for them, even as you keep in mind that these components may be changed for your own trial.

No Even Playing Field: Understand that the selecting coaches will have done their due diligence and will know which candidates will have the strongest potential in the trials. If you feel that you have not been noticed by the coaches to date but that you have the ability to do just as well, you will have to fight much harder for a spot on the team. Don't be surprised, therefore, if the coaches require different candidates to do different things based on what their expectations are.

Do Not Get Complacent: By the same token, if you feel that you have already been identified as a strong candidate for a spot on the team, do not get complacent and put in a half-hearted effort. Coaches are looking for attitude as much as aptitude and will not be keen on taking debaters who do not try hard and fight for their spots. Many speakers with glorious reputations have floundered at trials precisely because of their lack of effort.

Keep sharp: Keep practising your speaking and delivery. Trials often take place after a debate season has ended and many debaters will no longer be in competition shape. Thus, it is critical to keep delivering speeches and having debates as much as possible in preparation for the trials. Remember that your very first speech at the trial will need to count. So warm up and practice speaking just before the trial commences as well.

Knowledge: There may be a component on general knowledge and current affairs. Read up before you go for the trial! The trial may also test you on the rules of debate, so you may need to look up and digest the rules and regulations of the debate format.

Teamwork: Keep in mind that the coaches are not necessarily looking for the best debaters on the circuit. Rather, they will be looking for the best team that could be formed from the debaters on the circuit. Thus, a debater who proves incapable of working with other debaters and indeed, seeks to sabotage the other debaters, will not stand a good chance of making the team!

Expect the Unexpected: Given that these are trials and not regulation debates, you have to learn to expect the unexpected. The coaches may ask that debaters tackle very hard motions, suddenly shorten the time allocated for speeches (sometimes in the middle of the speeches!), or flip sides at the last minute. These activities test how well you react to unforeseen changes and how you cope with them. So stay calm and stay focused!

Good Luck!