

ADAPTABLE

By Josh Holmes

Definition:

"Someone who can quickly and effectively adjust their behaviour, ideas, and skills to new situations, changing environments, or unexpected challenges."

Introduction: The Need to Adapt in Modern Rugby

Rugby is a sport in constant evolution. With regular rule changes, tactical innovations, and increasing physical and mental demands on players, the modern game challenges everyone involved to adapt and grow. For coaches, staying ahead of the curve is no longer optional—it's essential. Today's players want to be challenged, not just physically, but mentally. They seek environments that push them, support their development, and allow them to thrive.

To meet these demands, coaches must commit to evolving themselves—not just their playbooks. However, the best and most consistent coaches in the world manage to do this while holding firm to a few non-negotiable core values. These values provide stability and direction amid constant change. They form the backbone of high-performing programs and help maintain alignment and purpose, no matter how the game evolves.

Core Values the Best Coaches Live and Breathe By:

- **Culture & Environment:** Building a strong, inclusive culture is essential—not just for player growth, but for everyone involved in the program. Success is rooted in surrounding yourself with people who believe in the vision and contribute to a positive, high-performance environment.
- **Trust:** Great coaches empower those around them. They allow assistant coaches and staff the freedom to contribute ideas, be creative, and take ownership. Trust builds confidence and promotes innovation.
- **Learning:** A growth mindset is critical. Whether it's through mentors, former coaches, or trusted advisors, the best coaches actively seek feedback, stay open to new ideas, and continually refine their approach.
- **Balance:** Success on the field is connected to well-being off it. Maintaining balance between rugby and life—through time with family, friends, and other passions—helps sustain long-term performance and mental health.

In this report, I examine two world-renowned coaches and explore the key traits and practices they follow. These examples highlight effective strategies for building high-performing, adaptable environments. Although their methods differ, both have developed systems that empower players to be creative, embrace change, and succeed at the highest level.

Case Study 1: Rassie Erasmus – Innovation Through Adaptability

Rassie Erasmus is a coach renowned for his ability to adapt through tactical innovation, mental preparation, and cultural awareness. His coaching is rooted in building a resilient and strategically flexible team culture.

Tactical Adaptation & Innovation

- **The “Bomb Squad”**
Erasmus pioneered the "Bomb Squad" strategy—bringing seven fresh forwards off the bench in the second half to maintain or regain physical dominance. Controversial, yet highly effective, it challenged traditional substitution norms.
- **Rule Interpretation**
Known for exploiting the rulebook to his advantage, he introduced creative tactics such as open-play lineouts and scrums from kick-offs, forcing referees and opponents to think differently.
- **Data & Simulation**
Erasmus built tools like “Outfox” to simulate in-game situations, helping players internalize complex plays and decision-making before stepping on the field.

Mentality & Cultural Adaptation

- **Winning Mindset**
He transformed the Springboks' mindset from one of struggle to one of belief—fostering a mentality of resilience and grit in high-pressure moments.
- **Inclusive Culture**
Erasmus cultivated a team culture that reflects South Africa's diversity, ensuring every player—regardless of background—felt seen, heard, and valued.
- **Psychological Coaching**
He implemented mental training techniques to instil an “us against the world” mentality, equipping players to thrive under pressure.

Adaptive Leadership

- **Strategic Flexibility**
Erasmus showed adaptability by changing game plans between World Cups, tailoring strategies to each opposition and evolving with the sport.
- **Learning from Setbacks**
Rather than hiding from controversy (e.g., the referee video saga), he used it as a growth opportunity for both himself and the team.
- **Referee Engagement**
He shifted from combative communication to building constructive relationships with referees, using clear and respectful dialogue.

Case Study 2: Ivan Cleary & the Penrith Panthers – Sustained Adaptability

Ivan Cleary has led the Penrith Panthers to an era of dominance in the NRL. With five consecutive Grand Final appearances and four titles, Cleary has shown remarkable adaptability despite constant player turnover and external pressure.

Integrating New Talent

- **Development Pathways**
The Panthers have a strong developmental system that allows young talent like Blaize Talagi to be integrated into first-grade seamlessly when opportunities arise.
- **Structural Adaptation**
The inclusion of new players often requires adjustments to the team's structure and play style, keeping the squad unpredictable and dynamic.

Adapting to Departures & External Threats

- **Roster Management**
Penrith consistently adjusts to key player losses by refreshing the squad while maintaining elite performance.
- **Staying Ahead of Copycats**
As other teams try to emulate Penrith's systems, the Panthers continue to evolve in recruitment, game style, and tactical preparation—forcing rivals to play catch-up.

Performance & Culture

- **Data-Driven Performance**
Use of GPS and wellness tracking allows tailored training plans and ensures players peak at the right time.
- **Leadership Development**
Cleary fosters an environment that empowers natural leaders to emerge and take on responsibility within the group.
- **Resilience & Grit**
The team regularly shows the mental toughness to bounce back from adversity, a trait that's vital during long, intense NRL seasons.

Personal Reflection: Coaching in the Shute Shield

As a young coach, I've learned firsthand how vital adaptability is—especially in a competition like the **Shute Shield**, which spans 18 rounds, three trial matches, and potentially finals from March to late August.

One of the biggest challenges is ensuring every player feels valued, regardless of grade. It's critical to build an environment that supports equal opportunity and also allows representative players to return and re-integrate into the system after external commitments.

The Three Phases of a Shute Shield Season

1. **Part 1: Trials to Round 6** – Teams are building combinations and identity. Opponents observe, analyse trends, and start preparing counters.
2. **Part 2: Rounds 7–14** – The “middle grind.” This phase is about consistency, smart rotation, player management, and ensuring the squad is both fresh and motivated.
3. **Part 3: Rounds 15–Finals** – The final push. This is where coaching adaptability is most critical. Teams know your game style and patterns. Coaches must:
 - Adjust game plans
 - Identify team and individual weaknesses
 - Grow new strengths
 - Introduce fresh tactical pictures each week to stay unpredictable

You can't rely on what worked in Phases 1 and 2—this is where innovation and strategic flexibility make the difference.

The Coach's Role in a High-Performance Environment

To stay ahead, coaches must:

- Foster a **strong internal culture**
- Ensure alignment between all staff
- Create a space where coaches feel empowered to share ideas
- Maintain core structures and values so that tactical tweaks don't destabilize the team

Adaptability isn't just about changing tactics—it's about evolving as a leader, listening, learning, and creating a system that thrives in uncertainty.

Conclusion

Whether it's Erasmus winning back-to-back Rugby World Cups or Cleary creating a dynasty at Penrith, the best coaches share one thing: a deep belief in **leadership, culture, and adaptability**.

Their environments are built on trust, resilience, inclusivity, and continuous improvement. As a developing coach, learning from their journeys reinforces that **adaptability isn't a luxury—it's a necessity** in modern high-performance sport.