

The changing nature of the modern-day rugby union head coach and its considerations

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Level 4 Performance Coach Written Assignment

Abstract

For context and background to this paper and topic I have included some statistical information about my journey as a coach.

Of my last 30 appointments as a coach within a team environment, 33% have been as an assistant coach vs 67% as a head coach. The teams have been in both the two predominant formats of fifteen and seven a side rugby both locally in Australia for the majority and abroad in Europe in the earlier years.

The type of athletes inside of these teams has ranged from Senior mens, Colts, Youth and high school boys, Senior women in both community rugby and performance rugby environments.

Since 2019, 91% of roles I have held in the team environment have been as a head coach.

I also have had regular discussions with coaches who have or are still coaching at professional/performance and community level. Majority of these conversations were with coaches who at that time or still held head coach roles within their respective team environments.

Definition of terms:

Community rugby – Club, association or school rugby

Performance rugby – Representative rugby at state level or above

Introduction

The role of the modern-day head coach requires a vast skill set to cater to the different complexities that come within leading a team environment.

With less and less time being spent on the grass actually coaching and more time spent off field in session planning, managing team support staff, overseeing player performance plans including feedback, facilitating the team environment and the group dynamics and organizational administration tasks. The requirement of these skill sets are an area all prospective head coaches should spend time in seeking development.

The modern-day head coach has been likened to that of a corporate CEO or a GM of a medium sized business, who is pulling and pushing on certain levers at the pointy end to ensure the ship is heading in the right direction. This candidate is also likened to a visionary who can inspire a group of people to obtain a common goal to the benefit of the wider organisation. The changing nature away from the grass is also evident with the high amount of head coaches looking for continued development in areas such as leadership, culture and strategy that isn't necessarily linked to the technical aspects of rugby union. With access to various sources of inspiration and ideas these coaches are looking for key learnings from styles and approaches from the best in the business in other sports, industries and corporate leaders. Traditionally we would have seen head coaches leading 90% in front and 10% behind the group, with now the norm tending to be the other way

around of 10% in front and 90% from behind relying on the key leaders including staff to influence the environment that the head coach has aimed to shape.

Whether it's leading a program (where multiple teams might feed into the 1st team) or solely having responsibility for a single team, either way both can bring with it high scrutiny and criticism and can seem like a lonely position to be in. This paper aims to provide considerations around planning and thought processes to suit the modern-day head coach.

Organisation

When considering working with an organisation whether it is at a community or performance level you need to know what it is that you are about to walk into.

Like any job where you will ultimately need to give up time and energy you should look to do your due diligence on the organisation and the team within it. Some strategies could be having discussions with current and former staff including coaches to see where the consistencies lie and whether you think it would be a suitable cultural fit with the way you operate and what you believe in.

Consider whether the program you are walking into is a renovate (continue on with the identity and vision from the previous coach/es and make slight adjustments and improvements whether it be to processes or personnel) or a rebuild (drastic change needs to be made in processes and

personnel and a new vision needs to be established to go forward. More than likely the organisation will look for leaders who might be able to facilitate the demolish and start again approach). Understand your style and where you are at with your coaching journey and what challenge suits your needs.

Ask yourself, how is the organisation going to support you and who will you most likely have the most discussion and interactions with from the organisation? Whether it is the director of rugby, a high-performance manager, or the board directly and understanding clearly what level of autonomy you have in decision making for the program. Ultimately this is a key area for ongoing understanding and longevity, this person in the organisation needs to support and challenge you to get the best out of you so that the program can benefit. Far too often this isn't the case, and it does not lead to continuity or longevity of the head coach.

Your level of give and take needs to be clear inside of your thoughts from the organisation. Is it the opportunity that excites you? Is it the finance? Is it the environment or type of athlete/program that you are wanting to influence? From the discussions I have had it usually is a combination of all three, ultimately you need to trust your gut and instinct when it comes to saying yes to being the spear head of the program for an organisation and understanding the people within that organisation is an important consideration you need to make.

Staff

Depending on the level you are coaching at, the number of staff involved can vary. This can range from the single digit to the double digit in personnel that you will be expected to lead and range from the coaching team of assistant and technical coaches including the athletic performance staff, Analysts, Medical, Team managers, Media manager, Interns etc. Just like knowing your players learning styles you also need to consider your staff and how they learn and best communicate. This is huge chunk of the role where time will be invested as each can assist with contributing and getting the best out of peak player performance and peak team performance. Being clear on the roles and responsibilities is one thing but the ability to manage the performance of the staff will also be a key part to you getting the best out of your environment.

You wouldn't expect to not be able to select your players, likewise you need to work with the organisation and have input and decision making on what staff are going to come into the program and who the organisation might need to change dependent on the earlier house analogy.

Specifically looking at the assistant coach and the head coach relationship, I recently surveyed current head coaches from both the community and performance levels of the game and asked a question to them. Over your last 5 appointments what percentage of those assistant coaches you had, would you ask to join you in the future or at your next coaching appointment? The continuity rate was just under 50%. It is a two-way relationship, but this highlights that like any job, trust is key to continuity and the ability to meet expected competence in the role isn't being fulfilled. Rather than appoint someone to fill your gaps as is the traditional approach consider someone who

brings strengths to the group or offers a diverse style to you and the other coaches, but more importantly someone who has a growth mindset and is willing to be broad in their thought process and understands their role expectations in working towards filling that as part of the team. i.e., there is more than one way to skin a cat.

Decisions should be made on trust and relationship integrity and how that person will benefit the playing group and the environment. Ultimately you as the head coach need to consider are they the right fit for where you are heading and if a change needs to be made, it should be done as early as possible. There is no use having inefficient processes and communication streams as this will not lead to an environment that excels.

With the increased demands off field for the head coach, people are the key to success. Having the right people on the right seat on the ship can allow possibility for growth and alignment. The staff are there as they bring value to the group in their own areas and ultimately want to contribute to the environment. Getting the best out of them is just as important as getting the best out of the playing group, however being clear on the structure of who the “suggesters” are and who the “decision makers” are can help inefficiencies that can arise along the journey.

The environment

Modern day coaches have learned to be more flexible regarding issues that do not undermine their authority, as the type of player coming through in the environment and their style of learning has changed. The autocratic style of leadership is seen less and less with modern day coaches tending to be more receptive to change as long as it does not compromise their basic principles and values. An approach to consider is that the coach group set the standards and parameters for the environment and the players are responsible for decision making in the environment in relation to what is expected through their own actions.

The head coach needs to have a clear understanding of what is occurring within the environment, a high level of empathy and ability to display emotional intelligence, the ability to read a room and empower leaders within a playing group to create more leaders that want to contribute. An approach might be to consider how you will understand your playing group and what motivates them as people before getting heavy with the outcomes around technical and tactical detail. Consider how you might demonstrate care or allow for regular opportunities for people to demonstrate care in the environment. If there is shared experiences and high levels of care for each other that organically forms, then the people will be much more invested in the purpose of the environment they are in.

Measuring success and planning

Modern day head coaches need to understand the shape of the game that the players are playing. With the consistent evolving laws that effect tactics and the type of athletes with different skill sets coming within the environment, you need to have a good understanding of tactical periodization and how that will affect your “what” and “how” as part of your planning.

When planning focus on the big rocks to success for the playing group and your competitive advantage over the opposition in your specific competition. To assist with alignment and reflection having a clear game model that relates to your team identity should be in place.

This is also key when it comes to selection of your players and providing feedback which is expected in detail with the modern-day athlete and delivered generally from the head coach. Assisting players understand the basic concept of the principles of play for the game will also help the perceived complex structures made simple. The coaches ability to take the group on a journey and “sell” them the “why” is a skill development that should not be underestimated and have thought, and time put into having factual data with the way it is delivered being the key to obtain a buy in from all.

Continued development and maintenance

Being at the pointy end of the vessel with squads of 40 plus including staff, as a head coach it can be very challenging maintaining the environment and tracking progress. Naturally there will be areas that you miss and hence why working with the right staff is so key to establishing an environment where you allow success to possibly breed. The key is the ability to self-reflect and be self-aware when things are going well and when things need to change.

Knowing which players need the carrot or stick metaphor is important. The approach of fear of failure and oral abuse are rare with the modern-day coach tending to use the positive reinforcement and encouragement as the preferred approach with the modern-day player. Regardless of what approach is taken, it needs to be backed up with an individual performance plan where the player can see how they are tracking along the season in terms of what areas they are doing well and what areas they can improve on and the actions required need to be clear. Being clear on what success looks like in relation to effort or skill allows for a progress vs a perfection approach.

Like the players the staff including the head coach should consider their own development plans and reflect on how they are tracking with their expected performance both from themselves but also the environment.

An approach for reflection can be referenced to the Performance triangle *Figure 1*. The process of analysing the *skill set*, *mindset* or *structure* and how they are relating to your performance environment is an important one to simply identify where tweaks might need to occur. Referring

back to having the right staff and key leaders relates a lot to where the performance triangle can break down for most.

Ultimately you might be admired for some of your methods and criticized for others. However, what most within the environment acknowledge, is that all head coaches have the last word even if it goes against the advice of the assistants. This is similar to the way most corporate leaders run their businesses so you need to understand the buck stops with you and the responsibility of development and maintenance is an area that should not be overlooked when it comes to performance and accountability as the head coach.

Conclusion

As the modern-day rugby union head coach, it may seem like a lonely journey but with good thought and consideration around processes you can get the best out of the environment and the people that operate within it. Yes, the world is changing, and you need to change with it. As highlighted with the varied skill sets required now to fulfill the role of head coach, however it is also important to remember why you wanted to coach in the first place. Like anything in life that you want to be good at, you need to have regular exposure to develop your knowledge, skills and experience, so if you are a coach then you need to practice coaching. Whether that is on grass or off field, it is important to find better ways and opportunities to overall coach and continue learning.

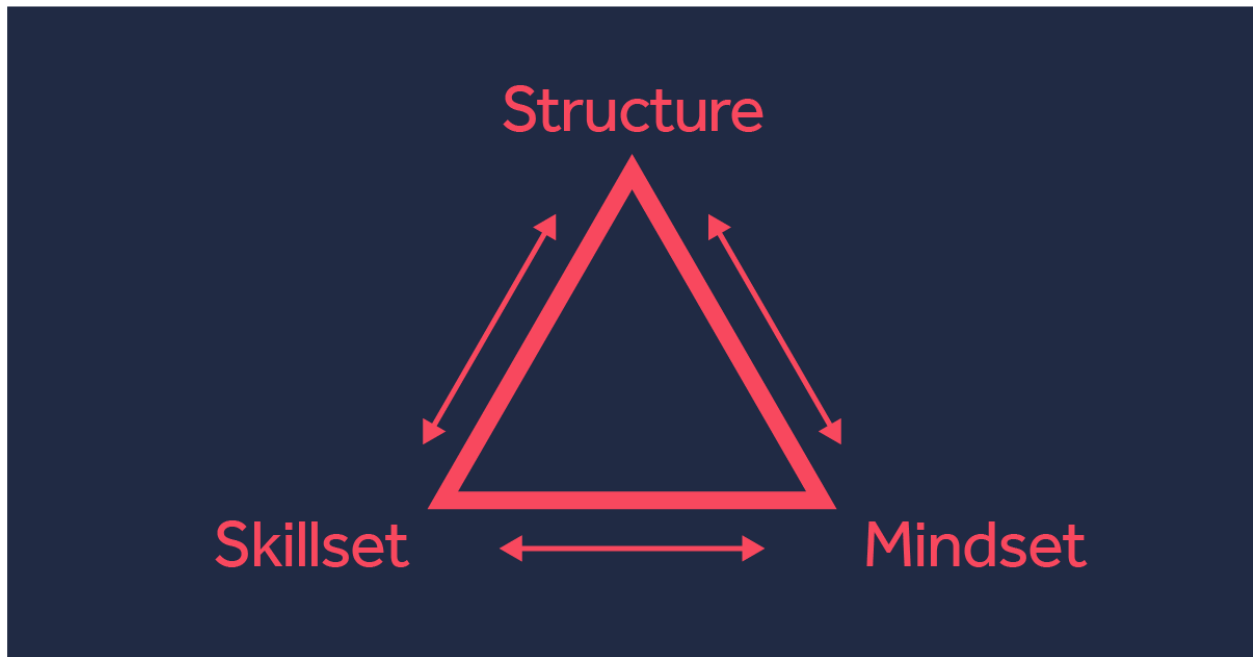


Figure 1. Performance triangle

Enoka, Gilbert “creating and maintaining a high-performance culture” Morgans Corporate Lunch,
10 May 2019. Brisbane