

Player/Coach Relationships

Level 3 – Task 13

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Introduction

The motivation for writing this paper has come from observing and sometimes being part of coaching teams where coaches do not value the relationships with their players. Do we need to continuously develop these relationships? Do we have better relationships with some as opposed to other? Do we fall into the single most dangerous trap of coach/player relationships – popularity & trying to be everybody's buddy... Quite often coaches will use the "buddy card" to try and achieve what they cannot through respect and ability – harsh statement? Possibly... It is sometimes true that a true friend will do anything for you...however, will that "player friend" accept being dropped or will he undermine you amongst the other players? Will the other players accept the "unusual" friendship?? Further in the paper I will single out this "trap".

It is important that we are aware of what our different roles are as coaches. It is important that we are aware of the different coaching styles, and what each stands for. How does that affect the way we treat our players; do some have to be treated differently? Are we aware of the different communication methods.

In order to put everything in perspective, it is important to look at the different aspects of relationships and every coach to assess where he/she fits in and how to address the challenges of maintaining good relationships. Roles, styles (both coaching and communication) & skills, all have a bearing on how we maintain & develop our relationships with our players.

These different aspects will be addressed in more detail below.

Coaching Roles

There are many and quite varied roles that a coach may find him/herself doing at different times

- Adviser – advising players on aspects of training, game plan, preparation, etc
- Assessor – assessing players performance in training and in games
- Counsellor - resolving emotional problems, whether it be personal or rugby/sport related – sharing can be both relieving and reassuring
- Demonstrator – demonstrate the skills required
- Friend – when working with players a certain personal relationship is built up where you not only provide coaching advice, but also become a friend, who they can discuss their problems or share successes with.
- Fountain of knowledge – this could be in a specialist area or have the ability to refer the player to someone that can assist
- Motivator – although we cannot motivate someone, we can certainly influence to motivate themselves
- Organiser & planner – preparation of team plans; as a team and maybe also for individuals – again it may be referred depending on the requirement i.e. strength & conditioning, skills, etc
- Role model – a person who serves as a model in a particular behavioural or social role for another person to emulate. The way you conduct yourself whilst in the presence of players provides an example of how they should behave – this is perhaps one of the most important roles of a coach. How do you behave next to field during games?

Coaching skills

As a coach you will initially need to develop the skills of: organising, safety, building rapport, providing instruction and explanation, demonstrating, observing, analysing, questioning and providing feedback.

Organising

In organising the training session you need to plan in advance how you will manage the players, equipment, area, etc.

Building Rapport

In building rapport with the players, use their names, smile and make eye contact, coach the player rather than the sport, show an interest in and respect for all players.

Instruction and explanation

In providing Instruction and Explanation you should think about and plan what you are going to say, gain the player's attention, keep it simple and to the point and check they understand by asking open questions.

Demonstration

In providing demonstration make sure you are in a position where the players can clearly see you, focus on only 1 or 2 key points, repeat the demonstration 2 or 3 times, ask if they have any questions and check they understand by asking open questions. There are times when it might be more appropriate to use someone else to provide the demonstration.

Observation and Analysis

In observing and analysing, break the action down into phases, focus on one phase at a time, observe the action several times from various angles, compare the action with your technical model and if appropriate determine what corrective action is required. Remember your ears can also be used to observe - e.g. listen to the comments amongst the players.

Feedback

How often do we plan to give feedback and then never get around to it? This is a very important skill that has to be implemented by all coaches. Players cannot improve if they're not aware of how they can improve and what they therefore need to work on. In providing feedback encourage the player to self analyse by asking appropriate open questions, provide specific and simple advice, limit the advice to 1 or 2 points, check they understand what they will do next and make the whole process a positive experience.

Coaching Styles

There are perhaps three coaching styles - autocratic (do as I say), democratic (involve the players in decision making) and laissez faire. The autocratic style could be broken into two types - telling and selling and the democratic style into sharing and allowing. There is little direction from a "Laissez fair" coaching style as this style allows the group to do what they want to. Coaches will use a variety of coaching styles depending on the coaching situation.

Autocratic - Telling

When using the Telling style, the coach:

- decides on what is to be done
- defines what to do and how to do it

Autocratic - Selling

When using the Selling style, the coach:

- decides on what is to be done
- explains what is required and the objectives
- ask the players questions to confirm understanding
- defines what to do and how to do it

Democratic - Sharing

When using the Sharing style, the coach:

- outlines the training requirements to the players
- invites ideas/suggestions from the players
- makes the decision based on the players' suggestions
- defines what to do and how to do it

Democratic - Allowing

- The coach outlines the training requirements to the players
- The coach defines the training conditions
- The players brainstorm to explore possible solutions
- The players make the decision
- The players define what to do and how to do it

Communication Skills

Communication is the art of successfully sharing meaningful information with people by means of an interchange of experience. Coaches wish to motivate the players they work with and to provide them with information that will allow them to train effectively, play according to the set game plan and improve performance. Communication from the coach to player will

initiate appropriate actions. This however, requires the player to receive the information from the coach but also to understand and accept it. A coach has achieved nothing if players' do not accept what they are being told.

Coaches need to ask themselves:

- Do I have the players' attention?
- Am I explaining myself in an easily understood manner?
- Have the players understood?
- Do the players believe what I am telling him?
- Do the players accept what I am saying?

Non-verbal messages

At first, it may appear that face-to-face communication consists of taking it in turns to speak. While the coach is speaking, the player is expected to listen and wait patiently until the coach finishes. On closer examination, it can be seen that people resort to a variety of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in order to maintain a smooth flow of communication. Such behaviour includes head-nods, smiles, frowns, bodily contact, eye movements, laughter, body posture, language and many other actions. The facial expressions of players provide feedback to the coach. Glazed or down turned eyes indicate boredom or disinterest, as does fidgeting. Fully raised eyebrows signal disbelief and half raised indicate puzzlement. Posture of the group provides a means by which their attitude to the coach may be judged and act as pointer to their mood. Control of a group demands that a coach should be sensitive to the signals being transmitted by the players. Their faces usually give a good indication of how they feel, and a good working knowledge of the meaning of non-verbal signals will prove invaluable to the coach.

Communication blocks

Difficulties in communicating with players may be due a number of issues including the following:

- The player's perception of something is different to yours
- The player may jump to a conclusion instead of working through the process of hearing, understanding and accepting
- The player may lack the knowledge needed to understand what you are trying to communicate
- The player may lack the motivation to listen to you or to convert the information given into action
- The coach may have difficulty in expressing what she/he wishes to say to the player
- Emotions may interfere in the communication process
- There may be a clash of personality between coach and player

These blocks to communication work both ways and coaches need to consider the process of communication carefully.

Effective Communication

Before communicating with a player, coaches should consider:

- WHY they want to communicate
- WHO they wish to communicate with
- WHERE and WHEN the message could best be delivered
- WHAT is it that they want to communicate
- HOW they are going to communicate the information

Effective communication contains the ‘six C’s’:

- Clear – ensure that the information is presented clearly
- Concise – be concise, do not lose the message by being longwinded
- Correct – be accurate, avoid giving misleading information
- Complete – give all the information and not just part of it
- Courteous – be polite and non-threatening, avoid conflict
- Constructive – be positive, avoid being critical and negative

Be Positive

When coaches provide information to the players that will allow them to take actions to effect change, it is important that they provide the information in a positive manner. Look for something positive to say first and then provide the information that will allow the athlete to effect a change of behaviour or action.

Coach/Friend Trap

Social relationships (socialising at times beyond the usual after training and/or after game drink/catch up) can interfere with the coach-player relationship. Coaches and players should not relate to one another as though they are in the same peer group, have similar interests, and share the same friends (Anshel, 1990) . Attempting to manage a social and coaching-player relationship simultaneously can negatively affect the existing relationship, or the friendship, or both.

There are several reasons to discourage the coach from becoming “the buddy” of player/s:

- The need to be accepted and liked may cause the coach to be less challenging and confrontive
- A coach’s own needs may interlock with those of his/her players to the point of lost objectivity
- Other players could resent the apparent favouritism inherent in the friendship
- Players may become uncomfortable with the coach trying to a friend and may also become confused about the coach’s role

Player’s expectations of the coach’s behaviour and attitude are different from those they have for teammates. While players *might want* teammates to demonstrate responsibility, integrity, honesty, and emotional stability, the coach is expected to demonstrate these characteristics to a greater degree and consistency, thus becoming a positive role model. No coach has to play the popularity game, if the coach is respected for his knowledge and coaching ability, no player will find it hard to 1) play in that team, and 2) accept what the coach says. Every coach must honestly assess the negative effect a social relationship might have on the coach-player relationship and in a broader context, team morale and cohesion. An immature coach might socialise with players to feel admired, to enjoy the power of the coaching role, or to combat loneliness and gain acceptance. Players sometimes socialise with coaches to try and improve

their chances of selection and/or playing time. However, when coach and player have their friendship needs met by their own separate peer groups with different interests and friends, the complexities and ethical improprieties of the relationship can be avoided.

Most coaches have noble intentions – a coach should be a teacher of the game... Whilst it is not the coach's role to be friends with players, it is a good idea to be likeable and show care and respect. It is a given fact that players will try harder for someone they like and respect. The "likeness" to come from coaching ability, knowledge and mutual respect!

The Blind Side

The Blind Side was a movie starring Sandra Bullock and portrays the life of Michael Oher in American Football

Sandra Bullock, plays Oher's adoptive mother Leigh Anne Tuohy. This true story shows how he overcame great odds to graduate from college and play in the NFL.

There is a striking scene when Bullock's character intervenes during football practice. Michael is being coached about his role on the team and his blocking technique. It is where Michael's coach, with the very best of intentions, is yelling at him, stepping inside his personal space, being highly directive and rather aggressive. The coach's message is not getting through and only causing confusion in Michael. Without being disrespectful to the coach, it appears his only strategy to deal with Michael not understanding him, is to say the exact same thing again, only louder.

Leigh Anne Tuohy (Bullock) intervenes. She understands football, she knows what Michael's role is on the team and most importantly, she knows Michael. She walks past the coach to Michael on the field. She explains to him how his role on the team is to protect the quarterback in the same way he protects his family. She creates the link that Michael's family on the field is his team. Essentially, she puts the message in a language and context Michael can understand. It's the turning point in the movie and the final exchange in this scene is between the coach and Leigh Anne Tuohy, when she says, **"Coach, you need to get to know your players".**

Conclusion

Our relationships with the players we coach are affected by the application of all of the above aspects. Improved communication skills, well thought through application of roles & coaching skills, will enable both the player and coach to gain much more from their relationship.

Alan Stein – CCS, says "everything in life comes down to relationships, everything. To be successful in any walk of life, from sport to business, you have to know how to build and maintain solid relationships."

Author Jeffrey Gitomer said, "Quality relationships lead to success, wealth and fulfillment. On some level, isn't that what we all want out of life?"

Coaches should (Crookes 1991):

- Develop their verbal and non-verbal communication skills
- Ensure that they provide positive feedback during coaching sessions
- Give all players equal attention
- Communicate appropriately to your the players' personality and possibly social style – what works with one does not necessarily work with another
- Ensure that they not only talk to players but also listen to them

In the end, we all hopefully coach because we enjoy it...the same goes for players, they play for enjoyment and fulfilment – if the coach/player relationship is sound, strong and built on good principles, coaching becomes that much easier and player performance that much better.

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