

Connection before performance

Building a
sustainable club culture

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Introduction:

The aim of the following paper is to look at what goes into making a culture of Care, Connection and Belonging. To gain sufficient success over an extended period; one needs to adopt the belief of connection over performance.

Understanding the person, then learn to coach the player. Once you have that in place it sets up the foundations to make them become a professional. You need to care enough to connect first. In doing so this will create a physiologically safe environment. Culture is a bit of a buzz word as of late, and many people have different views on what a successful culture is. Just because individuals can work with each other doesn't mean that makes a good or thriving culture. Below are some factors that are worth considering putting into place when developing a culture of high performance

1. People matter:

There is an ancient Māori proverb that goes, He tāngata, He tāngata, He tāngata, which translates to it's all about the people, the people, the people. As a rugby coach we are in the people business. We coach people to play rugby. To get them to reach their optimal performance we need to understand who they are as people before coaching them. As the saying goes, *Players don't care how much you know until they know how much you care*. This means to prioritize people feeling valued and supported by their coach or boss over the coach's sharing their knowledge and guidance on performance. Building trust is built through genuine care and by showing genuine interest in players as individuals, outside of their status as players or their position in a team.

Gen-Z players value authenticity and prioritise genuine connections and are quick to pick up on any inauthentic, fake behaviours or pretence of some coaches. To take time getting to know and understanding your players, and staff/management, to gain a deeper view and understanding about them as an individual is a coach's first and foremost objective to build a foundation for successful culture. Focus on communication and connection to create bonds and relationships - this may happen over time with some and more quickly with others – but it is key to help establish authentic trust between player and coach.

For this to happen successfully, you as the coach will need to lead this with intent in your introduction to the playing group. To show vulnerability and openness about yourself first. Give the group a clear understanding on who you

are as a person, where you have come from, what led you here, how that influences how you coach. Openly discuss your successes and your shortcomings, share the areas that you are working on to improve your own development. This goes a long way in building a psychologically safe environment where a coach is a more human figure, rather than an authoritarian/dictator. If players or employees see the leader or coach being vulnerable and sharing personal details in a genuine way, they will emotionally connect a lot faster. Consider the various ways in which you can share your personal journey and experiences with the group. Storytelling through presentation using pictures and videos may be more relatable and paint a clearer, visual of who you are. Regardless, it's pivotal to get this done at the beginning of every year from day 1.

Below are some of the questions a coach can ask players/staff to create a deeper understanding which will lead to connection then trust:

- Tell us where you from
- Tell us about your family
- What's your personal driver (Your WHY)
- How do you like to be coached? what's your preferred communication style
- What's something that a previous coach you've has done that you enjoyed and something that a previous coach you've had you haven't enjoyed?
- How do you learn best?
- How do you like to receive feedback
- What do you need from to help you achieve what you want
- When I coach you, how do you want to feel?

2. Building trust

Trust can be viewed to some as action over words. Being consistent with what you do and how you show up every day. As a coach this can be aided by having clear alignment with your coaching group and management. If the players can see and feel that the coaching group is aligned this will rub off on them in a positive way. Players want coaches to be consistent with their behaviours, moods and energy despite the result of a game. Win or lose. The detail around on-going improvement at an individual level will land better for players when the trust is high, and communication from the coaching/management group is consistent – especially through the more challenging parts of a season.

This isn't always easy for coaches but with honest self-reflection, coupled with the ability to communicate your vulnerabilities, it is achievable.

Make your standards and expectation on the group/s clear from day 1 – allow no space for interpretation to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding. When outlining behaviours or training standards it's important to define it, and even make it visible, print outs, the opening slide of every presentation, your mantra or even part of the team song. What matters is that players know and are reminded of the expectations and requirements for being a trusted member of the group.

Then follow through and enforce. Hold players and staff accountable to it – and give them the permission to hold you/others accountable too. See it, notice any poor/inappropriate behaviours in the moment and raise it immediately. When positively demonstrated, praise it, by highlighting, reinforcing and celebrating the good – those that are setting the best example. This should be a critical part of a coach's assessment for one-on-one conversations around player selection, player/staff feedback and performance reviews.

3. The feeling of belonging

Step one is the 'connection to club' piece and how you get back to the past and where you've come from as a team - your history, your origin story and who you represent. Respect and honour those that contributed to the team before you. From there it's about creating a vision of where the group can go. You need to start with the end in mind, then work back.

The focus on belonging is about creating an environment where team members feel safe to express themselves authentically, without the fear of judgement or rejection. The environment will drive the values.

Below are some of the questions a coach can ask players/staff to understand what belonging looks and feels like to them:

- How do you want to feel every day when you walk through the doors at work?
- How do you want visitors to feel when they enter the building or clubhouse?
- How do you want others to feel during personal interaction with players/staff?

Belonging isn't about fitting in, it's about identifying who you are as an individual and understanding that whatever your cultural background might be, there is a place for you within this club or environment. Then it's for the coach to show just how, by being themselves, and themselves only can have a huge benefit to the team. This is incredibly important to do as early as possible. If you are in a team that is multi-cultural, show the and explain to the players how this is a point of difference that can unite individuals. Rugby is a uniquely global game that has the power to connect and bind us together - forming bonds that are ever-lasting.

Facilitation ideas within the team environment:

Create and encourage face-to-face interactions regularly for your players and management to get to know each other away from the training field. Ways of which this can be done are actively scheduling it the diary or training schedule:

- Coffee groups before training, maybe a BBQ for the entire club once a week.
- Other ideas to show respect if you have players from different cultural backgrounds could be a cultural day where they present to the group about their heritage.
- Food and music go a long way in connecting people together. A pre – season connection camp or gathering is a powerful way to get the group together away from the training field.
- Getting them to connect through various activities that aren't rugby related helps build and shape a deep level of connection through fun and enjoyment.

Players and staff need to feel and be assured that whatever their cultural beliefs maybe, that they belong in the environment, and by them being there and being true to who they are as a person will strengthen the unity of the group.

4. A shared vision

After connecting on a deeper level, you can move on to creating a shared vision/purpose. Creating the vision of where the group will go, how they're going to get there together. A co-created vision that everyone buys into, because everyone has contributed. By everyone contributing they are more likely to feel

connected to it and have a deep care for achieving the vision – this will naturally impact their desire to drive standards and demonstrate the type of work ethic that is needed to make it come to life. It needs to be bone deep. Something that is bigger than the team or individual.

For the vision to flourish, accountability in everyone's daily behaviours and actions are critical. A 'High-Care High-Challenge' method goes a long way to holding yourself and those around you accountable for their choices.

'The standards you walk past are the standards you accept' is a common saying that emphasises the importance of everyone being responsible for living the values and bringing the shared vision to life – when it's applied to the big things or even the smaller things.

SUMMARY

There is no quick and easy way to build a successful culture – but if it starts with connection it will end with performances that you will be proud of.

Success requires applied and intentional work every day - being consistent with your daily interactions and behaviours. People are the root of any programme, by connecting with them, getting to know and understand them, their behaviours and their needs, creates trust and a psychologically safe environment where your people are free to be themselves. Making sure that you always refer to the values you want to live up to as a team will create unmissable alignment and foster individual growth.

On field performance starts with connection. It starts with the human-to-human aspect. It doesn't start with the X's and O's, the technical or tactical development. It starts with connecting to your teammates as humans and forging deep trusting relationships which help you endure tough times and create lasting memories together. Through connection comes care. Through care comes belonging, through belonging comes belief which ultimately builds the foundation for you to shape something special as a team. Success isn't just about winning games, it's about creating an environment where excellence and the mindset of constant improvement every day is driven from within your culture.