

Taking Control of Your Own Development as a Rugby Coach

By

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Summary:

Coaching the modern game is multifaceted and challenging (to put it mildly). The demands on coaches are increasing. Not only are you expected to have a good technical and tactical understanding, but you must also be an excellent communicator, have strong organisational skills, be able to build and maintain strong relationships with a variety of personality types, be a teacher, be a councillor, have excellent negotiation skills, you are expected to build leaders, create and maintain a winning culture, deal with media, keep up with trends in the modern game then on top of that you must deal with criticism all while taking care of yourself and giving your loved ones and family the attention they deserve.

And I am sure I am missing things.

How does anyone manage to do this successfully?

Is it an ability you are born with?

Or is it something you can learn?

Certainly no one starts with all these skillsets.

Whilst I believe that people start coaching with a certain inherit ability whether something you are born with or from experience as an athlete (or coaches you have worked with), I strongly believe that you can learn the skills required to coach at an elite level if you are willing to take control of your own development.

Formal Coach education is a valuable foundation for any coach, but if you have ambitions on progressing in your knowledge and 'climb the coaching ranks' then it is clear you must take control of your own development and look further afield to more informal coach education.

Taking Control of Your Own Development as a Rugby Coach explores the importance of self-guided and often informal means of learning for rugby coaches.

Key points discussed in the paper include:

1. Self-assessment: Effective self-guided learning starts with deep self-assessment to identify your strengths and weaknesses. Start with addressing questions such as: What is your existing coaching philosophy? How's your technical and tactical knowledge? How are your teaching and leadership skills?
2. Goal setting: This follows from self-assessment. It's important to have the self-awareness to know where you want to go in your career, being a specialist coach is a very different skill set from being a head coach and whilst certainly helpful to have an understanding, a scrum coach probably doesn't need to learn the tactical kicking game. Knowing where you are and knowing where you want to go helps sets the path and clarifies for you the skills you need to

learn. Once you know where you want to go you can plan how to get there. This includes setting clear, measurable, and achievable learning goals. This is essential for any coach looking to take control of their development. Whether it's improving tactical knowledge, enhancing communication skills, or embracing innovative training or teaching techniques, setting goals helps focus and guide the learning process. It also gives you a guide to refer back to.

3. Resources and tools: The paper discusses the importance of using a wide range of resources and tools. This includes attending coaching seminars, seeking mentorship from experienced coaches, reading relevant literature, listening to specific podcasts and using technology for video analysis.
4. Reflective practice: Reflective practice is one of the best tools coaches can use on their learning journey. Having an introspective practice can help coaches gain valuable insights, refine their approaches and continuously evolve. This section also discusses learning from “failure”.
5. Collaborative learning: Collaboration with fellow coaches, players, and support staff can provide valuable insights and alternative perspectives. Sharing knowledge and experiences can enhance a coach's learning journey.
6. Adaptability: Rugby coaching is not one-size-fits-all, and the paper discusses the importance of adaptability. Coaches must be willing to modify their approach and strategies to suit the unique needs of their team, the needs and drives of the individual players and the changing demands of the sport. You cannot treat every person and situation in the same way.

In summary, if you wish to make it to the top of your craft and embrace the challenge of remaining there, the modern coach must embrace a growth mindset and a lifelong pursuit of learning and self-improvement.

1. Self-Assessment

Knowing where you want to go is one thing and important, which I discuss in the next section. But you also need to know where you are starting from to work out your path of how to get there.

Effective self-guided learning for rugby coaches begins with a deep & detailed self-assessment. This process is critical and integrated with the other components for coaches who wish to keep learning new skillsets, improve their existing skills, adapt to changing trends in the modern game and provide effective leadership to their teams. To facilitate this self-awareness coaches, need to reflect on several key aspects:

1.1 Coaching Philosophy:

Coaches should begin your self-assessment by examining your existing coaching philosophy. What are the core principles that guide your coaching style and decisions on and off the field? It's vital to understand the underlying values and beliefs that shape your approach to coaching. This philosophy serves as the base upon which your coaching journey is built. Write this down in a journal and reflect back on it regularly.

1.2 Technical and Tactical Knowledge:

Sometimes it can be tough to know what you don't know, but it's important to recognise and assess your existing technical and tactical knowledge, then you can attack areas that you are weak in and improve existing strengths. If you are a head coach being aware of your limitations can be useful when it comes to hiring assistants who are experts in the areas, you might be weaker at. It can highlight for you the compatriots or fellow coaches with the requisite knowledge to consult with.

1.3 Teaching and Leadership Skills:

Coaching extends beyond the game itself. It encompasses teaching and leadership. Assess your ability to convey knowledge and concepts effectively to your players. Are you a motivating and inspiring leader both on and off the field? Effective communication, motivation, and leadership are fundamental aspects of coaching that require continuous attention and development.

1.4 Self-Awareness:

In addition to assessing your coaching abilities, self-awareness is a key element of self-assessment. Recognise your career aspirations and objectives. Understand the specific role you aim to play in the coaching world. Being a specialist coach, such as a scrum coach or a kicking coach, necessitates a unique set of skills different from those of a head coach. By understanding your aspirations and goals, you can tailor your learning journey to acquire the skills that align with your desired coaching path.

1.5 Identifying the Gap:

Ultimately, self-assessment helps you identify the gap between where you currently stand and where you want to be in your coaching career. This gap analysis is essential in charting the path for acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge. It serves as the foundation for setting clear, measurable goals and creating a roadmap for self-directed learning.

2. Goal setting

This is integrated with the previous section, but working out where you want to go, and the skill sets, and experience required to get there drives the self-development process. Goal setting is your road map that you can refer back to to ensure your development is on track.

2.1 What are your aspirations:

The first part of goal setting is writing down your career aspirations. Then clearly defining the objectives you want to reach, ensuring that they are specific, measurable and attainable. Coaching the All Blacks requires a vastly different skill set from coaching a local club team. Do you want to be a specialist, a unit's coach, a skills coach or a head coach? Knowing where you want to go is the first step.

2.2 What are the required skillsets:

Once you have an idea where you are headed you can then start to assess the skillsets required to reach your aspirations. Every role requires different levels of knowledge and skillsets. From technical and tactical knowledge to strategic and interpersonal skills. This part helps you get specific about what you need for where you want to go.

2.3 One Step at a Time:

Breaking down the areas you plan on attacking into smaller manageable steps is a key part of the process. This will help you create a structure for your learning journey and put specific actions to your areas of interest.

2.4 Reviewing And Holding Yourself Accountable

Regularly review your progress against you set goals. Ensuring you stay on track and constantly assess where you are at versus where you want to go helps ensure that your learning and development stays on track and is specific to your aspirations.

2.5 Use External Feedback:

Players, other coaches & trusted mentors will be your best resource here, regularly seeking feedback and integrating the useful feedback (not all feedback is useful) into your goal setting process ensures your goals remain specific and evolve as you evolve in your coaching journey.

2.6 Write it down:

Write it down, leave it somewhere that you can easily and constantly refer back to. This will assist you with staying on track but will also give you a tangible guide to reflect on your progress, celebrate your achievements and identify areas you might have overlooked.

3. Resources and tools

One of the biggest benefits of modern-day coaching is the easily accessible and readily available access to resources and tools to assist you. Knowing where to look and who to listen to is half the battle, this section is intended as a guide to assist coaches in this regard.

3.1 Coaching Seminars:

In addition to the obvious benefits of learning modern coaching methodologies from experienced and successful coaches attending seminars can be a useful tool to deep dive into a specialty area of learning and can provide the opportunity to engage with fellow coaches, share experiences and partake in valuable peer learning and relationship building.

3.2 Seek Formal & Informal Mentors:

One of the best things about coaching is that experienced coaches are very open to passing on knowledge to young coaches who are eager to learn. Seeking formal mentors is a useful way to bounce ideas off someone with experience, seek constructive feedback and gain valuable insights from someone who has done what you would like to do. Equally important is informal mentors, it may not be feasible to have a formal mentor, but you can always look at people you admire and read about their careers, listen to podcasts they spoke on or watch their teams play. Whilst less direct insight, you can still gain valuable knowledge studying successful individuals.

3.3 Read A lot:

Reading relevant books, articles & blogs relating to coaching, leadership, and sports science is a fundamental aspect of self-guided learning. Whether its 1 or 2 small things you pick up, a different way of thinking about something or maybe getting deeper theoretical insight into a subject reading from a variety of sources is an extremely useful tool.

3.4 Podcasts:

Listening to specific podcasts dedicated to coaching, leadership, psychology or sports science is a readily available resource to assist your learning. And best of all its usually free. Get specific and listen to a wide variety of podcasts. You can literally gain access to World Class coaches, experts, athletes and practitioners at the push of a button.

3.5 Video:

Video is an extremely useful tool to review and analyse your own coaching sessions as well as reviewing training and games. Coaches need to be up to speed with modern analyses software such as Hudl and learn how to use it effectively. In addition, there has never been more access to games to watch all over the world providing another useful tool to study and learn how world class teams are going about their business.

3.6 Online Groups:

Join a WhatsApp or Facebook Group where you can openly ask questions, share experiences or gain valuable insight with peers, players and support staff. Additionally the benefit to this will be feeling a part of a community, which is valuable for when coaching gets difficult.

4. Reflective practice:

Reflective practice is an essential tool in self guided learning. Whether solo, with a trusted mentor or in a group setting regularly reviewing your own coaching is an important practice for all coaches.

4.1 Analyse Your Coaching Sessions:

One of the cornerstones of reflective practice is the regular analysis of your coaching sessions. Coaches should revisit their sessions, by video ideally (if not feasible, mentally replay your sessions), assessing both good moments and areas for improvement. As well as getting a better understanding of coaching dynamics, you can assess player reactions for learning and evaluate the effectiveness of your intended strategies or practices.

4.2 Evaluate Your Game Strategies:

Beyond just individual coaching sessions, coaches should critically evaluate game strategies. Analysing match outcomes, tactical decisions and giving detailed analysis on the team's performance will contribute to an overall understanding on how your coaching effects the team's performance. Completing this practice will assist in refining future approaches and adapting your strategies.

4.3 Adjustments Based on Feedback:

Reflective practice involves an openness to feedback. Coaches should regularly seek input from players, fellow coaches, and support staff. As a coach you cannot see everything so seeking constructive criticism and observations provides an additional valuable perspective that might not be so easy to see during the middle of a training session. The ability to process feedback and make adjustments is key to continuous improvement.

4.4 Seek Feedback from Trusted Mentors:

Asking a coach, you respect to review your coaching and give feedback on your individual coaching style and your program can often uncover valuable insights and give you some nuance and considerations you might have overlooked.

4.5 Document:

Journaling, Blogging, Vlogging whatever suits your individual style will work but as coaches we should ensure that we have some kind of documentation so that we can track our learning and review our progress.

4.6 Group Reflection:

Reflection does not just have to be an individual pursuit need. Group reflection with fellow coaches can encourage a culture of shared learning. Participating in discussions about coaching experiences, challenges, and breakthroughs helps to create a collective intelligence within the coaching community and can assist individual coaches with clarifying their strategies or thinking on various subjects.

4.7 Learning from Failure.

In the podcast I recorded with Former All Blacks Coach Wayne Smith I asked him how he approached trying new things with the All Blacks as I assumed that you would want to know something worked before you did it in a game. His reply changed my entire relationship with failure (or making mistakes). He said "we didn't look at it that way, in fact we tried things all the time that didn't work. But if we reflect on the 2011 World Cup, A year or so before that we saw that some of the rules might change so we adjusted our kicking strategy early. This led to multiple loses in a row. But, before the World Cup they did change the rules and we believe the fact we changed this element in our game early ultimately led to us being successful at that tournament". Having a healthy

relationship with failure, learning how to look at it analytically & then adjusting your approach is perhaps the single biggest lesson I have learned as a Rugby Coach.

5. Collaborative learning

Whilst this section might be repeating some of the subjects discussed in previous sections, it's helpful to go over certain subjects again to emphasise their importance. Learning from and with others is an incredibly useful tool, as is sharing what you know with others.

5.1 Coach-to-Coach Collaboration:

Exchanging ideas, knowledge and strategies with your fellow coaches not only enhances your knowledge, improves the overall standards of the game but helps to create a valuable network that you will come to rely on through your coaching journey. Regular discussions, whether formal or more particularly informal can assist your own coaching in so many different ways and is a very useful tool.

5.2 Learning from Players:

Recognising and using players as active contributors to the learning process is integral to collaborative coaching. Players can possess unique insights from their experiences on the field, providing valuable feedback on your coaching strategies and communication style. An open relationship with players encourages a culture of mutual learning, enhancing the coach-player relationship.

5.3 Engaging with Support Staff:

Collaboration should extend beyond your coaching staff and playing group to include support staff such as Strength & Conditioning Coaches, Medical Staff and Analysts. Regular engagement can give a more holistic understanding of preparation and team dynamics and should further assist your coaching methodologies to enhance overall performance. You never know what gems or insight into the game, people, and players you may uncover in such conversations. In any event they make the sport work and need to be valued by all.

5.4 Group Problem-Solving:

Coaching inevitably presents challenges, and collaborative learning provides an opportunity for group problem-solving. Discussing coaching challenges with peers and mentors can open ideas for innovative solutions.

5.5 Mentorship and Learning from Experience:

Mentorship is one of the best forms of collaborative learning. Having the ability to ask questions, seek feedback, listen to valuable insights and perspectives from experienced coaches can rapidly accelerate your own development.

6. Adaptability

There is no one size fits all approach to coaching in the modern game. People are all different and no situations is the same. As coaches we must continue to be adaptable if we are going to prepare our teams to perform at a high level.

1.1. Tailoring Approaches to Individuals:

Adaptable coaching starts with recognising the uniqueness of each individual player in your squad. Adjusting your coaching approach to the individual needs, strengths, and learning styles of your players helps to create a supportive & personalised learning environment for both coaches and players.

1.2. Flexibility in Strategies:

The modern game of rugby is rapidly evolving and requires coaches to be adaptable in their strategies if they wish to be successful. If something no longer works, we must have the ability to adjust year to year, week to week and ultimately sometimes mid game. Being constantly open to new strategies and having an awareness of what is working in today's game with the talent at your disposal is essential for coaches to stay ahead of the curve.

6.3 Embracing Innovation:

Adaptable Coaching involves a willingness to embrace innovation. Coaches who stay up to date with advances in modern training methods, sports science, and technological advances can include these innovations into their individual coaching practices. Having an openness to new ideas and embracing innovation are essential to modern day coaching.

6.4 Adjusting Leadership Styles:

Effective leadership requires adaptability in leadership styles. A coach should be able to adjust their leadership approaches based on the personalities, motivations, and communication preferences of different team and support staff members. Remembering that no two people are the same. Having this ability to adapt will help coaches connect with their team and ultimately create a more effective learning and high-performance environment.

6.5 Responding to Adjusting Team Dynamics:

Teams can be dynamic at times with constantly shifting group dynamics. A modern coach must have an awareness of the teams' social dynamics and have a recognition when to provide support, when to challenge and when to encourage group collaboration. The ability to adjust your approach to respond to the emotional and interpersonal aspects of your teams is really important to continue to cultivate an engaged and cohesive squad.

6.6. Continuous Self-Reflection and Learning:

Continuously reflecting, learning and adjusting your approach is key to being an adaptable coach in the modern game. Coaches who regularly assess their strategies, approaches, outcomes and then make adjustments are better suited to the evolving nature of the sport.

References:

Whilst most of this paper is a reflection of my own observations and thought process the resources mentioned below have helped shape my thinking on the subjects discussed in this paper.

[Hyper Learning by Edward D.Hess \(Barrett-Koehler Publishers\)](#)

[The Art of Learning: An Inner Journey to Optimal Performance by Josh Waitzkin](#)

[The Rise of Superman by Steven Kotler](#)

[The High Performance Podcast](#)

[Wandering Bear Podcast](#)