

Level 4 Performance Coach Paper

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Effective Coaching: How Theming Can Transform Teams

Whether it's on the field or off the field, successful coaches need to understand the strategies to turn a group of individuals into a unified and successful team. Not all groups of individuals are teams - successful teams have distinct characteristics such as shared leadership, responsibility, accountability, and goals. My essay is going to explore how theming can help build these distinct team characteristics and ultimately wield significant influence and results.

Background

Theming in a sporting sense is weaving an idea or a subject through a campaign that will help to bring unity and connection through symbolism whether verbal or visual. It's primarily about sharing stories or ideas within the team environment to create a shared direction and purpose.

Effective coaches know that turning a group of individuals into a successful team requires the implementation of numerous tactics that help guide individual players into adopting a team vision and commitment. In my opinion theming is an essential tactic to ensure the development of a shared sense of purpose, responsibility, and accountability.

Theming sets a clear and consistent direction, and if a team can all agree on what they are trying to accomplish via a theme, it's my view that the team will work much harder to achieve the goal. As stated, ensuring everyone agrees on theme is necessary buy-in, it's essential to have team members discuss and decide on the theme to ensure it resonates.

Theming in practice

Champagne moments

As Defence Coach for the Ireland Women's team, Kieran Hallett employed Red Bull Racing as a theme, focusing on "Champagne Moments", such as ball recovery in three phases and emphasising speed, line speed, off-the-floor play, and kick chase.

In line with this theme, he also utilised the concept of "Nuts and Bolts," emphasising trust in teammates and strategic pit stops. Hallett even incorporated a video titled "The Life of a Bolt" to greater inspire the team.



Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iptAkpqjtMQ>

The Last Dance

Phil Jackson's '97-'98 season with Chicago Bulls was themed 'The Last Dance', a theme that has attained iconic status thanks to the widely acclaimed Netflix docuseries. Within the series, Jackson articulates the significance, stating, "I emphasised to the players the paramount importance of our

unity in this ultimate endeavour. That's precisely why I christened it The Last Dance." This not only encapsulates the ethos of the season but also exemplifies how a theme can transcend time, leaving an enduring legacy.

Ubuntu

A great example of how team unity can be built via a theme is the concept of “ubuntu”, which started in the NBA in 2007-08 with Celtics Head Coach Doc Rivers. The Nguni Bantu word means “humanity” and is occasionally translated to “I am, because we are”. Player, Kendrick Perkins recalled that Rivers made the rookies research the concept, Perkins relayed “we knew everything we were trying to accomplish was greater than one individual.”

The word appeared on the side of the Celtics rings following their 2008 NBA World Championship title.

I highly recommend watching Doc Rivers Episode on The Playbook on Netflix.

The Greatest Showman

The Exeter chiefs attack used The Greatest Showman.

This was brought in because the coaches had a belief that the players were scared of making mistakes and not playing to their potential.

One of their major quotes was play “Highlight Moments” and even had in most team meetings a short highlight of enterprising play.

They also went onto use songs for Theming the finals series.

- Never enough (as they usually lost in the finals)
- Embrace the crowd.

Even used a motivational award every week rewarded as the “Greatest Showman”.

Bomb Squad

The theme of "Bomb Squad" played a significant role in the success of Spring Box, particularly by creating greater buy-in from the bench players. This was an interesting observation from Rassie Erasmus, and it highlights the importance of team dynamics and motivation in achieving success.



South Africa's replacements come on in the RWC 2019 final (Getty Images)

On their way to triumph in Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan, South Africa's director of rugby Rassie Erasmus – then the head coach – adopted a system of setting up his bench for maximum impact. By using a six-two split (with six forwards and two back on the bench) the team could maintain a level of physical output up front. This group of six massive reinforcements in the forwards came to be known as the 'Bomb Squad'.

Since, it has been used as a shorthand for the Boks swapping their whole front row. It was something that was talked about at length ahead of the British & Irish Lions 2021 tour.

Arete and Kaizen

In Super Rugby history, one team has consistently distinguished itself through the strategic implementation of distinctive principles – the Crusaders, widely regarded as the benchmark. Since their establishment in 1996, this team has clinched an impressive tally of 10 titles. However, the nascent years posed formidable challenges for the Canterbury Crusaders, especially in the context of New Zealand Rugby's introduction of five franchises comprising amalgamated provinces.

The advent of player mobility across these franchises marked a paradigm shift in the fledgling professional competition. The Crusaders, grappling with an identity crisis, found themselves uncertain about their core values and purpose during the initial two seasons.

This pivotal time saw the entrance of Wayne Smith, a coaching guru known by the nickname "The Professor." Smith played a transformative role in defining the Crusaders' identity, themes he embraced, namely Arete and Kaizen, held profound significance. Arete, rooted in Greek philosophy, championed the pursuit of excellence, while Kaizen, a Japanese concept, advocated for continuous incremental improvements. Though these themes might seem superficial, their effectiveness hinged on proper delivery to prevent misinterpretation.

Rumble in the Jungle

The Crusaders under the coaching guidance of Scott Robertson also implemented the theme 'Rumble in the Jungle' for the 2017 season.

"I'm a storyteller. It's my greatest strength. As a coach, your first job is to select the right people – but then, you need to connect them with each other. You need a story to explain: 'This is where we're going'. That's how you motivate people," Robertson stated.

When he became the coach in 2017, Robertson took inspiration from boxer Muhammad Ali. He chose a theme for the year: "Rumble in the Jungle", inspired by Ali's 1974 fight by the same name. The Crusaders reached the final, and flew to Johannesburg for a showdown with South Africa's Lions. "I get a bit tingly just thinking about it. Ali hadn't won a championship for eight years, and neither had we. The story just lined up beautifully. We were in the jungle; we were in a rumble... This was real. We were living it."

The Crusaders went on to win the Super Rugby Championship that year.

Examples in practice...

By integrating these specific examples and insights, your points on the power of theming in sports teams can be more robust and grounded in real-world scenarios. A critical takeaway from the above examples is the importance of authenticity. Coaches must genuinely believe in and passionately convey the theme to inspire full team buy-in. Being vulnerable in delivering the theme is also seen as an asset, as it establishes a genuine connection with the team.

Theming advantages

The above examples go a long way in highlighting the advantage of theming, which more specially are:

- **Narrative and legacy:** It gives the team a story that becomes an integral part of their collective narrative.
- **Unity:** In the context of sports, theming refers to the cohesive and harmonious integration of a common theme or identity among team members. When a team adopts a unified theme, it fosters a sense of togetherness, shared purpose, and collective identity.
- **Memory enhancement:** Themes aid in better understanding and remembering common goals through the use of stories, pictures, emotions, and metaphors.
- **Fun:** Introduces an element of fun and variety, contributing to an enjoyable and engaging coaching environment.

Theming challenges and pitfalls

However, successful theming requires careful consideration of potential pitfalls:

- **Ineffective communication:** Coaches must effectively communicate and sell the theme to the team.
- **Consistency:** Persistent use of theme-related language and consistent reinforcement are essential.
- **Engagement:** Key leaders and players must be actively engaged in the theming process.

The provided information on potential challenges, such as ineffective communication, lack of consistency, and failure to engage key leaders, further supports the argument that successful theming requires proactive management of these factors. The examples given, like the Exeter Chiefs overcoming a fear of mistakes through theming, demonstrate the potential benefits of addressing these challenges.

It's all in the implementation

To mitigate the above challenged and pitfalls the following implementation strategies must be deployed to ensure success and reduce risk of the potential pitfalls:

- **Involvement of team members:** Themes or team identities can contribute to a sense of unity and purpose among team members. When individuals feel connected to a common goal or theme, it can enhance their motivation and commitment. In the context of sports, like in the

case of Spring Box, having a theme for the bench players such as "Bomb Squad" likely created a shared identity and a sense of belonging.

- **Consistency and authenticity:** The successful implementation of themes by various teams underscores the importance of consistency and authenticity. The Exeter Chiefs' example of "The Greatest Showman" Consistency is key, with regular integration of the theme into sessions and meetings throughout the week and season. Theming should be an ongoing and integral aspect of team development, continually reinforced to maintain its impact.
- **Weekly Theming for Fresh Focus:** The concept of weekly theming to bring new focus and energy to the team aligns with the dynamic nature of sports. This approach allows teams to tailor their themes to specific opponents, for example when coaching for Sydney University second grade against Easts this year, we used a theme bully the bully, it emphasizes reclaiming power and control in situations where bullying is prevalent. "Bully the Bully" encourages individuals to take a collective stance against bullying.
- **Co-creation:** Thematic development should involve the team members for better buy-in. Weekly theming, as observed in my experience, can inject fresh focus and energy into the team. It can be tailored to specific opponents or aligned with current events.
- **Delivering the theme:** David Sharky has built a career centered around supporting coaches in effectively delivering themes to their teams, drawing from his research on key principles. One of his strategies involves presenting familiar messages in innovative ways, breathing new life into conventional ideas. He notes that the effectiveness of theming deepens as teams acclimate to it, citing a notable increase in success with La Rochelle in year 3 compared to the initial year. Importantly, Sharky emphasises that theming is not an additional layer but seamlessly integrates with the core message, enhancing rather than overshadowing the intended communication. He underscores the importance of a meticulous articulation of the message to ensure clarity and resonance with the team.

Key questions to ask when implementing a theme

Selecting a narrative for your team is a crucial decision that requires thoughtful consideration. What has proven effective for others may not necessarily yield the same results for your team. It's imperative to choose a story wisely. If the story resonates strongly with you and your coaching group but fails to capture the interest of your players, pursuing it may be futile.

My foremost piece of advice is to prioritise the players. Reflect on what narrative elements are likely to connect with them. Especially if you are new to the club or environment, invest effort in gaining comprehensive insights into the group. Furthermore, a thorough understanding of the chosen story is essential. Investigate identifying aspects that align seamlessly and areas that may pose conflicts. This comprehensive understanding is crucial for determining whether to proceed with the chosen theme or story.

I found these questions from "**The Use of Themes in Coaching: A Framework for Coaches**".

*Why **this** story?*

Why will these people care about this story?

How will this story resonate with your group?

What do you – as individuals and as a group – want to achieve and how does this story help you to achieve those goals?

Conclusion

In my exploration of theming within the realm of sports coaching, I have drawn upon both personal experiences and extensive research to clarify the profound impact that thematic approaches can have on team dynamics and performance. I believe theming as a potent tool for providing clear direction and purpose to team goals, supported by examples such as Kieran Hallett's inventive use of "Redbull Racing" and "Nuts and Bolts."

One crucial aspect highlighted throughout my essay is the active involvement of team members in the theming process. I emphasise that the collective engagement of the team is instrumental in maximising the efficacy of thematic approaches. After looking into successful theming instances, I articulate the countless advantages, including the creation of a compelling team narrative and legacy, the fostering of unity, enhanced memory retention, infusion of fun, and the promotion of co-creation.

The "Bomb Squad" concept employed by Rassie Erasmus in South Africa's Rugby World Cup 2019 victory stands out as a compelling example, showcasing how themes can instil a profound sense of unity and purpose among team members, especially bench players. However, I also acknowledge the potential challenges associated with theming, underscoring the importance of effective communication, consistency, and the active engagement of key leaders and players.

By researching into the potential pitfalls and challenges linked to theming, I offer a perspective, demonstrating that successful theming demands not just creativity but also the careful management of potential obstacles. The recurring themes of authenticity and consistency emerge as critical factors, underscoring the necessity for coaches to genuinely believe in and passionately convey the chosen theme to inspire full team buy-in.

I conclude by providing key questions aimed at guiding coaches in the selection and implementation of effective themes. This exploration leaves me with a profound appreciation for the dynamic and impactful nature of theming in the realm of sports coaching. The potential to shape team culture, enhance performance, and create lasting legacies becomes abundantly clear through the lens of thematic approaches.

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