



The Significance of The Coach–Athlete Relationship

KEYWORDS

non-verbal message, coach, athlete, relationship, performance

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ABSTRACT *Communication is the art of successfully sharing meaningful information with people by means of an interchange of experience. Coaches wish to motivate the athletes they work with and to provide them with information that will allow them to train effectively and improve performance. Communication from the coach to athlete will initiate appropriate actions. This however, requires the athlete to receive the information from the coach but also to understand and accept it.*

The significance of the coach–athlete partnership has been acknowledged by a number of official sport organisations. For example, Sports Coach UK (formerly the National Coaching Foundation) in several publications (e.g. *Working with Children*, 1998; *Protecting Children*, 1998) has described the coach–athlete relationship in terms such as, commitment, cooperation, communication, bonds, respect, friendship, power, dependence, dislike and distrust. Moreover, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (*A Sporting Future for All*, 2000) referred to the coach–athlete partnership, and the coaches' mentoring and supportive roles, as prominent issues of coach education. Finally, UK Sport in a recent strategic document (*The UK Vision of Coaching*) stated: „By 2012 the practice of coaching in the UK will be elevated to a profession acknowledged as central to the development of sport and the fulfilment of individual potential“.

It is perhaps surprising then that, historically, coaching has been preoccupied with merely enhancing athletes' physical, technical and strategical skills (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Now that the coach–athlete relationship is recognised as the foundation of coaching and a major force in promoting the development of athletes' physical and psychosocial skills, coaches ability to create perfect working partnerships with their athletes becomes paramount. The question is "What makes the ideal coach–athlete relationship?"

Coaches need to ask themselves:

- Do I have the athlete's attention?
- Am I explaining myself in an easily understood manner?
- Has the athlete understood?
- Does the athlete believe what I am telling him/her?
- Does the athlete accept what I am saying?

Communication blocks:

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



- The athlete's perception of something is different to yours.
- The athlete may jump to a conclusion instead of working through the process of hearing, understanding and accepting.
- The athlete may lack the knowledge needed to understand what you are trying to communicate.
- The athlete 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 athlete.
- Emotions may interfere in the communication process.
- There may be a clash of personality between you and the athlete.

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

Effective communication:

Before communicating with an athlete, 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 six elements:

- Clear - Ensure that the information is presented clearly.
- Concise - Be concise, do not lose the message by being long winded.
- 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 athlete 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.

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 athlete 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 behavior in order to maintain a smooth flow of communication. Such behavior includes head-nods, smiles, frowns, bodily contact, eye movements, laughter, body posture, language and many other actions. The facial expressions of athletes 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 athletes. 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.

Studying the coach–athlete relationship:

Sport and exercise psychology research has largely studied the interpersonal dynamics between coaches and athletes from a leadership approach. Since the late 1970s, the multi-dimensional model (Chelladurai, 1993) and the mediational model (Smoll & Smith, 1989) of coach leadership have been the main frameworks for studying the behaviours, actions and styles coaches employ in their coaching. Emphasis is placed on how behaviours are perceived by the athletes and the coaches themselves, and their relative impact on outcomes such as satisfaction, self-esteem, and performance. This approach may be limited especially if one considers coach leadership as a function that can be shared (a coach cannot do it alone). Ultimately, a focus on what one person does to another may not accurately reflect what goes on between coaches and their athletes.

To fill this gap, over the last five years a relationship approach has resulted in the development of several conceptual models. Although this shift opens up an exciting direction to the study of coach–athlete interpersonal dynamics, the emphasis of the majority of the proposed models is still on exploring coaches and athletes' interpersonal behaviours. Whilst there is little to argue against this investigative approach, there may be a risk of neglecting other important non-behavioural components of relationships, such as thoughts and feelings. This is where the conceptual models of the 3 Cs and Co-orientation come in.

A series of recent research studies has demonstrated that high scores along the 3 Cs dimensions are associated with higher levels of satisfaction with performance and personal treatment, higher levels of team cohesion, higher levels of harmonious passion toward the activity – as opposed to obsessive passion, and lower levels of role ambiguity in team sports.

Another finding revealed that athletes from moderately developed relationships displayed higher levels of empathic understanding in terms of commitment and complementarity. Perhaps athletes in the earlier stages of their relationship are motivated to observe their coaches closely in an attempt to build their common ground. Female athletes displayed higher levels of assumed similarity in terms of commitment. Perhaps female athletes may choose to display greater levels of assumed similarity in an effort to affirm, support or indeed enhance their mental presentations of self.

Successful versus unsuccessful relationships

The nature of sports coaching implies an achievement situation, where the performance of both coach and athlete is evaluated. Thus, people are often inclined to evaluate a given coach–athlete relationship as either successful or unsuccessful. Successful relationships are those that have unambiguously reached a level of normative performance success.

A taxonomy that allows us to view successful versus unsuccessful and effective versus ineffective relationships together is an interesting one. An unsuccessful yet effective coach–athlete relationship will invariably have some positive outcomes for the athlete (and the coach) in terms of psychological health and well-being – but obviously not performance-related ones. Although successful relationships are desirable, without their being effective they run a risk of breaching ethical and professional issues that are associated with codes of conduct formulated to protect coaches and athletes.

Helping relationships

Carl R. Rogers explained that a helping relationship involves an ability or desire to understand the other person's meaning and feelings, an interest without being overly emotionally involved, and a strong and growing mutual liking, trust and respect between the two people. Helping relationships are optimally effective relationships, in that they facilitate self-actualisation („to be the best you can be"). According to Rogers, helping relationships are not exclusive to client–counsellor but include other types of relationships such as teacher–pupil and parent–child.

The task of a coach in developing optimally effective relationships that the athlete can use for growth, change and personal development is a challenging one, because it is a measure of the growth they have achieved in themselves. This implies a responsibility on the part of the coach in that they must continually strive to develop their own potentials. Ultimately, optimally effective coach–athlete relationship is reflected in the maturity and growth of both coaches and athletes.

Conclusion:**Coaches should:**

- Develop their verbal and non-verbal communication skills.
- Ensure that they provide positive feedback during coaching sessions.
- Give all athletes in their training groups equal attention.
- Communicate as appropriate to your athlete's thinking and learning styles.
- Ensure that they not only talk to their athletes but they also listen to them as well.

Improved communication skills will enable both the athlete and coach to gain much more from their coaching relationship.

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