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Intervention Tone and Coach-athlete Relations



New research from Canada has shown that coaches will often individualise their behaviour and tone for different people in a coaching session. However, the outcomes of such a strategy are not always as intended. Sometimes the best intentions can have unintended consequences.

Introduction

Traditionally, coaching research has looked at what a coach does and what they say. However, what happens if you shift your perspective to that of the person being coached? Research suggests in this case it is not just 'what' the coach is saying but 'how' they are saying it.

Researchers in Canada took this approach to look at what they called 'intervention tone' when they undertook a season-long study of volleyball players and coaches. This was not to replace existing theory on behaviour, but rather to build an extra dimension to what is already known.

The research was unusual for a number of reasons. Firstly, it set out to observe the intervention tone of the coach rather than behaviour. Secondly, it recognised that coaching, even in team sports, is a series of individualised and unique interactions between a coach and athlete. Therefore it may be the case that over the course of the season players with different developmental trajectories would experience different interactions with their coach.

The study drew heavily on the 4Cs model of athlete development. This model takes a holistic view that development encompasses all of the athlete beyond simply their sport skill and ability. In this case the 4Cs being developed within an athlete are Competence, Confidence, Connection and Character.



What they did

The researchers worked with 55 volleyball players and five coaches. Over the course of a season they attended three training sessions, collecting video and audio data to be analysed afterwards. They also asked players and coaches to complete a series of surveys measuring Competence, Confidence, Connection and Character so they could track player progress over the season.

The purpose of collecting this information was to split players into different groups based on their development over the season. They would then look at how individual interactions differed between these groups. In particular they were looking for differences in coaching tone and how players reacted.

To split the players, information was taken from their own perception of improvement and that of their coach and teammates. Three groups emerged over the course of a season.

High and Increasing players had significantly higher levels of Competence, Confidence and Character:

Low and Decreasing players had significantly lower levels of Confidence and Connection and were particularly lower than High and Increasing players around Competence.

Moderate and Maintaining players were the middle ground. They tended to score lower than High and Increasing but were above the Low and Decreasing.

Using the audio and video data from coaching sessions the researchers could then examine the intervention tone conveyed within different coaching behaviours. This was described as the degree of autonomy support, the evaluation climate promoted, and the degree of personal rapport. These are further explained below.

- Autonomy supportive tone ranged from conveying views of the players as capable decision makers who can contribute to a situation, through to taking a controlling or autocratic tone of the coach as the sole decision maker.
- Evaluation climate tone ranged from focusing on either the process or the outcome of skill execution. There was also a middle ground tone of no evaluation at all.
- Rapport tone measured if the coach was making reference to personal information about the athlete or sticking to sport-only discussions.

On the other side of the relationship, the researchers also wanted to look at how players were responding to these different tones. This could be: not directly communicating; simply acknowledging the coach; providing answers to coach-controlled questions; contributing new information; communication about non-sport/performance matters.



What they found - too much of a good thing

As hypothesised, the results showed that coaches had different tones with the different groups of players. With the High and Increasing group the rapport tone was significantly different. Coaches had more interaction with players about matters beyond their immediate sport performance. This gave the impression of a more comfortable relationship where the players were treated as more than just a player.

The players in the Low and Decreasing group had more interaction with the coaches, more individual attention, and this lasted for a longer duration. The tone was a mix of controlling, where the correct answer is known and held by the coach, and more positive evaluation/encouragement and discussion of mental skills.

However, the players in this group did not see the improvement that such attention would suggest. In fact the results of the research proved counter-intuitive.

It appears that despite the best of intentions of the coaches (and there was no issue over the quality of their coaching) their efforts have had the paradoxical effect of producing a negative developmental trajectory. It turned out this extra attention may have merely served to reinforce athletes' perceptions of being less skilled than their teammates, which negatively influenced their development.

As the researchers suggest, more of a good thing may not always be better.



Consequences of the research

Previous research has shown the self-fulfilling nature of coach expectation and player performance. Known as the Pygmalion effect it states that a coach's beliefs about the ability or potential of a player can influence the coach's behaviour toward that player. Put simply, expectation dictates outcome.

This appears to have happened in this research, with coaches' behaviour and intervention tone changing among different players. In this case the coaches appear to become friendlier with the good players, who in line with the theory get better with positive expectations placed on them. However, why did the lower skill players not improve given the attention they received?

There is no doubt this was what the coach was trying to achieve and there was nothing bad about what they were doing. So why did it not happen?

It appears players may be interpreting what coaches do, say, and how they say it, in their own idiosyncratic ways. As a result positive coaching behaviour may not always be interpreted in positive ways and have the desired outcome.

Shedding more light on these counter-intuitive results, the researchers suggest looking at the notion of relation-inferred self-efficacy (RISE). According to this theory an individual will be significantly influenced by how they think others view their ability. So more attention may have only served to reinforce in a player's mind that they are not as good as others. And personal expectation will influence outcome.



Acting on the research

The research shows that coaches will often individualise their behaviour depending on the skill or development of the different people they are coaching. However, how these actions are understood by the player is not necessarily what the coach would expect. Opposite are a few questions for coaches to reflect on these findings and how they might apply it to their coaching style.

- Have you ever thought about how you might be treating your players differently?
- How much do you let your expectations influence how you coach players?
- Can you think of other ways to work with players needing improvement? Will extra coaching only serve to increase the problems? How else can you help someone without singling them out for attention?



References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:

Erickson, K. and Côté, J. (2016) 'A season-long examination of the intervention tone of coach-athlete interactions and athlete development in youth sport', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 22: 264–272.

Other interesting articles are suggested below:

Hancock, D., Ashley, A. and Côté, J. (2013) 'A proposed theoretical model to explain relative age effects in sport', *European Journal of Sport Science*, 13 (6): 630–637.

Lent, R.W. and Lopez, F.G. (2002) 'Cognitive ties that bind: a tripartite view of efficacy beliefs in growth-promoting relationships', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 21: 256–286.

Ntoumanis, N. (2012) 'A self-determination theory perspective on motivation in sport and physical education: Current trends and possible future research directions', in Roberts, G.C. and Treasure, D. C. (eds) *Advances in Motivation in Sport and Exercise*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. ISBN: 978-0-736090-81-0. pp.91–128.





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