

COACHING STYLES AND COMMUNICATION



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Reading through this chapter will help you to:

- Communicate positively, ethically and effectively with players and others
- Understand how to encourage positive and effective communication between football players and others
- Resolve conflict between players, and between players and others

Introduction to coaching styles

Football is a game where the ability to pose and solve problems at speed is essential. A coach needs to know and understand how players learn, in order to help them become better problem solvers.

How you coach is as important as what you coach. Your planning, preparation and approach to a session can be undermined if you don't understand the learning needs of your players.

Players learn by:

- Problem solving
- Being actively involved and challenged
- Testing out alternatives and asking questions
- Practising regularly
- Seeing the point to what they are doing

The coach who cannot create situations where players can work things out for themselves is in danger of being too authoritative. If, on the other hand, the coach takes no part in structuring the session, he is in danger of allowing bad habits to be reinforced.

Coaching methods lie on a continuum, starting from 'directive', through to 'developmental'. Directive is coach- and information-centred, and is necessary in the early relationship between coach and players. Developmental is more player- and solution-centred and emerges over time. In the middle lies something we call 'discovery', where the coach creates problem-solving situations in which solutions can be discovered.

Directive – Discovery – Developmental

The coaching methods you adopt need to reflect the situation in front of you. You choose your methods based on the outcomes you want from the session. Don't set the bar too high or too low. There should be sufficient challenge in your session to stretch the range of abilities without demotivating anyone. However, the session needs to be well structured so that it is safe and progression is possible. With younger players and in situations where the coach needs to be aware of possible dangers (eg close to roads or when working with large numbers in limited space), coaches adopt a more directive approach.

The directive approach is necessary when a coach:

- First meets a group
- Needs to set out 'safe' procedures
- Begins to build trust and confidence
- Wants to develop consistent ways of working
- Establishes protocols for watching, listening or demonstrating
- Needs to revisit the basics

Lying in-between directive and developmental styles of coaching is discovery coaching. Often, this involves the coach posing a problem in a game-related practice and guiding the players to discover their own solutions. One-to-one coaching, game-related practices or working with more experienced players might favour a discovery style of coaching.

The discovery approach is necessary when a coach:

- Begins to develop more responsibility among players
- Starts to prepare players for competitive situations
- Puts restrictions on a practice
- Wants to spot player solutions, rather than errors
- Works on a one-to-one basis

A developmental style of coaching involves an appreciation of the all-round needs of the player. At higher levels, it also involves an understanding of the player's contribution to the team. The developmental style of coaching involves a coach showing awareness of the four corners of player development; these are technical, physical, social and psychological. The developmental approach is necessary when a coach:

- Forms a longer-term relationship with players
- Recognises that improvements in technical ability and tactical awareness are linked to ability and willingness to learn
- Emphasises player development over winning
- Has a responsibility for the well-being of the player
- Wants to encourage more individual responsibility for maintaining improvements

A developmental style of coaching shows understanding of how the four corners - technical, physical, social and psychological - link together. Within each corner, a player's development is related to her age and maturity. Inevitably, the best coaches mix and match being directive, guiding discovery and focusing on development. You should aspire to be able to do this. When doing so, remember the five principles of learning.

Questioning

All coaching involves asking and answering questions. The better the learner, the better the questions. The best questions are those that the players ask of themselves. For example, the 'What if' question. 'What if I take two touches instead of one? What if I show my opponent inside instead of outside? What if we use an extra man in the last third of the field?'

Closed questions require a 'yes' or 'no' answer and are useful in setting up basic procedures. Such questions require little thought, so limit their use.

Open questions use words like 'who', 'how', 'when', 'where', 'what' and 'why'. They are more useful and help us to learn. For example, 'How can you combine to create a shooting opportunity?' 'What made you choose the shot rather than pass?'. When beginning to use questions in your coaching, it is helpful to prepare the questions you might ask in particular football situations.

If you are not sure of an appropriate question to ask, guide players' learning by using 'Show me', instead of feeling the need to tell them what to do next or what should have happened. The more the players become involved in their own learning, the more effectively they should progress.

Good coaches will significantly cut their workloads by helping players to become more self-reliant. Nevertheless, the need to maintain safe practice and for coaches to feel in control of what is happening means it may be wise to adopt a more directive style until players are experienced.

Positive and Effective Communication

Since communication is a two-way process, coaches need to be able to listen, as well as talk. If instructions are not clear, problems will occur. Players should be encouraged to share their ideas and thoughts with coaches, since this helps to maintain motivation and develop positive relationships.

To communicate effectively, you should:

- Ask questions, as well as instruct, find out what motivates players, what they enjoy about football, what they need to improve, what their ambitions are, etc
- Listen to players, parents and other coaches (don't look away when they are speaking to you)
- Plan what you are going to say
- Keep information and instructions short and simple
- Avoid jargon, sarcasm and talking for the sake of it
- Talk with players, not at them
- Be prepared to share a joke and show you have a sense of humour

- Be positive and build on players' strengths, rather than identifying shortcomings
- Use your voice to capture attention, emphasise a key point and show emotions (eg speaking quickly is often interpreted as a sign of anxiety, while talking too slowly suggests seriousness)
- Smile and make eye contact when speaking to players and other people

This range of communication skills takes a while to develop and some might not appear naturally. Use some of your coaching sessions to practise your communication skills and ask players to provide feedback. Practise giving instructions by explaining your session to a friend or a partner, well before you actually do the session. If you find it difficult explaining it in simple terms in the comfort of your own living room, you might struggle in front of 20 inattentive players.

Verbal Communication Skills

Being an effective coach does not always require the use of a loud and dominating voice; it does, though, require effective use of the voice so that players can hear and understand what is being said. Changing the tone, pitch and speed of verbal communication will help to gain and hold players' attention, regardless of the speaker's accent. Speaking quietly can bring calmness and sincerity to a situation, and planning what to say before saying it can promote a sense of authority.

When planning your coaching sessions, make a list of important instructions, key factors, or questions you might seek to ask. Try to avoid too much jargon and keep information short and simple (the KISS principle). In addition, plan your positioning to ensure everyone can see and hear you speak, and check that people understand any instructions given.

Listening and Non-verbal Communication Skills

The majority of all communication is non-verbal and often begins with dress and appearance. Dressing scruffily and having untidy hair does not convey an attitude of caring, good preparation or personal respect. Appearing smart and appropriately dressed in clean clothing, and being punctual, well organised and smiling creates a picture of a more friendly, respectable and authoritative coach.

When you are coaching, you will at various times use eye contact, clapping, nodding, scowling, waving, pointing and other body movements to convey messages to people around you. Try to use them positively and to provide encouragement, even though this might mean masking your inner feelings. Experienced coaches will tell you how often they have shrugged their shoulders at a player who has just shot wide, seconds after silently cursing the same player for missing the target.

Next time you say to someone 'Sorry, I didn't quite catch what you said', remember how important it is to listen.

Listening and hearing are as important as talking for coaches at all levels. Try to be an active listener by paying attention to the speaker, as well as to the message. Make eye contact with the speaker, nod to show you understand information or questions, avoid interrupting, and be prepared to ask questions for clarification.

Motivating Players

Coaches need to use a variety of strategies to motivate players of differing ages and abilities. These strategies might include:

- Making the benefits of any session clear
- Individual and team goal setting
- Providing positive feedback about performance
- Using rewards, including simple things such as making the player the focus of attention
- Rewarding effort and improvement, not just outcome
- Focusing on good performance, as well as winning
- Making practice challenging, varied and enjoyable
- Encouraging players to take some responsibility for their own development

Goal Setting

Goal setting can be used to increase players' motivation and self-confidence, and reduce anxiety. By agreeing specific performance goals with each player, coaches should seek to focus attention on personal achievement, not winning.

For example, refinement of a particular technique (eg the Cruyff turn) so that it can be performed consistently well should be more likely to enhance feelings of accomplishment than if a player contributes little to a team's win. Successfully achieving performance goals should increase the potential for a winning outcome, so coaches should agree targets based on process rather than product.

SMARTER Goals

In using goal setting with players, coaches should try to make goals:

- Specific to the performance (eg 'I want to stop my opponent turning with the ball in our defensive third of the pitch')
- Measurable (eg 'How often did my opponent turn with the ball?')
- Acceptable to the player (and agreed by the coach and player)
- Realistic but challenging (eg only in the final third of the pitch, not the whole pitch)
- Time-phased (eg during the game)
- Exciting – so that players feel a sense of achievement
- Recorded – to enable players and coaches to monitor progress

The example focuses on what a player has to do to be successful (process or performance goal), rather than the result of the game (product or outcome goal). Successful achievement of process goals should contribute positively to overall team performance. For example, successfully stopping an opponent from turning in the defensive third of the pitch should restrict the creation of goalscoring opportunities and allow cover to be assembled.

Use of Rewards

Success and enjoyment are the critical ingredients in motivating players of all ages and abilities. Planned, progressive and challenging practices are the key to this success. Rewards should be used to let players know they are doing well, not as a means of control.

A young player's involvement in junior football, with clubs and schools, often includes competing for trophies and medals. These extrinsic rewards can provide a positive stimulus for young players, and encourage them to play and practise. However, young players should enjoy football for the fun or excitement of playing, so that they will continue to participate even if they do not win trophies or medals.

Such extrinsic rewards have an important influence on young players' motivation and make parents very proud, but they should not become the reason for playing. They are a means to an end, not the end itself. Good coaches should encourage intrinsic motivation through challenging and exciting sessions that incorporate winning/losing and success/failure, but always leave the young player wanting to come back.

Very often, players respond well to praise, a smile or a pat on the back. If these gestures are accompanied by positive feedback about performance, they reinforce successful practice. Positive rewards should be used to provide information, not to control players' behaviour. Threatening the slowest player with another set of shuttle runs might provoke an immediate response, but it is likely to lead to a lack of trust and respect from the player.

Use of additional physical activity as a form of punishment should be discouraged. It frequently penalises players who might benefit from extra technique practice and who might be less able than others. Young players who fail to achieve their goal should be offered remedial practice, not subjected to a form of physical punishment as, in the long term, this will put them off practising and playing football. Coaches should also seek to praise effort, as well as achievement, particularly with younger children. For many young players, effort is all they might be able to control, so it should be rewarded, but not at the expense of skill development.

Praise followed by corrective feedback followed by praise is a positive way of motivating players (see Chapter 5 – Providing Feedback section).

Resolving Conflict

Conflict is unpleasant and unproductive. While we want our players and teams to have a challenging attitude and win, it should be without the negative influence that internal or external conflict brings.

Conflict may occur at any time in the highly charged arena of football. It could potentially occur between any two people involved, but within your control/influence, it is most likely to occur between:

- Players in your team
- Your player(s) and those in the other team
- Players and match officials
- You and other coaches
- You and match officials
- Players/you and spectators

As a coach, you should try to calm any situation of conflict. This can be achieved in any number of ways and will require you to remain calm and not become involved.

The best starting point is to have a code of conduct for the players which they themselves have agreed to and written.

From time to time, remind them of this code. If possible, have a written version displayed as a reminder for all to see. The code should cover such things as behaviour on and off the pitch, promptness, language, supporting teammates, being courteous to opponents and adopting an appropriate lifestyle.

A code of conduct for supporters and parents will be vital. There is no bigger threat to your coaching than a group of irate parents shouting at their children from the sidelines.

Dealing with conflict on the field is the responsibility of the match officials/referee, but as the coach, it may be your responsibility to influence a situation. This can be achieved by speaking to players on or off the field, or substituting a player who is in conflict with another, to ensure that the codes of the game are upheld. If the conflict is addressed towards you, try to take yourself out of the situation by moving away or adapting your behaviour.

Conflict between your players will not always be sorted out straight away. You may have to instigate strategies to help the team gel and either begin to like, or at least tolerate, each other. There may also be times when, for the benefit of the team, you have to let perfectly good players go because of their poor interaction with others in the team.

Summary

In this chapter, you have been introduced to different coaching styles and methods of communicating effectively with players/people you work with. In addition, you have considered ways to motivate the players you work with so they enjoy their football and seek to maintain an involvement in the game. Finally, you have begun to understand how to resolve conflict when working as a football coach.

A key element of successful coaching is the ability to communicate effectively. Coaches and players would agree that this is a two-way process – one of giving and receiving information. Coaches can identify players' strengths and weaknesses if they are involved in the communication process. It could also help to develop good working relationships with parents, other coaches, officials and club administrators.

Further Reading

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