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COMMUNICATION FOR YOUTH COACHES

CHAPTER



Chapter 4

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INTRODUCTION

Good communication is an essential component of good coaching. Communication is a process that involves far more than the spoken word. It is the information link between coach and player which pulls together all aspects of coaching from sport science to team management. In the coaching environment, effective communication involves skill in sending messages and skill in interpreting messages.

A coach may possess all the technical knowledge and skills of Australian Football, but without the ability to communicate this information, it is of little use. Communication skills, like all other skills in coaching, need to be practised to improve your coaching effectiveness.

Consider the following questions:

- How do your players know if what they are doing is actually what you want?
- How do you correct a player's faults or weaknesses in a positive manner?
- How do your players and your team improve by having you as a coach?

Communication and feedback in coaching terms refers to information which is transferred from you as coach to your players, which is primarily aimed at improving both the individual's and team's performance.

Some other benefits of good communication:

- Improves morale.
- Provides a sense of involvement (belonging).
- Promotes commitment and understanding.
- Is more efficient (saves time and effort for coach and player).
- Promotes better teamwork.

Coaches should remember that:

- Coaching is a two-way process.
- Clear and consistent messages help to avoid miss-communication.
- Open questions will glean more information from your players.
- 'Good' feedback will complement your coaching.
- 'Active listening' shows interest in your players and gains valuable information.
- Non-verbal communication is as important as verbal communication.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

All players respond differently to various forms of communication. Some will find visual cues most effective, others respond to verbal cues and others to touch. Using a number of forms of communication will not only maintain a playing group's interest, but increases the chance of finding a communication 'trigger' that works for each player. Communication is also more effective when a coach encourages open communication and welcomes input from the group of players. This involves establishing an environment of mutual trust and respect between player and coach.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Non-verbal communication refers to all information which is not presented verbally by the coach but has powerful messages that can bring about both positive and negative behaviours in players. Non-verbal communication can be very effective if used in the correct manner, but destructive if used inappropriately.



A large percentage (studies suggest over 80 per cent) of the meaning we get from communication comes from the non-verbal cues that go with it. If your non-verbal cues match or complement your spoken word then your communication can be more effective. If, however, your non-verbal message conflicts with what you say, your message will be confusing. For example, if coaches tell their players they have done a great job and then let their shoulders slump and sigh heavily, the players are more likely to get the message that the coach is not really happy with them. Non-verbal information from coach to player can incorporate gestures, clapping, facial expressions, shaking the head, hands on hips, deep breaths etc.

There are four main areas of non-verbal communication:

1. Visual

This includes all aspects of body language, such as posture, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact.

2. Touch

Touch can be a very effective way of imparting meaning. For example, a pat on the back or hand on the shoulder, or using manual manipulation (physically guiding a player through a movement) as a teaching skill. Significant caution must be taken with physical contact. Different players will feel comfortable with different amounts of physical contact and closeness and this should be respected. In addition, there are legal implications with sexual harassment. A good rule of thumb is only to use physical contact if it is essential and then ask the player if they are comfortable with you using it. Coaches should familiarise themselves with the *Guidelines for Coaches* booklet in the Harassment-free Sport series published by the Australian Sports Commission (www.activeaustralia.org/hfs).

3. Voice expression

A phrase often said is 'it's not what you say, but how you say it'. The tone of voice, rate of speech and volume of voice can dramatically change what is being said. For example, depending on how you say the word 'no', it can express fear, doubt, amazement, sarcasm or anger. How you say something can also gain attention, maintain interest and emphasise points.

4. Role model

This area covers the other things a coach can do to communicate to their players, i.e. arriving to training on time and being dressed for action. Making the effort to do these things communicates to the players that you are interested in what they are doing. Most of the 'meaning' we give to words comes not from the words themselves, but from the non-verbal factors, such as facial expressions, tone, body language etc. Non-verbal communication can complement a verbal message and may even substitute for it – a coach may only need a slight nod or raised eyebrow to tell the player all they need to know.

Skilled coaches will use non-verbal communication to improve their coaching effectiveness. Using the SOLVER checklist is an easy way to remember how to use non-verbal communication in a positive manner.

- S** Squarely face the player. Face the player and move to their height level.
- O** Open posture. Crossed arms or legs puts up a barrier and suggests an unwillingness to listen.
- L** Lean slightly forward. Again this demonstrates interest and shows you are listening.
- V** Verbal comments are relevant. Comments should also support what the player is saying.
- E** Eye contact. Contact should be made and maintained, without overdoing it.
- R** Relax. Be comfortable and show it.

COMMUNICATION THROUGH DEMONSTRATION

Communicating to players by demonstrating or having someone else demonstrate while the coach instructs can be one of the most engaging ways to impart knowledge to a player of the team. An example based on correcting a player's kicking style is outlined below:

Problem: Player kicking the ball too high in the air.

What the coach can do: Firstly, the coach would identify with the player that the problem lies in the position of the foot at impact, where the toe is pointing to the sky rather than the intended direction of the ball. In the next step, the coach could demonstrate an example of the player's current kicking style illustrating the problem, and then demonstrate the desired kicking style, with corrected problem. Ideally, the player will then, with the aid of a teammate and coach, work on practising and improving this skill.

ACTIVE LISTENING

An important skill for coaches to master is 'active listening'. This is when you concentrate completely on what the player is saying, both in their actions and words.

This can be one of the hardest skills for a coach to do as they feel it is their job to direct and will often butt in or attempt to solve the problem without all of the necessary information.

There are large advantages to a coach listening actively to his/her players:

- It shows interest and fosters a positive environment.
- It reduces the chance of being misunderstood (more efficient).
- It encourages further communication.
- The player is more likely to listen to the coach if the coach listens to them.
- The coach can learn from the player.

Four simple steps to improve active listening

Stop

Stop what you are doing and pay attention to what the player is telling you. This may be difficult in a coaching situation with other things going on, but paying attention, even briefly, lets the player know that he/she is important. Avoid interrupting.

Look

Make eye contact with the player by being at the same level and facing the player. Show interest in your expression and look for non-verbal cues the player might be giving out.

Listen

Focus your attention on what the player is saying by listening to their words and the emotion in what is being said. Use non-verbal cues such as nodding, smiling or frowning, appropriate to the context of the message. Support this with encouraging words to show you are focused on what the player is saying.

Respond

Re-state what the player has told you, in your own words. This shows you have been listening, checks that you did understand and can summarise what was talked about. Remain neutral and supportive. Use open questions to prompt the player for more information if needed.



COACHES: PLEASE LISTEN!

When players ask you to listen to them and you start to give them advice, you have not done what they asked.

When players ask you to listen to them and you begin to tell them why they shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on their feelings.

When players ask you to listen to them and you feel you have to do something to solve their problem, you have failed them, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All players ask is that you listen.

Don't talk or do – just hear them.

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

The ability to provide effective feedback is an important tool for coaches to have. 'Good' feedback can result in dramatic improvements in comprehension, awareness and skill, however, 'bad' feedback can alienate, discourage and bring about a decrease in player skill level. Providing constructive or negative feedback is generally another component of coaching, but it must be constructive. Effective feedback provides information that helps learning and development of skills and attitudes. It can positively affect maturation, learning and self image, and can be the key to motivation. Players should be allowed to practise for a period of time, which arises with the complexity of a skill before offering them feedback (observe for a longer period). Correct one error at a time, allowing more practise time before attempting to correct other errors. What the coach says as part of the error correction must give the player the information with which to improve the individual's performance.

Positive reinforcement will hasten skill development – shouting and criticising will achieve very little. While players are practising, consistent errors may appear. Re-demonstrate the skill or rephrase instructions for those needing extra assistance. Players who are unable to correctly perform the skill following the second presentation should receive specific feedback immediately following each practice. It is equally important to provide feedback for the competent performer as well as for those making errors. Highlight what the player is doing right, and then provide feedback relating to errors.

Feedback is effectively given by using verbal reports, physical cues, checklists, video replays and/or peer comments. The style of feedback depends on the availability of resources, type of skill and the personality of the player. The ability of players to critically analyse and evaluate their own performance is often underestimated. An immediate critique of a player's initial attempts at a new skill may be an insult to the athlete's intelligence and a waste of time.

To be effective, feedback should be:

Specific – feedback should only relate to those components of a task that the player has been asked to attend to before performance.

Constructive – if feedback is used to identify an error, it should provide reasons for the error and possible solutions.

Immediate – for a brief time after a performance, a player retains in their memory information about the performance. Therefore, the sooner feedback is presented, the more meaningful it will be to the player.

Clear – when players perform rapid, complex movements, it is difficult to relate to them the nature of specific errors in performance. Therefore, to clarify feedback, it is sometimes necessary to use slow-motion video replay. Whatever the situation, players must understand exactly what is required.

Positive – most feedback should serve to improve the quality of performance. Feedback should be positive and encouraging as this will generally hasten skill development.

Simple – feedback should be brief and to the point to improve skill development and to avoid confusion between player and coach.

GAME-DAY COACHING

Communication and feedback on game day

It's always difficult for coaches to place a desired timeframe on the amount of information that should be communicated to players, not only before the game but in general. It is, however, supported and acknowledged by many coaches that the KISS principle be adopted (Keep It Simple Sport). Communication should be very specific, concise and clearly communicated to both the team and individuals within the team.

Players are naturally nervous before playing and their ability to absorb great amounts of information is generally low. A team meeting prior to the players preparing physically should reinforce key themes/processes and tactics that may relate to weather/ground conditions etc.

It is important that all communication and feedback provided to players during the game is specific and in the best interests of both the team and individual performance. The role of the runner is also crucial in communicating information quickly and efficiently to the players.

Golden rules for coaches on match-day

- Ensure players are aware of their positions on the field (a whiteboard is useful for this).
- Provide appropriate warm-up exercises with footballs (if possible do this on the ground).
- Encourage players to encourage each other.
- Use interchange players freely.
- Encourage all players to acknowledge their individual efforts.
- Focus on teaching the game, not on winning the game.
- Addresses to players before, during and after the game should be used as teaching and learning opportunities (coaches should be calm and positive and avoid any emotional gossiping, derogatory or sarcastic remarks).

Tips for match-day addresses

- Addresses to players are a means to teach them about the game: both its skills and values.
- Prepare the pre-match talk beforehand and consider what to say to individuals and groups (e.g. forward line players) and what to say to the whole group.
- Talk to players individually and in small groups about their responsibilities as they are getting ready.
- Stress that the game is an opportunity to practise skills.
- Encourage players to do their best.
- Use words and expressions they have heard before to enhance understanding.
- Be positive and encouraging.
- Use statistics as positive reinforcement during breaks.
- Make sure all players are attentive and focused when being spoken to.
- Reinforce plans and policies that have been practised.
- Comments during game breaks could refer to the playing conditions, skill strengths and areas for improvement, position play, good efforts from groups or individuals and plans for the next stage of the game.
- Post-game comments should review what was done well, what needs improvement, what can be learned from the opposition's play, what individuals did well, what was learnt, the extent of player satisfaction, what needs to be worked on and what the team should aim to do better next time.

SUMMARY

Depending on which form of communication and feedback you adopt as coach, it's critical that communication is clear, concise and, wherever possible, reinforcing. Obviously, players prefer positive communication rather than negative communication, however, as we all mature and develop, there is a place for both types. Most coaches in today's football acknowledge that positive individual communication is well received by all players, both publicly in front of peers and in a one-on-one situation. Negative communication, however, is probably best received in a one-on-one situation and not in public where humiliation or embarrassment can be very disruptive to the player and the team as a whole.

