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Reflective Coaching Interventions for Athletic Excellence

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ABSTRACT

The coach - athlete relationship can be regarded as an imparting of technical skills and mentoring from coach to athlete. In a healthy coach - athlete relationship, both people learn to coordinate their respective skills by appreciating each other's technical and disposition attributes. Earlier developmental weaknesses and trauma, for either member, caused as a result of respective family of origin experiences, or other formative experiences, can be healed through an appreciation of self- and other awareness. Conversely, a lack of self- and other reflectivity can foster a harmful relationship where both people experience and perpetuate psychological and affective damage within themselves and each other. The intention with this paper is twofold. One is to provide a framework to foster improved coach self- and other reflectivity. The second purpose is to provide intervention-based guidelines for improved coach - athlete development and excellence.

Introduction

In coaching literature, Martens (1990), Haslam (1988) and Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke and Salmela (1998) have noted that the relationship between coach and athlete is complex. There is extensive literature outlining the challenging interpersonal dynamic between coaches and athletes (e.g., Carron & Bennett, 1977; Chelladurai, Haggerty & Baxter, 1988; Partington, 1988). Martens (1990) and Wishnietsky and Felder (1989) noted that coaches are often unable to reach their athletes due to personal shortcomings in

communication such as impatience and the lack of understanding. Adding to the complexity of the dyad's relationship, Seligman (1991) and Rettew and Reivich (1993) have noted that athletes also vary in terms of how they perceive and subsequently respond to coach criticism based on their personal interpretation patterns.

Though coaches and athletes alike might not consider the root of such difficulties in the heat of the teaching - learning moment, there are reasons why their relationship is so complex, and in some instances, trying. Some of the factors that underlie the behavioral exchange between coach and athlete reside in the moment. However, there are also other historical factors that underpin the perceptual screens of coaches and athletes alike. Seligman (1991) has noted that peoples' perceptions and subsequent explanatory patterns are acquired based on what was learned in childhood from parents and teachers. Schinke and da Costa (2000) recognized that formative interactions with earlier coaches also influence the athletic expectations of sport performers. It seems conceivable that momentary perceptions and responses in the present have their basis in past experiences and interactions. Thus, it is essential for coaches and mental training consultants to understand the current and historical aspects underlying the communication exchange between coach and athlete. In so doing, it is argued herein that coaching and mental training consultants can foster improved interpersonal dynamics and the increased likelihood for personal and athletic growth.

Regardless of whether readers are mental training consultants or coaches, the consideration here is to understand how to work through interpersonal dynamics and develop athletes as performers while concurrently mentoring them on a more general level. To clarify, this article suggests one method of how to improve the interpersonal exchange between coach and athlete through improved awareness of athlete background and athlete perception. It is the intention here to elaborate on an intervention approach that can be used by reflective coaches or those interested in teaching coaching reflectivity such as mental training consultants. On another level, it is the ultimate objective with this paper to elaborate on how coaches might assist in the facilitation of athlete development, and subsequently, athletic excellence.

Imago Therapy - Background

Imago Therapy is a process of communication developed by Hendrix (1993). Its underlying assumption is that the challenges people experience when interacting with one another are linked to how each has been hurt or oppressed in childhood. Emphasis is placed on teaching individuals to sensitize others to the manner in which they were hurt, and then in collaboration, to create an environment of safety to explore these experiences. The exploration first takes place through a process termed the "conscious dialogue." The foundation of the skill rests with each person learning to mirror, validate and empathize with the other's experience. The crucial premise, and hence recipe for success, lies in one partner's understanding that it is essential to accept and therefore understand the other's reality. To communicate at their utmost potential, coaches must learn how to borrow the lens through which their athletes view the world, while also, remaining conscious of how they as coaches react to such perceived experiences. For the sake of clarification, this

process has previously been called "reflectivity" by social psychologists including Parker (1992) and Bruner (1990).

Assumptions of where Imago will contribute. Using a feedback process that was built on the foundation of the dialogue derived from Imago Therapy, it will be shown how coaches and other sport practitioners can work optimally with athletes. We, the authors of this article, have a number of beliefs regarding why Imago Therapy can contribute to coaching practice and athletic performance. First, there is an underlying assumption that there is ample opportunity to exercise a conscious dialogue process for coaches with their athletes. Coaches spend a lot of time exchanging thoughts and experiences with their athletes. When the time is invested working on the athlete's personal and athletic development concurrently, then the result will be a synergistic form of growth in both areas. Second, it is our belief, based on the work of Seligman (1991), that the areas in which the coach and athlete experience strife with one another may be directly linked to the manner in which the athlete [and sometimes the coach] have been oppressed or hurt in their own lives. If, for example, the possibility is embraced that some athletes have chosen the path of performing in front of a large numbers of people due partially to an unmet need for recognition in childhood, such information is useful for a coach to be conscious of and active in addressing. Alternately, if an athlete's partial motivation to perform is based on an overwhelming need to compete with others, and this is a life theme for the athlete, that information could also be deemed useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the athlete and how to work with him or her. Gaining developmental information about each athlete is important in order to improve understanding and pedagogical delivery. Ultimately, improved athlete awareness can help the coach to select a method of communication and feedback that will be more likely to be heard and integrated, within the context, and within general life for that matter, in a positive way.

The Athlete's Struggle with Confidence

Hendrix (1993) elaborates on six major stages of childhood development, which he believes largely influence the person on an individual and relational level; attachment, exploration, identity, competence, concern and intimacy. The attachment stage addresses the extent that the individual experiences acceptance or rejection from parents during infancy (0-18 months). The exploration stage addresses the extent that the individual was encouraged by parents to explore aspects in his or her environment while a toddler (18-36 months). The identity stage uncovers whether people were encouraged by their parents to assert themselves in social contexts during their third and fourth years. The competence stage is depicted through the actual willingness to exert effort and ability within achievement settings, and its basis is contingent on the previous three stages of development. Concern is the first developmental stage where people learn how to relate to others outside of their parents or caregivers. Intimacy, the final stage, addresses the individual's resulting long-term relational ability with a partner, and its basis is linked to previous experiences during earlier developmental stages.

The focus with this article is solely on the competence stage, which appears to be most relevant to the athlete - coach relationship as athletes struggle to garner their athletic

and personal skills in their attempt to strive for excellence. In terms of personal development, the competence stage occurs during the 4-8 year age span. The ability of individuals to feel masterful in their environment and their world is, according to Hendrix (1993), directly linked to retrospective factors experienced during childhood. Taking this premise to sport, something that Seligman (1991) has already teased at, athletes who feel competent and powerful in a performance environment undoubtedly have received a parent or caregiver's value during their earliest achievements. These athletes may have been noticed for their accomplishments received target specific praise for their successes in and out of sport. The adaptive-competent athlete most likely received unconditional love as a child for efforts, despite the mistakes made. In addition, a caregiver, whether a parent or early coach, who was conscious of nurturing competence in a youngster, may also have purposefully provided concrete efficacy information regarding how to correct mistakes. The underlying intervention was to ensure that explanations and subsequent understandings for performance variance were explained by potentially controllable and impermanent factors (see Seligman, 1991 for a review of explanatory patterns).

The aforementioned adaptive intervention is in contrast to methods that critically disempower the individual via permanent and personal explanations for sub-par performances, or basing acceptance largely on successful and impermanent performances. Hendrix (1993) maintains that the individual who receives selective praise from a caregiver who demands and only notices excellence internalizes the message "do not make mistakes." Such messages are often translated into a fear of failure. Hence, it can be assumed that this might be part of the reason why some athletes are scared to fail and cannot withstand the ego damage from sub-par experiences where others can.

There is a second adaptation to wounding in the athlete's competence stage. If a parent withheld instruction or ignored the child who did not excel, the message internalized might well have been "do not be too powerful, there is only enough room here for one of us to win and it is not you." According to Hendrix (1993), such an individual may operate from a place of fear of assertion affecting their level of success in life, and so, in sport. We believe that these are the athletes who tend to perpetually find themselves one step behind the proverbial gold medal because winning was not internalized as part of what they were accepted for and identified with. For coaches and other central coaching staff working with such athletes, conscious healing means noticing and accepting the assertive aspects of the athletes in an effort to connect them with their personal power, or agency. This sort of intervention might seem complex, but there is a concise means of achieving it.

Reflective Coaching Interventions

The application of Imago Therapy to coaching may be viewed as such: In a relationship where coach and athlete are connected, there exists a potential degree of safety for the athlete. With this sense of security athletes' unresolved issues can surface as they attempt to heal unresolved experiences. Situations and feelings, which remind athletes of previous experiences, will trigger positive and negative affect [feelings] in the present. Such feelings, already recognized by Seligman (1991), will typically come from

explanations of past experiences. Fear of failure originating from the parent-child relationship may resurface into feelings of inadequacy, threat, and guilt as athletes relate with their coaches. If believed that such a preoccupation could detract energy from the athlete's potential, it can become one potential coaching role to remain sensitive and intentional in communication. With a view toward building trust, coaches, and even coaching staff, can consciously give their athletes what they are craving on an emotional level; target specific praise for achievement, unconditional acceptance despite performance glitches, concrete and personally uncritical information to correct mistakes, and thus, a promotion of the athlete's personal agency.

The interactive approach outlined in this article provides such a method of feedback. It combines the evaluative process with the athlete's affective response. The concept of coach intervention and our personal adaptation of an interactive approach take into account the link between the athlete's mind, heart and body and coaching interaction as a complex and interconnected system. It is assumed that peoples' minds, souls and bodies are intertwined in a world with others, as many adherents of social learning theory including Bruner (1990), Bandura (1986) and Seligman (1991) agree. Hence, the underlying Imago adage developed by Hendrix (1993) seems applicable; individuals are born in relationships, they are hurt in relationships, and they need to heal through relationships. It is this adage that underpins the philosophy and rationale for coaches intervening with the athletes that they aspire to mentor as part of their role (see Bloom, et al. 1998; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke & Salmela, 1998 for a review).

Becoming the Conscious Interventionist

To this point, we have speculated on the implications of earlier formative experiences on the athlete's current state of competence. The remaining portion of this article will clarify how to employ an interactive and conscious feedback intervention based on Hendrix' (1993) Imago Training. The main feedback techniques proposed herein include the use of athletes' images, feelings, and body reactions with the use of the coach's technical suggestions. To these informational sources, coaches and athletes can select from a wide array of athlete and coaching evaluation sheets including those of Orlick (1986, 1990), Lynch (1992) and Albinson and Bull (1988). Combined, these informational sources can provide the coach and athlete with a wealth of information to improve athlete competence.

Understanding Images - Section One

In previous sport literature, Schinke (1999), Schunk (1995) and Orlick (1990) noted the importance of imagery as a pathway to confidence development for the athletic performer. In terms of the present framework, imagery serves as an opportunity to get in touch with the images that play in athletes' minds and bodies as they are coached to performance. The images that athletes see and feel influence their confidence as informational sources because they confirm self-perceptions in a facilitating or detracting way. For example, as Orlick (1990) has noted, if athletes view and feel themselves performing smoothly and successfully in competition, the probability of the result being a

positive experience is more likely. If, during a practice, the athlete experiences difficulty, and pictures the situation getting worse, it will more likely effect the performance in an adverse way. With both instances, it is of importance that coaches elicit the nature of such images through a feedback sheet. Subsequently, it is imperative that athletes share their thoughts and images openly through conversation before and during training and before and after competition to encourage a heightened and more adaptive level of athlete understanding.

Conversely, the negative performance image can undermine the physical capability of the promising athlete. It is common for athletes to tell their coaches "I cannot see myself completing my performance routine the way I have done in the past. I see and feel myself as off-balanced and under-confident." Images such as these have previously been discussed by Schunk (1995) and Schinke (1999) as negative sources of efficacy based information. Imago Theory takes an understanding of negative images one step further by providing the reasons why they occur. When the promising and under confident athlete is placed under stress, all past feelings of inadequacy surface through images long before the possibility of performance excellence is abandoned. The coach's ability to forecast the pending abandonment of performance quality provides pathway to remedial discussions where the athlete can be provided with a combination of healthy perspective and confidence boosting information prior to the performance attempt. Herein lies a useful remedial tool that can be employed by the conscious and well skilled coach prior to the athlete's acquisition of additional negative personal experiences.

Understanding Body Responses - Section Two

Another pathway to confidence-based information is via the athlete's somatic response to athletic challenge or adversity (see Bandura, 1986). As others, including Orlick (1986) and Lynch (1992) have already noted, it is worthwhile to ask athletes to consider and write down their observations about how their bodies are reacting to specific situations during practice, prior to, during and after competition. The athlete's conscious awareness and subsequent sharing of tension, relaxation, fatigue or anxiety experiences, allows the coach to draw the link between the athlete's mind, body and performance. In relation to coaching intervention, somatic understanding can also help coaches understand where and when things are going wrong. In addition, somatic information can help the coach decide whether to direct the athlete toward relaxation techniques, activation techniques, or simply paying attention to the success of mind and body working in harmony (see Bandura, 1997). An example of athletes sharing self-observations of somatic reaction with their coaches may sound like this: "After my first performance glitch, I felt a profound tension in my shoulders, which affected the remainder of my performance in an adverse way." This search for understanding, or causality, serves as a first step in the useful exchange between athlete and coach. Once the athlete and coach are able to comprehend what seems to be happening to the athlete's body, they can reach for a well-suited compensatory strategy so that the athlete can learn how to gain or regain physiological control. Inevitably, as Bandura (1997) and Schinke (1999) have already noted, such mastery and coping measures could also improve

affective and psychological cues, and garner a level of athletic confidence leading to improved athletic competence.

Without a collaborative discussion on how the athlete's body is responding, conversely, the athlete, the coach, or both in collaboration, might select an inappropriate coping strategy such as an activation exercise including performance imagery to battle pre-competition nerves. According to Bandura (1997), such negative sources of somatic efficacy information, in turn would re-confirm past maladaptive coping techniques and a sustaining of prolonged athletic incompetence that otherwise could have been avoided. In essence, an incorrect coping response can entrench what Seligman (1991) depicts as a personally helpless pattern of behavior. One potential result might be the athlete believing that there is no relationship between personal strategic efforts and abilities, and resulting successful athletic achievements. When considering helplessness in lieu of Imago Therapy, a negative and despondent response to pressure can be associated with past unresolved difficulties, and it seems plausible that such difficulties might "restimulate" so long as the athlete confirms past maladaptive self-beliefs through inappropriate coping behaviors.

Understanding the Athlete's Feelings - Section Three

This section of the evaluation focuses on athletes' emotions. One word, specific descriptions should be provided during the affect-based component of the performance review. An exchange of affect-based information allows the coach and athlete to understand the reasoning behind a specific reaction or create an opportunity for further exploration of emotions that are either detracting or enhancing from the athlete's competence. An example may sound like "Today in my training I feel pressured and self-conscious as I am aware that spectators are watching me." Such awareness and articulation opens the door for further communication, decreases assumptions, and promotes a sense of empathy on the part of the coach. Conversely, a coach can use this opportunity to communicate to the athlete his or her sense of fatigue for example, so as to prevent a misconception that occasional temper or impatience was a personal issue aimed at the athlete. This point is increasingly crucial depending on the extent of earlier ego damage experienced by the athlete during childhood and other formative moments. Therefore, a collaborative discussion on feelings and responses can provide the coach with a better understanding of where and to what extent their athlete's insecurities reside. Open discussion can also provide coaches with an opportunity to explain what they meant in their instructional criticism so that it is not internalized (or attributed) as any form of permanent, personal or pervasive flaw on the part of the athlete (see Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). On both accounts, the improved dialogue between coach and athlete can only add to the coach's credibility and success via the athlete's confidence.

What I / You Liked About My Work - Section Four

In addition to images, somatic responses and feelings, the acknowledgement of performance can become another source of useful confidence-building information. Athletes can list numerous positive, specific, and measurable things they like about their

performance. This might be a challenge for elite and aspiring athletes providing they have been conditioned to be perfectionists, and as a result, they have learned to criticize themselves openly at will. In addition, when athletes have relished their performances, others might have previously discouraged them from "bragging." How can performers be expected to enjoy and duplicate success when they are not allowed to acknowledge with what is going well? This is a noteworthy point considering that Bandura (e.g., 1977, 1986, 1997) has repeatedly confirmed that the primary source of confidence is the self-acknowledgement of past correct performances. With this in mind, if the mandate is confidence building, it is necessary for athletes to go against what, for some, has been socially engrained, and acknowledge positive personal experiences.

It is imperative for coaches to provide numerous positive, measurable, and specific examples of feedback to the athlete. Given the professional credibility of most coaches, verbal persuasion and even positive facial expressions can add to the competence of a confidence-depleted athlete. This, too, carries forward from Bandura's aforementioned research on self-efficacy. Part of the mandate of a conscious coach, then, is to ask athletes to mirror or paraphrase feedback so as to increase probability that confidence-building information has registered intellectually and emotionally as part of the self-referent thought process. An example of such an instance during feedback to an equestrian may take the form: "I liked the way you applied constant, steady pressure with your lower calf during the canter to encourage the forward motion of your horse. Well done." In boxing, the feedback might resemble "I like the snap of that punch as a result of the way you rotated from your hips." Regardless of sport discipline, it is important to list as many positive and specific praises as possible. Athletes need to be at very least a little vain in order to retain their persistence, and so, their success over the long-term.

Technical Suggestions - Section Five

Technical suggestions are an additional source of confidence intervention that can be given by coaches to their athletes, and by athletes to themselves. A technical suggestion is not an order, but merely a suggestion meant to decrease the traditional manner in which correction is associated with criticism. A technical suggestion implies athlete agency and should always be stated in the positive so as to minimize defensiveness. It should also be as specific as possible so as not to leave any room for misinterpretation. Words like more, less, and bigger register in the brain in an abstract manner and are less effective. A very effective technical suggestion should conjure up a mental image for the athlete. For example, "I suggest that your warm up be a half an hour long" (in lieu of longer or more effective). A pathway should also be suggested as part of the feedback such as "And I suggest that to ensure this happens, you wear a watch and time your warm up." Not only should athletes be provided with clear and concise information, they should also be provided with a pathway regarding how to achieve it. It is this clear and concise approach that leads the athlete toward competence, and away from helplessness. To borrow from Seligman's (1991) and Peterson's (1980) earlier work in explanatory research, the emphasis with coaching feedback must be to target how and where to increase athletic effort and ensure that momentary athletic inability is not viewed as a result of permanent, personal, or pervasive athletic attributes.

The Growth Gift - Section Six

A "growth gift" is the final competence building component that should be given by coaches to their athletes, and by athletes to themselves. The growth gift, much like all other forms of feedback, should be positive, measurable and specific. An effective growth gift captures the individual's essence while simultaneously encouraging the potential for personal growth. An example of a growth gift for athletes who have difficulty experiencing their success or digesting praise, may sound like this: " For the next month, every time you practice your sport and someone pays you a compliment, mirror the compliment back to him or her. Accept the praise and say thank you while feeling the joy of appreciation." Much like the suggestions found in Step Four of this article, the growth gift encourages the athlete to acknowledge the correct elements in their performance. This form of cognition is provided as a substitute to the ongoing rumination and dissection that Schinke (2000) and Seligman (1991) have noted seems to be prevalent for many athletes as they strive for excellence. Schinke (2000) and Seligman (1991) have found that too much critical thinking about what is going wrong in performance serves as a contributory factor to helpless - despondent behavior. What the growth gift seems to contribute to the development of athletic competence is an ongoing awareness for the athlete of that which is right and worth persisting toward in sport. The coach's role in this regard is to ensure that a growth gift is provided to the athlete on a consistent basis so as to ensure that competence develops in a synergistic way over time.

Concluding Remarks

There has been literature targeting coaching, confidence and attribution interventions in sport contexts. Seligman (1991), Bandura (1990), Schinke (1999) and Martens (1990) elaborated on these topics in previous literature. These forms of interventions have been used in this article to assist athletes in matters related to athletic and personal development. In an attempt to further improve success rates as applied coaching and mental training consultants, we have continued to seek out adjunct skill sets to educate and facilitate the competence of our clients. One such skill set has been Imago Therapy. Though the intervention of situation specific, yet transferable, developments is not a new topic to the sport domain, the means through which we propose it be built is unique. It is suggested herein that it is worthwhile to enlist the help of coaches as a central directive source in order to establish or re-establish the competence of aspiring athletes. Many coaches are creditable sources of confidence-based information, and their support, providing that it is adaptive, can help build or rebuild optimism and confidence in promising athletes, both in and out of the competition domain.

For athletes to achieve their competence, however, one caveat must be made. Athletes come from personal backgrounds coaches and other sport professionals need to be aware of in order to mentor. Many practitioners [including coaches] have some conceptual understanding of the pains and weaknesses of the people they work with and guide. Despite such knowledge, their efforts can sometimes become frustrated. Further, it is presupposed herein that such efforts can have little to do with their athletes' abilities.

This article outlined the importance of coaches gaining a better developmental understanding of athletes' generalized experiential backgrounds. It was also suggested herein how to facilitate an improved situation specific and general developmental pattern for aspiring and developed athletes. The aforementioned coach - athlete interpersonal refinements can foster a level of sport excellence that is unattainable without a formalized method of coaching reflectivity.

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