The psychology of coaching – Communication
by Kevin Spink

The author stresses the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication skills in coach/athlete interaction, drawing practical examples from athletics. He suggests methods of self-monitoring and techniques for maximizing coaching efficiency.

1 Introduction

There is probably no single element of coaching more important than communication. An effective coach must be skilled at sending and receiving messages in a variety of situations: for example, he must give technical instructions; explain team strategy; discipline an athlete; correct a mistake; talk to an irate parent.

While most coaches would acknowledge that communication is important, and desire to improve their skills in this area, there is limited information available to illustrate how this may be done. In this paper, therefore, I will examine the process of communication and the common ways in which it can break down. I will then suggest some practical means for improvement, stressing the importance of consistent and appropriate words and actions for the best possible coach-athlete relationship.

2 What constitutes communication?

Communication is a simple process. It is the transmission and the exchange of information conveying meaning between two or more people (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981).

Let us consider an example to illustrate the process. A coach has just seen a pole vaulter make a basic mistake resulting in a failed attempt. He notes that the athlete waited for the pole to straighten during the rock-back phase before stretching his legs skyward. The coach walks up to the athlete sitting in the pit and in a very loud and attention-drawing voice yells out: ‘How many times have I told you not to do that?’
Won't you ever learn?' He then shrugs his shoulders and walks away. The athlete stands with a blank look on his face while all this is happening, and then walks away with his head down.

This coach-athlete interaction serves to illustrate several important points about the communication process. The first thing to note is that there are three basic elements (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981):

1. The sender (the coach)
2. The message ('You made a basic error.')</n3. The receiver (the pole vaulter)

The sender transmits a message through a channel to the receiver, who interprets the message and sends information back to the sender.

In the situation outlined above, the coach, having seen the mistake, translated his thoughts about what had occurred into a message appropriate for transmission. The message in this case was that the athlete had made a basic mistake that needed to be corrected. This was then transmitted by the coach through both verbal (raised voice) and non-verbal (the shoulder-shrugging) channels.

The message was received by the pole vaulter who attempted to interpret its meaning. As illustrated in this example, the receiver's interpretation is based not only on what is said (comprehension), but also on how it is said (intention) (Alder, 1983). Finally, the athlete responded to his interpretation of the message and provided feedback to the coach about whether the message was interpreted correctly.

3 Breakdowns in communication

3.1 Comprehension

In the above example, the blank stare and the dropping of the head should have informed the coach that the athlete had not received the appropriate message. Obviously communication had broken down in this instance, reducing the coach’s potential effectiveness.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, while the coach’s intention was correct, problems arose in what was said and how it was said. In what was said, the communication was ineffectual only because it did not go far enough. It is not enough for coaches to tell athletes that they have done something wrong; they must also complete the message by providing information on how to correct the problem. While the coach may have provided the right instruction many times before, it is obvious that the athlete was not able to carry out the instruction on this occasion, and the reason for this must be explored.

It is worth remembering that athletes do not set out with the intention of performing poorly; when they do there is usually an explanation for it. The effective coach, rather than becoming frustrated at the athlete’s inability to perform the skill correctly, looks for possible reasons and conveys the resultant information to the athlete. In our example, the failure of the athlete to raise his hips above shoulder level and stretch the legs skyward before the pole began to straighten caused his body to be thrown at the bar. If the coach had noted this information, he would have been able to complete his message by imparting it to the athlete. Unfortunately this was not done and, as a result, the athlete was not provided with the information necessary for correction of the error.

3.2 Intention

The communication problem was compounded by the manner in which the coach delivered the message. Rather than simply focusing on the specific problem of technique, the coach communicated ‘punitive’ – ‘putting down’ the athlete. This probably added to the pressure that the athlete was already feeling as a result of the mistake. This illustrates a very important point in error correction. The coach should always criticize the behaviour and never the athlete. Athletes can respect a coach who uses constructive criticism to correct errors but they often stop listening to coaches who put them down.
3.3 Feedback

As communication is a two-way process, the coach must be willing to evaluate the feedback that he receives from the athlete (Alder, 1983). In this example the feedback provided should have indicated that the message was not received as it was intended. The athlete's blank stare and bowed head should have led the coach to make another attempt at getting the message across, possibly using a different form of communication. The coach should be aware that often a single type of communication may not always be received and understood by an athlete.

4 Communication skills

4.1 Verbal and non-verbal cues

To circumvent this problem the coach should attempt several different forms of communication. For example, various types of verbal communication may be used. Coaches who provide multiple examples, give more than one explanation, or relate information to some previous and similar experience are increasing the probability that the athlete will receive and understand the message.

For instance, an athlete who does not seem to understand how to ‘throw’ the discus might respond better to the image created by talking about ‘slinging’ the discus. Or, the coach could communicate the correct information to the athlete by actual physical manipulation. He could physically move a hurdler’s trail leg, while the athlete is in a standing position, in order to illustrate the correct angles at the hip, knee and ankle of that leg during hurdle clearance.

Effective communicators are also aware of the importance of non-verbal cues. In a typical message, the impact can be divided as follows: what we say (verbal - 7%); how we say it (paralanguage - 38%) and what we do when we say it (body language - 55%) (Mehrabian, 1968). In other words, things like voice pitch and facial expressions are much more important than what we actually say. In our example, the loud voice and the shrugging of the shoulders are likely to have a much greater impact upon the athlete than the actual words used by the coach.

The choice of technique depends very much on the athlete. Certain athletes respond well to verbal instructions; others respond well to demonstrations; some need to be physically guided through the actions. As a rule of thumb, younger athletes often benefit most from this last form of communication because words and attentional abilities are often not developed enough to translate adequately words and demonstrations into correct actions.

4.2 Listening

Listening is also an important communication skill. Unfortunately, it is also a very neglected skill. It is interesting to note that untrained listeners only hear about 50% of what is said, and listen to only half of what they hear (Martens, 1987). To be good listeners, coaches must be able to demonstrate the following basic attending skills (Becvar, 1974).

First, they must learn to demonstrate empathetic attention as a listener. This means they must act in a manner that is consistent with the mood of the athlete. The coach who scowls at the sprinter for expressing some fear about a particular race, or who looks disinterested and detached when a high jumper approaches with some personal doubts about competing effectively in the forthcoming meet, is not an empathetic listener. Facial expressions and gestures should reflect some understanding of the feelings being expressed by the athlete. For example, if an athlete is expressing some type of fear the coach should exhibit a posture which exudes reassurance and calm. This could be accomplished by looking attentively at the athlete while putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

To become effective listeners, coaches must also become active listeners (Gordon, 1974). These are listeners who provide
feedback to indicate that they have understood what has been said. Coaches who are passive listeners, on the other hand, remain silent while the athlete is talking and give no indication that they understand or even care to understand what has been said.

There are a number of things that coaches can do to become active listeners. They can indicate their understanding of what the athlete has said by saying from time to time things such as ‘yes, I see’ or ‘I understand’ (this is called bridging); or by repeating verbatim the last few words of what the athlete has said (called re-stating); or by asking the athlete for clarification of any points not understood. Any of these methods will reveal to the athlete that the coach is both sensitive and attuned to situations. As a result, coaches are likely to get the most from athletes with whom they are interacting.

4.3 Consistency

One final point that deserves mention concerns consistency. Coaches must ensure that their verbal and non-verbal communications are consistent with each other. That is, coaches should exhibit behaviour that parallels their communications. Although this seems obvious, I know of coaches who have communicated to their athletes the virtues of ‘keeping one’s cool’ under pressure, yet who have become visibly
upset when an athlete does not win an event in an important meet. In situations such as this, the incompatibility between the coach’s actions and words serves only to confuse athletes who may think: ‘He is telling me to keep control, yet he gets out of control himself.’ Since actions generally speak louder than words, athletes will probably model the coach’s action rather than the words.

Are all your actions consistent with what you are communicating to your athletes? If you are not sure, get somebody else (i.e., team assistant, interested parent, spouse) to monitor your behaviour during practice and competition situations. You might want to sit down and consider what behaviour would be more appropriate. Here are two more examples of incompatibility that may serve to confuse the athlete and destroy the coach’s credibility. A coach who demands punctuality, yet lets training time run consistently longer than planned; and a coach who insists that the athletes be prepared, yet does not know his weekly or yearly training schedule. Other examples could be provided, but I think you get the idea.

5 Conclusion

In order to be effective a coach must be a skilled communicator. He must constantly monitor his actions and his words, ensuring that they are consistent, clear and appropriate. He must be aware that the communication process works two ways, listen to the messages that the athlete is attempting to transmit, and respond accordingly. While it may take some time to improve communication skills, the rewards will be worth the effort.

REFERENCES


