

The development of communication skills by elite basketball coaches

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Abstract

Schinke, Bloom, and Salmela [14] have articulated four developmental stages in basketball coaching: novice, developmental, national elite, and international elite. The current study uses these developmental stages of adult coaches as a framework for the study of the communication skills of six expert basketball coaches. The interviews with the coaches, using an in-depth open-ended approach, suggested that basketball coaches altered their communication skills as their careers progressed. During the novice stage, they struggled with their approaches to communication, leading to frustration for both themselves and their athletes. While in the developmental stage, coaches had higher expectation levels for their athletes, but still facilitated the creation of an environment in which their athletes acquired technical skills, self-confidence, and beneficial life skills. At higher levels of expertise in the national and international stages of coaching, the participants had a better understanding of the communication process. At the national elite level, for example, coaches perceived their role as a balance between refining successful performers and ensuring that their athletes also achieved comparable success in their academic and personal lives. International level coaches also recognized the importance of well adjusted athletes, but placed a higher emphasis on sport performance outcomes, and altered their methods of communication accordingly. It is clear from this study that as these coaches developed and refined their skills for better communication with their athletes, they were better equipped to move up the coaching career ladder.

Key words: coaching, development, communication, expertise, basketball.

Introduction

Whether it is a word of encouragement, a special glance, a pre-game pep-talk, or a one-on-one meeting behind closed doors, communication lies at the heart of effective coaching. Despite the apparent practical importance of communication, Hanrahan and Gallois [8] have noted that there has been almost no direct empirical study of this process in a sporting context.

Martens [12] has provided one of the clearest definitions of this construct, citing three dimensions to help explain the communication process: sending-receiving, verbal-nonverbal, and content-emotion. Sending-receiving messages means that coaches must be skillful senders of information, as well as expert listeners for receiving messages. Verbal-nonverbal means that communication not only includes what coaches say, but also their facial gestures and body movements. Finally, coaching contains both the content or substance of the message as well as how you feel about it.

Martens' [12] thoughts on communication are very insightful and a number of ways are listed for coaches to evaluate their communication skills with athletes. Critical attributes of coaching include being positive, unpretentious, nonevaluative, and emotional. By contrast, practices such as transmitting incorrect information and failing to consider the needs of athletes, were cited as reasons for ineffective communication. According to Martens, a positive approach was the most important attribute a coach could possess.

While Martens' [12] guidelines are far reaching, it should be noted that none of them are based on cited empirical research. With the possible exception of research on leadership and coach-athlete interaction, empirical research on communication has generally been studied in combination with other variables [8]. Smith, Smoll, and Hunt [15] for example, examined youth sport coaches using the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS), a tool which tracks the communication strategies employed by the coach, and how frequently they are used. The coach's use of positive reinforcement, non reinforcement, punishment, ability to ignore mis-