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, nonevaluate, 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 mistakes, and general technical instruction are all monitored. The CBAS has enabled coaches to assess their communication practices and make any necessary adjustments.

Gould, Hodge, Peterson, and Giannini [6] have em-
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phrased the relationship between coaching strategies and the enhancement of athletes' self-confidence. One hundred and one successful intercollegiate wrestling coaches were surveyed in the first part of their study to determine which coaching techniques and strategies were most effective. The sample for the second part of their research consisted of coaches from over 30 different individual and team sports. The authors found that acting confidently, providing encouragement, and directing physical conditioning and instruction drills were used most frequently by coaches. Gould and associates also found that differences existed in the communication styles of team and individual sport coaches: team sport coaches favored instruction and drills more than individual sport coaches.

While most of the literature has emphasized the problem of communication from the coach's perspective, Bloom [1] approached the problem from the athlete's viewpoint. Three stages were identified in the development of talent: the initiation into a sport; a middle period devoted to the development of talent; and finally, a period of full-time commitment to the sport. Each of these stages offered insights into the communication practices of coaches and teachers. During the first stage, coaches motivated their athletes to play, experiment, and enjoy the sport experience through sharing their excitement and encouraging their efforts. While in the second stage, performers sought technically competent coaches who provided encouragement that was contingent upon progress. During the third stage of expertise development, athletes became almost entirely responsible for their progress. Coaches acted as collegial partners, helping athletes polish their skills for the international arena. As a result, communication evolved to a greater degree into a two-way process. While Bloom's study emphasized individual sports, and coaching communication styles were not the central concern, the author's results merit consideration given the insights they provide into the evolution of the athlete-coach relationship across their careers.

Other studies on coaching and communication have been based on a narrower research time base, namely during one stage of a coach's career. A survey by Gould and Martens [7], for example, found that many volunteer coaches of young athletes emphasized the well-being of their charges, and strove to go beyond teaching sport skills by providing positive lessons such as sportsmanship and cooperation. The coaches saw the personal development and happiness of athletes as falling within their coaching mandate, should have a chance to play.

Lacy and colleagues [9, 10] examined the behavior of youth coaches during practice sessions, using the Arizona State University Observation Instrument (ASUOI). In the first study, Lacy and Darst analyzed the teaching/coaching behavior of 10 successful high school head football coaches, and found that technical instruction occurred three times more frequently than other forms of communication, including praise. In the second study, Lacy and Goldston examined 10 high school basketball coaches, and found nearly half the interactions during practice between coaches and athletes were instructional in nature. In sum, both of these studies indicated that a coach's at this level emphasized instruction more than anything else.

They believed that every athlete on their team

Research from Côté and colleagues [3, 5] have examined the perspectives of expert coaches in the development of elite athletes. In their research, 17 top gymnastics coaches were interviewed to explore the structure of their coaching knowledge. Through an inductive analysis of the data, a coaching model (CM) was developed, consisting of three central components of competition, organization, and training. While this research provided an analysis of the content and structure of coaches' knowledge, the preferred communication styles of these coaches were not discussed in detail. This is not to say they did not exist, rather the goal of the research did not look into this process. Thus, it appears that more research is needed to help explain this phenomenon as it relates to expert coaches.

Schinke, Bloom, and Salmela [14] looked at the career development of expert basketball coaches and found seven stages in their athletic and coaching careers. The first three stages, early sport participation, elite sport, and international elite sport, emphasized the coaches' experiences as athletes and the subsequent influence it had on their evolving coaching philosophies. The final four stages tracked the evolution of the participants' coaching careers, beginning with their first career appointments as novice coaches at community centers, public schools, or as player-coaches. During the second developmental stage, they obtained paid positions working with aspiring athletes. By the third stage, the national elite level, the coaches began working with university or provincial team athletes. Finally, coaches who progressed to the international elite coaching level worked with Olympic, World Championship, Pan-American, or World University Game athletes. The purpose of Schinke et al.'s study was to identify both the athletic and coaching stages of development of expert basketball coaches, rather than focusing upon their communication styles with athletes.

The current study will employ Schinke et al.'s [14] four coaching stages of development in order to determine how basketball coaches changed their communi-
cation styles across each stage of their coaching careers. More specifically, it is hypothesized that communication is a developmental process and that the coaches' communication styles will change as they progress up the coaching ladder. The significance of this study is threefold. First, it will study communication independently, not as one variable among many others. Second, it will utilize elite coaches to study this process. Finally, it will allow the coaches to recall and discuss the development of their communication over time. That is, it will seek to outline the changes in communication over time rather than the mechanisms explaining these changes.

**Method**

**Participants**

Six highly successful Canadian basketball coaches were identified for the interview process by officials in their national sport governing body. The coaches were selected based on their win/loss ratios as well as their impact on national and international athletes they had developed at the time of selection. All coaches had more than 10 years of coaching experience at an elite level, with the average being 19.7 years. The average age of the coaches was 51.5, varying from 42 to 61 years. The sample was comprised of five males and one female, including two former coaches from the men's national team, two former coaches from the women's national team, the current women's national team coach, and one very successful women's university basketball coach.

**Procedure**

Each coach was interviewed by the senior researcher for approximately 1.5 to 3 hours, with one interview lasting 5.5 hours. Four of the six interviews were conducted in the respective coach's office, one in a hotel room, and one at a coach's home. The interviewer was familiar with the nature and terminology of basketball and with each coach's history.

**Interview technique.**

Patton's [13] interview guide approach was employed to elicit the knowledge of each coach, using an open-ended semi-structured protocol. This method of interviewing allowed the coaches first to follow the general interview guidelines, and then to move into personalized directions that they chose to share. Coaches discussed their personal athletic history, evolving visions of coaching, team building procedures, approaches to training and competition, and reflections on improving coach education. When these coaches discussed themes without going into depth, the researcher elicited more detailed information by probing, using who, what, where, when, and how types of questions. For example, when discussing athlete discipline, the interviewer asked the coaches to further elaborate on this topic by using a probe question, such as: "Can you give me specific details of ways in which you disciplined your athletes?"

**Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and resulted in 296 double-spaced pages of interview manuscript. The transcripts were read and edited for spelling and grammar without altering their essence. They were then segmented into "meaning units" based on criteria provided by Côté and colleagues [2, 4] for analyzing qualitative data. Tesch [16] defined a meaning unit as a "segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode or piece of information" (p. 116).

In the original analysis of the data, each meaning unit was coded into one of three stages of athletic development or one of four stages of coaching development, and then sorted based on shared characteristics, which involved creating higher order categories [4]. For this study, each meaning unit in the four coaching stages of development was re-analyzed by the same authors to determine whether or not it dealt with the topic of communication. Of the 602 total meaning units in the original study, 402 or 66.8% were considered relevant to the process of communication, and were used for the present analysis.

**Establishing trustworthiness.**

One concern frequently raised about naturalistic inquiry is its reliability. How does the researcher differentiate a subjective observation from data that can be considered reliable? More specifically, naturalistic inquirers are often questioned in regards to the trustworthiness [11] or credibility [13] of their data. Three precautions were taken to ensure the validity of the results in this analysis: familiarity, persistent interviewing, and peer debriefing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaching Stage</th>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Developmental</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>International</th>
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<td>Number of MU related to Communication</td>
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<td>91.9</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. Number of Meaning Units of Communication per coaching stages in their careers.
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1) Familiarity: This term presupposes that the individual who conducts the interviews is familiar with the area of study, allowing the interviewer to benefit from what Lincoln and Guba [11] refer to as "prolonged engagement", which renders "the inquirer open to the multiple influences - the mutual shapers and contextual factors - that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied" (p. 304). The question of familiarity was addressed in the present study, as the interviewer was involved in many dimensions of sport, as a participant, official, coach, and sport psychology consultant. As a researcher in sport studies, he has published books and articles in the sporting domain for close to 25 years. Furthermore, the interview transcripts were returned to the participants before the data analysis took place so they could authenticate the transcripts, a process referred to as member checking [11]. This allowed the coaches the opportunity of checking the accuracy of the data; more precisely, was the information they relayed to the interviewer an accurate representation of what they were actually thinking and doing. It also provided the coaches the opportunity of deleting any text episodes they might have felt were sensitive, offensive, or inaccurate.

2) Persistent interviewing: Whereas the previous step provided scope to the analysis, a process known as persistent interviewing added depth [11]. The naturalist must "continuously engage in tentative labeling of what are taken as salient factors and then exploring them in detail, to the point where either the initial assessment is seen to be erroneous, or the factors are understood in a nonsuperficial way" [11] (p. 304). Thus, the coaches were often probed for clarification [13] to ensure that what they were saying was understood and that they had enough time to complete their full thought processes. Furthermore, the coaches were always given the chance to revisit any issue or idea which they felt was important or needed further clarification. Finally, the interview always ended with the following question: "Is there anything else that has not been covered that you feel is an important aspect of your job?"

3) Peer debriefing: This task meant that members of the research team met regularly to discuss all aspects of the analysis process [11]. Two individuals with experience in qualitative research acted as debriefers or judges at all levels of the coding process. They randomly examined 25% of the meaning units, whereby a list of all the codes/tags was provided and the code/tag best representing each meaning unit was individually selected. The judges discussed all individual results and discrepancies until a consensus was reached. For the purpose of this analysis, each meaning unit was re-analyzed to determine whether or not it related to communication. The coders conducted this analysis separately, until a consensus was reached on the accurate coding of all 602 meaning units.

Results

Our present intention was to explain the development of communication styles for basketball coaches. The four stages of novice coaching, developmental coaching, national elite coaching, and international elite coaching, were used to help situate this evolving process over their careers.

Novice Coaching

Novice coaching involved entry level positions that included coaching a variety of sports in a primary school or community setting [14]. During their initial stage, coaches indicated they were searching for comfortable approaches to communication, as they were not sure whether to speak with athletes in a non-threatening way or to be authoritative. In most cases, the coaches began with a more autocratic style of leadership:

- We did a lot of hollering and we were like Matt and Jeff on the bench. We had a lack of knowledge of what we were doing. We were expending all this energy and yelling at these kids because they weren't doing what we had taught them.
- The problem you run into when you start coaching is that you are more into plays and patterns than players. I think everybody goes through that phase because it is easier to tell five guys what to do.

As the coaches experimented, they encountered either skepticism or fear in their athletes. In some cases, athletes were uncomfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, frustrating the coaches in turn. The communication dynamic between coach and athlete became an ineffective one-way learning process:

- If a kid missed a shot, I would yell "Come on make that shot!" When I did that the girls would just kind of look at me and then I wouldn't get anything out of them. So I stopped that very quickly.
- I was known to be brutally frank. Sometimes the kids were intimidated and so tense. These kind of scenarios made me really doubt how good my information translation was. I really had a big problem with information communication and the translation of it.

The coaches soon had to search for a better way of communicating, one which would instill athletes' confidence, increase their commitment to sport, and create a more positive and productive learning environment.

Developmental Coaching

Developmental coaching positions were at the high school level and competitions were now used to judge
the progress of the team [14]. During this stage, coaches attempted to integrate what they had learned at the novice stage, namely the necessity of creating a training environment for athletes that was both enjoyable and structured, one where coaches could freely experiment with their interpersonal approaches of communication.

Although coaches now had higher performance expectations, they still began to communicate in a more amicable way:

* I was still very enthusiastic but I don't think I yelled as much. I don't know whether they cried the first couple of times, but I became less abusive.

* We needed other things, such as a conceptual understanding and a management style that was more conducive to cooperation as opposed to authority.

* I started to expend less energy into a cheerleading fashion as opposed to now directing and encouraging I started to ease off and became more of a coach and less of a cheerleader.

Many of the coaches also tried to teach their athletes values that extended beyond sport, ones which would improve their athletes' levels of self-confidence.

* When I coached basketball in a competitive summer camp. I used to get the kids together and say how tough we were going to be and that we were not going to be intimidated. None of us were going to back down from anything, and that we were going to dish it out as well.

During the developmental stage, each coach placed comparable importance on the refinement of their players' athletic and personal skills, recognizing that successful athletes come from an environment dedicated to encouraging the acquisition of technical skills, self-confidence, and life skills. These coaches also understood that failure to provide such an environment would eventually limit their athletes' commitment to the sport, and increase their chances of dropping out.

**National Elite Coaching**

Coaches during this stage now worked with university teams or coached regional teams at national competitions [14]. The coaches realized their interactions with athletes would now have to include a wider variety of subject matter than just their technical skill development. Coaches took a more involved approach with their athletes by talking to them about proper diets and maintaining a balance between their social, scholastic, and athletic responsibilities:

* I would say to a girl that I wanted to see her tomorrow. She would bring in her log book and we would take a look and see that she had a real bad day or practice. I would say, "What happened yesterday? " We would chat a bit, and af-ter that I would try to help her park her problems for a while.

* At times, some of my team members were up half the night studying for a mid-term. Health can become a huge problem with student athletes who are constantly tired and run down. They are young, and a lot of them are away from home for the first time. As a result, I was always talking to them to see if they were healthy.

Once training began, the coaches provided feedback for their athletes in a way that was constructive and caring. At this level, the coaches knew the approach to communication was at least as important as the content they transmitted:

* I think it is critical with today's kids that you don't bully or brow beat them. You have to coax them, convince them, define standards and let them know when they don't meet those standards. You have got to do it in a much softer way.

* As I got better and became more professional, I knew that my decisions became more palatable. My delivery made it much more palatable, so there was compliance rather than challenge.

At this level, the coaches were just as committed to their athletes as the athletes were to the team. They were expected to produce successful nationally competitive teams, and ensuring success involved creating a secure environment for their athletes:

* I make a commitment to those kids, and I mean that commitment. They in turn should be working to get better, to be as close to their potential in year five as they can possibly be. They are part of the team and they know that they are there for five years. There is a give and take on both sides that is carefully monitored at the end of each year.

* Players are much more relaxed and play better when they are not playing with fear. I now have a much better relationship with the team and I am also a much happier coach. However, I am no less intense, organized, or demanding than before.

The first three stages of development were directed by their attempts to teach two important lessons. First, was the necessity of creating a healthy learning environment for athletes. Second, was the importance of good communication, designed to inspire mutual commitment. The final stage was more directed towards performance outcomes than the process of coaching.

**International Elite Coaching**

Five of the six coaches achieved positions with the Canadian National Team, qualifying them as international elite coaches [14]. The transition to the interna-
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tional coaching stage involved a conscious decision by these coaches to move their game to another level. During this stage, the coaches also became responsible to national sport federations, the media, and the public. Inevitably, these added pressures affected, and at times, even strained, the coach-athlete relationship:

- We understand that respect is hard to come by. The problem is if I am the coach and you are the player, you have a responsibility mostly to yourself. However, I have a responsibility to myself, you, my employers, and whomever else I am accountable to.

Coaches at this stage soon learned their job security was contingent on their ability to produce winning results. Though the coaches still wanted to remain loyal to their athletes, there was no longer room for unconditional support. Inevitably, the coaches were left with no choice but to voice these realities to their athletes:

- Eventually I am going to talk to them about their skills, the mistakes they are making and about how we can win. They are going to be uncomfortable because we are going to ask them to get it done or put in somebody else that will get it done. I am trying to do something that will lead to winning.

- To me the area that we overlook in coaching is that you’re supposed to be positive with everyone - only positive reinforcement will work. Well, life’s not like that. It’s full of brutal experiences. You can be the most positive person in the world but you ‘d better be prepared for some real intense pressure, pressure that you don’t even know exists. Much of the pressure is self-imposed by your competitiveness, but also in dealing, coping, and maintaining your focus. It’s not easy to maintain your standards, while remaining human, to create an environment where everyone is trying to excel, where they are trying to achieve and do their very best.

It is implicitly understood by athletes selected for national teams that their coaches have the final say. However, the results of this study revealed that even at the highest level, coaches attempted, to a certain degree, to empower athletes by involving them in the decision-making process. The coaches understood that at this level, more than ever before, commitment to the team and the team’s vision, could only come via two-way communication:

- Sometimes a player gets mad and says, “Coach, what the hell is going on?” “I don’t want them to be mad, but it is okay for them to have this forum. I couldn’t handle that when I was younger. It was a challenge to my integrity and ability, and it was threatening.

According to the coaches, before the athlete truly commits to the team’s mission, even at the Olympic lev-
Discussion

The present study was influenced by literature related to aspects of coaching development and communication. This research provided information about the career evolution of aspiring coaches and the communication process of coaches working with various athletic populations. The present intention was to consider the developmental nature of communication styles for coaches of team sports using a four-stage developmental process that was earlier identified [14]. More specifically, the four stages of novice, developmental, national elite, and international elite coaching were used to help situate this evolving process across the careers of selected expert basketball coaches.

Earlier empirical and non-empirical research was more concerned with identifying the behaviors and type of communication used by coaches during one stage of their career [6, 12, 15]. The present study extended these findings by incorporating a framework that explained why coaches behaved in a certain manner and how they changed their approaches to work with athletes at different levels throughout their coaching careers.

Many similarities between Bloom's [1] study and the present research can be seen, although the former concentrated on the evolution of talented performers. During the first stage of development of Bloom, coaches of young athletes provided a supportive and encouraging environment. The coaches in the present study also acknowledged the importance of trying to craft an enjoyable and encouraging environment while training young performers. However, they found this was not such an easy task and they often reverted to an ineffective authoritarian style.

A comparison of Bloom's [1] middle coaching stage with the developmental stage in this study suggested further similarities. Coaches in both studies recognized the importance of establishing a balance between technical feedback and intermittent social approval. The present research also suggested the necessity of maintaining this balance even for older athletes in order to sustain their commitment to sport. In addition, developing coaches also tried to teach positive life skills to their athletes, allowing them to derive the benefit of self-confidence and a sense of belonging to a team. While the coaches in the previous stage may have contemplated teaching values to their athletes, most did not actually do so until the developmental level.

The characteristics of elite level coaches in Bloom's [1] study paralleled those of the international elite level coaches in the current study. Coaches in both studies became more collegial and often played a more subservient, supportive role with their athletes. The coaches provided feedback on skill refinement, while the athletes strove for performance excellence. The present study furthered Bloom's research by identifying the importance of athlete involvement, namely in decision-making. The coaches were aware, especially at the highest levels, that having athletes buy into their mission facilitated athlete empowerment, improved performance motivation, and increased enjoyment.

The current research corroborates findings on developmental aspects of coaching from Gould and Martens [7]. For example, during the novice level, the present coaches, like those in Gould and Martens' study, developed a specific coaching mandate when working with recreational level children and adolescents. There was a recognition that in order to motivate children, the coaches' primary tasks were to provide encouragement with the aim of increasing a novice performer's commitment to sport, while also teaching them positive life values. In the current study, however, novice level coaches were not always as patient as those described by Gould and Martens, perhaps because these coaches were more ambitious than many of their athletes. As a result, several of the coaches initially intimidated their athletes, which led to the creation of learning environments which were emotionally upsetting and counterproductive. Perhaps, the present coaches were never meant to work with novice athletes.

The work of Lacy and colleagues [9, 10] also has other implications for this work. In their research, the central component of effective coaching for team sports was instructional feedback, where praise was used at least three times more often than scolding. Coaches in the developmental stage of the present research described a coaching approach which complemented that of the coaches in Lacy and colleagues' work. The current sample of coaches recognized that to teach competitive sport, and to satisfy and motivate athletes, they had to provide skill related technical feedback in a supportive environment. They also explained to the researchers that through a balanced approach on issues in sport and life, they would ensure concurrent performance success and personal growth. The present research, however, differed from that of Lacy and associates, as it used a qualitative framework which provided coaches with an opportunity to share their professional approaches to the communication process. Communication was used by the coaches to promote sport skill as well as healthy perspectives for life.

The recent work of Côté and colleagues [3, 5] is consistent with the present findings. For example, at the elite level, Côté and associates found gymnastics coaches needed to support their athletes in order to push them both physically and psychologically to the highest levels. The nature of that support included developing a sense of empathy for the athletes and construction of a
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partnership to deal with issues such as diet, rest, family, and personal conflict. Côte et al., however, only looked at gymnastic coaches who deal with younger athletes who tend to require more individual attention. The present findings, however, suggest that the emphasis on sport and life skills is also demonstrated by elite coaches, although the relative emphasis on each area differs.

There are also certain implications for the findings of Schinke, Bloom, and Salmela [14]. In the previous study, the aim was to articulate the different stages of a coach's development, rather than examine a single part of any stage in detail. The present study found there were distinct communication patterns in each coaching stage. This was particularly evident at the national and international elite levels. University coaches, to name one sample, perceived their role as a balance between refining successful performers and ensuring that their athletes also achieved similar 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, and adjusted their method of communicating accordingly. When international athletes were not able to perform up to expectations, they were replaced with athletes who could.

It is clear from this sample of internationally recognized basketball coaches that as they developed and refined their skills for better communication with their athletes, they were able to advance their careers. Future research on communication must take these developmental levels of expertise into account.

References