

Athlete Centered Coaching / Effective Coaching

An Effective Coaching Philosophy: (Applying to all Coaching Communities)

This resource is developed for an Effective Coaching Module:

The coach will be able to:

- Explain his/her philosophy of athlete-centred coaching.

This resource has been divided into three key parts. The first deals with the **ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach**, a philosophy of Sport and Recreation. The second part discusses how coaches coach and how they might use a range of coaching modes for athlete learning. The last considers differences in characteristics between athlete-centred and coach-centred coaches and the athletes they coach.

Part 1: ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach

What is it?

The ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach is a philosophy to unleash the potential of athletes through a style of coaching that promotes **learning** through athlete **ownership**, **awareness** and **responsibility**. It describes a way of coaching that encourages coaches to increase the awareness and responsibility of the athlete by asking questions as opposed to giving instructions. It is founded in the belief that people are best at finding their own way and that this will lead to higher levels of performance.

The ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach has evolved from the desire of the Coaching Team ideal to clearly describe what being “athlete centred, coach led” really means for coaches - in practice - on a day to day basis. The thinking underpinning the ATHLETE CENTERED Coach Approach is based on research, literature and best practice in sport, education and business, integrated with the practical experience of a number of coaches.

Why?

It has become clear that the method of instructing (i.e. telling an athlete what to do) is not the most effective way of supporting athlete learning and development. Coaches often report that they have to tell athletes over and over again the same things, and then under pressure of competition athletes go back to their old habits. Training sessions are frequently focused primarily on the knowledge the coach has. This way of coaching can stifle the athletes’ own potential, thinking, decision making and creativity and limit these to the extent of the imagination and experience of the coach.

Where do the ideas come from?

The ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach is based on a number of practices and concepts – It originated from a group of experienced coaches evaluating what worked and didn’t work for them. They also evaluated what appears to work for other coaches who are successful both in keeping their athletes participating in sport and in developing performance.

Concepts that have been used in developing the ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach are:

- Leadership
- Empowerment
- Principles of learning
- Understanding the athlete e.g. learning preferences
- Emotional Intelligence
- Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU)
- The Inner Game

What do coaches do?

The purpose of coaching is for athletes to learn about how things work best for them. First, this is about their individual physical and mental makeup, and where they are with technical and tactical development. Second, it is about being able to perform to their best when in competition or when challenged. The ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach has this purpose very clearly in mind – to develop independent athletes who are aware of what is theirs (ownership) in terms of performance. This ownership encourages them to be responsible for their performance and this responsibility will enable them to repeat that performance as and when required – consistently and sustainably.

Basically at a training session, the ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach would lead a coach to:

- provide a planned and structured environment based on a shared goal short term/vision (long term)
- enable athlete/s to “do” the skill or “practice” the tactic
- then ask questions about what the athlete is noticing about his/her own performance.

The intended outcome is that in a competitive situation the athlete will preferably just compete, be in the moment and react based on his/her self-awareness of the situation or movement. Part of the self belief will be that he/she has an appropriate goal and knows that he/she can get back on track when something goes astray. The learning that happens at training should be about developing that skill – the skill of self correcting or self coaching and being the best that you can be on that day.

If the athlete does find he/she needs to adapt then he/she will be able to draw on focused attention learned in training situations. The focused attention may be about:

- What am I noticing?
- What would I like to do better?
- Where is the discomfort?
- Where am I now? – rating scale
- Where would I like to be? How would I like it to be?

This focused attention is noticed “in the moment”. A judgement that is tinged with the emotion of looking at the outcome (after the moment - either good or bad) can take away the focus. Focused attention will enable the athlete to avoid judging him/herself and his/her performance, as that awareness enables him/her to focus on something identified as important to him/her.

While the above description of the ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach focuses mostly on coaches helping the athlete find his/her own way, the approach does acknowledge that there will be times when coaches will decide it is necessary to give instructions. This can happen in particular when there is time pressure. The necessity to be directive is a signal for the coach that there is something that has not been learned in training and needs to be addressed at a future training session. However, as much as possible, it is advantageous for athletes and their performance if coaches attempt to move back into ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach processes. The most effective way for coaches to upskill themselves in utilizing the ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach is to seek regular feedback about their coaching.

Coaches will need to develop their questioning skills to use the ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach through gaining experience in asking open and probing questions. The GROW model provides a sequence that coaches can use to develop the types of questions to ask:

- G** What is your **Goal**? (what are you wanting to achieve etc)
- R** **Reality** – what is happening now?
- O** **Options** – what options do you have?
- W** What **Will** you do now? – What are you going to do? (then loop around to the goal again) – What did you notice now that you have had your turn?

The ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach and its underpinning philosophy are equally relevant for team or individual sports, and for children, teenagers or adults. When a coach uses the ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach, an athlete has the opportunity to function as a complete, integrated, human being and this experience fosters the recognition that when performing, all aspects of the individual – physical, emotional, social and cognitive – are engaged (Lombardo, 1999). The purpose is to enable athletes to be self-aware and involve them in the process of sport by learning, doing, thinking, and feeling holistically.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS IN ATHLETE CENTERED COACHING APPROACH		
	DEFINITIONS	POSSIBLE COACH QUESTIONS
	What does this mean for coaching?	What do you want to achieve this turn/ this training session/this season?
ATHLETE-CENTRED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops independent, confident athletes able to “coach” themselves Learners LEARN, coaches only help the process <i>Rod Thorpe</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you notice? What would you need to do about that? What is your goal for this season?
AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being in the moment. Helping athletes to be aware of what they are doing at the time rather than telling them what you think as the coach. Increasing focused attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are you noticing What are you aware of? Is there anything you would like to do better? What did you focus on?
RESPONSIBILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choosing to take action Choosing to work with the intensity level required to achieve the goal Choosing to work consciously while training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are you trying to do? What happens now? What could you do to meet that goal? What will you do?
ATHLETE OWNERSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The process belongs to the athletes. They are participating, performing, training because they believe in the cause. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where do you see yourself at the end of the season? Where are you now? What could you do to get to that goal of the season? What will you do?
ANALYSIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What the coach sees or the athlete thinks removed from the moment of doing. (Analysis can be initiated through video, tactical games (TGfU) etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the best way to get around the defence? What happened in the last 100 metres of the race?
EMPOWERMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An environment which: consists of mutual visions, values or principles the individual owns mutually established clear roles, responsibilities and boundaries. the individual is doing it for him/herself, but sees and owns the big picture (vision) and has self-determination (establishes values and strategies). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are our goals? What strategies do we need to meet those goals? What values will you live by when attending to the strategies? What is our overall vision?
GROW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The GROW questioning framework is a simple way for coaches to focus on the types of questions to ask. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> G: stands for the Goal: “What are you trying to do?” R: stands for Reality, “Ok, what is happening now?” O: stands for the Options athletes (or coaches when mentoring), might have, eg. “What could you do?” W: stands for the question, considering these, “what Will you do?”
TGFU - Teaching Games for Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning progressively through meaningful and appropriate games. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The game is the question or problem to solve.

Part 2: Coaching Modes

It is recognised that effective coaching requires the coach to vary his/her approach according to the needs of the athlete at that particular moment. There is a range of coaching modes and coaches will shift within this range depending on factors like the immediate needs of the athlete/group, time constraints, health and safety issues and athlete receptiveness.

Athletes need to have self belief to just ‘do it’. How does the coach help them to ‘get there’? Three ways of working as a coach are: (There are lots of combinations within this.)

1. Instructional mode (doing as the coach says) – the coach talks, the athlete listens and tries to do what the coach tells them (the athlete’s body responds).
2. Analytical mode (creating analysis) – the coach encourages analysis (either with or without technology), discussion, thinking and/or planning, for example about what worked or what to try next time (the athlete’s mind responds).
3. ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach mode (creating awareness) – the coach helps the athlete to be in the moment and feel/notice what is happening (humanistic/holistic – mind and body respond together).

The table below presents a visual picture of this range of coaching modes.

	Instructional Mode	Analytical Mode	ATHLETE CENTERED Coaching Approach Mode
Coach	Instructs	Asks questions for analysis	Asks questions for creating awareness
What is the athlete doing?	Listening	Thinking, then doing and/or thinking while doing	doing
What is the primary outcome for the athlete?	Compliance	Understanding	Self correction and self belief
What is the athlete using?	The physical body	The mind/brain	The mind and body together

An example of ‘coaching’ someone to walk up the stairs with a hot cup of tea is posed here for consideration. The coach could:

1. Tell the person how to walk up the stairs – describe for the person what actions he/she needs to take.
2. Discuss with the person what he/she does when walking up the stairs, asks how could they do it differently and then ask the person try it.
3. Ask the person to walk up the stairs.

Part 3: Athlete-centred Philosophy

The following two tables provide an overview of the characteristics of athlete centred coaches and coach-centred coaches (two ends of the coaching continuum – see Figure 1). This may be useful when discussing the athlete centred coaching philosophy. These tables emphasise why the “how to” of coaching significantly affects athlete learning. The characteristics in the athlete-centred columns provide a focus for effective coaching approaches that underpin all learning outcomes for this module. An athlete-centred coaching approach helps to develop talented people, who take responsibility for their own learning, regardless of the coaching community they participate in, or their stage of development.

Figure 1: Coaching Continuum

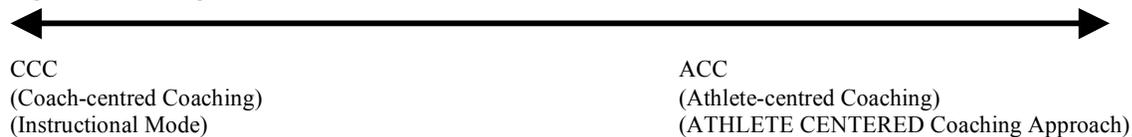


Table 1: Practices that characterize coach-centred and athlete-centred coaches

Coach-Centred Coach	Athlete-Centred Coach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides an environment of dependency • expects the team to conform to his/her ways of doing • speaks to rather than listens to the athletes • tells athletes only what he/she thinks they need to know to suit his/her needs • expects athletes to conform to values established by him/her • has a ‘winning at all costs’ attitude, which promotes unfair or illegal practices • does not actively discourage acts of cheating or unprofessional ways of seeking an advantage • treats the team as one, rather than as individuals • does not accept athletes’ opinions • insists that athletes abide by his/her rules • is organised • is inflexible and not open minded • makes the decisions for the athletes or team • asks closed and redundant, or few questions • criticises mistakes • uses threats or punishment to coerce athletes into following coaches’ expectations of behaviour • provides feedback of what to fix • is a disciplinarian • insists on his/her way or the highway • coaches to win, rather than to develop or educate athletes • promotes fear of failure • does not ask for athlete’ evaluations of his/her coaching • does not monitor or assess psychological and emotional experience as much as physical and technical ones • fails to exercise a caring, athlete-centred approach • stresses extrinsic rewards over intrinsic values • promotes the role of sport as the most important aspect of athletes’ lives • promotes dictatorship and a ‘one size fits all’ philosophy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides a safe and confirming environment • encourages wairua (a spirituality Maori term encompassing all aspects of ensuring oneness within a team) • is empathetic and caring towards his/her athletes • listens to athletes and takes them seriously • is honest and open • reinforces values and morals through facilitation of teams’ goals and the coach’s own actions (role model) • values all athletes contributions equally, but accepts each athlete as a unique individual • gives athletes responsibility to encourage accountability for their actions • is purposeful and provides meaning to learning • accepts athletes’ opinions • makes each athlete feel capable of succeeding • through athlete responsibility, establishes reasonable limits for behaviour • organises and plans training sessions • is flexible and open-ended • provides athletes with appropriate choices and opportunities for decision making • assists athletes in establishing team and individual goals and values; goals should be multiple (outcome goals should NOT be the only ones) • asks questions of his/her players; encourages problem solving and critical thinking • provides information to players about their performance and other matters related to the team • answers questions, encourages players to ask questions and seek knowledge • assists players in analysing their individual and the team actions and feelings • learns about his/her athletes, takes a personal interest in each one and “gets to know them” • promotes a healthy attitude toward sport and competition; stresses the intrinsic value over extrinsic rewards, the importance for respect for opponents, and other ethical values • recognises the role of sport in a larger society, which should be democratic and egalitarian.

Table 2: A comparison of characteristics of athletes who are coached by athlete-centred and coach-centred coaches

Coach-centred Athletes often:	Athlete-centred Athletes often:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have their goals set for them • feel as if they don’t have a say in any direction • lack enthusiasm • are treated as a means to an end • make no decisions • talk back when they’ve had enough • compete ‘robotically’ • display anger and stubbornness • listen to the coach’s way • have a disrespectful attitude • are defensive when challenged • get easily frustrated • are not listened to • feel that there is no respect or trust from the coach • are encouraged to be individuals and therefore show uncooperativeness • lack confidence and competence to make informed decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set their own goals and have an intrinsic desire to reach them • enjoy their sport • show enthusiasm • develop self-efficacy and confidence in their ability and are enabled to control results produced by their skill and effort • understand that they contribute and take responsibility for their learning and direction • are accountable for their actions • are resourceful and innovative • feel that they are important because of coaches’ actions in understanding the athletes (e.g. listening, empathy) • understand that there is a mutual trust and respect • cooperate to enhance mutual goals and directions • are more coachable because they have freedom and choice • are highly committed to achieving levels of excellence • are willing to engage totally in what they believe

Adapted from Kidman, L. and Davis, W. (2006), Empowerment in Coaching, In J. Broadhead and W. Davis (Eds) , *Ecological Task Analysis Perspectives on Movement*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

References:

Kidman, L. and Davis, W. (2006), Empowerment in Coaching, In J. Broadhead and W. Davis (Eds) , *Ecological Task Analysis Perspectives on Movement*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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