

Effective coaching: Case studies from professional sport teams in Australia

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PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

- The purpose of the present study was to investigate the concept of effective coaching based on observations and interviews conducted with three professional sports teams in Australia.
- This aim was to provide a series of case-studies in order to provide contextual examples of professional coaching in Australia and add to the pre-existing literature in the area of effective coaching.
- Furthermore, recording the views of professional coaches and athletes from a variety of team sports provided insight into their perceptions of the pedagogical features (e.g. planning, instruction), psychological techniques (e.g. motivation, developing team cohesion), interpersonal strategies (e.g. building strong athlete-coach relationships, communication skills), personal characteristics (e.g. attitudes, beliefs and philosophies) and contextual factors (e.g. facilities) that influence effective coaching.

METHODS and SAMPLE

- This study employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the notion of effective coaching in a professional sport environment. A case study approach (1) was combined with Grounded Theory (2) analytic techniques and adapted to coaching by Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell (3) to frame the project and analyse the data.
- The research involved a multi-mode approach to data collection in order to review participants' cognitive perceptions (through interviews) and coaching behaviours (through observations) in relation to the topic of effective coaching.
- Three professional teams from Australia were involved in this research project with one each from cricket, rugby league and rugby union. These teams are all involved in 'league' style competitions carried out at the highest possible representative level below international competition.
- A total of 41 semi-structured observations were carried out at team training sessions, team meetings and during competition over a four month period.
- Six coaches and 28 athletes were interviewed regarding their views on effective coaching at a professional level.

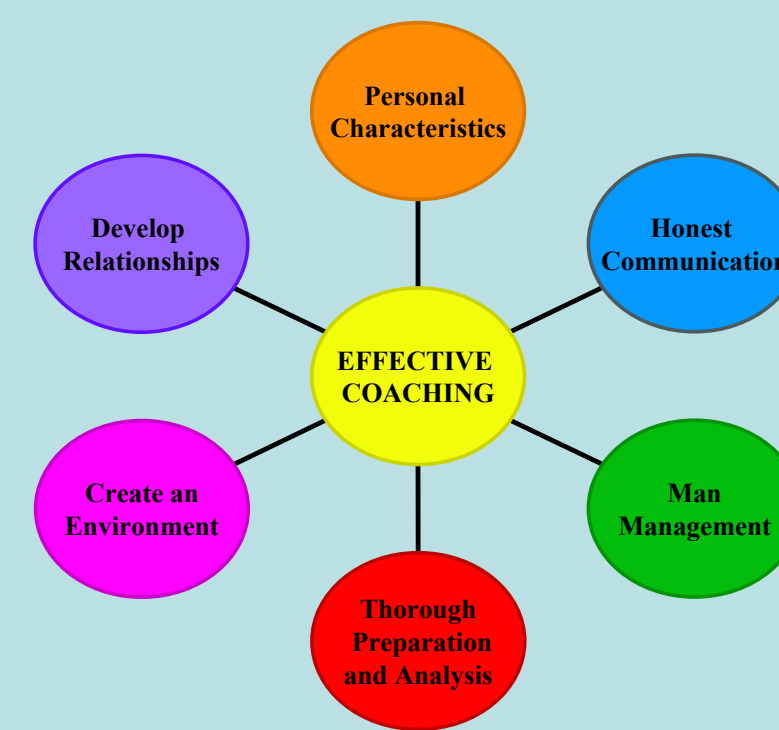


RESULTS

- This section outlines the combined results from observations and interviews with each professional sport team.
- According to the interview data, the key to effective coaching was being able to communicate in an open and honest manner in a variety of contexts.
- This was deemed fundamental for developing relationships within the club, gaining the respect of the athletes, developing an open and honest club environment, and providing feedback.
- Effective coaching involves the creation of a challenging, open and enjoyable environment where player input is encouraged, and responsibilities are delegated to both players and assistant coaching staff members.
- A team goal or vision is essential to ensure that everyone is 'on the same page' when working towards achieving success. This is central to providing direction for 'acceptable' behaviours both on and off the field.
- Effective coaches develop trustworthy, respectful and honest relationships both with coaching staff and players yet maintain a professional distance at all times.
- Effective coaches are man managers who attempt to understand and attend to individual needs both on and off the training ground.
- The results indicated that training sessions must have a clear purpose, involve a variety of tasks, be implemented in a precise and efficient manner, and completed at a high intensity.
- Whilst at training, coaches alternated roles by taking time to provide instruction, observe, and then provide feedback to the athletes.
- Effective coaches possess a variety of personal characteristics such as being knowledgeable in all areas of the game they coach; were approachable, honest, well organised, and relaxed. Their personal philosophy became the key to developing an effective environment in which to coach, develop athletes potential, and ultimately enjoy success both on and off the field.

DISCUSSION

- This section intended to provide a cross case analysis of the results from the three sport teams and link the findings with research that has been conducted previously in the area of sports coaching.
- Similar to previous research (4,5) in the field of coaching, the results of this study indicated that effective coaches possess certain personal characteristics such as being committed, motivated, approachable, and passionate. They also lead by example, communicate effectively, created an enjoyable environment, and were well organised.



- Open and honest communication was identified by the participants as integral for establishing trust with and respect between coaches and athletes. This specific communication style was not identified in previous systematic observations of coach behaviour and communication patterns during training and games which tend to focus on 'what' effective coaches' said rather than 'how' they communicate.
- Similar to previous research with elite gymnasts (3), expert rowers (6) and professional Australian footballers (7); the results from the field observations and interviews that an effective coach creates an open, challenging and enjoyable environment for athletes both on and off the field. Coaches and athletes believed that a positive environment is important for maintaining athlete commitment and enhancing performance.
- As in Vallée & Bloom's (5) study, one of the top priorities for a successful club is for the coach to establish a vision: a central purpose to direct the team's behaviours both on and off the field. Coaches both in this study and in Côté & Sedgwick (6) developed a detailed (and collaborative) vision which included specific goals and directions in order for the team to be successful.
- Developing open, honest, trustworthy and respectful relationships were seen as vital to effective coaching and as a fundamental part of an enjoyable environment/culture. Interestingly, Côté & Sedgwick's (6) study was the only research paper that specifically acknowledged the importance of establishing positive rapport with each athlete. According to the participants in this study, good relationships between staff and between staff and athletes set the tone for commitment to the team's overall success.

- As in Côté & Sedgwick's (6) work with expert rowers, effective coaches were considered to be "man-managers" who identify and attend to the varying individual differences amongst the playing group. This is because each player may potentially react in a different way to the coach's criticism, positive reinforcement or correction; are motivated by different things, communicate in various manners; and have varying levels of confidence in their abilities.
- Similar to previous research (6,8,3), effective coaches are well organised, plan thoroughly for meetings, training sessions and matches by conducting video analysis of both their own and opposing team's strengths and weaknesses.

CONCLUSIONS

- Whilst standardised approaches to researching coaching have emphasised technical elements considered to be vital for effective coaching, the results of this study revealed that effective coaching also involves a variety of key social skills, personal characteristics, and organisational expertise.
- The limited and mixed sample size means that future research to complement this project may instead focus on effective coaching within the same sports context in order to provide a more in depth and specific examination within the one competitive environment.

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