

Coach Communication: What you see is what you get!

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INTRODUCTION

- Match-day preparation plays a significant role in the physical, mental, and performance preparation of athletes. At the high-performance level it is a planned and managed process for coaches and athletes (See Figure 1).
- Research investigating match-day preparation has focused on the physical and mental preparation of athletes. Performance preparation, the communication of the game or event plan, is yet to be explored.
- Coach communication is recognized as a key component of good coaching (e.g, Chelladurai & Riemer, 1992; Horn, 2002; Kellet, 1999) however, research until recently has been restricted to the content of verbal coach instruction.
- Communication is a two-way process that involves encoding by the coach and decoding by the athlete. Based on developmental definitions of communication, communication between the coach and athlete is influenced by the coach-athlete relationship (Montgomery, 1988). As the coach-athlete relationship progresses the athlete develops a deeper understanding of the coach as an individual and is better able to pick up non-verbal communication signals. Alternatively, it may take time for athletes to understand the complex language and requirements of the sport as communicated by the coach (McPherson & Kernodle, 2003). As athletes gain experience they may be better able to decipher the language and develop a clear mental model of performance information and expectations.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of athlete experience on decoding pre-game communication.

METHOD

Participants

- The participants in this study were athletes and coaches from a division 2 rugby team in Ireland.
- Athletes N = 20 Coaches N = 2 (head coach and fitness coach)
- Athletes were divided into four groups based on experience
 1. Freshman (first year university athletes)
 2. Experienced athletes (2-3 years university experience)
 3. Academy athletes (members of the provincial rugby academy)
 4. Captain

Research Design

- This study was initiated by rugby coaches working with a division two senior men's team. They wanted to improve their match-day preparation with a focus on communication. An action learning approach was utilized to enable the coaching team to be responsive to feedback and make adjustments during the season.

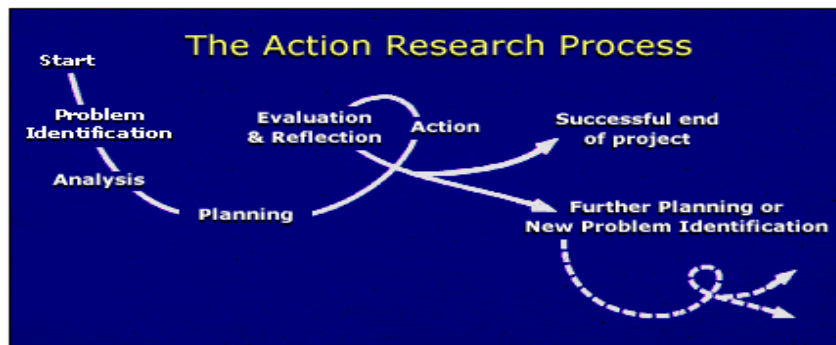


Figure 2. The action research cycle

- Structured interviews were conducted after every game with the captain and representative members from the other three groups. The head coach's pre-game and half-time talks were transcribed and his post game analysis was emailed to the researcher.

RESULTS

Information collected during the analysis phase (see Figure. 2) of the study indicated that athletes with different levels of experience differed in their interpretation and use of information. Freshman and experienced athletes focused on pre-game information related to their own performance. The academy athletes and the captain concentrated on information about the opposition and strategies to counter the opposition. The following athletes are describing the same game plan.

Freshman

...to get my aggression out on the pitch and be aggressive out there and that it would be a tough environment to play in against a tough opposition...

Academy athlete

...that my opposition was typically out of position and the coaches felt he was vulnerable to attack and that he would have difficulty with some switch moves, also [opposition pitch] was a hostile ground so players knew what to expect from this hostile environment...

Captain

To stop a particular player, their most influential player. He was involved in a lot of game play and it was important to stop him playing.

Common observations across all athletes were: (a) the delivery of pre-game information was most potent in the training sessions prior to the game, (b) information delivered using visual cues clarified the pre-game message, (c) athletes remembered cue works that summarized game plays, and (d) in the majority of cases the defensive message was not received.

The delivery of pre-game information began at the Thursday training session prior to the weekend game. In some cases it was a verbal communication, or a combination of verbal information followed by a light training session to practice strategies, and in a limited number of pre-game talks verbal information was supported by video footage.

Pre-game information was retained best when verbal information was combined with a light workout where players practiced some of the strategies to be implemented in the game.

Academy athlete

...not so much on the Tuesday but on the team run on Friday night. It was laid on the table on Friday as the team ran its moves and options...

The verbal and kinesthetic delivery of the message assisted in clarifying coach expectations. However, the clearest pre-game message delivered by the coach during the season was the session where a video clip was used to explain performance expectations.

Captain

The game plan was presented on Thursday night when the team met with the coaches. The game plan was never as apparent as in this game; athletes knew exactly what was expected of them after the video session.

In this session the coach explained what he was seeing in the video clip and then discussed the pre-game plan. This visual representation helped the coach and athletes establish the same mental model and clarify pre-game performance expectations.

There were particular cue words that athletes found effective and easy to remember as part of their own preparation. These cue words are part of the rugby language and many of the athletes would have been exposed to this language prior to playing for the university. For example, the term *same same* was a representation of play that required athletes to continually pass to the same side of the field.

The team captain was the only athlete to decode the defensive message communicated by the coach. This may be influenced by his captain's role and the need to be the leader and decision-maker on the field. It could also be that culturally players concentrate on the offensive components of the game and defense plays a less significant role.

DISCUSSION

Coach communication has traditionally focused on the verbal content of information delivered to athletes. The results from this study suggest communication delivered through multiple mediums, in this case kinesthetic performance and visual presentation, provide athletes with a clearer understanding of what the coach is trying to communicate. The coach and athlete are working towards a shared mental model of what is expected on the playing pitch. This shared mental model is also influenced by athlete experience.

The athletes best able to analyze and strategize information in this study were high performance athletes who were members of the provincial rugby academy as well as representing the university rugby team. The academy athletes had a deep understanding of the tactical and strategic components of the game. These athletes are on long term development programmes designed to improve their skill and knowledge

of the game. This form of deliberate practice may have enhanced the academy athlete's ability to decode information and transfer it to their game play.

Coaches working with athletes of mixed experience need to be cognizant of what message they plan to deliver and how best to deliver it so all athletes are prepared for the game.

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