

THE COACH-ATHLETE COMMUNICATION PROCESS. TOWARDS A BETTER HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN SPORT

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Abstract

Interpersonal communication plays a key role in obtaining success in sports. Two important parties that communicate in sport are the coach and his athlete(s). The latter one(s) can be seen as the human resources a coach has to manage. These human resources are property of a sports club or team and. In order to improve his management, the coach has to communicate with the athlete(s), face to face interaction defining the nature of sport. The better the management and the interpersonal communication, the better the sporting results. The coach can obtain these improvements by transferring his knowledge to the athlete or even by changing knowledge with him/her, depending on the level of sport the two actors place themselves together. This paper presents how knowledge is communicated at the different levels of sport and which are the four anchors that coaches can use in their communication with the athlete in order to improve the human resources management in sport.

Keywords: coach-athlete communication, sports management, knowledge dynamics, communication anchors

1. INTRODUCTION

Being a sport coach doesn't just mean physically training your athlete(s). The job of a coach implies also managerial and leadership abilities. Because sport means working with people, communication plays a vital part in obtaining succes.

Communication defines human beings in each relationship they have, private or professional. One of the research interests over the last forty years was the athlete-coach dyad. Researchers such as Poczwadowski, Jowett, Mageau or Wylleman focused their studies on how sporting performance and succes are influenced by the way coach and athlete communicate (Poczwadowski, 2002, 2004; Jowett, 2003, 2004; Mageau, 2003; Wylleman 2000). Communication between the coach and the athlete is a factor of succes and this paper presents how knowledge is communicated at the different levels of sport and which are the four anchors that coaches can use in their communication with the athlete in order to improve the human resources management in sport, to be precise, the management of the athletes in their sporting activities

2. THE TWO KNOWLEDGE DYNAMICS DYADS OF THE ATHLETE-COACH RELATIONSHIP

There are two knowledge dynamics dyads that can be analyzed in the coach-athlete relationship: the explicit knowledge – tacit knowledge dyad (also known as the old dyad) and the cognitive knowledge – emotional knowledge dyad (also known as the new dyad). Both are important for achieving success in professional sport, but the way in which they manifest themselves in the interpersonal relation are different.

To better understand the way the dyads work in professional sports, a look at the different levels of sports. Sports can be categorized in a pyramidal form of four levels¹, as shown in Figure 1.

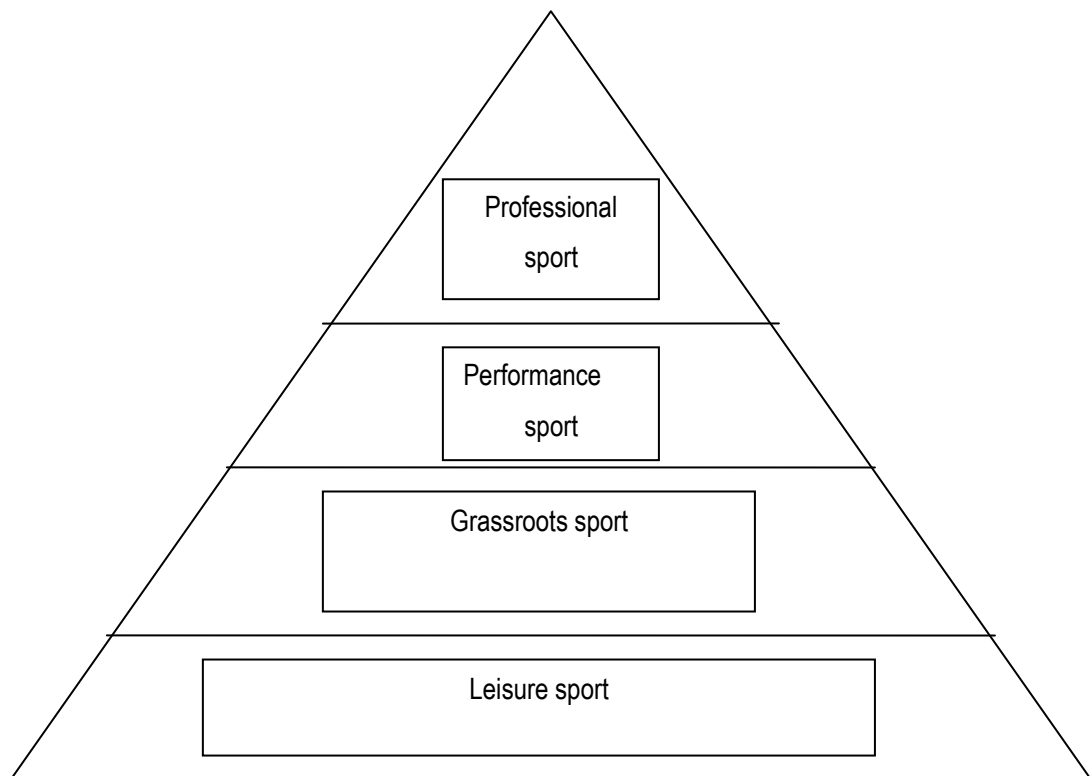


FIGURE 1 - THE FOUR LEVELS OF SPORT IN A PYRAMIDAL FORM

At the bottom of the pyramid there is the leisure sport, that means the kind of sport people, whatever their age, use to practice in order to relax. For example, this is the sport done by people for recreating after a day at the office. The step upwards, we can find the grassroots sport, practiced, commonly, by people who join a sports club so that they can practice sports on a regular basis. This is a more organized form of sports than the leisure sports, because the club assesses a coach to train the members, so this is the minimum level from which we can talk about the coach-athlete communication. Moving further up, we will find the performance

¹ The four levels are enough to explain how the knowledge dynamics dyads work.

sport. While at the grassroots level people still practiced sport for their own health and fitness, at the performance level we can talk about athletes in competition. Another difference between the grassroots and the levels above it is the age. The majority of athletes who practice for performance and who wish to have or already have sport as a profession are aged somewhere between 14 and 36 years old.

Moreover, the lifecycle of the levels of sport can be identical with the one of an athlete: kids begin to do sports as a leisure when they are really young, after which many of them sign in at a sports club so that they can practice their beloved sport in an organised way. The really talented youngsters of the sports club are entered into local, regional, national or international competitions, compete against other valuable athletes. The performance-orientation being formed and from now on athletes practice in order to defeat their opponent and to win prizes. Many of the athletes identify themselves with the club they represent and those ones who are really talented end up to sign professional working contracts with sport entities. The end goal is to obtain succes in a highly competitve environment.

Table 1 analyses the four levels of sport, showing for each of them what type of sport is practiced, which are its goals and its frequency of practice, and how is the communication between coach and athlete.

Table 1 - The four levels of sport, their specifics and the type of coach-athlete communication is used

Level	Type of sport	Goals	Frequency of practice	Coach-athlete communication
Top Level	Professional sport	Obtain success in highly competitive sport	On a daily basis, as a job	Professional, based on both dyads of knowledge dynamics
Intermediary Level 2	Performance sport	Competing with other athletes and winning	On a regular basis imposed by the environment	Communication begins to be performance-oriented, clear targets are being set by the coach, deep knowledge transfer from the coach to the athlete
Intermediary Level 1	Grassroots sport	Recreation, personal health and wellbeing	On a regular basis imposed by the club	First time coach-athlete communication; explicit knowledge begins to be transformed in tacit knowledge
Bottom Level	Leisure sport	Recreation, personal health and wellbeing	Without any regular basis	Inexistent

Beginning with grassroots sport and ending with their career in professional sports, athletes are accompanied by coaches, who have the job to train them, to show them the way to sporting success, as well as to prepare them for life, because what a teacher is for a scholar, that is the coach for an athlete.

So, there is a relation between the athlete and the coach. The key element of the relation is communication. Without it, the athlete can't let the coach know about his needs, feelings or desires, nor can the coach transfer his knowledge upon the athlete in order to help him improve his sporting capacity.

TABLE 2 - COMMUNICATION OF KNOWLEDGE AT THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SPORT

Level	Communicated information	Types of knowledge
Top Level	Professional information	The four types of knowledge are already developed by now; tacit and emotional knowledge play an important role in communication
Intermediary Level 2	Elevated information about practicing the selected type of sport	Explicit, tacit, cognitive and emotional knowledge are being developed
Intermediary Level 1	Elementary information about practicing the selected type of sport	Explicit knowledge begins to be transferred from the coach to the athlete; emotional knowledge at the athlete is beginning to be built
Bottom Level	No communicated information; there is no athlete-coach relationship	Mostly tacit knowledge (learning by experience)

Table 2 shows how knowledge is communicated at the different levels of sport. At the bottom level, as long as there is no coach and persons do sports only for their personal interest², there is also no interpersonal communication. Despite of that, the person who does sport gains knowledge through practicing. It is tacit knowledge that is accumulated by experiencing.

If the person decides to enter a sports club, she/he will keep the tacit knowledge. Also, the person will be working with a coach, coming closer to what is known as an athlete. From this moment on, the coach begins to transfer his knowledge onto the athlete, by explaining him – through words, signs or practical demonstrations – what he has to do in order to improve his sporting qualities. Both dyads of knowledge are being developed and the first signs of emotional knowledge – sentimental bondness between athlete, coach and the sporting activities they build and share - can be traced.

When making the step to professional sports, the athlete already possesses explicit, tacit, cognitive and emotional knowledge. Working with an athlete who has learned the fundamentals of sports by now, the coach can send the sportsperson elevated information about the sports discipline the two of them are practicing. Communication and transfer of information are facilitated thanks to the knowledge capital the athlete has

² Not for the interest of a sports club.

built. The coach insists on explaining a lot of cognitive knowledge to the athlete, with the goal to train the latter as good as possible for the professional career.

When making the step to professionalism, the athlete already has the necessary knowledge to properly practice his sports discipline and to take part to competitions. Although cognitive information is still transmitted, the better the athlete and the competitions he is entering in are, the more emotional knowledge will be used in training. Professional athletes don't need detailed explanations, because they already know what they have to do, but what they need is motivation to perform well and to win. The coach can obtain this motivation through using emotions.

3. COACH-ATHLETE COMMUNICATION IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

The relation with the coach is an important factor for the athlete's success in professional sports. The athlete needs to gain knowledge and experience from the coach, whose role is even to communicate knowledge and experience to the athlete (Philippe, 2006). The athlete and the coach are entering a relationship and, if they really want success in sport, then they both have to invest in it.

The simplest way to describe a relation would be to say that coach and athlete come and work together. Their interdependence makes them want to invest in the relation. A coach wouldn't achieve success without the athlete who participates in competition (in this case, the athlete is the driver through which the coach reaches sporting success, because it is the athlete who directly competes on the field against other athletes in search for glory, not the coach), as well as the athlete would find it hard to be successful without having a coach to send him knowledge and to advise him. The more serious the two are and the better the investment which comes from both parties, the higher are the chances for success.

In order to improve the relation with the athlete and to raise the chances of maximum sporting achievement, the coach can use four anchors of communication.

4. THE FOUR ANCHORS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACH AND ATHLETE IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

Poczwardowski identifies six types of communication between coach and athlete (Poczwardowski, 2006), of which four will be presented as anchors in the relation the two social actors build in professional sports. In order to better understand the four anchors of communication, it is good to say that the coach communicates in three ways with his athletes: (a) as an instructor, (b) as a mentor and (c) as a manager. The coach must not be just an instructor, he has to be a leader and a manager as well, so that he can motivate and organize his athletes.

Instructive (behavioristic) communication means that the coach sends information regarding the physical and tactical behavior of the athlete. Types of such information can be:

- The way how the athlete has to perform a training exercise or how he has to perform in competition;
- The tactical roles the athlete has to play on the field.

The coach is a mentor (or a leader) when he has a socio-psychological communication with the athlete. The physical movement of the athlete is not important any more, but that what counts in this type of communication is the mental wellness of the athlete. Just as Muhammad Ali, one of the biggest sportsmen of all times, said, you have to have the skill and the will, but the will must be stronger than the skill in order to be successful. So, even though the coach communicates all the tactical aspects of the game to the athlete, the two may find out they are not successful, because the athlete isn't mentally strong enough to perform well. This is why the coach mustn't be just an instructor, but a leader as well. He has to use the dyads of communication in order to socio-psychologically influence the athlete, to prepare not just his body for the competition, but also his mind and his soul.

As a manager, the coach has the role to make the best use of the resources he has in order to obtain success. This means the coach has to use communication to send the values and the norms of the sports team/club to the athlete, to help him integrate and feel good in the team, so that the athlete can perform well.

Instructive, psychological and managerial communication being presented, the four anchors of coach-athlete communication can be explained.

1) Individual communication

Individual communication is the direct communication between coach and athlete. The coach is sending information just to a single person, without any intermediaries. He is not communicating to the team, but to the individual athlete, trying to manipulate his perceptions, his motives or his needs, in order to make him perform better. Individual communication is less present in team sports as in individual sports.

2) Group communication

When communicating to the group, the coach is transferring knowledge and information upon the whole team of athletes. His goal is to communicate principles which are general to all the athletes in the team, like for example how the team has to perform in a match. In some sports, like ice-hockey, rugby or american football, the coach also uses to split the team into different groups, depending on the roles each group has in the

game. For example, in rugby often communicates separate to the forwards³, because the some of the instructions he has to give to them are different from the ones of the rest of the team.

3) Institutional communication

The coach communicates institutionally when he transfers the values, the norms and the rules of the sport club or team to his athletes, as individuals or as a group. So, the coach plays the role of a manager, to whom the athlete is a human resource he has to integrate as good as he can in the club or in team in order to raise its sporting performance. The coach has to communicate and make the athlete identify himself with the club he is representing.

4) Cultural communication

Because the culture – whichever its type, be it local, regional, national, international or organizational – is the foundation of success, the coach has to make the athlete understand it. The coach and the athlete have to adapt the communication so that their relationship will be based on the same culture, to be precise the organizational culture of the team or the club they are part of. For example, when an athlete moves from a sport team to another, the new coach has to integrate him in the team by communicating the values, the principles and the norms that form organizational culture of the team.

The process of communicating the culture can take place intentionally or involuntarily. The coach communicates intentionally when he transmits elaborated information to the athlete, with the purpose to persuade him and make him think within the boundaries of the culture of the sports club/team. The athlete is conscious that the coach wants to make him change his point of view and to switch to a specific culture. Often, coaches are the ones who decisively influence the culture of the team through the vision they have.

On the other hand side, there is an involuntary communication, in which the simple existence of objects and human beings sends information to the athlete. For example, the architecture of a stadium can tell much about the culture of the owner club and, by simply practicing in that stadium, the athlete unconsciously assimilates some norms and values which he also unconsciously tries to respect, so that his behavior adapts to what he assimilates.

Involuntary communication can improve the relationship between coach and athlete, because it keeps a secret that coaches should use in order to bring sporting success closer: it may sound funny, but involuntary communication can be done intentionally. Coaches can act in such a way that they influence the athlete without letting him know that. For example, a coach demands to his athlete to repeat the same exercise for many times, telling him he has to do it for improving his practice in competition. This may be true, but what

³ Forwards are the rugby players who play in the forward line.

the coach also wants is to make the athlete understand that in that sport team, seriosity and hard-work are within the cultural values. If the athlete doesn't respect them, he won't be successful. By continuously repeating the exercise, the athlete assimilates the values in his unconsciousness. There will be a moment when the athlete will realize that he has to work hard and seriously if he wants to be successful. That moment, the uncouncious will transform into councious, and the athlete will finally receive the message the coach has intended to send to him through involuntary communication.

Coaches have to intentionally use involuntary communication if they want to influence the athletes, but they have to bare in mind that the results won't come out soon. The athlete needs time to interpret the messages the coach sends to him through signs – not through words -, so the transition of the idea from the uncounciosness to counciousness of the athlete is a long term process.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is essential that coach and athlete communicate, asuming they both want to achieve sporting success. As Poczwardowski and Jowett point out, communication is an essential factor in coaching, managing and mentoring (Poczwardowski, 2002; Jowett, 2004). This paper has tried to identify different communication types in sport, making a difference between the four levels of sport: leisure sport, grassroots sport, performance sport and professional sport. If most of the recent researches in this field (Poczwardowski, 2002, 2004; Jowett, 2003, 2004; Mageau, 2003) concentrate on only a single level of sport – either leisure sport or performance sport, in most of the cases – the present paper analyses the coach-athlete communication characteristics at all the four levels of sport, taking a deeper look, at the end, on the cases of professional and performance sport. The two levels were chosen with the goal to exemplify how the leader and manager roles of a coach can influence the sporting succes of the athlete. The link with the process of communication is made by the fact that without communicating, either intentionally or involuntary, a coach can't motivate (leadership role), nor organize (management role) his athletes. The paper demonstrates that, if he wants to guide his athletes to success, the coach has to communicate. For coaches who are active in professional sports, the research proposes four anchors of communication which the former ones can use in order to better communicate to their athletes: individual, group, institutional and cultural communication. An exclamation mark must be set upon the cultural communication. Many coaches do not realize what an important role the cultural communication plays in obtaining success. Most of them concentrate just on communicating sporting facts, which are technical, but neglect the cultural values. This is why the paper tried to present some cases that underline the importance of the cultural factor in sport, like for example the change of teams or coaches by an athlete.

Depending on the level of sport, the coach will adopt different communication styles, so that he can better address to his athlete(s). Next to individual or group communication, institutional and cultural communication play a crucial role, even if these two latter forms happen involuntary. Evenmore, involuntary communication can sometimes have a higher impact than intentional communication. Fact is that next to the sporting-tactical communication, a coach must send institutional and cultural values to his athletes too, especially in professional sports.

Ideas for future researches could analyze even in more detail the communication process, concentrating only on professional and performance sports, because these are the levels at which the coach and the athlete spend the most time together, which means the level at which they most communicate. Moreover, such a research could be conducted as a case study of a professional sports team, bringing real life examples to complete the theoretical study. This study wasn't ment to concentrate on a particular practical example, but future researches could try this, in order to evidentiare how coach-athlete communication have influenced sporting succes in reality. By having an example, coaches can try to implement research ideas in their own job. This move could lead to the development of sporting quality, which brings higher performances to the athletes.

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