

2 - Coach - Athlete Communication

Getting it Right

by Diane Culver and Emma Stodel (613) 741-9578
PhD. Candidates – Sport Psychology - University of Ottawa

Consider for a moment the following scenario. Coach Rob takes a large team to the provincial championships. Among his athletes is Mike, a quiet boy who is coming back from an injury and feeling pressure to perform. Mike perceives that his pre-race training has gone well but he has not had any feedback from Rob who is busy organizing the large team, and who also does not want to put any additional pressure on Mike. Mike skis well in the race but makes a mistake towards the end of the course. Rob decides not to say anything to Mike, because he had been skiing well up to that point. Mike is upset because nothing was said and thinks that Rob is disappointed in him. However, he does not approach Rob because he does not want to bother him. What has happened to the communication in this interaction? The most important lesson from this example is that even a decision to not deliver a message results in a message being received. In fact, one cannot *not* communicate. As this example demonstrates, communication is a complex issue. Breakdowns in communication can have serious repercussions for the coach-athlete relationship.

There is probably no single element of the coaching process that is more important than communication (Spink, 1991). Indeed, being an effective communicator is a distinguishing characteristic of expert coaches (Bloom, 1996). Despite this, little time is devoted to helping ski coaches become better communicators. A study of coach-athlete communication on a national team ski team found that even though both coaches and athletes declared that effective communication must be a two-way process, in reality it is often not. Factors such as individual communication skills, previous experience, the situation and power issues were all found to interfere with the communication process. In this article, we recommend seven strategies to facilitate effective communication during coaching practice.

Be positive

Research has indicated that a positive approach leads to greater athlete satisfaction, higher self-esteem, more learning, and better results. Create a supportive learning environment where athlete development is fostered and your belief in them is affirmed. Provide constructive feedback. Use positive images and language to illustrate the behaviors that you want athletes to model rather than highlighting errors. Be respectful in all your interactions.

Listen

H. D. Thoreau once remarked “it takes two to speak the truth ... one to speak and another to hear”. The word communication comes from the Latin *communico*, which means to share. In order to share you have to listen, with your ears *and* your eyes.

Get to know your athletes.

Ski coaching is challenging because although skiing is an individual sport, training is almost always done in groups. Learning is optimized when good one-on-one communication prevails. Your athletes are your partners in the communication process so become familiar with their

individual communication styles and past experiences which may affect the communication process. For example, ask racers to tell you what type of cues best facilitate technical change for them.

Check for understanding

The critical component of communication is what the receiver understands. Rather than asking, “Do you understand?” ask the athlete to relay the information back to you, or even to your assistant or someone else nearby. If the message involves technique, get the racer to show precisely what moves they will try to do to implement the changes referred to in the message.

Remember your position as coach is perceived as powerful

Within the sub-culture of a ski team the coach is in a position of power, a fact that can complicate communication with racers. Most racers will want the coach to think well of them and will therefore be reluctant to discuss negative issues. Fear of injury and returning after injury are common problems that tend to be overlooked or simply ignored in coach-athlete communication. Just because an athlete is given the go-ahead physically, this does not mean that emotionally and psychologically they are ready. Giving athletes some control over the pace of their reintegration can help them to get back on a solid footing. The racer must be allowed to feel that ultimately, they can make the final decision regarding readiness, *without any repercussions*. Coaches can assist racers by allowing them to discuss their fear, letting them know that it is okay, that others have faced it also, and helping them to control it by making a plan to build up confidence.

Emotional and psychological issues are the hardest to address

All but the very timid athlete will feel quite comfortable initiating messages to do with technique and tactics. On the other hand, even the most outgoing athlete will be very reluctant to address issues relating to emotional and psychological factors. It is the job of coaches to help athletes deal with these factors by finding the appropriate time and way of initiating communication regarding these sensitive issues. Athletes have stated that knowing the coach believes in them enhances learning by giving them the confidence to change.

Be aware of the consequences of your messages

While it may appear that at times racers do not seem to be listening, most coaches would be surprised at just how much impact their messages, verbal or non-verbal, have on athletes. Delivered or interpreted the wrong way, a message can mark an athlete for a long time. Coaches need to think before they communicate and judge the appropriateness of their words, tone and gestures.

Effective communication is the foundation of the coach-athlete relationship, which in turn supports productive coaching. Because good communication must be a two-way process, athletes also have their role to play in the process. However, especially in developmental stages, the coach must take the lead in ensuring that communication is indeed effective. Keeping in mind the points addressed in this article will help coaching performance and at the same time move athletes towards greater autonomy.

References

Bloom, G. A. (1996). Life at the top. In J. H. Salmela (Ed.), Great job coach! (pp. 37-65). Ottawa, ON: Potentium.

Culver, D. M. (1999). Coach-Athlete Communication within a National Alpine Ski Team. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Spink, K. (1991). The psychology of coaching. New Studies in Athletics, 6(4), 37-41.