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Task 13

The Art of Coaching:

Player - Management

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INTRODUCTION

"Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look on them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death."

Sun Tzu

There are plenty of coaches that know the game of Rugby. They may have played at the highest of levels, have outstanding technical knowledge in a certain area, be experts in the biomechanics of a player, been to the best coaching courses, learnt from the best coaches with the brightest minds. That these credentials are helpful, there is no doubt.

However, none of these factors are what ensures that person is a good coach. It is through connecting and communicating with the players to bring out their best that a person reaches the pinnacle of coaching.

This paper will discuss that whilst technical knowledge and credentials are important, it is the things that are going on within the team, behind closed doors, that really make the difference to success.

It is successful player -management that will get the best out of your players. It is creating a connection between yourself and your mantra, the team and *their* goals that will provide the most benefit to all those involved with the team.

It is through excellence in player–management that the players will follow you to the deepest valleys. Add technical improvements to this, and results will inevitably come.

PLAYER MANAGEMENT

The Art of Coaching is being able to bring out the best in your players through the environment you set up. Being the champion of the program and maintaining minimum standards whilst searching for ways to improve the standard.

An excellent place to start is finding out from the players what they need to be successful, whilst remembering that less is indeed more.

Overcomplicating the process for your benefit is rarely the path of the success.

There is a myriad of principles within the field of player – management.

During this paper we shall explore some of these - the topics of values, player empowerment, managing expectations, communication, setting up a culture, and leadership.

VALUES – THE STARTING POINT

"When your values are clear to you, making decisions becomes easier."

Roy Disney

For a team to be successful there needs to be some recognition of what the foundations are of that team. Values being defined as the ideals, customs or principles that are desired within the group. Once these values are decided upon, then goals can added onto them to provide what is essentially a plan for the team.

If the players do not know what values they are being held accountable for or are expected of them, then it makes it nigh impossible to effectively and consistently manage them.

It maybe appropriate for the coach and/or coaching staff to determine their own values and how they will apply them to the playing group. However, the desired values of the playing group are paramount to the process.

The values will provide a framework by which the minimum standards and expectations of the team are set.

The values will also provide the means of management of each and every member of the team – simply, through the behaviors that are present. It is these behaviors that are manifestations of the values within the team.

These values that the team will be held accountable for should come from them. However, the coach must be able to guide and direct this process to ensure that the values are relevant and realistic for the level of the group. An effective way of doing this is by giving the players the opportunity to take ownership of the program.

EMPOWERMENT

"There is no point in coaching unless the teaching you do helps the student overtake you."

Rene Deleplace

The playing group is the most important and valuable asset that any coach has. As a result, it makes sense that the assets are treasured and cultivated to provide input into the direction of the team. Given that rugby is a game based on the contest for possession, it stands to reason that players constantly have to make decisions and solve problems throughout the game – under fatigue.

Surely then, throughout the coaching process, the coaches intent should be to mimic this environment?

Players that solve problems for themselves, enhance their learning. Problems within the team environment are both on field and off field. Players need to take ownership and be made accountable for making good decisions. There are some simple structures that can be put in place to set up an empowered environment. The challenge is ensuring these structures work and the group buys in effectively.

The company called Leading Teams has experienced significant success within this field. They have worked with a myriad of teams including the Sydney Swans, Geelong Cats, NSW Waratahs, QLD Reds, Sydney University and the Melbourne Rebels, setting up empowerment structures which have encouraged player ownership and accountability.[i]

This process begins with eliciting from the players a reality check. How they as a group is perceived by outsiders, which translates then to how the group wants to be perceived. From this point, the group decides on some non negotiable behaviors which, when followed, will ensure the desired perceptions. From this point a "Trademark" can be decided on to encapsulate these behaviors. Once the group agrees on these behaviors, they are accountable to them, and accountable for managing these behaviors within the group through open and honest communication. This should be reflective of the off field behaviors, as much as the on field expectations.

The extent and success of this process will be different for each group. The key to this process is guiding the group through it and assisting with setting up the boundaries. Some groups will be able to cope with extensive honesty and player

direction. Other groups may require much more input and influence from a coach. Examples of this can be seen time and again in the sport media. After years of this process, the Sydney Swans leadership group was actually having a direct influence on team selection and even recruitment of new players onto the list. This illustrates that in some cases, certain groups have the structures in place and capabilities to empower the players to a significant level of control.

Certainly this process can take a long time and will require plenty of massaging along the way. The key to this process is clear and that is the input of the players. The players set the non negotiable behaviors. The players are expected to manage these behaviors within the group. It is more compelling to include peer assessment where players each tell their team mates what they need to stop doing, start doing and keep doing rather than feedback only coming from the coach(es).

If the players have ownership, they have accountability. This means instead of having the coach trying to manage a squad of 22, there are now 23 people that are responsible for managing the behaviors and propagating the culture.

This processes shares the management load, giving players the opportunity to make decisions that have a positive influence. In this environment it will be much easier to see those players that are evolving into becoming your eyes, ears and foundation of the culture that is growing – the leaders.

It will also provide you with what you can bench mark the group against.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

"Treat a man as he is and he will remain so. Treat a man the way he can be and ought to be, and he will become as he can be and should be."

Goethe

The values provide the framework and the behaviors are the values in action. Once this has been established then it is up to the coach to manage each player, their expectations and also the expectations of the player.

The key to this? All players must be treated *differently.*

Why? Simply, because each player is different. They are motivated by different things, have different needs and their own way of dealing with challenges and other people. Many coaches fear the term "favorites". When in actual fact there are valid reasons for it – perhaps they have simply earned it. Those reasons need to be harnessed and communicated to the other players – so all players know what is expected of them and what rewards come when these expectations are reached.

The best coaches are those that realize "people don't change that much. (So) Don't waste time trying to put in what was left out. Try to draw out what was left in – as that is hard enough."

The key to managing expectations is by asking the following questions[ii]:

Do the players know what is expected of them in their position and in the team?
Do the players have access to the correct resources and facilities to do their job well?
Do the players have the opportunity to do their best every time they are at training / game?
Have the players received positive feedback on their performance in the last week?
Do the players feel that they are cared for by the coach/ staff?
Do the players feel they are in an environment that encourages their development?

As can be seen, by ensuring that the players are answering yes to all of these questions will give the players opportunities to evolve – and improve. How do you know that as the coach you have succeeded in answering these questions?

Effective communication.

COMMUNICATION

"The single biggest problem in communication… is the illusion that it has taken place."

George Bernard Shaw

Communication is often recognized as the single most important factor in what determines good player-management. However, too many coaches see communication as what they are telling or showing the players. Communication should be all about what the players take in, hear and understand.

It should be viewed not as output from the coach, rather input for the players.

In this way it is very much a two way process and needs to be treated as such. Within a team environment it comes in many forms including: 1 on 1s, feedback during training, pre game addresses, half time speeches, dropping players, season/ session plans and simply getting to know each other.

People learn through different methods. There are a plethora of learning style models that separate the ways in which people develop; some include visually – what the player sees, auditory, what the player hears or kinesthetic, what the player experiences or feels. Having an insight into what sort of communication your players will best respond to will make things much easier, as you can tailor your sessions and feedback to satisfy the individual need.

To be a great player manager you need to have the ability to have the hard conversations and be honest with players through different communicative methods. Being direct (face to face) and honest will give the players a much quicker and healthier view of where they are at and where they need to be.

Communicating against the values and expectations that have already been set up will also provide a consistent base for the players to buy in to what is being talked about and not be surprised by the point you are trying to get across.

The most effective tool that a coach can have in their communication repertoire is an excellent ability to ask questions and have them answered directly and honestly.

After all, the players are the most important asset any coach has. Assuming what is the best for them will be superseded by eliciting from the player the truths of what is best for them. This process is a skill in itself.

CULTURE

"We generate our own environment. We get exactly what we deserve. How can we resent a life we've created ourselves? Who's to blame, who's to credit but us? Who can change it, anytime we wish, but us?"

Richard Bach

The role of a coach is to provide an environment which encourages players to exhibit productive behaviors and stop doing unproductive behaviors. The culture must and will, come from the players. As the coach, you need to be able to shape it, channel it, allowing and encouraging the culture to grow and spread.

So what is it?

Culture is the environment that has been created by the team. It should hold at its core the values that have been decided on by the group and those behaviors which will indicate it. The culture needs to be a fluid creation - so it can change as the group dictates. It should evolve with the group and its characteristics will be evident within the group. This will be clear to you from the empowerment process.

Culture is holistic. It incorporates the on field competition and the off field behaviors. It is the sum of all parts – as all players and staff have a direct hand in its creation and direction.

As a coach it is important to devise ways in which a positive culture can develop and continue to grow. It may entail creating opportunities for players to bond off field through camps, functions or points of difference. Such opportunities could be themed training nights (such as old school week, league jersey nights), pushing through tough conditions (contact session in driving rain or a "hell" camp where players are pushed to their limits), rewards to players who win internal competitions, off field teamed competitions (splitting squad into smaller groups to break down communication barriers through games), trust games, involvement of players friends/ partners and families. There are endless possibilities that the players will respond to and get benefit from.

The thing about culture is that it is self sustaining. Once it is evolving it is hard to stop. As a result the coach must have a hand in guiding it from its inception to ensure that the growing culture is a positive one that excludes undesirable behaviors. To ensure this, it is necessary to have players that you can rely on to propagate this direction.

LEADERSHIP

"The test of leadership is not to put greatness into humanity, but to elicit it, for the greatness is already there"

James Buchanan

There is strong argument that a team with a poor coach, but great captain, will prevail over a team with a great coach but poor captain. One of the true tests of good coaching is selection. There is no more important issue of selection than finding the player or players who will be responsible for leading the group.

Leaders are made and as such can, and will, develop over time depending on what situations they are thrust into.

They are a key component in ensuring the success of a team and the success of the coach.

If the topics in previous chapters are addressed, then the leaders of your group will become easily apparent. The process can be formalized during the empowerment process. Once the desired behaviors of the group have been finalized the next step is to ask the group, who within the group currently best displays these desired behaviors?

Those players that stand out from this simple vote are those players that the group feels are the leaders of the team. This will cut through age and experience and correlate directly to the behaviors and values that the group desires. In this way you know that the leaders have the respect of their peers and have it due to their values and behaviors. They are the examples to the other players of expectations of the program and of the coach.

Leaders carry with them a significant responsibility of the day to day management of the group. If the leadership group is right, many issues within a team should be fixed, without it ever having been brought up to the coach.

Good leaders will become champions of your program and provide valuable insight, support and access to your playing group – ensuring open communication and a more conducive learning environment.

SUMMATION

From the grassroots to the elite, the need for effective player management within a team environment is paramount. Commissioned studies show many of the most common reasons for players dropping out of sport are directly related to the coach. International coaches must have the ability to gel players into a common cause in a short amount of time.

Successful teams are those teams that are directed towards a common cause and take on the challenges of the cause with a united front.

By mastering the art of player management, the coach will provide the players with an effective environment to perform to their best ability, be challenged and have input into the success of the team. They will have ownership of the program in conjunction with the coach and will be accountable for it.

When these characteristics of the team are instilled into the playing group, the strength of that team will be clear. What will also be clear is the person heading up the program – who is responsible for the culture, environment, planning and direction – is a coach who understands the players, their needs, strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, will ensure that the players will follow the coach who excels at player management into the deepest valleys.

CASE STUDY – SYDNEY UNI 2nd GRADE 2006

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Case Studies

Sydney University Rugby	2005 - 2007
Canterbury Crusaders Rugby Union	2007
Queensland Reds	2007
Melbourne Rebels Rugby Union	2007
Melbourne Uni Blacks Australian Rules Football Club	2008

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[i] What follows is a rudimentary summary of the Leading Teams process. By no means is it a substitute for reading "Any Given Team", or dealing direct with either Ray McLean or Craig Biddiscombe direct through Leading Teams. If there is any interest in this process further, they are easily accessible through the web. This summary comes from the book and seeing it first hand in a variety of teams. The power of this process and having skilled, outside input into a process like this should not be understated. This process is also discussed in an interview with Ray McLean in the Powerade Elite Coaching Series.

[ii] Buckingham & Coffman, pages 53 - 55