An Effective Coaching Model: The Perceptions and Strategies of Professional Team Sport Coaches and Players in Australia

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This paper explores professional coach and player perceptions of effective coaching, closely scrutinising what coaches do (behaviours) and what coaches think (perceptions). A unique range of professional coaches and players from Australian team sport contexts were observed and interviewed regarding the topic of effective coaching. Qualitative data analyses lead to the creation of an ‘Effective Coaching Model’ (ECM) for professional sport with three major concepts that represent the professional coaches'/players’ perceptions and strategies of effective coaching: (a) The Coach, (b) Coaching Skills, and (c) The Environment. After presenting the key features of the ECM and how they were applied in these professional contexts, the ECM is critiqued in relation to the various eminent models of sport coaching.

Keywords: effective coaching, professional team sport, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Sport coaching models aim to make sense of the often-chaotic nature of the coaching process. They have been used by coaching researchers to provide theoretic frameworks of coaching practice and in order to guide research projects. According to Côté and Gilbert (2009), conceptual models of coaching have materialised from various theoretical positions including leadership, expertise, coach-athlete relationships, motivation, and education. Early coaching models focused on leadership (Multidimensional Model of Leadership; Chelladurai, 1990; Chelladurai and Saleh, 1978) and coaching behaviour (Mediational Model; Smoll et al., 1978) during training. There were also several attempts to conceptualise instructional models of the coaching process (Franks et al., 1986; Fairs, 1987; Launder, 1993; Sherman et al., 1997) based on sequential and interrelated steps used as a basis for helping athletes learn. More recently, researchers have developed models based on the coach’ overall role in organisation for training and competition (Coaching Model; Côté et al., 1995).

As many of these models were created based on research within the North American community, there is a significant gap in relation to other sport settings. Further to this, previous research has neglected the professional sport scene where previous studies examined the youth (Smoll et al., 1978), university (Vallée and Bloom, 2005) and Olympic and World Championship settings (Côté et al., 1995; Côté and Sedgwick, 2003). Many of the existing models have not attempted to symbolise the entirety of coaches’ actions but rather provide representations of key parts of the coaching process. This is not surprising given the many and varied elements that constitute coach behaviour across the range of team and individual sport settings. While the main aim of this research was to investigate the perceptions and strategies of effective coaching with a unique sample of professional team sport coaches and players from Australia, a secondary purpose was to develop a conceptual model that clearly represents their beliefs.
2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Three male, professional sport teams from the Super 14 Rugby (rugby union, RU), National Rugby League (NRL), and the Sheffield Shield, One-day and Twenty-20 competitions (men's national cricket league, CR) participated in the study. One assistant and one head coach from each team (n = 6) and 25 players (NRL = 10; RU = 7; CR = 8) were involved in the interview process. There were up to seven full time coaches and 30 players who were observed during training or competition (total number of observation sessions = 41).

2.2. Data Collection

The data collection process involved observations and interviews. The observations recorded verbal communications and the training activities for each session. For example, the timing and type of coach instruction, feedback or management of the athletes was noted as it occurred during training. The interviews enabled the exploration of coach and athlete perceptions of effective coaching in training and competition. This included questions about the development of a team environment, planning for training and the establishment of relationships between coaches, players and support staff (for detailed explanation of the observation and interview guides, see Bennie, 2009).

2.3. Data Analysis

The analysis process involved constant comparative analytic procedures (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Côté et al., 1993) to examine perceptions of effective coaching both within and across each context investigated. This involves several stages including: (a) creating tags, (b) creating properties, (c) creating categories, and (d) developing a conceptual model (Côté et al., 1993). Such a procedure enables important information to emerge inductively (i.e. from the data) rather than being established prior to data collection and analysis. All initial data analyses were carried out by the first author.

Initially, I transcribed verbatim copies of the interview tapes and observation notes into Microsoft Word and then saved them in a qualitative software program (NVivo7) to store and assist with the analysis of transcribed data. In the data analysis process, meaning units (important words, sentences or paragraphs) were established based on text segments that contained one idea that was appropriately coded with a provisional descriptive tag (Côté et al., 1993). When comparable information emerged, the same code was re-used. For example, the meaning units constructive criticism, ‘honest feedback’, and ‘positive feedback’ were assembled into the tag called ‘Effective Feedback Strategies’.

The next phase of data analysis involved me re-reading and re-analysing previously coded text and tags to see where similarities and differences existed. I then created properties (groups of key ideas) based on similar features from the initial level of analysis (Côté et al., 1993). I repeated this process for each level of analysis to make up the eight categories and three higher order concepts that formed the ECM.

2.4. Trustworthiness

Positivist research has addressed issues of rigour in the research process by identifying internal and external validity, objectivity and reliability—terms not commonly used in qualitative studies. Addressed below are a number of techniques previous researchers (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003) have used to ensure trustworthiness in the qualitative research process.

To minimise the possibility of misrepresentation, data was triangulated (Yin, 2003) by comparing coach to athlete perceptions as well as observations with interview data. Academic colleagues (e.g., supervisors, conference review boards) critically appraised the research process (peer debriefing, Patton, 2002) regularly during data collection, analysis and writing up of the final report. In addition, data, tentative interpretations, and the final model were taken back to the participants to seek verification for their accuracy (member checking, Patton, 2002). None of the participants requested changes to the data.

Case studies based in qualitative paradigms merely attempt analytic as opposed to statistical generalisations because case studies can be generalised to theoretical propositions but not to populations or universes. The researchers’ goal may be to expand and generalise theories rather than enumerating statistical generalisations (Yin, 2003). There was no attempt to provide generalisations beyond the con-
texts investigated. I provided rich descriptions of data throughout this project so that readers could make their own generalisations from the findings.

3. Results

A total of 953 raw data units emerged including comments, statements and quotations from a few words to entire paragraphs. Further inductive analysis revealed 70 tags, 22 properties and 8 categories. The 8 categories were ultimately conceptualised into 3 higher-order concepts to form a conceptual model that best described the current coach and player perceptions of effective coaching (for a detailed description of the data units, tags, and properties, see Bennie, 2009).

3.1. Proposed Model of ‘Effective Coaching’

The model in Figure 1 represents the conceptual elements that professional coaches and players from rugby union, rugby league and cricket teams in Australia perceive as vital for effective team sport coaching.

The three overarching concepts of the model are The Coach, Coaching Skills and The Environment. Each concept interacts continuously to produce effective coaching in which players learn and develop. It is imperative to note that while the three concepts are subdivided into eight categories of effective coaching all the features identified are contingent on each other. For instance, the coach’s ability to communicate in an open and honest manner is an essential coach quality (The Coach) that effective coaches use to manage the team dynamic (Coaching Skills) and form the basis for the team ‘working off the same page’ (Team Environment).

3.2. The Coach

There are two categories (Personal Coach Characteristics and Knowledge, and Coach Philosophy) in the concept referred to as The Coach. The coach’s personal characteristics, technical/tactical knowledge and philosophy provide a background to their beliefs and form the basis of the coach’s leadership, communication, player-management and planning skills. For example, the rugby league head coach stated that an effective coach is:

> Just a good communicator... it’s just man-management when it’s all said and done. Having a knowledge of your sport is obviously very important... being a good organiser as well. Being able to organise, communicate, know your sport and know your product I think is probably three of the qualities you’re looking for.

Effective coaches are also empathetic, approachable, and capable of identifying and then catering for the individual differences within the team. These emphasise the personal coach qualities, knowledge and approach to coaching which dictate how a coach directs their team. The coach’s personal characteristics, knowledge and philosophy have a significant impact on the coach’s perceived effectiveness because if the coach’s beliefs and personal make-up do not resonate with the players’ preferences, the players are likely to lose respect for the coach and render him ineffective.

3.3. Coaching Skills

The Coaching Skills concept consists of four categories known as Leadership, Communication, People Management, and Planning. Effective leadership is determined by the coach’s own unique leadership approach. This includes the ability to empower players, coaching and support staff while possessing the ability to make significant decisions where necessary. For example, the rugby union assistant coach stated that “...effective coaching comes down to less about over direction and more about facilitat-
ing’’ while the cricket head coach emphasised the importance of player decision making: ‘‘. . . in a successful team you have individuals that are prepared to make decisions and back themselves and I think that’s one thing I’ve always encouraged.’’ Leadership therefore influences the way coaches communicate, plan for training and manage the team.

The coach’s perceived effectiveness in communication is dependent on their ability to be honest, consistent and fair while opening up communication channels between players, coaches and support staff. The cricket head coach provided an outline of why he felt open, honest communication was an effective coaching strategy:

I believe you’ve gotta have full honesty and you’ve got to also expect the honesty to come back the other way . . . I’ve always encouraged that a guy can come to me in the right situation, and have a very open discussion and maybe disagree with the things that I’ve been doing because there’s two things that can happen. One, I’ll learn from him, or two, he hasn’t got the understanding of what we’re actually trying to achieve . . . Hence, the time and place in which the coach communicates are also important to effective coaching given the individual differences amongst players within a team.

The coach’s people management strategies reflect their communication and leadership skills. This relates to how they deal with team issues, communicate to the team, accommodate for individual differences and balance the team dynamic in an effective manner. The rugby league coach indicated how effective people management forms a crucial part of his role:

. . . you’ve got groups of people . . . players at all levels, in age and experience and you know, races for instance . . . You’ve got middle and senior management . . . And peripheral to everyone in this is their families . . . and you’ve gotta have dealings with [these people] and being able to relate to . . . young players and families-having children, issues at home and those sorts of things. And you’ve got media, fans, your own family, so there’s . . . a plethora of people that you’ve really gotta understand and try to get to blend together to come up with what you call that x-factor which is team spirit, club spirit. Without it . . . you can go through the motions but you need that blend-

ing of people where they’re all working together . . .

Effective planning involved a review of team and individual performances and the ability to create challenging, enjoyable and high quality training sessions. For example, the rugby union assistant coach declared that:

. . . Players like to be challenged. So coaches that can engender a spirit of inventiveness and courage and [enable players] to find out how far they can push themselves . . . and then they get invigorated by that. And I think [this is] an important part of coaching . . .

Training sessions that focus on match specific tactical practice that is flexible to individual player needs and specialities was considered crucial to effective coaching. Furthermore, the way in which effective coaches plan training sessions depends on the coach’s leadership approach, management of the team and use of communication skills. They use these skills to organise team meetings for coaches and players to decide on tactical and technical areas of focus for the upcoming training and competition fixtures.

3.4. Team Environment

The Team Environment is characterised by the categories called Developing a Positive Team Environment and Team Culture. These categories represent the physical areas in which the team trains (e.g. facilities) and the psychological dynamics that provide direction for the team (e.g. team culture, trademark or vision). A positive team environment relates to the enjoyment and support players receive from coaching staff and each other. For example, one cricket player noted that:

. . . he [current head coach] really built a culture around enjoying each other’s success, supporting each other, kinda get the individual mentality out of it . . . which is you know a little bit cliche and it’s what you expect with team sports anyway but it’s not always achieved in the teams because you do have those egos.

The findings from the current research indicate that the coach’s ability to create such an environment is strongly related to perceptions of effectiveness.

Embedded within the environment is a team culture that reflects the team’s goals as well as parameters for on-and off-field behaviour. For ex-
ample, the rugby union coach said, "...we have a trademark that drives the direction we want to go, and that’s a player-driven, player created trademark, I just have to make sure we stick to it". The coach’s ability to ensure that everyone associated with the team (including players, support, coaching and administrative staff) works together determines their effectiveness.

4. Discussion: Examining the coaching model

The Effective Coaching Model (ECM) represents the perceptions of professional coaches and players from Australia about the concept of effective coaching in a professional team sport context. The categories and relationships of the ECM are similar to certain aspects of the Coaching Model (CM; Côté et al., 1995), the Multidimensional Mode of Leadership (MML; Chelladurai, 1990), and the Mediation Model of Sport Leadership (MM; Smoll and Smith, 1989).

The ECM is a broad model that encompasses more than one component of the coaching process. In this sense, it provides similar scope to the CM (Côté et al., 1995) regarding the various roles that coaches execute in organisation, training and competition contexts. However, the ECM offers two outcomes from the coaching process (i.e. developing the player and the person) as compared to the singular focus of the CM (i.e. developing the player). This is indicative of a more contemporary professional team sports environment whereas Côté et al. (1995) based their model on research with amateur gymnastic coaches nearly 15 years ago. As such, the ECM supports many aspects of the CM yet confirm Gilbert and Trudel’s (2000) findings that differences may exist in team and individual sport programs.

In some respects, being able to adapt coaching styles to suit the needs of each individual is similar to the main assumption of the MM (Smoll and Smith, 1989). The MM outlined how coach behaviours and player perceptions were influenced by situational factors and the individual characteristics of both the coach and athlete. Similarly, the ECM indicated that while each of the coaches based their leadership approach on their own personal philosophy of coaching, they were able to adapt their coaching techniques to suit the individual learning preferences of each member in the team. This created a situation where players were more likely to respect and work hard for the coach, which accounts for the player perceptions of coach behaviour outlined in the MM.

The ECM confirms the assertion from the MML (Chelladurai, 1990) that coach and player preferences for leadership need to align for effective coaching to take place, and for players to compete at an optimum level. The current research emphasises the rising influence of empowerment on contemporary leadership practices, rather than the autocratic or democratic leadership styles that feature prominently in research using the MML’s framework. This may be due to the recent increase in the number of professional sport teams in Australia. With players required to spend more time training and more staff involved in the coaching process, the role of the coach and player has changed. Head coaches now delegate more responsibilities to players and other staff rather than controlling the entire coaching process.

The need for coaches to ensure that all players, coaching and administrative staff work together to achieve the team and club goals formed a significant part of the ECM yet failed to generate the same relevance in previous models. This has only been confirmed in more recent qualitative research with international team and individual sports (see Jones et al., 2004). Perhaps the different aims and contexts of previous research account for these differences given the MML focused on leadership styles, the MM was based on research in youth sport, and the CM was established from a sample of individual sport coaches.

5. Implications

The players and coaches in the present study specified distinct qualities, characteristics and skills of effective coaches. They also noted that if a coach exhibits characteristics, qualities and skills contrary to these concepts, they are perceived as ineffective. What the participants in the current research did not specifically identify was the extent to which coaches are considered effective or ineffective if they possess only some of the qualities, characteristics and skills, but are lacking in others. For example, if a coach possesses a deep knowledge of the rules, techniques and strategies of their respective sport but their organisational skills may be lacking in that their training sessions generally run over the planned time, it is unclear whether they are likely to be considered
effective. Therefore, there may be varying levels of competency within the concept of perceived effectiveness as explained below.

Two coaches may possess all the desirable qualities, characteristics and skills as defined by the current research, yet one coach may be perceived as more effective. This situation arises if one of the coaches is more proficient in a particular area when compared to the other coach. For example, both coaches may be equally perceptive when it comes to reviewing team performance, yet one coach is able to communicate the relevant strengths and weaknesses more clearly and concisely. This does not mean the other coach is ineffective because they do not demonstrate as exemplary communication skills, it merely points out that some coaches may be more capable in the perceived areas identified as effective in the current project.

It is important to note that coaches can develop the qualities, characteristics and skills outlined in the current study. This means that if a coach is less proficient in one area (e.g. knowledge of defensive strategy) and they take steps to rectify or improve in this area, there is a high likelihood that they will then be considered effective. Alternatively, many coaches in the professional sport context have the luxury of being able to hire assistant, specialist, and other support staff to balance their weaknesses yet still maintain an optimal environment for player development.

It is worth reiterating that the current research model reflects only the perceptions and the strategies employed by professional coaches and players in Australia. Due to the contextual nature of the coaching process and the methodology employed in the current research, generalisations beyond the current sample should be limited. Ultimately, the current study aims to provide a contribution to the existing database of effective coaching. The topic of effective coaching therefore warrants further research to build on the existing knowledge base available to coaches, researchers and educators in the field of sport coaching.

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