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## **Becoming a Better Coach through Reflective Practice**

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Many coaches develop their skills and expertise through their experiences and by watching other coaches. However, simply acquiring experiences does not guarantee coaching competence. It is the integration of experience and knowledge in a meaningful way that promotes learning and in turn develops expertise. Coaches need to know how to best learn through their experiences. Reflective practice is a major learning tool in this regard.

### **Reflective Practice**

Reflection is at the heart of the learning process. It is a necessary component in learning to regulate one's thoughts, feelings and actions. Reflection links experience and knowledge by providing an opportunity to explore areas of concern in a critical way and to make adjustments based on these reflections. This exploration enhances learning and promotes coaches' abilities to identify and respond to cues within the environment.

Coaches can use reflective practices both during an event, such as a practice or competition, and after an event. Reflection during an activity involves the consideration of what is happening as it is happening. Coaches learn to read the environment and respond accordingly. For example, during a practice, a coach may recognize that a drill is breaking down and then take steps to improve the drill. This recognition is based on their ability to identify relevant sport specific information and use this information to guide their actions. Reflection after an event involves the consideration of what has taken place in relation to the goals of the activity. During this type of reflection, there is more time to assess the situation and consider possible alternatives or review other resources in order to improve or progress the activity. For example, after the practice and upon reflection, the coach may realize that a different drill would be better suited to help the athletes learn the concept.

Research suggests that expert coaches engage in both kinds of reflection on a regular basis and that reflective practice plays an important role in their development as experts (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Learning to reflect, whether it is during or after an activity, is a skill that involves several steps. Understanding the reflective process can help coaches make refinements and incorporate strategies at each stage. The following are the key elements of reflective practice.

#### **a) Issue Identification**

Reflection is usually triggered by an awareness of uncomfortable feelings or thoughts regarding an experience or issue. Some coaches may refer to this as intuition or a "gut" feeling and use this information to examine the situation more closely. Perhaps the coach sees an athlete responding in an unusual manner or recognizes that within the practice or drill something just did not feel

right. Reflection may also arise from discussions with other coaches. Another coach may have noticed a weakness in a drill or a lack of communication by the coach to an athlete. Reflection may also be triggered by others within the sport community, such as parents or sport governing bodies. Parents may approach coaches regarding an issue with their son or daughter and the coach may use this information to pay more attention in particular situations. Regardless of the source of the discomfort, model coaches use this discomfort as an indication of a need to acquire more knowledge to better understand the situation and themselves and to make adjustments as necessary.

## **b) Self Awareness**

It is important to note here, that whether or not coaches are triggered by certain experiences will relate to their personal approach to coaching and their level of self-awareness. For example, with respect to personal approach, if discipline and winning defines a coach's personal approach, then that coach is more likely to be triggered by athletes who arrive late or do not adhere to training programs in comparison to a coach whose approach is defined by fun and personal growth and development. Therefore, part of reflective practice entails coaches assessing their personal approach to coaching and taking responsibility for how their approach may be influencing their actions and reflections. Further, coaches who are self-aware or more attuned to their internal states, behaviours, and intuitions, are more likely to be aware of, and respond to, cues within the environment that indicate something is amiss.

## **c) Critical Assessment**

The reflective process also entails a critical assessment of certain events along with recognition of the associated thoughts, feelings and current knowledge. During an activity the assessment tends to be more preliminary and expert coaches recognize that they may not have all the information necessary to make an accurate assessment at that time. This recognition can help them regulate their thoughts, feelings and actions until more time and information are available. Critical assessment after an activity often involves searching for more information in order to get a better picture of the situation. A clear picture needs to emerge in order for coaches to begin to generate strategies for resolving the issue. Coaches may seek advice from peers or expert coaches, collaborate with peers to problem solve, observe other coaches, seek out additional resources (i.e., books, videos), review previous strategies from experience, or engage in personal creative thought to generate new solutions. Expert coaches tend to challenge their personal assumptions and envision and explore several alternatives at this stage. New knowledge may emerge from this process and this knowledge can be integrated with previous knowledge to generate problem-solving strategies.

The critical analysis stage is perhaps the most challenging, especially for developing coaches. They may not have the knowledge or support to generate creative solutions and they may be limited in their access to resources. Moreover, they may have difficulty challenging assumptions both during the activity and after, especially if they are uncertain or only beginning to develop their personal approach to coaching. Coaches designated as mentors could play an invaluable role at this stage, providing perspective as well as a forum for discussion (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Research suggests that if individuals can be guided to direct their

attention to their actions, thoughts and feelings in the moment, they are more likely to critically evaluate their personal approach and restructure it as necessary (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985).

#### **d) Experimentation**

The next stage in reflective practice involves experimentation. Once coaches are armed with a few solutions they then need to explore the likely consequences of each and select the most appropriate response. In some cases this experimentation may be hypothetical. They may present their ideas to their peer coaches for feedback. Hypothetical experimentation can be a practical way to reflect after a season is over and coaches are preparing for a new season. Real world experimentation occurs in the sport domain where coaches can carry out their envisioned solution and review its impact.

It is important to note that experimentation within reflective practice is different than trial-and-error practice. Trial and error simply involves doing something and when it fails, doing something else until something works. The approach is random and unpredictable in comparison to reflective experimentation. In reflective experimentation, the idea is to build upon existing knowledge by drawing from experiences and learning to make educated selections based on the relevant information. This approach is more predictable and thoughtful and promotes a more effective learning environment for athletes.

#### **e) Evaluation**

The final stage in reflective practice involves evaluation. Evaluation relates to an assessment of the meaning or value of the solution. It can be compared against some standard or criteria, or assessed based on its effectiveness within the specific situation. Model coaches often approach evaluation as a solitary endeavour. They may keep a journal related to their coaching experiences or they may simply conduct a mindful evaluation after the process. The approach is usually systematic and integrated into everyday practice. It often involves both technical evaluations and personal considerations along with a willingness to accept responsibility for the impact of their choices. Expert coaches are willing to assume responsibility for their decisions. Sometimes strategies will work out well, while at other times they will not. Reflective coaches consider their decisions and accept the consequences of those decisions and make adjustments to their future choices.

External evaluations are also valuable contributors to reflective practice. External evaluations provide coaches with perspective and a chance to learn about themselves and view their coaching through different points of view. External evaluations may take a number of forms. They may involve informal discussions with peers or expert coaches, written feedback, or more formalized questionnaires. Regardless of the form, these evaluations need to be meaningful to the coaches and conducted in an effective manner in order for them to contribute to reflective practice. Coaches need to be able to use the feedback and be provided with time to incorporate it into their regular practices. Therefore, evaluations of coaches should not just occur at the end of a season, but rather at systematic points throughout the season so coaches can learn from the feedback and adjust as necessary.

Recently, the CABC developed a series of evaluation tools for use by coaches and sport organizations. (See [www.coaches.bc.ca/resources/07\\_evaluation/index.htm](http://www.coaches.bc.ca/resources/07_evaluation/index.htm)). These evaluation templates serve as valuable learning tools for coaches, parents and organizations and can help promote the process of reflective practice.

## **Developing Reflective Coaches**

Reflective practice can be a significant contributor to coach development. As a process, it needs to be integrated into day-to-day practice. Reflection skills in coaches can be developed and supported in a number of ways. Here a few suggestions:

### **a) Discussions**

Coaches can benefit from discussions with other coaches. These discussions provide a chance to reflect on current practice and be exposed to different approaches and experiences. Opportunities need to be created where coaches can engage in discussion around relevant and meaningful coaching issues. Monthly coach meetings, mentor-coach support, conferences, coaching clinics are just few avenues where discussions can occur.

### **b) Dialogue Journals**

In a dialogue journal coaches record their thoughts, feelings, questions and concerns related to their roles and responsibilities as a coach on a daily basis. Mentor coaches then respond to the entries providing alternatives and challenges to ways of thinking.

### **c) Season Projects**

At the beginning of the season, coaches can designate a question about coaching or learning to which they would like to explore possible solutions. Throughout the season they then attempt to address the question through various strategies and approaches. For example, a coach might wonder about the impact of a systematic team building approach on athlete enjoyment and commitment. This coach would then develop and implement a program throughout the season and reflect on its impact.

### **d) Practical Coaching Clinics**

Practical coaching clinics provide opportunity to experiment with different ideas and receive feedback from other coaches. Coaches are assigned coaching tasks and then are required to present them to the class in a practice format.

### **e) Video Analysis**

Coaches can benefit from videotaping their performances both at practice and competitions and then reviewing the tapes with peers or mentor coaches. The process promotes reflection on

elements that are sometimes more subtle and not known to the coach such as body language and tone of voice.

## **Conclusion**

Expert coaches learn from their experiences, and as a result, have a more expansive knowledge base than developing coaches. Reflective practice is key factor contributing to their knowledge development. Coaches can learn to develop their reflective skills and gain the most from their experiences if they integrate reflection practices into their daily routines.

## **References**

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## **Bio**

Laura has a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Ottawa. Her formal training is in the area of psychopedagogy and the psychology of performance. She is a certified Mental Trainer with the Canadian Mental Training Registry (CMTR). In addition, Laura is a National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) level four coach and a chartered professional coach (ChPC) with the Canadian Professional Coaches Association. She applies her knowledge and skills of mental training to sport and exercise, health, and business contexts through her private consulting practice, Mind in Motion Consulting. She also teaches part-time at Douglas College in New Westminster, British Columbia in the Department of Sport Science and Coaching. Laura can be contacted at [drlaura@mindinmotion.ca](mailto:drlaura@mindinmotion.ca) or 604 512-3256.