

Coaching Style of Management for the Development of Individuals, Teams and National Federations

Author: Frank Dick (GBR)

Introduction

The standard of athletic achievement during the next decade will depend to a great extent on the ability of coach and manager to develop people - the sport's most precious resource - for the tasks involved in the initiation and control of progress.

While it is true that it is only the athlete who can make a statement in the arena, the quality of that statement depends on whether or not he has been afforded the right climate for achievement. It is the job of the coach and the team manager to help to create the appropriate climate.

In the development side of the sport, the pursuit of "people development" has been gaining momentum for some time by way of both internal and external programmes. However, I believe that team managers could be still more effective in the provision of high quality leadership to help their athletes and their staff meet the challenge of change.

In this article, therefore, I will propose a change of leadership style to what I will term a coaching style of management. I will attempt to describe how this differs from other styles of management, with particular reference to methods of evaluation and support.

The Challenge of Change

Last year I heard the Managing Director of a top international company address his senior management in threatening tones: "We're in a tough jungle and some of our leopards are going to have to change their spots. If they can't, I will have to find new leopards."

This is not what I would call a coaching style of management! While it is true that our various jungles are getting tougher, and that some leopards will have to change their spots, it is a manager's job to help them to understand the value of that change. If they can appreciate the positive contribution it will make to the individual, to the team and to the National Federation, they will generally be willing to co-operate.

The manager must also help to make the necessary changes. This requires skilled and appropriate coaching. Success in this is a mark of quality leadership and of quality National Federation administration.

The Agenda

Athletes look to coaches as people who will help them to achieve their ambitions, both in terms of their development and their performance. Athlete and coach are therefore working together in order to achieve. It is critical to the future success of individual, team and National Federation that there is a feeling of shared objectives. One way in which to create this is to hold an annual performance review of all staff who work for the team and for the National Federation administration.

When a coach evaluates his athlete, both know that the outcome will be beneficial. As a result of the evaluation a new programme is agreed; the athlete follows it and step by step approaches his goal. A staff performance review should be regarded as a similar procedure.

Last year the British Amateur Athletic Board (now the British Athletic Federation) introduced the Managing Achievement Programme for our top 100 Olympic-potential athletes. This project has been generously funded to the sum of £100,000 each year by the Sports Council. Its administrators meet with both athletes and coaches in order to establish how they can be helped to meet their needs.

These needs come under three broad headings: lifestyle management; performance management; medical management.

When they come to the meeting both athletes and coaches know that the purpose of the interview is to help them. They understand that resources can be accessed - in the UK or abroad, and in sport or outside it - to give them what they need for their own particular projected achievement. For example, training facilities at home and abroad can be contacted according to the athlete's specific training requirements. The best medical advice available can be sought. The athletes are even encouraged to consider their own lifestyle management.

Continuing Support

The second area in which the coaching style of management distinguishes itself is in the provision of continuous, reliable support. The development process is pursued throughout the coach/athlete relationship and over the course of several years. The athlete is secure in the knowledge that the coach represents a continuous supporting presence, sometimes directing, sometimes coaching, sometimes just being available if required. Moreover, any National Federation will be more highly valued, and will generate a much richer climate for achievement, if coaching staff perceive their relationship with the Federation as being similar to that of an athlete and his coach.

Translating this into the practical realities of present-day management, yearly and half-yearly conferences and periodic courses will continue to be valuable focal points for training and development. However, there should also be year-round programmes for individual and team development afforded by managers and personnel.

Training the Staff

Once the new coaching style of management is accepted, the next step must be to train the staff accordingly. The first stage involves the development of individuals. Personally, I have always found coaching individuals easier than coaching teams. No matter how complex the individual, progress will result from the sensitive application of technical and management skills, and this will eventually be translated into a winner's statement in the arena.

However, as the chief coach to the Boston Celtics once said, "Getting the players is easy. It is getting them to play together as a team that is hard." It is important to realise that there are two kinds of teams, requiring two separate kinds of team management.

Co-Operating to Achieve

The co-operative team is where each team member works with others in order to achieve a goal. This is the situation in rugby, rowing, soccer and hockey, and in the relays in athletics. Even the player who is a "class apart" can be an integral part of the team: he can use his genius to help others in the expression of their own skills; and he can use their skills to help him to an optimal performance.

Contributing to Achieve

The contributory team forms when each player's contribution in terms of points is critical to the team's success. This is the situation in team 3-day event, cross country and team modern pentathlon. It is also the situation in athletics in the European and the World cups.

I am happy to remind you that the British men's team won the European Cup for the first time in Gateshead in 1989. At the team talk on the first day, the team was told that they had a 14-point mountain to climb. A mountain because it would be a tough assignment; 14 points because that was the difference between what they were worth on paper compared to their key opponents - the former Soviet Union and East Germany. In the European Cup, each event attracts 8 points for the first place, 7 for second - through to 1 point for last.

If an athlete worth 1 point can turn it into 2, then the contribution is the same as if he or she is worth 7 points and turns it into 8. Each person in the team then has a stage in pursuit of the trophy, and everybody's points matter.

The Goal - High Achievement

The coaching style of management can be applied to individuals and to co-operative and contributory teams in order to produce a consistently high standard of achievement through what will be a tough and progressively more competitive decade for the Federation.

Progress, however, requires a high level of patience. When I became Director of Coaching in 1979 my objective was to develop a team to challenge for the European Cup. When Great Britain won that trophy in 1989, several journalists asked what had made the difference that year - as if the achievement was just something that had suddenly happened. I suggested that it was something like

growing Chinese bamboo. You plant the bamboo and make sure it has all the right nutrients, water and amount of sunlight. Nothing happens in the first year, nor in the second year, nor the third. In fact, you do not even get a single green shoot in the fourth year. In the fifth, over a period of six weeks, it grows 30 meters!

I do not think that my knowledge of Chinese horticulture impressed the journalists, but the point was made. Success is not achieved by chance; it is necessary to work hard and allow time for development. With a refined style of leadership which relies on constant evaluation and support, athletics will continue to grow and prosper.