

Positive coaching: Coaches must be open to self-examination, lifelong learning

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In the high stakes world of elite level athletics, coaches are king – but that lofty perch can prove a sword of Damocles. More often than not they're regarded as the undisputed authority on what it takes to train an athlete to maximal performance potential, and being placed on a pedestal doesn't allow for proper reflection about their coaching practices or any margin of error when there are Olympic finals and medals at stake.

As a consequence, that doesn't always mean they're always doing the right thing for their athletes, says Dr. Jim Denison an expert in [coach](#) education at the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta, and co-author of a new paper on positive [coaching](#) and ethical practices for athlete development. "Coaching is complex, continually changing and influenced greatly by the context, athletes' circumstances and the developing relationship between the coach and the athlete.

"Good coaching, as we talk about it in our paper, means thinking about these complexities and dealing with them positively, proactively and ethically," he says.

Denison says one of the greatest dangers is that coaches can become set in their ways and practices of working with athletes, positioning themselves as experts, who brook no criticism or questioning of their expertise. "They become entrenched in methodologies that worked in the past and they expect those methodologies to continue to work," says Denison.

"There's good research that shows that when coaches achieve this expert status they tend to want to maintain that," he says, "so admitting that you don't know becomes a threat to their expertise."

Once on the pedestal, he adds, "it's hard for that person to express uncertainty, or be open to new ways of looking at a problem or consulting with others." Athletes play their part too in entrenching the idea of the coach as oracle, placing great faith and confidence in their coach, expecting him or her to help them deliver the performance of their lives. If they don't, consequences are often dire: the coach is fired, the athlete finds another coach or the athlete quits the sport.

Denison, a sport sociologist and coach educator who directs the Canadian Athletics Coaching Centre, is working to break down these harmful paradigms. He says coaches need to take an integrated approach to coaching and look at their athletes as individuals rather than trying to find a system or template they can apply to all and, importantly, learn to "problemetize" an issue before coming up with a solution. In essence that means thinking critically about a problem, determining whether it is in fact a problem, and having the confidence to look at themselves because their behaviour might be contributing to a problem.

"Often the most successful coaches are the ones who are most willing to adopt a lifelong learning approach and to admit that they don't know," says Denison, who advocates "problem-setting" – determining whether there is indeed a problem, before "problem-solving."

He gives the example of athletes reaching a plateau in their training. "This is common in swimming and running," he says. "Many coaches see that as a problem because the logic of sport and coaching is that you continue to progress, but that doesn't always happen. If you see an athlete's plateau as a problem, you've already made the assumption that it needs to be fixed. A coach must first ask whether it is a problem because

a plateau can be a good thing: it shows that the athlete has reached a standard level of performance. But you're bringing with you the assumption that the athlete should be improving continuously."

Denison says the assumptions we hold and that influence how we diagnose a problem may not be positive, healthy or ethical. "If you challenge your assumptions, what looks like a problem isn't always a problem."

At the coaching centre Denison and his team have developed a national coach mentorship program in partnership with Athletics Canada to enable this cultural shift from being the unquestioned expert to the thoughtful coach. "To us (at the CACC) you cannot begin to 'problemetize' until you acknowledge and recognize that the knowledge you have is socially constructed based on a lot of take-for-granted ideas and traditions that have become dominant. We invite coaches to think more critically about how they think and what they do, to 'problemetize' their assumptions and to open their minds to look at their coaching practices critically and with the opportunity to try new things without feeling threatened by change."

More information: The paper, "Positive Coaching: Ethical Practices for Athlete Development" was co-authored by Dr. Jim Denison and doctoral student Zoe Avner.

Provided by University of Alberta

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