

The Disconnect

I had the opportunity recently to start a conversation with a person about to enter the bureaucracy of a sport. It was certainly a surprise to be asked to offer some comment as I have never heard of a bureaucrat willing and able to seek the counsel of someone operating at the 'participation' level. What on earth could I say that might mean something and create a thought process that just might see some thought and action going to the cutting-edge of the sport in question – the world of the athletes, coaches and officials.

While I initially thought that all I could do was to list the strategies, processes and protocols that I had been banging on about for the last 30 years about Coaching and Coach Development in the hope that someone might eventually listen, I used the time for another purpose. I sent him a large number of example strategies including all the background and rationale for the usual suspects of Coach Education content; post-certification mentoring; Club systems; mending the coach/administration divide; the difference between coaching development and coach development; etc. At the same time, I tried to describe (clumsily) the reasons that might be behind the relationship problems the sport faced. What social and cultural episodes might have created the pathway we are all on and trying desperately to get off?

While probably of no interest or substance I thought that I might throw these thoughts out there. Here goes.

"It is truly pleasing to find someone who is willing and able to enter into an administrative role with enough of an open mind to actually seek out information. Thank you for asking for my thoughts and observations and I will try to be as frank and constructive as I can.

It is also quite possible that much of what I will set out may not sit well with you and so I will understand completely if you terminate this contact. I have attached my CV for no other reason than to give you just a little more of an overview of the experiences I have had that have helped formulate the position I take on things.

Add to this journey that I have been on, the fact that my heart and soul is, and always will be, centred around coaches, athletes and Athletics in general. My journey began with the sport in the UK and has left an indelible mark on my life. This is why I continue today to make as much contribution (albeit from 12,000 miles away at the moment) as I can. I have always offered my services, both formally and informally, to all projects that appear in the varying pathways of the sport and I now volunteer everything I can to those plans that support coaching and coaches.

Enough of me – let me outline some framework thinking that might be appropriate. I completely understand that there are copious 'governance' issues that will focus your attention and therein lies the kernel of truth to one major element – the elephant in the room, so to speak.....DISCONNECTION

This is illustrated by the disconnect between the NGB and the Clubs which amplifies the critical disconnect between the NGB, coaches, athletes and officials. Put another way, the ever-accelerating divide is between the bureaucracy and the people. My focus for decades has been on the world of the coach-athlete interface and most of my observations are centred here.

Here are some comments made from within the sport and relative to the coaching environment. These are not all my words but are taken from presentations and reviews conducted by the sport in recent times.

- *Coaches not feeling valued or respected.*
- *General poor feelings towards the NGB.*
- *Poor communication from the NGB.*
- *NGB not dealing with complaints.*
- *Treatment of personal coaches.*

- *Little action against (a) falling numbers (b) increasing injuries (c) transition from junior to senior (d) high-performance consistency.*
- *No quality control after coach certification, especially in the realm of 'Learning'.*
- *The dearth of investment in Clubs to support them in optimising the contact they have with the participants.*

Where might this state of affairs have been born?

Let me try to offer a picture of how all this may have unfolded because there can be few solutions if the underlying bureaucratic behaviour is not understood. I am guessing that this will be the point at which we go our separate ways because my illustrations are far from being benign, warm and fuzzy excuses but observations born of decades of experience in this area.

1. The evolution of the career bureaucrat in Sport.

In those far off days of yesteryear, many sports were manned by people who evolved into administration from the love of the sport and some participation in it. Since the late 1980's the role of public monies, of often gargantuan proportions, has played a part in a shift from those far-off amateur days to those of company-based governance. Entities like Olympic Committees, Commonwealth Games Committees and government sporting organisations such as UK Sport and Sport Australia have demanded that each sport address wider and wider strategies, processes and protocols in governance as these financial stakes got higher and higher. It was quite a simple message – "get your house in order administratively before we give you any money". Can't really argue with that stance because we must never forget that none of this money is a gift from any Government. The money comes from the people in the form of taxation. Immediately the pendulum started to swing towards the influences of politics, policies, financial strategies and all the other elements that make up the corporate world.

This unfortunate but inevitable shift in emphasis has created a language and vocabulary unlike that of previous generations. When language and vocabulary shift in emphasis so does the shift in focus. Now we have the career sporting bureaucrat who treads a pathway that is moving further and further away from the philosophies, understanding, motivations and desires of the participants (athletes coaches and officials) operating in the now dying Club infrastructure. The role of the participant has become more and more marginalised as the core strategies, beliefs and investment continue to accelerate to the world of 'governance'. The idea that administration should grow from a core set of practices, processes and protocols that centralise the needs of the participant is no longer heard of. This direction continues unabated, cycle after cycle, Chairman after Chairman, CEO after CEO, Committee after Committee. It has now reached a stage where the often-desperate plight of the participant has now become an accepted norm. We have reached the point where there are only governance standards and governance behaviours that prevail because they are the only language and vocabulary in existence in the world of the decision-maker. I always recommend that all agencies learn to prioritise all the competing demands as they assemble all their resources. The catastrophic element is that the participant and all that this entails is no longer appearing on this priority list.

Let me give you a clumsy example of this. In a recent consultancy with a NGB outside Europe, the issue of Coaching and Coach Development was part of the review. When the new strategy was presented to the decision-makers about the total plan and how it would completely update and upgrade the role of coaches by appropriate changes to content and processes being rolled out in a special timeline – I just got blank faces looking back at me. When I mentioned that the strategy would also require a new management structure for the human, physical and financial elements, pandemonium broke out. Their only concern was that they might lose financial control of all the certification monies that the coaches were paying annually into their coffers. Their near apoplectic reaction was that of a career bureaucrat and not one that reflected anything to do with the needs of the participant.

2. Other social triggers

Some of the reasons for the more recent acceleration of the disconnect have been centred on the latest and perilous societal behaviour that has influenced the actions of the bureaucracy. Just as the need to put the participant (athlete, coach, official) at the centre of the Track and Field universe has become more and more important so our society has thrown up more problems that have attracted the attention of the bureaucracy. While some of these attractors e.g. Diversity, Inclusion, Safeguarding, etc have a valuable and necessary contribution to make across all elements of a national strategy, the lessening of investment in the participants has accelerated as these 21st-century social stressors have, rightly or wrongly, increased in importance. This can be summarised by this description of a recent behavioural pattern of the human race:

"Given the implicit tendency to have a pronounced "in-group" preference and a potential we have for violence and vengeance against "out-group" members, a fear has arrived in our midst that accelerates us to poor actions. Add to this an exacerbation by those with power and privilege and the cocktail is devastating." (modified from Peterson (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8v7ueICWuU>))

The 'devastating' cocktail is exemplified by seeing people, who once stood for honourable, supportive, open-minded behaviour towards those in the weakest position, being appointed to the bureaucracy and quickly losing their integrity as they succumb to the trappings of power and the self-serving environment they now inhabit. Sometimes the appointment process has used a system that is the enemy of competence and justice as the bureaucracy seek out only those who will toe the party line or who have recognised traits or history that will easily see them succumb to the 'dark' side. It is common to see integrity being unravelled when a position, often longed for over many years, is threatened if the unwritten corporate rules are not adhered to. Each of these people (and I know many) are now pale comparisons of when they were independent, bold spirits with a dream to make a difference.

The distance in priorities and philosophy between the decision-makers and the participants is so wide that sometimes it is hard to understand some strategies. Here in Australia, where the successful Brisbane 2032 Olympic bid has magnified the behaviour of the bureaucracy, there are plenty of examples of this distance. A leading Academy of Sport has undergone huge investment as the bureaucrats fight over the dying remains of the once successful Australian Institute of sport. The 'trough' has reached huge proportions and what do we see? – an immediate appointment of senior bureaucrats at football-star salary levels. At the same time in the sport of Athletics two coaches were sacked from the production line. Don't forget that all this money now lining the pockets of the sporting decision-makers is provided by the taxpayer.

Summary

If you ever get the chance to direct some thinking towards the essence of the sport, the coach-athlete interface and all that goes with it, you will be on the right track. While quality 'governance' is vital it must also be appropriate. As unfashionable as this may sound, the soul of the sport must remain at the centre of any strategy – and the soul is people and it is the people who are disillusioned.

The documents that I have attached to the email are mostly specific to the strategies surrounding the coach/athlete interface. In general terms, they have been created in the hope that someone questions all the current assumptions that prevail around the Coaching and Coach Development topic. It is time for those who have been part of the problem to cease trying to be part of the solution. Fresh perspectives are needed and you might be that person.

Good luck with all you do.

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