

A Slight Chance, then the usual outcome.

Surprisingly I managed to have a chat with one of Australia's latest high-powered sporting decision-makers in recent weeks. To get an audience with one of these very powerful people is so very hard but, thankfully, I was given permission to meet with one of them.

My aim was to see if I could get some traction for Coach and Coaching Development to be able to sit at the high table of support. I was ready to link the 'High Performance (HP)' trinket that usually dominates proceedings, to the qualities and support mechanisms so desperately required in all athlete and coaching pathways. The HP attraction is always high with the decision-makers especially now when there is the added magnetism of the 2032 Olympic Games to be held here in Brisbane. This latest 'bandwagon' of commitment that attracts so many to the table is coupled with the normal quest for 'Legacy' that goes with the Olympic language and vocabulary (and has never been successful). I have witnessed decades of botched attempts to create a 'Legacy' for those who follow on from us as each Olympic bid is tabled. There is a 50-year track record of failure in this strategy yet the ruling class of sport continues to gain favour and longevity from wheeling out the 'Legacy' statement every four years.

Inside the halls of Australian Sport lies the 'institutionalised-performance' strategy (State Institutes and Academies) that is undergoing major rebuilding with all the associated political and bureaucratic in-fighting that one could imagine. Here in Brisbane, the local component of this entity has undergone its first changes with the recruitment of the latest bureaucratic layers of Directors and Service Leads (Sports Medicine, Sports Science, Sports Psychology, etc) that has eaten into several million dollars of public monies as salaries. Even in the short period of time it has taken to assemble this very expensive layer of decision-makers their administrative behaviour is being felt at the coal face.

One must never forget that the language, vocabulary and protocols associated with the culture of a bureaucracy will taint all that follows in their strategies. This phenomenon has led to coaches and athletes being disenfranchised by the political classes. The spending of public monies is an exercise that grows out of the public service mentality that surrounds it and every dollar must rightly go through an exhaustive journey of justification and control. What must not continue is the continuing lack of understanding of the nature of all the requirements that surround the coaching journey.

The problem is that each department lead must now continuously show the value and progress of their department in administrative terms and so the 'box-ticking' environment prevails. It centres all focus on these administrative processes and protocols to such an extent that the things that matter at the coach-athlete interface

are reduced to a by-standing role. One of my colleagues is working in this pathway, very close to the coach-athlete interface, and is now feeling the full force of this administrative competition for 'ticks in boxes' and the validation of all the other support mechanisms. In fact, there are near-suffocating effects of all these very expensive Directors as they scheme to get their department and their personal status to gain the upper hand in the performance environment. There is nothing worse than watching bureaucrats fight over their status and a share of the spoils from the trough of sports performance resources.

Imagine how daft I must have sounded when I asked if there was any chance of reversing things and putting the coach-athlete interface at the centre of all activity. I presented my best arguments for a change of emphasis in the whole scheme of things. They included asking the bureaucrat what elements of the new strategy were specifically aimed at reversing the critical limitations being felt at the cutting edge of the system – the coach-athlete interface. I highlighted just a small number of these e.g.

- *Participation drop-off occurrences in the development journey*
- *The decline in physical qualities (mechanical and metabolic) as illustrated in the 'Physical Literacy' predicament the community is creating.*
- *The problems associated with having a 'certification-centric' as opposed to a career-long 'learning-centric' coach education strategy.*

After some minutes of non-sensical mutterings (usually witnessed in the political landscape where never is a question answered), full of public service jargon, I nearly gave up. I reiterated the fact that each of the stages of the journey from 'engagement', through 'development' and onto 'talent' required the very best practitioners to be involved in both the School and Club environments and that their skills had to be at a level of repeatable excellence. This initial journey should lead to athletes arriving at the cusp of their step into the senior layers with the fewest limitations across all four pillars (Technical, Tactical, Physical and Behavioural). It would mean that regardless of the final destination (lifelong physical and emotional well-being as an adult or a high-performance journey -or- both) every person in the pathway would be serviced by the very best practitioners. Coupled with this level of practitioner quality must always be a culture of empathy, respect and appreciation of the coaching population to such an extent that they appear at the centre of things and not just an easily ignored volunteer group. Just as there is a never-ending service provision for the bureaucracy with opportunity and advancement coupled with the knowledge that there is very little risk to their future, so the teaching / coaching population should be treated equally. I asked him how successful his administration might be if 99% of the bureaucracy were volunteers who, once certified, were ignored for the majority of the time. A deafening silence.

It was at this point that I was, again, reminded that I already knew the answers to these questions. For all their supposed association with coaching (have a read of their CVs) the truth is that they simply do not know what is happening at the coach-athlete interface and, if they have seen this environment up close, they do not have any answers to the problems that the coach-athlete operation faces. Surely this required level of understanding is an essential element of leadership.

"You know, farming looks might easy when your plough is a pencil and you are a thousand miles from the corn field." Dwight Eisenhower.

Bureaucrats beget bureaucrats and their vision and decision-making are not on the same wavelength as the coaches. For them to have reached the point where they are attractive to other more senior bureaucrats must have meant that they have amassed attractive bureaucratic characteristics. Seldom do these characteristics fit well with the needs of the coaches and athletes.

As time passed, I remained committed to trying to set out arguments and statistics to try to get a shift of emphasis. I was determined not to make him uncomfortable (a trait I am continually accused of) but I have learned that most who get 'triggered' are usually the most disconnected from the matter at hand.

"Is the system worth serving or is it worth saving?"

The general attitude of this public servant was to defend and justify the positions taken in the new strategy. The defence was backed up by a list of the qualifications and experiences of all the decision-makers in the pathway, his fellow bureaucrats. It began to be an exercise in group dynamics where the well-intentioned interventions underway were simply a reflection of the assembled thoughts, desires and needs of the bureaucracy.

"Things had gone beyond the desire for group consensus and now reeked of group pathology." Peterson, 2020

It seems that the higher up the bureaucratic hierarchy you climb, the more corruption you are susceptible to. There is a slow capitulation to the needs, demands and behaviours of the hierarchy's culture of self-preservation and self-promotion. What started as an honest endeavour to act on behalf of those who need support, progress, respect and appreciation quickly dissolves into an exercise of protecting the ruling bubble at all costs.

Of course, his arguments appeared very sound when the aim was to be a smooth operating, effective manager of public monies or to be the catalyst for the building of new facilities or to be another feather in the cap of local politicians as they

continue their quest for re-election. Relevant to the journey of coaches and athletes?
Absolutely not.

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