

## Trying to Answer Some Questions from a Colleague

One of the strengths of sharing on social media is that I always get the chance to learn a little more. While social media is fraught with some terrible elements of often insane political viewpoints and reflections, it has also been a source of communication between me and my colleagues. I live half a world away from some of them and miss the banter and sharing with them in person.

Luckily for me a few days ago I answered a post from my colleague Simon Harling in the UK who posed me a question on LinkedIn.

*“Have you ever done any work on developing personal leadership in coaches, teachers, and parents?”*

*I ask because I have 4 questions when developing personal leadership. What do you stand for? What is important to you? What change do you seek? What is it like to know you?”*

This is an area that Simon excels at and it was a challenge for me to even try to make any effective comments. However, it did what most ‘brainstorming’ activities do – it made me think. Rather than reply with a series of short post replies, I thought that I would try to set out my reasoning in a longer article to him – here goes.

Hi Simon,

Mate - somewhere in here is my answer, so be patient with me!

You catch me at a time where most of my thoughts are being directed at trying to find solutions to a range of problems facing coaches worldwide. This has made me a little myopic as I am attempting to get my head around finding answers to the following glaring issues:

1. The increasing ‘participation’ problem where more and more young people are turning away from organised physical activity.
2. The ever-increasing lowering of physical literacy and personal fitness standards and how these impact both physical and cognitive well-being.
3. The increasing injury frequency in the development and high-performance layers of sport.
4. The increasing difficulties of young people transitioning from their development years to their senior years in sport – particularly seeing them carrying limitations forward in their technical, tactical, physical and behavioural qualities (the four pillars).

As I attempt to assemble appropriate coach education content to improve these journeys I have used the “must-do, should-do, nice-to-do” process to ensure that all energy is being used to solve the aforementioned problems. I find myself aiming my energies directly at enabling the coach to consistently deliver an appropriate learning environment across all four pillars. Every day that I work on this I see information that appeals. I hear about some quality work by a colleague, or I brainstorm a program for an athlete, or I get involved in a research project, or I conduct a review of a performance strategy, and I often feel that this new information simply must appear in the content of the courses. The test for me is to keep the content pertinent to the actual course structure. I find myself always having to prioritise all this competing information into a plan that will work. I learned a long time ago that I am not there to impress the recipients by telling them how much stuff I know.

The people I am trying to help are those volunteer coaches taking their first or early, faltering steps into the world of teaching, coaching and mentoring, just as I did 57 years ago. I know that I probably only have one or two weekends to furnish them with enough content and confidence to turn up at their Club the next Tuesday and coach a group of 8–12-year-olds. This is where the “must-do, should-do, nice-to-do” exercise helps. I slowly work out what I need to deliver NOW and what I need to ENCOURAGE for later. There will be things that they simply must do next Tuesday and things that they can take their time on at a later date as part of their ongoing education and development.

A short while ago I did a short presentation for the European Track & Field Coaches international conference. It was a checklist of things to assemble to create an effective learning situation within the training session. My very first slide took a step into the elements you have raised in your questions – I emphasised the use of the questions, *Who are they? Where are they? and How are they?*

The “*Who are they?*” point was this. You are about to embark upon a relationship where communication, trust, loyalty, respect and understanding play a vital part. This means that you will need to find out who these people are in front of you. What are their reasons for being here? What motivates them? What are their hopes and fears and dreams? What is their background away from this environment? What are the characteristics of their personality and how do they interact with their peers? By building this understanding the coach will be better placed to make appropriate decisions on how this individual will need to be treated as they progress along the learning journey. Just as this individual will adapt to the sessions completely different to others in the squad so the coach will need to find the appropriate means of coaching this person in a manner that works for them.

This set of statements was quickly followed by a near reversal of the principle. Just as we as coaches need to know the person in front of us, so must they know us. Your values, principles, behaviour and *raison d’être* must be on view to the athletes if they are to trust that you are there to make them better no matter how long and

hard the road may be. This goes some way to answering your first question, **“What do you stand for?”**

The second question, **“What is important to you?”**, is also a critical position to investigate. My first reaction to this was to look again at some recent comments I have made about the development layer of the sporting journey. While I pride myself on standing up for patience and perseverance as a major coaching tool and coupling these with practices including the skills of progression and feedback, the world we live in is very different. Our colleague Richard Bailey recently said,

*“Most development programs are not designed to meet children’s needs; they are designed entirely for adult ambitions.”*

Al Smith has also chimed in with,

*“The greatest enemy of progress is an environment that allows any kid to be defined as a high performer. That’s just status anxiety masquerading as development.”*

This illustrates that the question you have posed about “What is important to you?” is a critical one. If we continue to create a journey that is about the fixture list, rankings, winning at all costs, over-and early specialisation, then we have chosen the wrong things to see as being important. Maybe it is time to invest more effort and quality in coaching the adults than coaching the kids. In this way, the adults might finally create a language, vocabulary, systems, strategies, processes and protocols based on standards that are appropriate for the recipients.

I am hoping that I might have thrown some light on the ‘*developing personal leadership in coaches, teachers and parents*’ point that you set out earlier. Let me tidy all this up by just making some quick comments about the other two elements of my starting questions – “Where are they?” And “How are they?” so that I don’t leave them hanging there.

The “*Where are they?*” question is very important and more important than many coaches think. Knowing where the athlete is on their unique journey will allow decisions to be made that are appropriate to their needs. The whole point is to fit the program to the athlete so to know what the athlete is bringing to the training table is impossible to ignore. What is their training age? Sometimes just stating that they have been doing formal training for a period of ‘x’ years is not sufficient. It is far more important to know where they are on the biological journey, their physical literacy/competence journey, their social journey and, their emotional journey. Understanding their biological journey e.g. where are they on their maturation pathway? - will give you many, many clues as to what might be appropriate to prescribe to them in their training activities or what emphasis should be placed on the chosen components. Understanding where they are on their literacy and competence pathway is also vital when the exercise prescription is about to be created. Where are their movement efficiencies and where are their deficiencies?

What elements need to be consolidated?; what elements need to be regressed?; what elements need to be progressed? These questions are often answered simply by getting the athlete to move. I can't see the point of carrying out all sorts of formal testing when observing them move in a progressive sequence e.g. static to dynamic, slow to fast, simple to complex, unloaded to loaded will give you the answers to "Where are they now?".

Finally, "*How are they?*" Make no mistake, asking the athletes: How are you today? Sleep OK? Eating OK? Anything sore? - can arm you with all sorts of clues to what might happen next.

On the matter of "*making coaches, teachers and parents more assertive to the need for fundamental movement skills*" you know that you are preaching to the converted. Whether at the developmental or high-performance levels of the journey the principal building blocks of physical performance are mechanical and metabolic efficiency coupled with appropriate arena skills, both delivered at exactly the right time. This means that movement patterns, and all the things that underpin them or result from them, are keystones. To arrive at the point of optimal production and delivery is a progressive journey unique to the individual.

All the best - Kelvin