

One of my last adventures

Last Roll of the Dice

Interesting that just after my 74th birthday, I had the chance to roll the dice one more time. I applied to an overseas NGB for the advertised post of Head of Coaching Development. Here it was, a probable last chance to turn words into action on behalf of all the coaches of the nation. I could not believe it when I was invited for an interview – whoever appoints an old bloke! I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to present a case for change to what was a really pleasant interview panel full of coaching experience. Even though I was not successful I am praying that the successful candidate approaches the job with one single, driving factor – support all coaches in the field.

The job description told me a lot. The words “Coach Development” told me that someone had, maybe, seen that “Coach Certification” was failing and that a new paradigm needed to be explored and assembled. Whether this was an exercise in ‘wordsmithery’, appeasement or just window dressing can only be assessed in 3-5 years’ time, but I was hopeful that there was a chance for change. I have yet to see any NGB start over, but the Chair of the panel made that very clear – this was a chance to start again. For too many decades the sporting bureaucracy has found good, bad and indifferent projects to bolt onto their failing coaching infrastructure. Time to change the culture!

As my final word here in this tome, I list the main features of what I presented that day in the interview.

Being asked to describe in 10min “How” I would go about the job was difficult because this whole pathway of coaching is complex and interrelated with so many factors. However, I decided to start with the context of “What” before any “How”. It was important to assemble some factors that the NGB has to address, and that coaching plays a part in.

Pillar 1 – The Athletes.

The strategy must arrest or reduce the participation decline that prevails along the Athlete Pathway. The strategy must reduce the limitations seen in the Technical, Physical, Behavioural / Mental and Arena Skills development of all athletes.

Pillar 2 – The Coaches

Coaches must be able to deliver repeatable excellence in all matters that influence the participation and limitations problems in the Athlete Pathway. Coaches to be offered a lifetime of opportunities for progressing their abilities. Coaches to be

treated in a way that they are respected, and feel a sense of belonging and appreciation. They need to operate in an environment where sharing adds a powerful arm to their development.

Pillar 3 – Culture

The most important element of the new strategy. The most difficult part of the plan. The new strategy is to take place within a culture driven by service, fairness, inclusion, loyalty, respect, empathy and appreciation. In all projects like this the 'human element' is usually completely ignored. Here was the chance to see a change in the hierarchy of a sport where coaches become central to all activity.

I illustrated this part of the journey by listing some thoughts I had recently delivered to another NGB here in Australia. I referenced Vicky Huyton in this section where she had recently said: *"Coaches do not feel valued or respected. There is a general poor feeling towards the NGB. There is poor communication from the NGB. The NGB is poor at dealing with complaints. Personal coaches are treated poorly."*

To which I added a couple of my own illustrations recently delivered: *"Once the coaching certificate is awarded there is little or no appropriate support. Coach Education is seen as an income stream by some of the bureaucracy and is treated as such. Why not offer some quality control to your most important assets?"*

The above pillars were offered as the cornerstone of the KPI's assembled for this new strategy.

I then commenced the "How" section by grouping ideas into Human and Physical sectors.

Human Elements

The whole journey must start with enthusing and convincing the entire organisation, from bottom to top (from Clubs to Chairman) that they have the appetite and fortitude to: *"Do things different and do different things."*

Nothing was ever going to improve without a groundswell of support from those who glue the sport together – the volunteer coaches who are charged with delivering the foundations and fundamentals at a level of repeatable excellence; and the decision-makers who will be charged with resourcing the strategy. This meant that cogent argument mixed with unrelenting enthusiasm and determination must be the initial behaviour of the new appointee.

It would all start with winning hearts and minds by watching and listening. The key to this element would be to answer the question, "Where are we now." No more

assuming or guessing or ignorance, but a powerful review of *What is being delivered? How is it being delivered? Is it working?* – as illustrated in the varying environments of the Clubs and other private squads. This would mean visiting the coalface with a friendly, supportive demeanour (“How can we help?”) so as to clearly see what was needed to improve things. *“It is time for the NGB to get out of their offices and go to the Clubs and coaches.”*

After this initial intervention, clarity of purpose should be clear for the new strategy.

Next comes the creation of a coaching journey that sees most of the education and development of the coaches occurring AFTER they get their initial certificate. Herein lies the first of the “different” and difficult mountains to climb. The most important element would see the creation of mentorship / apprenticeship support at SESSION level. This would be supported by the less important but still effective local and area WORKSHOP support. Finally, there would continue the less important but still worthwhile regional and national CONFERENCES. It is time to support the coaches where the ‘rubber meets the road’ inside the actual coaching session.

This improved post-certificate journey would finally see the creation of a vertical pathway of progression for the coach at a performance level they might choose. No longer would the journey be one of a frantic progression to the right towards High Performance. Each coach would be able to stay at a layer they were interested (passionate) about and progress their depth of learning and experience. Through this element of the strategy, we may soon see a “Master Coach” at development level. Hopefully, we will no longer be crying out for excellence at the fundamental / foundation layers of the sport.

Next comes the section of the strategy where we identify, recruit and educate the appropriate quality and quantity of coach mentors to appear in the structure at the session and workshop level. This is difficult mountain number two. This team must display the finest examples of character, personality and humility. Their work will start with the creation of relationships with all the coaches in the field who need support and guidance to better practice. Their existence is one of ‘service-provider’ and not a boss. They would need a flexible and adaptable approach to each coach they interact with and they will need to be great teachers and communicators. Like I said – a really big mountain to climb!

To allow this to be a seamless series of steps, each Club will need to be supported towards putting themselves in the best possible position to take full advantage of the service provided by the NGB in this new strategy. It may be that Clubs are supported towards the provision of their own internal coaching management or that their existing coaching strategy is enhanced by support / interventions from the NGB. Again, the approach to the Clubs must be one conducted with humility and a service provision behaviour.

Physical Resources

The strategy will require that all content of the certification courses and ongoing mentorship pathway be questioned as to their relevance to the 21st century. For example, with a more sedentary existence prevailing for many youngsters and Physical Education in schools failing in the mechanical and metabolic fitness levels of all students, the Physical syllabus of the coaching content requires re-visiting. I am suggesting a move to a journey as follows:

A General Movement vocabulary - An Event-Related Movement vocabulary - An Event Specific Movement vocabulary

There would need to be a shift away from an information-centric education platform to a learning-centric version to give all coaches an improved "teaching" skill level. Through this, we would see an optimal use of such things as "variability, external-focus, constraints manipulation and analogies" being used more effectively.

Also, an improvement in the ability of the coach to recognise opportunities and solutions for all the behavioural elements of maturation as the athlete navigates their journey to adulthood.

I have had success in the creation of hand-held multi-media resources that immediately support all the exercise prescription decisions made within the session. This would strengthen the coach's ability to appropriately progress / regress the learning environment at each step of the session. All these resources to be created with a continuous relationship with the "Explicit to Implicit" learning continuum.

I was proud to be able to tell the panel that while some of these initiatives might appear to be a 'bridge too far' (bloody hard work!) there was considerable hope for progress because I had already created courses for the Movement Vocabulary journey (Levels 1, 2, and 3), the Physical Competence journey for students in tertiary education institutions and the multi-media resources through my Movement Dynamics video library. I offered to let the person they appointed scrutinise these existing resources for their suitability to the chosen strategy.

At this point, I assured them that they should not, for one minute, think that this strategy did not include the High-Performance layer. It was pertinent to say that High Performance depends on 'what has gone before' just as much as it does on 'what is yet to come'. The strategy presented would hopefully see all the limitations we see in athletes at the transition from junior to senior ranks diminishing which would allow for a seamless transition to the rigours of high performance.

It also invited the panel to see that such initiatives as the Elite Coaching Apprenticeship program; the Women Sport Leadership program; the Women in High

Performance program; the ICCE Coach develop Framework, should all be pursued with vigour but that the same creativity that these initiatives bring to high performance must be matched and engagement and development levels.

Finally, I added some very brief comments about:

The strategy must 'earn the right' to progress and be built / evolved with care. Some small packages / pilots may need to be tested before rolling out. Patience will need to be a major component as it will take 3+ years to arrive at something that can be rolled out with purpose.

My hope was that I could get the panel to appreciate some of the important features of a Coach Development strategy and that finally there just might be a shift of emphasis in the hierarchy of the sport. It was hoped that the bureaucracy moved itself to being service providers to the coaching fraternity for the good of the athletes and the sport. All three of the panel came from a coaching background so I am hopeful that whomever they appoint might have some chance of success.

My final roll of the dice I hope was worthy of all the coaches out there. It must never be forgotten that, along with the athletes, they are the sport.

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