

Building Character And Self-Reliance In Players - Some Suggestions For Coaches.

**By
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The pronoun 'he' has been used throughout this article, merely for convenience and ease of reading. Please read "he" as "he or she".

After being closely involved at Super 12, NPC and U19 level rugby for a few years, I have come to the conclusion, and I'm certainly not alone in this, that we have a few problems that need to be addressed. I must also point out that I'm writing this from the perspective of someone who works with elite players, rather than lower levels. I'm not sure whether these problems apply across New Zealand rugby or not, I'll leave you to be the judge of that, but I do believe that they're problems in my neck of the woods.

The problems are as follows:

Leadership

Self-reliance and character

On-field decision-making (or option-taking)

Skill level – especially skill level under pressure

In this article I don't want to focus on the latter two (maybe another time), but I do want to have a look at the first two (which are really interconnected) and particularly the second one – self-reliance and character. Players who are strong and admirable human beings (i.e. show character) are obviously more likely to become leaders. I think it is widely accepted that we are struggling to find leaders in our modern rugby teams at all levels. I know there are exceptions, but I still think it's fair to say that there is an issue here. Why do we have a dearth of natural leaders? Well, there are probably several reasons, and I believe it worthwhile to consider what some of these may be, as it may help us to try to put things right. These views are not based on any scientific research, but rather they're the views of someone who is closely involved with modern rugby, who thinks about things a fair bit and who cares deeply.

Clearly there are societal issues at work here. There seems a general erosion of traditional family values and some of our players are not receiving the role modelling or training in human values that they should be getting. For a number of our players, school is not a place they remember with any fondness. There may well be no tradition of education in their families, they struggle at schoolwork, develop a negative attitude, because of their poor attitude they get into trouble, the downward cycle gains pace and school becomes more of a prison for them than anything else – except for their rugby. I don't mean to suggest that this is the case with all of our youngsters, but a significant proportion of them. They end up, through their physical talents, making representative teams and coming through the system to U19, Colts,

NPC and Super 12. Neither do elite youngsters these days have the experience of working an eight or nine hour day, training after a hard day's work, playing rugby for their club with experienced club and rep players and getting up at 7.00 am on Sunday morning for a club working bee.

For the talented players, the amount of rugby they have on from the time they leave school means that they don't have many, if any, of these learning experiences. They may also come from families, and play for teams whose leaders (Mums, Dads and coaches) encourage them to be seen and not heard, to do what they're told when they're told. It's often easier as a coach to take a pretty prescriptive "do this, do that" approach. After all, a number of the players will be very used to it and probably respond quite well to it. But it is certainly not teaching them to think for themselves, and it's not encouraging them to become more self-reliant. Is it any wonder then that some of the players coming to representative level at nineteen or twenty are struggling with self-esteem (or if they have it, it's based pretty much solely on their rugby ability), confidence (outside the rugby field), self-reliance and leadership skills? I don't think it's too surprising at all.

When I talk about character, I am referring to such good old qualities as honesty, work ethic, forthrightness, integrity, loyalty, fortitude, and persistence. When I mention loyalty, I don't mean to suggest that young players should necessarily stay with one union or club all their careers (they have short careers and must do what's best for them and their family), but they certainly should show loyalty to whomsoever they're playing for at the time. Now these are not qualities which babies are born with, rather they are qualities which people develop as they grow up. They learn them from those who influence them – mums and dads, brothers and sisters, teachers, mentors, friends and coaches. Either they learn good stuff, or bad stuff.

As coaches, you can't change the world, but you can do your piece to encourage character, self-reliance and leadership in the players that we coach. I am reminded of the old story about the little boy walking along the beach where there were tens of thousands of starfish washed up and dying. When a man saw the little boy throwing them back into the sea one by one, he told the boy he was wasting his time, that he wasn't making any difference. The little boy replied, "I made a difference to that one, I made a difference to this one." And as coaches, you can make a difference with your players.

I believe that coaches of school teams hold the future of New Zealand rugby in their hands. So what can you do? Well firstly, you can build a good culture in your team. You can teach your kids, whatever age they are, that standards and values are important. That things like honesty, loyalty, up-front communication, putting the team first and supporting your mates on and off the field are core values of your team. And, of course, you must role-model those values yourself. I would encourage you to come up with a little card, or something similar, which clearly outlines what the team values are (this will be very simple for young kids, but you get my drift). Or you can write it on a page and give it to everyone (including parents) and then hand out the cards (as a symbolic gesture) as you go through the season when players demonstrate their commitment to team values. With older players you'll want to give them a say in what these values are, but try to get a few key senior players on board beforehand to lead the way, especially if you're a little uncertain what they'll come up with. Players

will be keener to adhere to team standards and values that they've played a part in designing than they will if they have been imposed upon them.

Also, you should adopt a coaching philosophy and style that encourages players to think for themselves. That means being a democrat rather than an autocrat, an agent of empowerment (and yes I know it's an overused word, but I can't think of a better one) rather than a dictator. How can players learn to make decisions for themselves if they don't get practice at it? How can they learn to think for themselves when they are told, "Do this, you're doing this wrong, do it this way, do it that way, no that's wrong, you should be doing it like this"? If you tend to coach like that, well, that's how I used to coach too, and I discovered that there's a much better way. I'm not suggesting that you abdicate responsibility for teaching your players things, but I'm suggesting that you go about it in a different way. Socrates taught like this when he was playing No 8 for the Greeks over 2600 years ago. It's called questioning. I have developed a style of coaching that I call the Query Theory, which is based upon questioning to establish self-awareness and improvement. A number of top coaches are highly talented at this approach to coaching, including Wayne Smith, Graham Mourie, Colin Cooper and Dave Rennie. I'm sure there are many other coaches throughout the country also using this approach to a greater or lesser extent.

The Query Theory seeks to aid players' self-awareness through questioning. Once the player has a strong mental image of the skill (and I believe it is crucial to demonstrate the skills as completely and effectively as you can), the skill is performed by the players, observed and analysed by the coach, and the good points and faults identified. The coach then aids the player in comparing their action with the ideal model by using "what", "where" and "how" questions (e.g. "What happened to your hips when you missed that shot at goal? What was your body position when you hit that ruck? Where was the blindside defence when you went on the short side? How can you clear the ball off the ground more quickly?"). If the players are unaware of what their bodies are doing, the coach should assist by asking "shaping" questions which are designed to move the player towards self-awareness (e.g. "The ideal model showed that it's important to throw your hand after the ball when throwing in at the lineout. How well did you throw your hands in the direction of the throw?"). Then the coach might say, "Let's do it again and I want you to be aware of how effectively you throw your hands straight after the ball". After the next throw, the question would be asked again. Coaches can also help by asking athletes to rate their performance on a 1-10 scale. A perfect execution would be a 10, while an inferior performance would rate 1, 2 or 3. Further awareness can be encouraged by quizzing players as to why they gave the score they did (e.g. "You scored yourself a seven for that throw. Why not a nine or a ten?"). It's a "double whammy", because each time you ask the player a question, you're insisting he develops self-awareness; and each time he answers, you get feedback as to how much he knows.

There are other ways of assisting self-awareness that assist questioning. In cricket, bowlers who veer to the left when bowling can be assisted by placing a rubbish tin across the outside of the bowling crease, thereby ensuring that the bowler will deliver the ball in close to the stumps. Sprinters whose footfall is incorrect can be taken to the beach and asked to observe their footprints, and then a variety of straps and gadgets can be used to assist athletes with bodily awareness of how the correct action should feel. Players running into rucks under a stick or flat board at training are

developing an awareness of correct body position. Another obvious aid is the use of video or computer analysis, an “awareness ally” which is now widely used by coaches all over the world at elite level (i.e. in NZ Super 12 and 1st division NPC) and increasingly at lower levels.

When teaching tactics, decision-making and option-taking, the questions usually change from simple “what, how, where” questions to “why” and more complex “how and what” questions (e.g. to a rugby player, “Why did you run that particular line of support”, “How might we be able to get past their defensive line in that situation”, and “What would happen if you shepherded the player towards the sideline before tackling him?”). In order to answer such questions players are forced to think about the question. Their answers will also give coaches valuable feedback as to the level of understanding of the athlete(s), and a guide regarding what questions should be asked next.

The effectiveness of the Query Theory model depends on the coach’s ability to ask the right questions at the right time. Questioning, like anything else, is an acquired skill. Coaches will find that the more questioning they do, the better Query Theory exponent they become. The following are useful tips to enhance your “querying”.

- Firstly, ensure that you plan your questions. When you know what skill or move you will be coaching, plan questions that will assist athletes to learn the skill/move. If necessary write them down.
- Make sure that you leave your athletes sufficient time to answer questions. Don’t be tempted to rush in with the answer (i.e. augmented feedback) when there is a gap between when you ask the question and when the athlete answers it.
- If athletes seem unaware of what they have done, or why they have done it, probe with more questions that will lead them to discovering the answers for themselves.

And keep at it. Practice makes perfect. But it works. Good luck with your team this season. If you create a good team environment where good values are foremost and you do all you can to build character, self-awareness and self-reliance in your players, you’ll be doing New Zealand rugby an important service, at whatever level you coach.