

FREE-UP THE APPROACH TO IMPROVE RESULTS BY JOHN HACKETT.

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It always intrigues me how we apply certain techniques and tools within a business context and then don't really understand the need to apply them in dealing with sportsmen and women. This may be because many cynics in the workplace believe these to be hocus pocus – so why should sports people see any benefit when they are normally applied from 9 to 5 in 'office' environments.

Now that I am making the move, ungraciously, into coaching referees rather than spoiling Saturdays for the players, I have tried to utilise those things which I use to coach individuals in the workplace. One of the most important tools I have used is based on the work of David A Kolb in his work on experiential learning called, "How Adults Learn".

The theory states that for proper learning to take place, a full cycle needs to take place. This cycle consists of:

Experience - something that you ACTUALLY do.

Reflection - Taking time to observe and reflect on what happened.

Concluding - Drawing conclusions from what happened and starting to define an abstract model

for what will happen in certain circumstances.

Testing - Thinking through how to apply the theory to the next real situation.

In children, the learning nearly always follows this path. For example, a three-year-old experiments by putting a pencil in the electric plug socket. As all adults (should) know, this is not to be recommended and the resulting shock will cause the three-year-old to reflect on what happened (probably accompanied by lots of screaming). They will draw conclusions about what to do next time – such as avoid the socket at all costs and they will probably finally understand that only *certain* things are safe in the socket.

Of course, without the proper guidance of the coach the child might move straight to theory – without reflection – and then deduce that it was the pencil that was the problem not the socket. This is known in the trade as 'jumping to the wrong conclusion'.

However, by the time we are adults we are able to start the cycle at any of the four points, either by observing others before trying something ourselves, or just by theorising about a certain abstract situation before actually trying it out. However, we all have our favourite starting point. There is great debate about why this is, but most feel that it depends on how successful you were or how you were rewarded for choosing each approach as a youngster. However, it explains why some people just jump in and others stand back and observe first.



Peter Honey and Alan Mumford have devised a 'Learning Styles Questionnaire', which helps individuals find their preference and this is a tool I have often used to help me determine the most appropriate way to coach individuals so that they learn best.

So, that's the theory and anyone who would prefer to jump straight in will already be asking, "So what?" Well, let's look at two different ways that a coach may choose to work on a skill. The first would be to break the skill down into its component parts slowly and in a very structured way, explaining the dynamics of each component.

After the theory, the coach describes when the skill might be used in certain situations and then creates a 'training situation' for the individual to practise the skill. The benefit of this approach is that three parts of the cycle are already covered and, provided there is a decent reflection and feedback on how it actually went, the whole cycle will be covered and the player will acquire the skill.

However, I would argue that this is fine for inexperienced or junior players, but the major disadvantage is that it can lead to an overly structured approach to performing a skill, which makes it much easier to defend against. It removes the 'natural' feel from learning the skill that taking a more activist approach might give.

To do this, the coach simply describes the context in which a skill should be performed and a description of the desired outcome, allowing the individual to determine the most natural way for him to achieve the outcome. The coach can then create the same match situation, but allow freedom of action from the player.

Provided there is a proper discussion and reflection about how well the experience went, and what conclusions would be drawn, it will help the majority of individuals to get more proficient more quickly.

Both approaches are fine, but the contention is that the more 'natural' one is to allow freedom to achieve the outcome rather than a slower, more structured, theoretical approach.

When is it best to use each? The secret lies in the amount of 'danger' or 'risk' involved. For example, we wouldn't normally allow people to learn electronics without them understanding the basic theory. The same applies to front-row play, in particular the engagement, and to the basics of tackling. However, when it comes to coaching how to beat a player, or how to create space, or running angles, it might be appropriate to move away from the structured and move towards freedom. There are many who feel the recent resurgence in Scotland and Wales is directly as a result of a change in coaching strategy towards this.

Finally, when have I actually applied it in coaching a referee? Well, the most recent example is in working with a referee who was having several problems at the lineout which resulted in scrappy ball for players and he was giving more penalties than most other referees. Using the 'freedom' approach, I gave him the context by stating the problem and then asked why he didn't think of managing the 'engagement' at lineout in the same way that he did for scrums – where he was an excellent performer.

He listened and, in various scenarios, started to apply these 'engagement techniques' in more junior games, before developing the style that he has now adopted. Each time he reflected on the



'scrappiness' or otherwise of the lineouts in his games and the number of penalties resulting, then determined what was working and what wasn't and he could then adjust for the next time. It has taken a few games to perfect, but he is there. What is more, he doesn't do what I would do – or what I would have instructed him to do if I had simply used the 'theoretical' approach. But then, he's not me and his preferred approach leaves him much more comfortable for refereeing what happens after the lineout too!

In conclusion, I'd advise that coaches think about the preferred way that their 'players' have of learning and try to free up their own structured approach for better results in the long term. Of course, we need to be careful with high-risk situations and inexperienced performers, but let's free up the thinking a little.