

NEGOTIATING CULTURE CHANGE AT JUNIOR CLUB LEVEL

BY
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David Beck is a Level 3 coach at Scarborough RFC. In January 2005 he joined the club when they were four points adrift at the bottom of their league. Utilising this article's techniques, they ended the season mid-table, and in April 2006 were promoted champions.

He was a hostage negotiator in the police and negotiator trainer for sixteen years, including secondment to the 2004 Athens Olympics as an advisor. He now has his own consultancy in conflict and crisis management.

His article on Effective Listening appeared in the Winter 2001 Technical Journal.

Part 1: Identify the prevailing culture.

Are you coaching a club where many of your senior players turn up for training when they feel like it? Do training numbers consistently drop once the December rain, frost and snow arrive? Ever asked yourself what you have to do to change today's attitudes, when we never missed a training session in our day? Well, I've been there with you, and my experiences suggest there is hope if a few quick and easy processes are undertaken.

Like most coaches at junior club level (and, for all I know, at professional level too), when coming into a new club for the first time one of my key tasks is to evaluate the existing culture of the players. Over the past decade I have been involved with a number of clubs between Levels 9 (truly amateur) and 5 (who consider themselves semi-professional) and have undertaken the same process with all of them. The results have been consistent and provide a good grounding from which to start changing cultures.

At the first players' meeting of the pre-season, having first introduced myself, I then split the players into small groups of 3 or 4. Arming each group with paper and pen, I then ask them to address a number of questions. As indicated, the responses have been consistent at all levels throughout that period, and are shown below.

Q1: "Why do you play rugby?"

"Love of the game/physical contact/keeping fit"	56%
"Friendship/social environment/teamwork"	32%
"Winning"	9%
"Improvement"	3%

Q2: “Why do you play at this club?”

“Team mates/social environment/perks.”	46%
“Standard of play/winning”	31%
“Location”	17%
“Improve/potential”	6%

Several other questions follow, such as, “What do we want to achieve this season?” and, “What do we agree to do to achieve our aims?” to name but two. The first questions, however, should indicate to the coach at junior level the first problem he will have. The concept of “improvement” invariably ranks bottom of all other considerations. Yet isn’t player improvement one of the main reasons most of us start coaching in the first place?

The next thing I do is hand out copies of the Sports Leadership questionnaire that I first came across in the January 1995 edition of the Technical Journal. This lists forty different behaviours that coaches demonstrate and I have always found it a useful tool to help me judge what my players are looking for. Again, results have been consistent over the period, the top six answers invariably being:

- “Correct technical faults.”
- “Plan ahead.”
- “Make players work to capacity.”
- “Coordinate team efforts.”
- “Explain techniques and tactics.”
- “Give credit where it’s due.”

Most of these answers are to do with improvement and thereby produce the first culture challenge – the players are saying they want their coach to get them doing the very things they put bottom of their list of priorities and which, by their own actions, have shown they are not entirely motivated to achieve!

Part 2: ‘Negotiating’ the change.

For a large part of my professional life I have been a hostage/crisis negotiator. Many of the skills from that discipline lend themselves directly to the business and sporting world – for example, Effective Listening, which is at the core of all interpersonal communication. Another key component of negotiation is an understanding of the six Principles of Influence. These surround us every day. Each time we see an advertisement in a newspaper or on TV we are being subjected to one or more of these principles. Businesses spend millions using them, so they must be effective.

As someone once said, the art of negotiation is getting someone to do exactly what you want whilst believing it’s their idea. Isn’t that an ideal place to be in for a coach trying to change his players’ culture? Using the answers they gave in Part 1 above, how can we now use a bit of psychology to get them to do what we want? Let’s have a brief look at each of these principles.

1. Reciprocity.

Ever been in a group of people at the bar of an evening and been the person who didn't get his round in by the end of the evening? What was the pressure on you the next time the group got together? Chances are you would have bought the first round. Why? Because you felt the urge to give something in return to those who had given you something previously. The charity envelopes that fall through your letterbox often contain a pen. Same principle.

2. Authority.

From birth we are conditioned to accept that certain people in society carry more respect than others – doctors, teachers and police officers to name but a few. Who says something is often more important than what they say. This is why John Stalker advertises awnings and Carol Vorderman certain financial products.

3. Commitment and Consistency.

None of us likes to be known as someone who breaks his word. The pressure is greater if the commitment is written or publicly stated. This is why marriage vows are made in front of a congregation. Suicide bombers are often encouraged to record a video statement before their mission. Different circumstances – same pressure to comply.

4. Social proof.

“Eight out of ten owners say...” Next time you watch Children in Need or a similar production, note the names scrolling along the bottom of your screen. It is never a major corporation donating a zillion quid, but is instead little Johnny who has given his £1.50 pocket money, or old Mrs Brown £5 from her weekly pension. If they can do it, so can you, is the message.

5. Scarcity.

The less available something is, the more we want it. This is the principle behind ‘Limited Edition’ productions. You may recognise the ‘special offer, only available today’ pressure of the window salesman in your front room, who has just asked you if he can use your phone to ring head office for that special discount. (Spooky how it's always available...)

6. Liking.

Famous sports and film stars are forever paid to associate themselves with particular products. If David Beckham or Jonny Wilkinson says something is good, then that's the very thing for me. We love to associate ourselves with success. Name-droppers get a buzz out of doing just that.

How do these principles have any bearing on changing the culture of a rugby club? Well, as a first step I suggest you sit down with your Director of Rugby or whoever, with a sheet of paper and write each of the six headings down. Then alongside each put your minds to what needs to be done to make use of as many of them as possible. For example, under ‘Authority’ could be ‘Get that ex international to come and give a coaching session’. Under ‘Commitment’ could be ‘Get each player to sign up to personal targets’. The list is as long as your imagination is wide. In my experience,

‘Reciprocity’ tends to have the most headings, which in turn will usually have financial implications for the club – but that’s the Committee’s problem, not yours!

Linked into the wider coaching process, these principles can positively help you to impact on the playing culture. They do not guarantee overnight results, and must be seen as a longer-term programme over a season or two. What I do know is that they are effective because they make use of human nature.