

**AN ANALYSIS INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
CHANGING MY COACHING BEHAVIOUR TO CREATE
MENTALLY STRONGER INDIVIDUALS AND A MORE
COHESIVE TEAM**

PART 2

BY

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Part 1 of this article appeared in the Technical Journal last week and can be found in the Technical Journal Archive.

There are references to video clips (VC) in the text.

All players' and coaches' names have been replaced by letters.

THE LEADERSHIP SCALE FOR SPORTS

VERSION A: Players' perceptions of the coach. B: Coaches perception of self

Each of the following statements describes a specific behaviour pattern that a coach may exhibit. For each statement there are five alternatives:

5. ALWAYS (A)
4. MOSTLY (about 75% of the time) (M)
3. OCCASIONALLY (50% of the time) (O)
2. SELDOM (about 25% of the time) (S)
1. NEVER

Please indicate the actual behaviour of the coach / yourself by ticking the appropriate space. Answer all items even if you are unsure of any. Remember that you are rating your present coach / yourself.

MY COACH / AS A COACH I :-

		Average Scores 22 players	Stuart Lancaster Personal scores
1.	See(s) to it that the players work to capacity	4.9	5
2.	Ask(s) for the opinion of players on strategies for specific competitions	4.2	4
3.	Help(s) players with their personal problems	4.0	3
4.	Compliment(s) a player for good performance in front of others	4.3	4
5.	Explain(s) to each player the technique and tactics of the sport	4.6	3
6.	Plan(s) training sessions strategies etc. without consulting the players	2.9	2
7.	Help(s) members of the squad settle any personal conflicts which may develop	4.0	3
8.	Pay(s) special attention to correcting players' technical faults	4.6	4
9.	Get(s) group approval on important squad matters before going ahead	4.3	4
10.	Tell(s) a player when he/she does a particularly good job	4.4	5
11.	Make(s) sure that the coach's role as head of the team is understood by all players	4.7	4
12.	Do(es) not explain the reasons for his / her actions	1.9	2
13.	Look(s) out for the personal welfare of the players	4	4
14.	Instruct(s) every player individually in the skills of the sport	3.9	3
15.	Let(s) the players share in decision making	4.1	3
16.	See(s) to it that a player is rewarded for a good performance	3.9	3
17.	Figure(s) ahead on what should be done	4.6	4
18.	Encourage(s) players to make suggestions for ways to conduct practices	4.2	2
19.	Do(es) personal favours for the players	2.9	2
20.	Explain(s) to every player the DO-s and DON'T-s in any situation	4.0	2
21.	Let(s) the players set their own goals	3.7	4
22.	Express(es) any affection felt for the players	2.6	3
23.	Expect(s) every player to carry out assignments to the last detail	4.5	4
24.	Let(s) the players try their own way even if they make mistakes	3.7	3
25.	Encourage(s) the players to confide in their coach	4.1	2
26.	Point(s) out the players' strengths and weaknesses	4.6	4
27.	Refuse(s) to compromise on a point	2.6	1
28.	Express(es) appreciation when a player performs well	4.0	5
29.	Give(s) specific instructions to each player on what should be done in every situation	3.6	4
30.	Ask(s) for the opinion of the players on important coaching matters.	4.2	4
31.	Encourage(s) close and informal relations with players	3.3	1

32.	See(s) to it that players efforts as a team are co-ordinated	4.6	5
33.	Let(s) the players work at their own speed in practice sessions	2.3	3
34.	Keep(s) distance from the players on a personal level	3.6	5
35.	Explain(s) how the contribution of each player fits into the total picture	3.9	4
36.	Invite(s) the players home	1.2	1
37.	Specify(ies) in exact detail what is expected of the players	4.2	4
38.	Give(s) credit when it is due	4.5	5
39.	Let(s) the player decide on tactics to be used in a competition or game	3.2	2
40.	Speak(s) in a manner that discourages questions	2.0	1

The Five sub categories for the Leadership Scale for Sports

	Players' score	SL score
Training and instruction	4.4	3.8
Social Support	3.3	2.4
Autocratic	2.6	2.2
Democratic	3.8	3.2
Rewarding	4.2	4.4

- **Performance v results.**

Without doubt the Academy at the club has some talented players and the playing vehicle to test this is in the A XV League. The competition, as the size of the first team squads has increased, has led to more senior players playing and, as a consequence, with a small first team squad and a young Academy, positive results have been thin on the ground. A run of disappointing results can obviously have an effect on team cohesion and morale and this proved to be a useful test of my coaching process.

This 'art' of coaching, when results do not go your way, requires the coach to see situations through the players' lens, then alter his coaching/behaviour accordingly. In order to do this, I set myself the task of effecting the 10 – 1 rule as much as possible. That is, 10 positive comments to 1 negative one. This is not always possible but, as a useful template in creating a positive environment, it became particularly relevant as the season 2005/2006 unfolded.

Previous experience of poor results in this competition has given me a good foundation on which to build my philosophy when this does occur, as it had for the previous two seasons. That is:

- Mutual accountability.
- A good review process.
- Focus on the performance.

- Focus on things in our control.
- Avoid blame and retribution when things go wrong.

Again, however, the most powerful feedback would come from the players and again I created a questionnaire that I felt would give me the feedback I wanted on whether my coaching process improved, so that in spite of results we are still moving forward in a positive direction as a group.

At the mid-point in the A XV League programme, when we had won two and lost three, I spoke to the players about where we were as a group and I gave them the questionnaire to fill in; this was three days after our 60-20 defeat against Newcastle. By using my improving understanding of the management of players, I attempted to analyse the psychology of the group with reference to my 'Improvement in Performance Process'.

IMPROVEMENT IN THE PERFORMANCE PROCESS

Please rate the process used when performance/results are not what is expected using the following scale.

1 = Low 2 = Inconsistent 3 = Good 4 = High 5 = Very High

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	The truth is supported by evidence.					
2.	We are all in this, both players and management, and mutual accountability has to be accepted.					
3.	We focus upon factors that are within the squad's (or the player's) control.					
4.	We reassess our goals for the next match and revise if appropriate.					
5.	We involve the players in this process.					
6.	We establish commitment to any revised plans.					
7.	We avoid blame and retribution, as they are entry points to a downward spiral for spirit and performance.					

I found the result of this anonymous questionnaire encouraging, especially given that fresh in the minds of the players was a defeat by forty points!

		Av Score 1 – low: 5 – very high
1	The Truth is supported by evidence.	4.4
2.	We are all in this, both players and management, and mutual accountability has to be accepted.	4.8
3.	We focus upon factors that are within the squad's (or the player's) control.	4.4
4.	We reassess our goals both for the next match and revise if appropriate.	4.4
5.	We involve the players in this process.	4.2
6.	We establish commitment to any revised plans.	4.1
7.	We avoid blame and retribution, as they are entry points to a downward spiral for spirit and performance.	3.8

I suspect that if I had carried out the same analysis at the same time last year, it would not have been so positive, as this year I have looked to improve by involving the players a lot more in the coaching process yet seeking to retain control of the direction in which the team is heading. Again, this was another difficult balance to achieve.

I was particularly pleased with scores relating to mutual accountability as this is one of the areas I had been focusing on in my feedback to the players throughout the course of the season. The lowest score was on 'blame and retribution' and it has made me reflect particularly on the words I use when highlighting errors in post-match reviews. This is an area on which I need to improve and I have begun work in this area with an example from a recent review when I previously would have said....

"That's not good enough," which I changed to

"I expect you to do better"....It is only slightly different but it is an important difference.

- **Personal growth**

Another area that helps in the creation of individual and group cohesion is if you are seen to be supportive of the players. As a consequence, I tried to improve this support off the field. The Academy Manager's job is not just about coaching; a lot of the players are living away from home for the first time and also have the job of managing their education alongside their rugby development. Examples of where I have tried to become more proactive centred on the Academy players included in the first team squad. Player X was a good example who, having just completed his A levels, was getting pulled between the 1st team, the Junior National Academy, England Under 19s and the England Sevens squad. Rather than wait for situations to happen, I tried to get the relevant parties to talk for the ultimate benefit of the person who counts, the player.

The assessment of the effectiveness in this area was measured in the Leadership Scale for Sports and I suspect that this might be one of the reasons the players rate me higher on social support (3.3) as opposed to my own perception (2.4). They see it as me supporting them, I see it as me doing my job.

How well did it work?

Throughout the course of this project I have attempted to reflect on the interdisciplinary nature of my coaching. That is to improve my leadership, management and coaching skills, paying particular attention to emotional intelligence and psychology to create mentally strong individuals and a cohesive team so that, all things being equal, these would be one of the defining characteristics of a high performing team.

All the feedback I have received has come from the players themselves and my own personal reflection. Initially I have found that my baseline data of the Group Environment Questionnaire and the feedback from the first team coaches demonstrated that I was progressing along the right lines, although it also revealed my relative weaknesses. What this interdisciplinary project has done has made me concentrate on the coaching processes outside the technical and tactical development of players.

Some of these processes have been highlighted in the video clips, however this is not an area you simply put into your training programme for a week and then drop. Good management and leadership happens all the time and if you pay lip service to it and you are inconsistent in your approach with the players, you will be found out by them, regardless of the level. It might be that it takes longer to manifest itself in a group, but ultimately sub-consciously and then, even worse, consciously, the players will stop delivering on and off the field!

Feedback from the players via the Hardiness scores was reassuring and The Leadership scale for Sports is a positive way of showing that my change process is beginning to work. Even with results on the field not going our way I felt the cohesion of the group

remained strong and that the values I feel were important were manifesting themselves in the body language of the players so that, when all is equal, our time would come. The results of the feedback from the players in my process for dealing with poor results also showed that I have improved in this area.

Ultimately, I still felt I wanted one final piece of evidence to fit the jigsaw together and get a complete picture of my current situation as a coach. For this I wanted to focus more on the team as opposed to the individuals and decided to create a questionnaire on the back of a book I read by David Whittaker – ‘The Spirit of Teams’. In it he talks about characteristics of high performing teams and gave twenty three qualities that high performing teams possess. I turned this into a questionnaire for the players to see where they rated our group on the back of the environment I have tried to create through improving/changing my coaching process.

HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS

Each of the following statements describes qualities of the very best teams:-

Please mark a tick against each element and indicate where you think our group stands at the moment.

1 = Low 2 = Inconsistent 3 = Good 4 = High 5 = Very High

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	High quality support					
2.	Good leadership					
3.	Mutual trust and respect					
4.	Encouragement					
5.	Risks allowed					
6.	No blame					
7.	Positive competition					
8.	Focus on common goals					
9.	Clear roles and responsibilities					
10.	Clear lines of communication					
11.	Good communication process					
12.	High quality skills					
13.	Good balance of talents					
14.	Ability to change the pace of play					
15.	Variety of personalities					
16.	Personal and team responsibilities accepted					
17.	High expectations set by performers of themselves					
18.	The will to win					
19.	Commitment					
20.	Honesty					
21.	Openness					
22.	Unity of purpose					
23.	Clear personal goals that support team goals					

Analysis of the results was quite revealing. I was pleased that the players identified that we needed to improve our skills and develop the ability to change the pace of play. I was also pleased that they scored our processes highly on, 'commitment, honesty and openness'. I was interested to see that they scored 'encouragement' highly, yet felt slightly inhibited in taking risks and that there would be some blame attached if things go wrong. This is the second time this has arisen and obviously it is an area that I need to improve on in the future. I accept the feedback that suggests there needs to be more work on individual goals and I would put this down to not making time for the individual when you are backing up games week to week. I must learn to spend time with individuals as well as preparing the team, because the collective strength is the total of the cohesion of the individuals in it.

On other areas, I wanted to improve through changing my coaching process, mutual trust and respect, focusing on common goals, unity of purpose are all above high, which suggests my improvement has worked, although the key would be repeat this in twelve months time to see if we have developed still further as a group.

		1 – low : 5 – very high
1.	High quality support	3.9
2.	Good Leadership	4.3
3.	Mutual trust and respect	4.1
4.	Encouragement	4.4
5.	Risks allowed	3.5
6.	No blame	3.5
7.	Positive competition	4
8.	Focus on common goals	4.1
9.	Clear roles and responsibilities	3.7
10.	Clear lines of communication	3.5
11.	Good communication process	4.1
12.	High quality skills	3.7
13.	Good balance of talents	3.9
14.	Ability to change the pace of play	3.4
15.	Variety of personalities	4.1
16.	Personal and team responsibilities accepted	4.2
17.	High expectations set by performers of themselves	4.2
18.	The will to win	4.8
19.	Commitment	4.9
20.	Honesty	4.6
21.	Openness	4.1
22.	Unity of purpose	4.2
23.	Clear personal goals that support team goals	3.7

Final reflection?

So where does that leave me? I feel the benefit of doing the job I do is not only to complete my job description, but also to develop as a person and subsequently develop those around me. There is no doubt in my own mind this project and this Level Five course, coupled with the unique nature of my position deep in the middle of two major rugby clubs, has developed me. I feel, judging by the feedback from the players, that they feel it has developed me and hopefully I have developed some of them.

Did I change my coaching process to achieve this? On reflection I would like to think I didn't too much as the players would see through this and ultimately it would be unsustainable. I feel you can only be who you are; it is great to observe and learn but don't change to become something you are not. You must know yourself before you can start thinking about others. Stick to your principles and philosophies because ultimately, when the pressure comes on, you will revert to type.

One of the key things that has come out of this project for me is that I believe it is important to get to know yourself. However, it is only important if I am prepared to make changes for the better. Whilst I must be aware that, although I might not be able to be someone I am not, I need to learn to apply skills and ways of doing things that aren't natural to me and my personality. It is showing these in practice that will demonstrate how much progress I have made as a coach and as a person.

Do I think I have improved? Without a doubt, I feel this has been acknowledged by others and there have been significant benefits to the changes I have made. I have been fortunate to have done a Sports Science degree and as a part of that I have a good grounding in the Sciences of Psychology, Physiology and Biomechanics. However, what that doesn't give you is the science of managing people. I am not naïve enough to think that the art of managing Academy players and that of the first team are the same, but I am sure that the same principles apply. The area I have improved most has been dealing with the psychology of the player and the management of the group. The area of greatest use has been to identify my weaknesses and put in a change process to try and improve them.

What I have also improved on has been to work outside the normal parameters of the coaching role I am in. This has been in no small way due to the Level 5 course and this interdisciplinary project. I liken it to my time as a Physical Education teacher. You can go through long periods of the same lessons over and over again and then suddenly an Ofsted inspection comes around and you spend some time putting real thought into the planning of your programme and the words you use when the inspectors are present.

The Level 5 has been like this for me. I have put real thought into everything I have done, applied it to real life coaching and paused for honest reflection. In the case of this project I also supported it with feedback from the people that really matter.....the players. The

key to success, I feel, is to maintain this level of reflection and thought once the process of the level 5 is finished. The discipline for me will be to look after the small things because ultimately, when all is equal, this will be the defining factor for individual players and, thus, the collective team.

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

"I made a difference to that one, I make a difference to this one." And you as coaches can make a difference to your players. – Dave Hadfield.

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