

THE COACHING X FACTOR BY NICK SCOTT.

The author is the RFU Coach Development Officer for London North and Midlands East and previously was RDO for Leicestershire. He is currently coaching at Loughborough University.

Most of us have stood at the side of another coach's session, watching him or her work the players and inevitably we have made some sort of judgement as to how good the coach is. This begs a question, though, and it is a question rarely asked – good at what? What is it that a coach does well that singles him out to be better than others? Is it technical insight, tactical wisdom; has he got some great drills, or is it simpler influences such as a loud voice and good stash?

Most of our judgements are actually made in the first five minutes of seeing a coach perform and the same is true of players. It is an interesting exercise to see players weighing up and evaluating a new coach when they first meet him and their judgements are certainly made in the first five minutes of a session. So if players and fellow coaches are making their judgements so quickly, technical knowledge and tactical nous, or a great bunch of drills are not hugely influential factors as there has not been enough time to take them into the equation.

There must be some more subtle indicators of coaching ability which we and players tap into, the Coaching X Factor! In this article, I hope to try to explore some of the factors contributing to a coach 'having it' or 'not having it'.

Ask players or ex-players to describe the best coach they have ever had and what made them into a great coach, and the answers are fascinating. In terms of what made the coach so great, technical knowledge is way down the list. Usually, the most important factors involve personal attributes. Indeed, the three most often quoted attributes for a favourite coach are ***respect, honesty and communication***.

If this is so, it surely begs the question of how much of coaching is based on a coach's

- Knowledge (which can be learned).
- Skills (which can be acquired).
- Attributes (personal, integral, innate).

From what we see above, the most important factors in making a good coach are not necessarily knowledge, but skills and attributes. I have often seen two coaches deliver almost exactly the same technical session with similar practices and structure; one is well received, the other derided. Usually the difference comes in the **coaching** skills employed and the personal attributes and behaviour of the coach.

Technical knowledge has to be present and it must be relevant and appropriate to the level of the players being coached. But all too often, players have made judgements on a coach before he or she can begin to share any knowledge. Sometimes this can be

within the first minute of the session – occasionally as the coach and the players step onto the pitch!

So the aspiring coach needs to be aware of players' behaviours and he must possess detailed knowledge of the *whole* coaching process.

In improving coaches' coaching skills, it may be worthwhile here to look at the work the RFU are doing on Coaching Process Skills – those who have recently been on RFU Level 1 and 2 courses should be familiar with these. The Coaching Process Skills are an attempt to break the act of coaching into a process, (leaving technical input aside) and then break down each part of the process into key factors, so that a coach is aware of what has happened in the process and can replicate it.

The identified process skills in **instruction and explanation** are:

Key Factors:

Prepare and plan what you are going to say before you say it.

Make sure everyone can see and hear you.

Limit information given to 1 or 2 points at a time.

Check for understanding, preferably by use of questions (and not the old one, "Everybody understands?" I have never yet heard a player dare say, "I don't understand.")

Provide Demonstration:

Stand so that everyone can see and hear.

Stick to making 1 or 2 key points.

Repeat the demonstration so that players can observe from different angles and possibly at a slower 'walk through' speed as well as full speed.

Invite questions.

Observe and Analyse:

Have a clear template in your mind of what you want to see.

Observe from all angles (unobtrusively).

Compare what you see with the template.

Action Plan.

Give Feedback:

Ask questions to promote self feedback.

Limit information to 1 or 2 key points.

Give specific, simple information.

Keep it positive.

How can the above help us achieve the X Factor? Do the points above help us achieve those intangibles that are so important – respect, honesty and good communication skills?

One thing they do is to give the coach a structure on which to base his coaching skills that are separate from the purely technical knowledge of the game/coaching. Then, how do we generate respect from the players? Part of that involves respecting the players themselves and asking the right questions will inevitably raise esteem and respect. Inviting self feedback and staying positive involves and empowers players, which is all part of the respect process.

Honesty? Having a clear structure relating to observation, analysis and feedback will help with honesty and transparency. Players need to know what the coach was looking for/at and how he comes to his critical conclusions. Players appreciate knowing the process.

Good communication skills? A clear, recurring theme in coaching at all levels is economy of expression – while the coach may enjoy proving to everyone how clever he or she is by reciting verbatim their wisdom for 15 minutes on a freezing January evening, the players appreciate a couple of wise words then more action! A useful exercise in self discipline as a coach is to limit each intervention to 20 seconds; inputs soon become sharp, clear, and accurate!

As for the attributes of a good coach, we move into areas linked with personality. We begin to look at issues such as patience, control, approachability – traits that are deeply ingrained into who we are and, as such, more difficult to alter. Perhaps, if the coach is naturally impatient and has this as a fairly innate part of his personality, the best he can hope for is just to be aware of this and perhaps try to control the most extreme outward manifestations of it! To go any further may need the help of psychiatrists!

In conclusion then, the X Factor for a good coach is a combination of knowledge, skills and personal attributes. Knowledge can be learnt from a plethora of resources. Coaching skills are a huge area of potential for coaches to develop, and use of the Coaching Process Skills can help sharpen those skills and eliminate the risk of poorly presented sessions.

As for attributes, perhaps it is true to say that some just ‘have it.’