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We often speak about the importance of communication in rugby and how the standard of a player's communication can be the difference between making it to the top of the game and falling by the wayside. The words "be louder, more specific and speak more often" are regularly uttered by coaches during training; unfortunately for many players, this does not necessarily equate to becoming a better communicator.

A contextual framework.

Communication can be defined as "*a process of exchanging information*" (www.wikipedia.org) and is a very broad-ranging topic. It is important to remember the context within which communication is occurring and in this instance we are discussing the inter-personal communication between players so that they are better equipped to deal with situations as they happen on the field, whether that is a support player giving information to the ball carrier, a pack leader making a lineout call or a player offering encouragement to a team mate. In terms of improving communication we need to think about how we can make it habitual, i.e. we should be able to do it without necessarily thinking about it. Put simply, good communication is the difference between players being able to pre-empt a situation and players having to react to a situation. It is the difference between making an informed decision and an educated guess on what to do. Quite often we are referring to very fine margins, but it is these fine margins that are the difference between taking opportunities and wasting opportunities. Imagine these two scenarios...

Scenario 1.

Two players approach a 2 v 1 attacking situation and do not communicate to each other. The ball carrier must look to see how the defender and support player are reacting to his movements and then makes a decision to interest the defender *and* pass the ball accordingly. The time taken by the ball carrier to see what is happening, process this information, make the decision to pass, move into position and execute the skill is just long enough for the defender to put enough pressure on the ball carrier to force a bad pass and a knock on. Result = wasted opportunity.

Scenario 2.

Two attackers approach a 2 v 1 attacking situation and both communicate with one another. The ball carrier listens to the information given to him and knows instantly what options he has, provided he manages to interest the defender. The time taken by the ball carrier to listen to what he is told, process this information, make the decision to pass, move into position and execute the skill is greatly reduced because of the

information sent verbally. In other words, there is just enough time for the ball carrier to interest the defender and get an appropriate pass away. Result = support player scores.

Verbal and non-verbal communication.

Communication in the literal sense can be verbal (spoken) or non-verbal, such as body language, eye contact or paralanguage; the latter one is the conveyance of emotion (changes in pitch, tone or volume to emit a different message, or at least a message with a different undertone). Changes in the tone or pitch of your voice could signify to a fellow player that you are struggling to support him or that he is about to receive a hospital pass and should brace himself for contact. Communication occurs all the time during a game and it is important to remember that it is not limited to the words we speak. In fact, studies show that around 70% of everyday communication comes via non-verbal cues, meaning we tend to read more into the way we say things rather than the actual words spoken (Ellis, 2002). In a game context it might mean we can communicate effectively simply by pointing at the player we are marking, making eye contact with a jumper as you are about to throw the ball into the lineout or standing in space. As long as everyone on the team understands that they are all trying to move the ball into space, team mates can see the situation and adapt their actions/make decisions that move the ball accordingly.

Body language is an essential part of effective communication because it allows us to convey emotion, enabling the receiver to relate to the message. If we talk and simultaneously express emotion, we innately attract more attention to what we are saying than if we were to remain emotionless. Probably the first stage to having an effective communication system in your squad is to promote an open and honest environment whereby all players feel comfortable talking to one another to discuss their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Without this, it is much more difficult to get everyone 'singing from the same song sheet' as there is always the possibility of disruption or conflict arising. Communicating with positive body language instils confidence in players and in those around them and can help to improve team spirit and togetherness, which is a key component of any team sport. Unfortunately, negative body language can have the opposite effect. A common example of this is when a player makes a mistake. Nobody makes mistakes on purpose and the guilty party is often likely to be suffering from a lack of confidence as a result of his actions. Demeaning comments, gestures and judgements are very likely to compound this effect. Studies show that offering encouragement and support after a mistake can remove the recipient from their negative focus and bring about the positive emotion of togetherness. A quiet word ("don't worry about it, think about your next job"), a pat on the shoulder or a smile can often be enough to bring the person back into a positive state of mental arousal, ready for the next phase of play.

Shared meaning – understanding information.

Knowing what/when information should be sent are hugely important skills to learn, as is gaining an understanding of what players are likely to do on the pitch. Once players can appreciate what their (and others') roles and responsibilities are, they can then go about helping the players around them by giving appropriate information, actively listening and checking for understanding. As coaches we often tell our players to give lots of information to the ball carrier but ultimately they will have to react to what the ball carrier does, so if players are not on the same wavelength then the process is more likely to break down. Probably the most prominent barrier to good communication is our perceptual distortions, which are caused by a poor shared understanding and often lead to the misinterpretation of messages. Semantic effects (same words meaning different things) are central to this so having a generic calling system for certain movements or shapes will help, for example knowing what a "hold" and "push" call mean in defence. As long as there is an understanding amongst players, calls can even be used to put off the opposition. A player going through a set move might call "give it now" when "cancel" is the teams call to signify that they want the ball. Spending time with your team mates can bring about many indirect developments in communication. Everyone has a different personality and the better equipped we are to speak in a language that suits each individuals needs, the more likely we are to be effective communicators. Relationships develop through the expression of our actions so problem solving and creating situations at training can imply an element of learning about each other, which will not necessarily bring the players closer in a social sense but will develop their unspoken understanding.

Informing others – giving information.

Communication is something people do. It is very much to do with relationships and what we know about people's personalities and perceptions. Everyone is different and we need to know how to engage with our intended audience so that we can convey appropriate information. Just because you say something does not necessarily equate to a message being received or understood, so it is important to repeat messages, be loud and clear and use other forms of communication such as non-verbal cues where possible. In a rugby scenario, a coach may say to a player, "Are the water bottles filled?" and the player replies, "No". Does the coach want the player to fill the bottles or does the player think the coach will sort it out? In volleyball, players are taught to call "mine" but never "yours" because of the confusion it can cause over which team mate they are referring to. The point to remember is that information senders should make every effort to ensure that their message cannot be misunderstood by keeping it simple and to the point, avoiding any jargon that could cause the message to be misheard or misunderstood. In rugby the opportunities to communicate during phases of play are often small, so short statements and instructions tend to be more appropriate than longer sentences or questions. As a guideline, words with few syllables, repeated often usually make for a good message – particularly if the words used have a generically understood meaning ("got your inside covered, push out, hold shape").

Active listening – receiving information.

One area of communication that is typically understated is its two-way nature. A message can only be deemed useful if the recipient understands it and can translate it into appropriate actions. An example might be listening to a support player telling you to “stay on your feet” or “stay strong” through contact and making the decision to do what you have been told. If a message is misheard it often results in a poor decision being made and the ball being turned over by the opposition. Active listening is, therefore, just as important as giving information and requires us to be able to nullify the effects of external distractions, such as noise from the crowd. A key part of receiving information is to check that you understand what is said. In the military forces a confirmation is always sent after each radio message to remove doubt, for example,

“I am in position, over.”

“Roger, standby for further command, over.”

“Over and out.”

However, due to the frantic nature of rugby, such confirmation is unlikely to be practical whilst the ball is in play, so instructions should be precise in their meaning and the sender should always be aware that what they want to happen might not happen. Teams can only realistically adopt confirmation methods during breaks in play and even here, players need to have a shared understanding of the protocol. When an outside half calls a backs’ move, how does he know that everyone involved knows the call? Do players pass the message on to the next player or do the outside backs ask for the information to be given to them?

Practical steps to improve communication.

In terms of improving our effectiveness and making communication a habit, there are several exercises we can practise. These exercises can be done during normal training sessions, during indoor training sessions (when the pitches are frozen etc) or as individual tasks to improve understanding, speaking and listening skills:

1. Research what the team are trying to do in any given situation on the field (where they are going, what it will cause defenders to do etc) and make sense of the meanings to improve your game understanding. Analysing more games of rugby in general will also help.
2. Create a hierarchy for decision-making and problem solving within the team for match situations. Does the captain make all the calls or are there several leaders in the team? Having a sole leader is more likely to achieve a quicker result but allowing everyone to voice opinion will probably work better for team morale. Designating roles to certain players will help with clarification and will ultimately improve communication channels in times of stress and pressure.
3. In small groups, define a short pass and a long pass and the key words you would use on a rugby pitch. Compare your answers and do not be afraid to ask questions of

people to check that you understand what others are thinking or doing. This will help to reduce the influence of perceptual differences. Why do you think this? Why do you think that? What are your reasons? Come to some sort of clarity over such calls and make these a team-wide agreement.

4. Play the twenty questions game or other fact finding games that enable you to spend more time with your colleagues and learn about their personalities and perceptions. Gain emotional intelligence by finding out what they respond to (verbal, visual, physical cues) and what their voice sounds like.
5. Play small-sided games (touch, end ball etc) and introduce a rule whereby if a player makes a mistake he must actively encourage someone else immediately. This is to promote a positive mindset and to remove negative thoughts from players' minds when they do make a mistake.
6. Get small groups of players to complete physical challenges (races etc) and get the other players to give encouragement. The point is to train the players in the art of encouragement and positive body language, which helps to promote team spirit.
7. Practise shouting across a room to someone then gradually lower the volume of your voice until they can not hear you. Find out how strong your voice is through trial and error and how loud you need to speak to convey messages. Having a radio on in the background can act as external noise, making it more realistic.
8. Commentate on games that are on the TV and get used to giving relevant information about what is going on and what you, as a ball carrier or support player, could be saying. Start by doing it in your head and then begin to say it out loud...it might be quite tough to stop yourself getting tongue tied when you have lots of things going through your mind at once. Think about the process and how you can prioritise certain statements or words. Ask yourself why you do not do this normally. You will probably find that you already do it in your head, but do not realise it and therefore do not speak.
9. Read extracts from books or newspapers when you are out of breath or have a mouth guard in, as this is when communication tends to break down most in a game. Keep control of your tone and pitch when speaking in short breaths as well as giving shorter strands of information that are still clear and get the message across.
10. Guide a blindfolded player around an obstacle course using only verbal cues. This will help to develop trust as well as active listening and giving appropriate and relevant information. Having a shared understanding of communication will help. These exercises can evolve so that the blindfolded person cannot stop moving and the guide cannot stop talking, putting both under more pressure.
11. A ball carrier closes his eyes and another player stands somewhere near him and claps his hands. The 'blind' ball carrier must pass the ball to his partner without looking. It is a game to develop active listening and an appreciation for where sounds come from.

12. Players sit in a circle. The first person says where he was born and names a favourite team. The second person repeats what the first person said and adds his statements...and so on. Continue until all the players have contributed. It doubles up as a memory game too. Generally speaking, people near the end will remember the early statements but forget the last statement because we innately think about what we are going to say and do not always listen when someone else is speaking.

13. Sit in pairs and have a conversation whilst other players are putting you off by talking at you and distracting you physically. Then try to recall what was said afterwards. Do the same with the pair sitting back to back so that no body language or physical emotions can be expressed. It is much harder to recall what is said when you cannot relate to the conversation emotionally.

14. Visualise game scenarios with other players. Sit down, close your eyes and talk through the phase of play as you see it happening in your mind. Try simultaneously listening to what your team mates say whilst you give information to others...it's much harder than you might think. For example, in a defensive line players will have to listen to other players to know when the ball moves into their channel.

15. Play Chinese Whispers, whereby you must think hard about what is being said, possibly picking out certain prompts/sounds. Alternatively play a song you have never heard before very quietly and try to pick out the words. You might be surprised at how often the words you think you hear are not actually the words that are spoken because your brain makes assumptions based on information you have heard in the past.

Final thought.

Talking can get you out of lots of sticky situations in a game so do not be afraid to give information to people because ultimately it will help the team (provided the information you give is appropriate and people understand what is being said). It is a fairly straightforward skill to learn, but one which is very difficult to master. Just hearing a voice can be enough to enable someone to know where you are, a bit like a peripheral sense. Make it a habit!

References.

Ellis, R. (2002) Communication Skills – stepladders to success for the professional.
Intellect: Bristol pp: 12

<http://www.wikipedia.org> (definitons and models of communication) (08/02/08)