

CREATING THE PERFECT LEARNING ENVIRONMENT – HOW DO WE DO IT?

“I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think” - Socrates.

Learning – is it positive or negative?

Thinking back to when we have been coached I am sure some memories will make us smile and some we would rather forget. As a coach there is nothing better than having learners smiling all the time – because if they are smiling they are learning! The question is when we are being coached, what is it that makes it a positive experience or what is it that makes it negative? When we are coaching, what is it we do to create that positive experience, or what do we do that could make it negative? I am prepared to take a chance... I reckon I know why your experience was positive or more importantly why it was negative! I would bet my bottom dollar that it all came down to the learning environment that was created, it was one that either worked for you or did not. Take a minute to reflect on a positive/negative coaching experience; try and work out the root cause of the reason behind the experience, I am sure it will be learning environment related, but what exactly?



Understanding our learners

For us to set the right learning environment and work out exactly how we do that, we must first understand our learners. There is a lot to understand, and plenty we never will be able to! There are two key things to consider:

Motivation: Our learners are often with us because they want to just get better, to perhaps explore different rivers/coastlines, do a trip they always wanted to or because it is a social way to 'get away from it all'. For many paddlers (particularly non-competitive) you could describe their motivation for being coached to be 'intrinsic'; partaking to better themselves, feel more competent and able to be independent. So our learning environment needs to support this.

Learning inhibitors: In the 'paddlesport' learning environment what is it that most often prohibits performance/learning? Have a think, but I would suggest that it could be fear; fear of failing, fear of swimming, fear of getting hurt or even the fear of not knowing. Managing fear is all about managing a learners arousal/anxiety, so our learning environment needs to support this.



Creating the optimum environment

As complex as it may seem I believe it can be relatively easy to support our intrinsically motivated learners in a way that supports their state of arousal. To do this I need to draw knowledge from some psychological research done by people far cleverer than me (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-Determination Theory is all about creating an environment where people feel 'self-determined'; i.e. they feel empowered to operate in an autonomous way. They suggest that this self-determined environment best suits those intrinsically motivated and through this helps manage arousal – bingo, that's what we are looking for eh!

Within this they suggest that we all have three fundamental human needs and if these are met during human interaction (coaching in our world) then a self-determined environment will be created.

Relatedness: the need to perceive we are connected to those around us, e.g. the coach took time to talk to me, find out about me and develop a rapport.

Autonomy: the need to perceive behaviours and thoughts are chosen freely, e.g. the coach gave me choice, involved me in the decision making and supported me setting my own goals.

Competence: the need to perceive that our behaviour is effective, e.g. the coach made me feel competent and provided feedback regularly to help me realise what I was good at.

My challenge to you now is think back to that positive/negative coaching experience we discussed earlier and the route cause of the reason behind it being so. Is it linked to one of the three 'fundamental needs above? As I said I am prepared to take a chance and bet that your experience was directly linked to at least one of the above. Your most positive experiences will involve all three, your most negative experiences will be missing all three – am I right?





What does this mean to me as a coach – it's the simple changes that make the biggest difference.

Over the last six months I have been exploring how the learning environment I create supports relatedness, autonomy and competence in all aspects of my coaching/leadership; whether it is skill development coaching, NGB training course or assessing. I have got to be honest, I have been amazed at the results; when it comes to creating the optimum learning environment my success/failure is usually related to the 'fundamental human needs'.

Is our 'coaching context' the biggest challenge: When 'borrowing' knowledge from some more clever people (Magaueu & Vallerand, 2003), it was clear that the context of our learning environment will have a huge effect on how easy it is to support relatedness, autonomy and competence. For us as paddlesport coaches I think this is particularly relevant and we need to be aware of it to overcome the challenges. Our 'challenging' contexts could be: short-term coaching, real risk environments, competitive environments, NGB courses or assessing people to highlight a few. The key thing is if we are aware that the context is going to make it challenging, we just need to plan a bit more and even be a bit creative to ensure we still manage the optimum learning environment.

As Socrates has said....

So hopefully I have given your coaching mind something to think about. When out coaching next, or when being coached next, or when watching someone coach; think back to these three simple things. Are the relatedness, autonomy and competence needs being met, and if so is that creating the optimum environment. It is simple, but I hope it may just help make all the difference – now go and teach yourself....

As with all theories, SDT by Deci & Ryan (2000) is there to be challenged. The pure human psychological basis to this theory is not sport based and for some this makes it invalid – it is up to us the practitioners to decide though.....