

Person management: Exploring adventure sport coaches' and students' perceptions of building rapport between coach and student.

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Independent Study submitted as part of Postgraduate Diploma, Performance Coaching, University of Stirling, 2015.

Abstract

Background and Purpose:

At its heart coaching involves a relationship between the coach and athlete (participant). In many sports the coach has time to develop this relationship and the consequences of not getting it right on the first interaction may not have long lasting effects. In adventure sports, however, coaches often deliver one-off coaching sessions in complex environments where 'getting it wrong' by misreading the student can have a serious impact on trust, credibility and ultimately the students and/or coaches' personal safety. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the strategies adventure sport coaches use for building rapport between coach and students.

What was done?

Participants: Four coaches who have a reputation within the paddling community of being very skilful at building rapport with their students and with many years' coaching experience at a high level agreed to participate in the study. Eight students (3 trainee instructors, 2 outdoor instructors, 3 outdoor activity participants) also participated in the study.

Process: The coaches and students participated in an interview which sought to explore their perceptions of how coaches developed rapport and a relationship with participants. A particular focus was how this was achieved in a relatively short time frame (e.g., a 2 hour course). A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse and make sense of the participants' responses.

Key findings

The coaches' responses indicated two central themes for quality relationships with students:

Creating a relaxed environment. This was important before the 'formal' coaching began. It included giving the students time to relax, getting to know them individually and enabling them to get to know each. Where possible this involved meeting the students in a less formal setting, 'with a cup of tea'. The coaches wanted to develop trust and connect with the students which would be helpful to enable them to interact effectively with them later in the course. Humour was a useful means to create this environment.

Positive body language. The coaches felt how they presented themselves was important to developing relationships with the students. The coaches described energy level, lots of smiling, eye contact, listening, and posture. The focus was to present a positive, interested, enthusiastic image.

The students' responses indicated that they were very aware of and valued a positive social environment facilitated by the coach. Their responses indicated the importance of the coach being

relaxed and the use of banter to make them feel at ease. They also commented on the importance of feeling cared for and supported to succeed and that the coach conveyed genuine interest in them as a person.

Points of interest for coaches

Students are very much aware of and value the social environment that forms a critical foundation for their experience and learning. The coach is central to facilitating this environment and there are a number of strategies and skills that can be used to develop it. Some coaches, at least, are aware of this and actively seek to develop a relaxed social environment for participants.

Conclusion

The paddlesport coaches interviewed saw the value in taking time to build rapport, spending time getting to know their students, getting them talking, and understanding what motivates them. This value is summed up by Jones (2009): “As those of us who have tried can attest, coaching is much more than sequentially imparting content knowledge through a particular pedagogy. It also has to do with people, the interaction that occurs between them and the subsequent relationships they engender” (p.377).

If you would like further information on the research or to receive a copy of the full project please contact Oisin Hallissey on: oisinhallissey@tollymore.com