

The "Soft Skills" Superpower

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A regular and recurring misconception of the coaching world is around the need for the soft skills being a negative thing. Soft skills are increasingly becoming the factor I am experiencing that makes the difference between one time success and long term excellence. Yes, talent and hard work can get you on top of the podium once or twice. But it's the want to come and train every day no matter what's going on at home, in work or school life and doing it with someone that supports you as a person that helps deliver long term, high achieving individuals.

Talent is a very powerful thing and, if nurtured in the right way, can take you very far. But as I am learning from being a coach in the English National Talent system of sprint kayaking, there is always going to be some form of "emotional life wobble" that can quite quickly see that talent completely wasted if not nurtured and "softly supported".

So let's go back to these soft skills, but for the purpose of this I am going to refer to them as **power up points**. In your day to day life, what is it that puts you in a good frame of mind? For me, it's a simple smile from a stranger, a picturesque training venue that makes me happy that I do what I do, or a good morning from a shop assistant as I purchase my pre-coaching cinnamon bun. They give me a "power up". A simple acknowledgement that I am here and in the correct and positive head space to perform my coaching role to the best of my ability. So take this into the concept of an athlete and coach dynamics. If they turn up to training, even on the most miserable of days, and they are greeted by "Good morning Kate, how are you today?" it helps to pop a little bit of power into their battery pack to help get them firing for the session. I am not saying it might be quite as powerful as a strong coffee, but it can make a difference.

Now, with these power up points they are brilliant to add when someone might be already in a good frame of mind to just keep the energy topped up. But they are invaluable when things aren't quite going to plan.



Think about it, your athlete is in a session feeling a bit sluggish and not able to deliver how they want to. You can give them a few simple ques to help reignite the power: "Alex, you have been smashing it lately so don't worry if you aren't at your best today. What do you want to achieve?" In doing this, you have given that little spark of reassurance to help them manage their performance expectations of the session as well as giving them the power to make the change.

If they want "it" they can decide what "it" is (and be confident in the fact you as a coach can help them to obtain this). But in this instance it wouldn't only be around those short, sharp conversations in the training environment (for me, on the water), it's all about touching base outside of those as well. The power comes to the athlete when you take that time to try and help them work out why everything felt that tiny bit harder than they wanted it to today. Taking the time as a coach to learn about the athlete's life helps allow you to direct them in the correct way.

Working with coaches across different sports and different performance levels, the ones that always stand out to me are those who genuinely care. Not just care about winning medals or doing their job, but the ones that care about the person that is out there winning medals or the reason for their job. If you were to ask the top coaches within my sport, I bet you that they could all tell you what really makes their athletes tick. Deeper than just their favourite sessions, but probably also their favourite meal, their family set up and maybe even their rest day netflix go to. These can very much seem unimportant to some and people may question why a coach needs to know that. Well, the thing is that it might not make them paddle a boat faster or lift a heavier weight, but (and it's a big but) it makes them happier. And a happier, healthy, fully powered up athlete makes a successful athlete.

So if happiness is key, how do we deliver this to our athletes? A smile: **YES!** A caring question: **YES!** An open communication route: **YES YES YES!!!**

By allowing those open and two way communication links you immediately emphasise that you are there. My strongest belief is by letting athletes understand me as a coach I am then able to understand them. The general life conversations we have with our athletes remind them that we are all humans: more than just a stop watch or a megaphone.

