

Coaching in and out of context

A recent workshop in Nottingham gave coaches, coach managers and coach educators the chance to pause, reflect and debate the issues of the day in the coaching system.

Jonathan Ives reports.

Although the venue for The Leisure Review Insight session on coaching was Nottingham Trent University, the event really began the night before. In a small but elegant restaurant in Nottingham city centre the protagonists of the following day's discussion explored the event title – 'Coaching in and out of context' – over dinner, demonstrating to a very small audience (which comprised the editor of The Leisure Review and the waiting staff) the high level of expertise and the great depth of experience that would be put before the Insight session delegates. It was a fascinating and enjoyable conversation, the themes and feel of which continued into the following day's event.

Delivered in partnership with the Sports Marketing Network and hosted by Sport Nottinghamshire and Nottingham Trent University at the latter's Clifton Campus, this inaugural Insight session brought together an audience of 30 sports coaches eager to listen to the expert coaches presenting but just as keen to engage them in debate. The result was a half-day session with discussion and interaction that punctuated the presentations and spilled over into refreshment breaks and the post-session schedule. Hamish Telfer, a national coach in four different sports and only very recently retired from a senior academic post, served as chairman of proceedings and set the scene for the morning.

"I sometimes feel like a stuck record," he confessed. "We've been trying to push coaching forward but are we replicating that same tired mantra? There's a difference between the development of a system and the development of coaches per se. Coaching has been extended outside sport and it is important that we learn from applications elsewhere. We've got a UKCC [UK Coaching Certificate] but some NGB [national governing bodies of sport] are still unsure about it. Are what we teach and how we teach producing robust coaches? Are we producing craftsmen and women?"

Considering the learning process, Hamish offered the example of brain surgeons. Neurosurgeons, he explained, operate in a very complex area with no room for initial error as they gain experience but they still need – and manage – to learn. "How do they learn?" he asked. "Are we producing a generation of coaches who are risk-averse? Are we training the risk-taking out of coaching? The more I coach the more I know how much I don't know but unless we take risks we are in danger of becoming mediocre."

A good example of coaching and learning outside sport is Trevor Laurence. An Olympian and former captain of the New Zealand hockey team, Trevor has taken his experience of high performance participation and coaching into his work on organisational change, particularly in the areas of teams and leadership. In the language of Trevor's own Auckland-based organisation, Experiential Training and Coaching Ltd, it is about the alchemy of teams.

"When the chemistry goes well it's great to be part of a team," Trevor said, "but when it goes bad it's pretty ugly. I'm a great believer in experiential learning. This is one of key things that sports coaching can offer to business." The recent football World Cup in South Africa had clearly demonstrated teams working well and poorly. Contrast, he suggested, the performance of the All Whites [NZ World Cup football team], which did not have the most technically gifted players but remained unbeaten during the tournament, and England or France, which had supposedly gifted players but failed spectacularly.

"Paul Jackson was a legend in the NBA, coaching the Lakers and the Bulls. His mantra was: players need to put themselves second to the needs of the teams. He recognised that the abilities that get you into the team can be the things that stop the team from being the best it could be. A lot of the work we do in the boardroom is to get them to realise the state they're in. Sport has an advantage in getting immediate feedback from the result of the game. In business the feedback can be about finance rather than how people behave."

The Team Alchemy concept developed in New Zealand to coach business performance comprises six elements: the primacy of the team; collaboration; trust and respect; dialogue; direction; and accountability. This system allows reflection



Trevor Laurence: making golden teams out of base business metal

"Are we producing a generation of coaches who are risk-averse? Are we training the risk-taking out of coaching? The more I coach the more I know how much I don't know but unless we take risks we are in danger of becoming mediocre."



Q&A: Telfer, Haskins, Laurence, Robinson and Owen shedding light

and encourages discussion. If you are building a team do you want the best players or the best people? Respect, whether in the workplace or on the sports field, is often gained by the ability of an individual to do their job well but when a coach is building a team they have to link people and performance to make the team work properly.

The question of performance has led Paul Robinson, a senior lecturer at the University of Chichester and a coach and coach educator, to explore the science of metacognition in detail. This, he explained, is the process of changing habits in a sports performance context. Some studies suggest that a performer will need to repeat a new action 2,000 times before it becomes a habit but metacognition allows a performer to "move from one furrow to another" very quickly.

"Metacognition is a higher order of thinking," Paul explained. "Where traditional coaching is about top-down thinking, metacognition is about how performers learn. It's about thinking about what they're doing rather than being told. The coach uses question-and-answer to get the performer to articulate their experiences. They then practise the difference between the old and the new skill." Having identified the old and new methods the coach facilitates a process of elaboration, demonstration and differentiation. This can bring the number of repetitions required to change a habit down from the 2,000 mark to about five. Research supports the claim.

Old and new was a theme of Kay Adkins's presentation, which was delivered by Mick Owen, himself an experienced international coach and a coach educator, owing to a small scheduling difficulty. The question was, do all coaches look the same? And, if the answer is felt to be 'yes', why is this the case? Does the sports system perpetuate a particular image and do the coaches of some sports look any different to coaches in other sports? Kay and Mick suggested that this was in fact the case but that it meant that the best people were not necessarily getting appointed to the most appropriate coaching, and indeed coach educating and coach developing, roles. This prompts further questions regarding whether the most effective coaches should automatically gravitate towards high performance or whether the best coaches might be best utilised elsewhere in the development process.

David Haskins, visiting fellow at Sheffield Hallam and John Moores Universities, picked up the theme of appropriate coaching and explained the '5Cs approach' to coaching. Coaching children, he suggested, was about more than having appropriately sized equipment and remembering not to shout too much. He argued that so much of what sports coaching is about is dependent upon accepted practice, unchallenged tenets of coaching faith that dictate that swimmers have to train in the early hours of the morning to cover a huge weekly mileage and that gymnasts have to start to start taking their sport seriously very young. The 5Cs approach challenges such assumptions.

"Being positive with young people is not just about not being negative," Dave said. "How to make a performer confident is not in the coaching manual but it's an essential part of performance. How do we coach someone to be positive? Under the old coaching system it's all about mental, technical, physical and tactical. Under the 5Cs system it's about competence, confidence, connection, character and creativity."

This approach, David suggested, provides coaches with a fighting chance of instilling confidence in children and helping them enjoy sport. "Why is it all but impossible to integrate such an approach into the NGB awards?" he said. "We're carrying on doing what we're doing because we don't understand enough about working with children. Have you got the heart to change? Is it too much of a challenge?"

Discussion of these questions carried over into the question-and-answer session involving all of the day's presenters but other themes also emerged: working outside the coaching system, whether there is a need for a collective voice for coaches in the UK and whether a coach has to moderate their approach to certain challenges if they want to stay employed. And along the way someone quoted Ghandi: you only need 20% of the people to change the world. The energy and enthusiasm in the room suggested that the world of coaching might be about to change.

The Leisure Review Insight sessions are presented by The Leisure Review in association with the Sports Marketing Network. For details of further Insight sessions visit the events page.

A review of David Haskins' book Coaching the Whole Child: positive development through sport can be found in the April 2010 issue of The Leisure Review via the features page.

To find out more about ETC Ltd and their approach to team building go to www.etc.co.nz

The Leisure Review, September 2010

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by The Leisure Review or the individual contributors where stated. Contact The Leisure Review for details.

www.theleisurereview.co.uk



David Haskins: pointing out what it means to be working with children



Paul Robinson (2nd from left) in discussion with Insight delegates



Point taken: Mick Owen gets the measure of Dr Telfer

The Leisure Review is supported by:

SLC SPORT
LEISURE
CULTURE
THE SPORT, LEISURE AND CULTURE CONSULTANCY

sta
International Experts in Safety Training Solutions

The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

tlr.comms
TLR Communications Limited

