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Embracing chaos: innovative approaches to coaching

Jonathan Ives reports from the latest TLR Coaching Insight seminar and hears some of the leading exponents of coaching and coach education give their views on creating, managing and living with change and a changing coaching environment.

Mark Drummond could have been forgiven a wry smile as he began his presentation. As someone who had been a member of the Sportscoach UK staff until its recent clear-out of personnel, he may well have felt himself admirably qualified to lead a discussion on chaos in coaching but, sticking to his brief as the opening speaker at the latest in the Insight series of seminars on coaching and coach education, he focused from the outset on the role of change and innovation in the coaching environment.

“Change is central to the concept of coaching,” he said. “The role of the coach is that of change agent but chaos might just be an example of bad planning.” The difference between innovation and chaos, Drummond explained, is all about perception. Understanding and planning for the effects of different perceptions can make the implementation of change much easier for all concerned, particularly when change in a coaching programme invariably leads to a drop in performance. The coach’s job, he argued, is to limit this drop.

An appreciation of how change works – and how easily this can descend into chaos if change is not skilfully managed – is important in limiting this dip in performance. “You have to think about what affects change, what the reaction will be, whom you need to involve and who is going to lead,” he said. “People learn in different ways. It’s more complex than the ‘plan, do, review’ model that we’re all taught. Whether you are working with coaches or athletes you have to account for different ways of learning.”

A graph with a line that dipped before climbing again illustrated the accepted process of reaction to change. Initial denial and anger is followed by bargaining, often accompanied by attempts to avoid the change. Then people get fed up; then they accept it and the final stage is integration. Dealing with this process, making it as short as possible and even bypassing some elements requires a team approach to support and drive change but, Drummond said, with good leadership it can be done.

As usual in an Insight session, the questions and comments came thick and fast from a fully engaged audience. There were examples of change in action along with personal experiences of dealing with the UK coaching certificate (UKCC), while others offered thoughts on changes within the Rugby Football Union (RFU) coaching system and numerous other attempts to innovate.

Delivered in partnership with both Sport Cheshire and GreaterSport, the event had drawn coaches from across the north west and many had signed up to see the next contributor to this debate, David Haskins. A respected coach educator and a visiting fellow at both Liverpool John Moores and Sheffield Hallam universities, Haskins is also widely acknowledged to be “good value”. As a former nursery teacher who subsequently taught all through the age range, Haskins observed that coaching was a very good environment in which to witness the butterfly effect, which he defined as a very small action having a disproportionately significant impact. In a sporting context this butterfly effect could include a coach facilitating some simple aspect of performance – a change in attitude perhaps or learning a correct movement – that will go on to have a profound impact on a player’s involvement, enjoyment or achievement in their chosen sport. Haskins was at pains to stress that this “butterfly moment” might be something that the coach themselves might regard as inconsequential – perhaps a brief comment in a single session – and it could have this effect at any time.

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Working with children as they begin to grasp the fundamental skills required to enjoy any of the sports they might choose makes a coach's awareness of this butterfly effect crucial. But as children begin to learn to play and practise, does the coach education structure reflect this fundamental truth? Haskins argued that it does not. "My problem is that after that most of us have one thing in mind as coaches," he said. "The way we're taught as coaches is to help people get better at their sport. My contention is that this may not be what the majority of people in coaching do. Where is the coach progression for participation? Shouldn't all routes have a progression? Does any coach award reward progression in participation?"

This prompted a discussion across the room as everyone considered the structures in which and the coaches with whom they work but after much debate Haskins brought everyone back to the butterfly effect and its impact on participation. The 5Cs model – comprising competence, confidence, connection, character and caring but now updated, he noted, to 6 Cs with the addition of creativity – is a methodology that can deliver such impacts with some consistency but of them all perhaps connection is the key.

"For a coach, connection means can the player or performer understand what's going on at every stage?" Haskins said. "Our prime concern is getting children connected and then building confidence. Connection could be a very big butterfly, particularly if you begin to think about how people are going to connect at the start of every session."

John Mills, British Cycling's coaching, education and development director, continued the theme of young people in sport with an insight into how British Cycling have structured their coaching programmes for talented young performers. To support the lauded Olympic talent programme, which comprises 30 riders at any one time, British Cycling has introduced a support system that includes regional schools of racing and is founded upon a strong club development programme. Simon Watts, British Cycling's talent development coach for the North East and Yorkshire, explained some of the nuances of this development system and introduced us to the concept of the "Snickers approach", a five-ingredient product that defines the elements of a successful competitive cyclist. The Snickers ingredients in question, he explained, are bike handling skills, speed (youth races are sometimes run at speeds comparable to the professional peloton although over much shorter distances), bravery (a willingness to put oneself in situations outside one's comfort zone rather than recklessness on a bike), tactical awareness and hard work. "We realised that when developing riders that can win races the end point needs to be the starting point," Mills explained. "In this respect our programme reflects what the coach educators were telling us."

Ian Thompson, coaching development manager for the RFU in the north west, had raced across country and arrived with barely enough time to unpack his laptop before launching into a presentation that revealed the results of an important RFU coach development meeting that he had been party to only that morning. The headline news, hot off the proverbial press, was that the RFU was set to embrace non-rugby elements within its coaching system.

"Every sport has some unique elements to it and rugby is no different," Thompson said. "It's a traditional game developed in a traditional way. However, from these decisions today comes a new model. Our sport has been limited in respect of the development of the athlete. We are now saying that in the early years we shouldn't be playing too much rugby. We should be developing mobility skills with a rugby thread and developing a whole range of skills of the individual. It's about motor skills but also about emotional and social skills of young people."

The key question that has driven this change is fundamental, he explained: what are we trying to achieve with children in rugby? The answers came from an understanding that the game should fit what the child wants. Social and personal skills will be a key part of programmes for under-7s and under-9s and up through the age ranges but Thompson was under no illusion that this new approach would require new skills for coaches.

Some video clips, part of research commissioned by the RFU from Exeter University, illustrated some of the results of a pilot project in which four-player games were tested. The outcomes included more individuals involved in the game more often, much higher success rates for individuals taking part, better decision-making among players and, perhaps most importantly, more enjoyment.

"This will have an impact on our coach development model," Thompson said. "It has to follow the player development model so we'll be changing Level 1 to include a lot more focus on personal development of the child in non-rugby elements." A new model for coach development will allow coaches to progress within a particular age group and allow an emphasis on development of the athlete beyond physical attributes.

"It's work in progress for us," he said, "but it is a revolution. It will be interesting to see how it will roll out. The key message for us is that we're looking at the development of the athlete as a whole and to shape the game around the individual rather than the other way round. Of course, our coach development model must follow player development."

Although Thompson was the final name on the programme, his presentation did not mean the end of the event. With all the speakers gathered at the front the debate continued, engaging everyone in the room. Questions regarding such thorny issues as governing bodies accepting each other's Level 1 qualifications in the wider, non-sport-specific interests of multi-skilled and physically literate children followed discussion of the differences between how to coach and what to coach within governing bodies' coach education programmes. Although the proceedings of this latest TLR Insight session had been drawn to an official close, it was clear to the casual observer that light continued to be shed and cages continued to be rattled as numerous conversations continued.

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