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## Coaching in business and in sport: a round table discussion

With the likes of David Brailsford taking lessons learned at the cutting edge of sport into commercial settings, *The Leisure Review* brought three coaches of varying backgrounds to compare the contexts in which they work.

*Our round table cast:*

### **Sarah Ives, client director, QFI Consulting**

Sarah has a background in nursing and has worked as a management consultant in healthcare for the last 10 years. She became interested in business coaching having been coached herself, took a diploma 12 years ago and has coached in different private and public organisations in the healthcare sector.

### **Steve Kemp, sports development manager, Oxfordshire Sports Partnership**

With a background in agriculture, Steve describes his move into coaching as an epiphany. Having embraced coaching, he moved into sports development in 1998. A Level 3 rugby coach and coach educator, he felt he had reached a ceiling and took a masters degree to facilitate his progression.

### **Mick Owen, managing editor, *The Leisure Review* and *The Coaching Review***

Mick is a Level 3 coach in both volleyball and rugby union, and has worked with players in after-school clubs and the international arena. He is a coach educator, writes on coaching and its politics, and drives The Leisure Review's Coaching Insight seminar programme

**“Coaching is about offering a mirror for the person sitting there and adding quite a bit of challenge. The point is maximising potential but that means for the organisation as well as the individual.”**

How do we define coaching?

Sarah Ives: For me, business coaching is about people maximising their potential. Sometimes it gets a bad press because it's about the soft skills. Life coaching, for example, is very much about the individual but for me coaching is about offering a mirror for the person sitting there and adding quite a bit of challenge. The point is maximising potential but that means for the organisation as well as the individual.

And in terms of sport?

Steve Kemp: I take a philosophical viewpoint. Coaching is very much about maximising potential but the less coaching you can do the better. For me it's about creating an environment to allow the person to take it where they want to take it depending on their philosophy and what they are trying to get out of coaching. It's about walking the same path and asking the right question at the right point. It's about being a sounding board, being a check and a challenge, taking another perspective on issues and raising questions within the person.

Mick Owen: Can you afford to do that in your context, Sarah, where your company is being paid to work with a group of people on behalf of that organisation to benefit that organisation? Can you in business afford to walk that same path or is there pressure – akin perhaps to the [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

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pressure in elite sports coaching environments – to achieve the ends of the organisation?

SI: Quite often we are brought in by an organisation because they have talent that they want to keep and they feel those people need a bit of coaching. The other side is being brought in when somebody is not performing and the organisation can't – or doesn't want to – manage that but they still see the potential. So there is an agenda for the organisation but the content of what you do for that individual is, for me, about them, the individual. Our job is to get the most out of others and sometimes that can involve a conflict of interests. Frequently I find I coach them out of the organisation, because they don't want to be there, they're bored, they've had enough. Sometimes I can coach them up into different aspects of the organisation but I'm always upfront with the client that sometimes people will want to go; you can't chain people to your organisation for life.

SK: There are hierarchical structures in business but in sports clubs there is something similar. We've been pushing the idea of dynamic networks where you have a hierarchy but for specific projects you have to get different people in the room with different skill sets. They may even be at different levels in the hierarchy but they come into the room at the same level because you want a coalition. Out of that will come learning, a direction of travel or sub-action groups that will go away and do the job. So it's a networking approach that is attached to the hierarchy but which allows flexibility

Is the issue of flexibility within coaching as much about the organisation as the individual?

MO: I think the sports coach – and it must be the same in business coaching – has to work out what it is that somebody wants and then help them get it; and that requires internal flexibility. I work for an organisation that wants to be successful in national competition in a sport where the governing body wants to see participation increase. The players mostly want to have fun, but there are some who want to get better because they are on the sport's performance pathway. That is four very different agendas, plus I've got my own agenda, which is to keep my job. Add to that the fact that while I coach a squad every player requires individual attention and it all requires endless flexibility

In business presumably there is a similar range of drivers: the organisation's aims will not be the same as that of the individual being coached. Do you have to strike a similar balance?

SI: I would never go into an organisation not knowing what their goals and their values are. If I was coaching someone who was clearly not aligned with that I think I would challenge that on behalf of the organisation, not because I represent the organisation but I would think that if they are not aligned they are not going to enjoy working there and the organisation is not going to get value out of them. So that's not a conflict for me. Sometimes I might feel people have suffered at the hands of the organisation and that there is a sense of injustice but my role is to get them out of that rather than to fight a cause or try to get them to see things in a different way. My role is to focus on that person and find out how they are going to manage that.

MO: So you're fixed on the individual. In sport we are moving towards the C-system.

Just explain the 5C system for Sarah.

MO: Essentially, it is a child-centred approach. The needs of the child dominate. The 5Cs stand for: confidence, competence, caring, character, creativity and connection. Yes, there are 6 Cs in the 5C system. What we're being urged to do is make sure that in every

session we pay heed to each of those.

SK: This comes from the work of Jean Côté and David Haskins. It's about developing the individual rather than the sport. The model doesn't just work for kids: it will work with adults as well. We've done some work with 'back to netball' coaches about the motivation of the person coming to them. The coach has to make connections with that group: what they want to do, how they make relationships within the group. If you get that bit right they will come back again and get their confidence up. Then we can work on their competence. It's probably not new. Good coaches have probably been doing this without even thinking about it but it's been packaged, I suppose.

SI: The predominant theme with the people I coach is that it's not about skills – perhaps some of it is, particularly interpersonal skills – but a lot of it is about managing relationships, whether that's managing up through the hierarchy, managing a difficult peer or a team that seems to be disparate. Eighty percent of my 'coachees' will bring that in. We use a lot of techniques that would encompass the 5Cs but a lot of it is looking at your own personal preference for learning, working with others, how you might do that and getting them to see that they can't change these other people, they can only change their approach to them.

MO: I think that's absolutely right and I think good coaches have always been doing it but there's an awful lot of bad coaches in the system; people calling themselves coaches who have no real right to do so. If you don't recognise that any change of behaviour – which is what coaching is about – is as result of internal motivations acted upon by external influences then you're dead in the water. Too many people seem to think, I'm a coach, I've got a shirt that says so on the back and I'm going to tell people what to do.

SK: I think this is where you're right that the system isn't working. I've pitched two ideas to development colleagues, the first being that we should be running fewer Level 1 courses and focussing instead on developing coaches who are in it for the coaching, who we then keep longer. At the moment we're filling a leaky bucket all the time. Apparently 200,000 coaches disappear every year. My point, which is controversial, is that we bring these people in, train them but they might not be that good. This in turn gives the kids a bad experience and they are therefore more likely to drop out. Would we be better off not giving those kids any experience at all? If we just let them go out and play at least we're not encouraging them away from a sport.

Has sport changed its understanding of what a coach is and what a coach does to a sufficient extent?

MO: No. The Leisure Review is going to be interviewing Steve Grainger of the Rugby Football Union soon, a sport which I believe is attempting to change its own culture. This is a massive task to set yourself – I mean the change rather than the interview. Using the 2015 rugby world cup as a hook, they are changing the way they coach, the way they educate coaches and, if that sticks so that the coaches behave that way at their rugby clubs for a year, they will have changed the culture of the sport. But I know of no other sport, except perhaps football, who are trying to change their sport by changing the type of coach they produce.

We accept that you can't coach a squad, you must coach the individuals in it. Having said that, we are still called upon to coach squads. Does that happen in business?

SI: It does but I wouldn't call it coaching and if I were to do it I would have to have worked with the individuals first to get them to understand a bit more about themselves and how they work with the team. I use Myers-Briggs in a team. I'm just about to do it with a team of

physiotherapists and the manager's objective is to get some team bonding but the individuals will also benefit from it.

SK: I think there are analogies. Meeting the needs of the individual can include the desire to be part of the team because of the agreed team culture. A lot of Lynn Kidman's work is about setting a team culture: what does success look like for the team, where are we trying to go as a team, what are the values and behaviours that we are going to add to underpin the team? I think that aligns to business to a certain degree, in terms of the culture of an organisation and its objectives.

Do people in business think about teams to the same extent?

SI: They try. I think that the difference is that in sport unless the team performs you are not going to get success as an individual. In business teams are much looser and it can quickly become a case of pointing at the individual who has not performed. In business you have teams of individuals but in sport you have a common goal, which is to win. In business you get slightly different agendas; some people might be in it for the money and not everyone is necessarily in it to exceed their potential.

Are there different techniques for the coach in when working with juniors or seniors, whether staff or players?

SI: For me, I wouldn't change my technique. We might have a more sophisticated conversation around an issue with some people. Some people might have a greater level of self-awareness but the fundamentals would be the same. I'm reminded that business coaching really started with sport and I think business has taken the good bits. It's usually about working with adults rather than juniors so it's about maximising potential rather than giving them a skill set, using questions and getting people to think for themselves. For me a coach is not necessarily as skilled in the field as the person being coached. The coach is pulling things out of people; they are not just dropping stuff on top of them. The question within sport is where instruction and coaching cross over.

MO: If you're not asking then you are not coaching. Learning happens in the learner; it's nothing to do with me as a coach. You have to give everything over to the learner, which is why business and sport do not invest in proper coaching at the lower ends. So the people who coach kids are parents, Level 1 or pretty much anyone. It has long been the argument that if we put our best coaches there they would stay longer and be better, but we don't. You're saying that in business you find coaches at the senior levels who never seem to work at the lower levels, because that's a cost and takes time. If you're at the sharp end we don't give you time; only the powerful people have time invested in them.

SK: It's interesting for me and I see similarities. One is that we coach the good coaches away from where they need to be, putting them in front of better players and into a smaller pool. We should be saying, 'You're really good with these youngsters.' Our system drives us up and often away from where we should be, from where we're best suited.

MO: It drives us up by valuing that work more highly, by paying you more. Or for kudos. Tell someone you're the coach of the under-13s is one thing but tell someone you're coaching the South of England and you get some respect.

How far as a coach is it your job to push someone out of their comfort zone?

SI: I do it regularly, when we get into conversations with lots of defensive excuses of why things aren't working. People gradually

realise that it is them but I push, although it is always based on my experience of them rather than what people might have told me about them. Sometimes they might want to deal with a difficult situation with a colleague and I'll challenge them about their approach to that situation but it's about the challenge within that moment, knowing that nothing will go out of the room. So I will challenge quite a bit, rather than just sitting there nodding. I do think that the pull strategy can get taken too far. For example, mental health in the UK avoids all the push strategies of prescription, informing and challenging people. They stay with catharsis, being catalytic with people but I think coaching is both push and pull. You have to be able to push back on some stuff and a lot of it is getting the person to discover for themselves. I think it's weak if you just use one side or the other. Instruction has typically sat within the push approaches and I think counselling has sat on the pull side. I think coaching is both sides. You are able to push and pull people through a conversation.

MO: What would you call a conversation? Is it a season? In the 'conversation' I had with a team over last season – which did involve some very cathartic moments along the way for individuals and for the team – there was quite a lot of pushing going on.

SK: There have been a number of articles about some of the high-level coaches – Stewart Lancaster is probably one -- explaining that you are not just looking at this person as a performer. You have to look at the whole picture and good coaches will pick up on something being not quite right somewhere else.

SI: Things get cathartic when something is blocking performance, whether in business or sport. Sometimes it is personal stuff and people can't move on. I had three coachees on my last programme where the average time between our session starting and them crying was about three minutes. I was getting a reputation for provoking them but they were under shocking pressures at work and they had held it all in. People need to be able to do this to move forward; they can't keep sucking it all in or they would explode. I imagine it would be the same in sport.

MO: If we don't understand the people we coach we are just people shouting on the pitch.

Do coaches need coaches themselves?

MO: We need to put together a healthy mentoring system in sport which recognises that mentoring is a life-long relationship and not something that you can impose. But any 'mentoring programmes' in sport will be packaged over a time-limited period because that's what governing bodies want to hear.

SK: I have my own mentor. It was my need and we connected but I'm slightly nervous of mentoring because for whatever reason we've never made the process work. However, it can work if you can go and find your own. I still see my mentor at events and we always have a chat, so it is an ongoing process.

SI: There's a big mish-mash of mentoring and coaching with some people unsure of the difference. A mentor is life-long and you may not activate that relationship for a long time but you will use that person, often as a leg-up as well but mainly as a learned adviser. For me, coaching has a fixed period of time. Mentoring doesn't.

We started by asking what sports coaching and business coaching have in common. Is our conclusion that they have more in common than sets them apart?

SI: Yes.

SK: Yes, it's the same process. If done properly. We would be able to recognise good coaches and bad coaches in each other's context. Wouldn't we?

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