Chapter 7: Towards mutual understanding: communication and conflict in coaching

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Chapter 7

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Effective communication is an essential part of interaction in sport, and it is particularly pertinent to the success of the coach-athlete relationship. For example, through verbal and non-verbal communication, during a competition a long jumper might look up to the stands to receive pointers from their coach. This also occurs every time a ball is passed from player to player on a football pitch, where information is offered and received about the passer's intention to pass, the weight and angle of the pass, and the receiver's readiness to take the ball. In both instances, effective communication is the key to success as intended messages to one another can easily get 'lost in translation'. The long jump coach in the previous example has seconds to convey their message, which is often done through hand signals. Thus we see the challenges that might be faced in getting communication 'right'. Indeed, it is important to consider how we convey our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in order to facilitate our interdependent goals and in turn generate positive relationships (Knowles et al., 2015), which are crucial to coach-athlete interactions. Understanding effective communication, often cited as a mitigating factor in the breakdown of relationships (Weinberg & Gould, 2019), is essential particularly as our ego often prevents us from considering, appreciating, or sometimes even hearing another individual's point of view (Bartholomew, 2017).

This chapter explores the nature of our communication, the skills associated with quality communication, and the contextual factors within sport which influence the development of strong working relationships, which are only achieved through clear communication strategies (Gordon, 2009). Furthermore, the challenges and opportunities presented by interpersonal conflict in coaching environments are discussed.

Communication: the essence of social interaction

At any given moment via both verbal and non-verbal channels, whether intentional or not, we reveal information about who we are, how we see the world, how we feel, and what we are thinking (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018). Communication put simply is the encoding, transmission and decoding of information (Martens, 1987). However, it is also a social construct, and its purpose may vary; for

example, a coach may need to inform and encourage an athlete during a performance, or wish to convey their thoughts and feelings about the team scoring or conceding a point, or athletes may want to show their intentions to work hard and equally share their expectations of their teammates' efforts (Niculescu & Săbăn, 2018). Communication is best understood through a socio-ecological lens where the influence of individuals' varying demographics, values and beliefs, self-regulation skills and their communicative limitations and aptitudes can be seen (Cherubini, 2019). Critically, for the individual to be perceived as genuine and authentic by the recipient, with the message being accurately received, there must be a consistency between the verbal and non-verbal information exhibited by the sender (Rogers, 1961). Table 7.1 provides a summary of the varying forms of verbal (linguistic) and non-verbal (non-linguistic) communication.

<Table 7.1: Types of communication (adapted from Hargie & Marshall, 1986, p. 36)>

Now that we have distinguished between verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, we explore each in turn.

Verbal and written communication

The linguistic aspect of communication delineates both *what* is spoken or written, but also *how* it is spoken or written, through paralanguage and grammatical intonation respectively (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018). There are several factors which contribute to the micro-decisions about how one might speak in any given situation. Perspectives from speech accommodation theory (Giles, 1984) propose that an individual's speech style may be modified according to context (i.e., listener, situation). For example, consider how differently a pre-competition talk from a coach might be delivered compared to a one-to-one intimate conversation with a friend. Elements of paralanguage are used to convey the thoughts and emotions behind the words: these play a vital role in fostering the desired response from the listener.

More and more frequently in the digital age, we are communicating via the written word, be it through text messages, emails, or social media. Digital communication has for better or worse changed our social environment, bringing individuals greater immediacy and a more constant connection to people and information. However, one of the challenges for the written word, is the lack of non-verbal elements of communication, which can lead to misinterpretation by the reader. Hence, the advent of the emoji designed to provide the recipient with a partial electronic characterisation of our related emotions. Whilst emojis are considered a modern invention, reflective of a digital age, creating

symbols to convey meaning is one of the oldest forms of literacy (Fane, 2017), yet they are still vulnerable to misinterpretation and misuse. This may lead us to consider the cautionary challenges of using electronic messages within coach-athlete communications, for example a coach providing an athlete with feedback on their performance, may be best delivered in person rather than solely via text message. We will now explore the varying facets of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication

The non-verbal aspects of communication (see Table 7.1), often referred to as cues, encapsulate a wide range of elements such as gestures, touch and body positioning, physical appearance and posture, and facial expressions (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). Gestures can quickly and often inadvertently reveal a great deal about how someone is feeling during an interaction. For example, if an athlete crosses their arms or turns away, they may be perceived to be, or perhaps actually are, feeling defensive or unreceptive to a coach's feedback at that time. Similarly, an individual's facial expressions are crucial to connecting with others; a warm smile from a coach knows no language barrier and brings connection for everyone, in contrast a steely glare or shake of the head may illicit a different response from the athlete(s).

Touch and body positioning - for example, to calm or comfort another person - whilst effective in many ways, must be conducted in a respectful manner. Posture and physical appearance can also contribute significantly to the impression formed by others. For example, competition situations pose an important opportunity for the coach to communicate to the athlete or team their unconditional positive regard towards them and their efforts, irrespective of the result, for example shaking their hands and giving them a pat on the back. Additionally, an individual's physical appearance such as a coach or athlete wearing a uniform or team colours speaks volumes about their sense of identity, and their beliefs and values (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018) within the team or organisation.

Communication within the coaching environment

The ability to understand how others identify with and interpret the world assists us in understanding their actions; therefore, the skilled development of what some researcher's term 'interpersonal constructs' is critical to facilitating learning within any coaching environment. Initially proposed by Delia (1977), the constructivist approach to interpersonal communication has been widely supported throughout a range of contexts including close relationships (Burleson et al., 2000), education (Applegate, 1980), and intercultural interaction (Applegate & Sypher, 1988). Most significantly however, its application within the context of sport reflects functional communication, defined as "the

ability to generate and process messages in ways that enable people to accomplish their goals efficiently and effectively" (Burleson & Rack, 2008, p. 52). It offers the broad assumption that all individuals interpret the world differently and seek to create meaningful understanding of their interactions.

The development of interpersonal constructs is something that all individuals develop 'schemas' for over time (Burleson & Rack, 2008). These schemas are formulated information gained via verbal and non-verbal avenues of communication. Therefore, how we construe another individual is shaped by our predictions and interpretation of their behaviours, attitudes, appearance, traits, and dispositions (Kelly, 1955). According to Burleson and Caplan (1998) those individuals with a strong aptitude for accurately interpreting and understanding other people are thought to have highly attuned construing systems for interpersonal cognitive complexity.

The constructivist viewpoint of an individual's experience also asserts that it is embedded within the sociocultural and historical context within which they find themselves. Therefore, the environmental context can both influence and constrain how the individual interprets and finds meaning in their interaction with those around them (Burleson & Rack, 2008). A significant influence upon an athlete's experience within the coaching environment is that of a coach's philosophy of practice, which we will now explore in more depth.

The influence and application of a coaching philosophy

A coach's philosophy of practice is reflective of their intrinsic values and beliefs and is often shaped by their own previous experiences of being coached themselves, particularly if their experience was positive (Cherubini, 2019). This is typically translated through their coaching style (i.e., democratic, autocratic, holistic, laissez-faire) and in turn can significantly influence athletes' emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses, not to mention their motivation (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2015). It is important that a coach's communication behaviour aligns with their philosophy of practice (e.g., Yukelson, 2015). Therefore, time taken by a coach to understand their own beliefs, values, motivations and intentions is a good starting point and opens the door for developing awareness of how their coaching philosophy will impact on their relationship with athletes and other stakeholders.

Côté and Gilbert (2009) proposed that the coaching process is "the consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection and character in specific coaching contexts" (p. 316). This widely cited

definition recognises the importance of acknowledging both content and relatability (Cherubini, 2019) in the coaching process. A coach can possess all the knowledge in the world about their sport, but if they cannot translate that knowledge to their athletes, they will not be an effective coach (Kidman & Hanrahan, 2011).

The *professional* knowledge described by Côté and Gilbert (2009) refers to the technical and tactical knowledge of the sport. In American Football, a technical aspect of a coach's knowledge might be training an athlete to develop specific skills such as the quarterback's passing technique. Whereas a tactical aspect in the same sport, might be a coach's knowledge of specific plays to run at the appropriate moment in a game. Fry (2015) observed that whilst having a knowledge of the rules of a particular sport is important, a coach's "self-knowledge, insight into particular individuals with whom the coach interacts, and awareness of what human beings, and in some cases, nonhuman animals, are in general like" (p. 387) is even more critical, as it will determine when, and more importantly how, this information is imparted to their athletes. This emphasises that the "power of effective communication in shaping human attitudes, emotions and performance, is fundamental to successful sports coaching" (Cherubini, 2019, p. 451), and this is where the *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* knowledge in coaching is applied (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Indeed, the coach's "ability to transmit knowledge to athletes" (Fry, 2015, p. 387) is essential. However, moving away from this more traditional view of coaching, the dominant discourse of current coaching psychology research is the recognition of a more reciprocal communication strategy, facilitating greater understanding between coach and athlete (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016).

Strategies for effective communication in sport

> *"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place"*
>
> George Bernard Shaw, playwright

Success in sport is highly determined by a coach's competency in effectively communicating to their athletes the required support - be it technical, tactical, motivational or emotional - to help turn their aspirations into reality (Sagar & Jowett, 2012). However, this can only be achieved through effective communication strategies (Anshel, 2012) and coach-athlete mutual knowledge and understanding (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013).

Developing emotional intelligence as a coach

Emotional intelligence is the culmination of the awareness of oneself and empathic understanding of others and is defined as:

> the ability to accurately perceive, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. (Mayer and Salovey, 1997, p. 10)

During the communication process, individuals' personalities, needs and expectations have a strong influence on their behaviour and the subsequent outcome of the interaction (Niculescu & Săbăn, 2018). Therefore, time and energy invested in developing an accurate understanding of both themselves (Côté & Gilbert, 2009) and each individual athlete is essential to effective coaching practice and positive coach-athlete relationships (Ehrmann, 2011). As described in the previous chapter, a substantial body of research evidence suggests that a quality coach-athlete relationship comprises the 3+1Cs; Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity and Co-orientation. Communication is cited within the 3+1Cs framework, as the fuel of the relationship (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016).

The construct of co-orientation comprises two interdependent elements; empathic understanding and empathic accuracy. Whilst empathic understanding can be defined as a non-judgemental and comprehensive knowledge of the athlete as a whole person, empathic accuracy is more the perceptually intuitive capacity to understand and respond appropriately to the thoughts, feelings and intentions of the athlete on a moment to moment basis (Burleson & Caplan, 1998). An important facet of empathy is the capacity to understand, without judgement, the other person's thoughts, feelings or behaviours; to accept that "all feelings are legitimate: the positive, the negative, and the ambivalent" (Ginott et al., 2003, p. 26-27). This reflects the constructivist approach to interpersonal communication discussed earlier in this chapter, acknowledging that a person could feel or think differently about a situation at any given moment. Individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviours are not perceived as right or wrong. However, the proposal that they are malleable and can change over time offers scope for the coach, through empathically accurate feedback, to encourage the athlete toward a more optimal perceptual state, generating in turn a positive impact on performance and the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006).

The two elements of empathic understanding and empathic accuracy have been described above in terms of the coach's knowledge and understanding of the athlete. However, the 3+1Cs model also recognises that in order to generate a quality relationship, both parties must consciously work towards

developing a shared understanding of each other, thus reflecting a more balanced and reciprocal relationship (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). In the Case Study 7.1, we explore an example of how elite athletes perceive their interactions with their coach, and its implications for their thoughts, feelings and behaviours in training and performance.

Case study 7.1: Olympic archers' experiences of coach-athlete interaction

Kim and Park's (2020) case study investigation explored athletes' perceptions of the effects of communication with their coach during significant moments in training and performance environments. Eight Korean Olympic team archers took part in the study. In the semi-structured interviews, the researchers divided the interviews into three sections; athlete background and experience, positive and negative elements of coach communication during performance, and positive and negative elements of coach communication during training. An analysis revealed a number of main themes and sub-themes. The athletes' responses suggested that they perceived communication with their coach to be important during training and performance, and additionally when they were experiencing psychological crises. The main themes and respective sub-themes are outlined below:

Training: "My coach is a really good communicator…I feel that he is a good storyteller" (p. 8)

Autonomy support - when arranging training schedules, athletes felt a stronger sense of responsibility and commitment if the coach engaged with the athletes' own opinions.

Motivation - the athletes offered positive and negative examples of how coach-athlete communication could directly affect their motivation levels during training.

Skill and equipment - due to the intricacies of technique and equipment selection in archery, coach-athlete communication around this topic was particularly significant for positive and negative implications for the athletes' during training.

Performance: "He wanted me to focus on what I usually think and feel when I am performing to the best of my abilities." (p. 6)

Self-awareness - coach communication was acutely impactful on their self-awareness, especially during a performance crisis.

Positive encouragement - following a decrease in performance levels, athletes reported feelings of uncertainty which affected decision-making and focus, therefore supportive coach behaviour was of value to help regain performance levels.

Psychological Crises: "When I am psychologically agitated, I tend to pay attention to my coach's verbal and non-verbal expressions." (p. 7)

Self-confidence - a coach's reactions and behaviour towards the athlete during times of crisis play a significant role in the athlete's confidence levels.

Anxiety - athletes reported that conversations with their coach during periods of anxiety can have a powerful impact on their anxiety levels.

The study identified that "communication can have both functional and dysfunctional effects on the athletes' performances and psychological conditions, depending on the verbal and nonverbal messages of the coach" (p. 9). Most significantly, athletes conveyed the importance of individualised communication from their coaches, emphasising the need to recognise the uniqueness of each individual athlete.

Navigating the communication climate

The findings of the Case Study 7.1 are in-keeping with the constructivist approach to studying interpersonal communication (Delia, 1977). This recognises that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to coach communication, that athletes' and coaches' perceptions, actions, and reactions can change across contexts, and are highly influenced by the perceptions, actions, and reactions of those around them (Cranmer & Brann, 2015). Within the coaching environment, interactions between coaches and athletes can take place in a multitude of contexts (Yukelson, 2015), for example, on a training ground, at a competition, in a locker room, or a coach's office. Therefore, consideration must be made about the timing, appropriateness, and content of communication or feedback in any given situation (Millar et al., 2011). Indeed, interference to communication exchanges can take many shapes and forms, and it can be challenging for an individual to process multiple cues at once (Ehrmann, 2011). For example, in a performance environment, both the coach and the parent may be communicating conflicting instructions from the touchline with limited or no impact. Indeed, delaying feedback often provides the athlete with the opportunity to self-regulate themselves either in terms of emotional control or performance mastery (Millar et al., 2011).

Also notice how the dynamics of feedback in the coach-athlete relationship may change over time, particularly as the athlete becomes more competent. For example, with an experienced athlete the feedback may become more relational (emotional, motivational) from the coach as opposed to instructional, whereas the athlete themselves may also provide more verbal informational feedback. In contrast, a coach with a younger athlete may provide more instructional feedback and gain non-verbal behavioural feedback from the young athlete. However, Gould et al. (2012, p. 86) also asserted that "kids don't care what you know until they know you care", therefore suggesting that coaches should prioritise the emotional needs of young athletes and adapt their own feedback accordingly.

An accurate understanding of athletes' needs and perceptions is critical to effective coaching. Research by Vansickle et al. (2010) suggested that there are often some discrepancies between the perceptions of coaches' emotional intelligence by the coach and athlete and propose a couple of reflective "checking in exercises" (p. 31) for coaches to improve their self-awareness and empathic accuracy. Table 7.2 offers some questions that a coach may wish to reflect upon in order to improve their coach communication.

<Table 7.2: Coach reflections for self-awareness and empathic accuracy (adapted from Vansickle et al., 2010, p. 31-32)>

The reciprocity of feedback

The assumption that the provision of feedback lies solely in the coach's domain is outdated, and the importance of a coach's receptivity to athlete feedback cannot be understated (Cassidy et al., 2016). This feedback can take many forms, verbal and non-verbal, and may reflect an athlete's attitude, emotion, clarity of understanding, and motivational needs (Cherubini, 2019). In fact, this feedback is the communication the coach is seeking out from athletes through empathic accuracy, to inform and therefore improve the effectiveness of their next communication to the athlete - be it informational, esteem, or emotional support (Cranmer et al., 2016). One highly effective mechanism for gaining meaningful feedback from athletes is active listening. The spotlight explores the key ingredients of developing this fundamental coaching skillset.

Spotlight on: Active listening skills

Active listening can be defined as offering one's undivided attention to the speaker's total communication (Weinberg & Gould, 2019), and using verbal and non-verbal communication cues

to show the speaker that they have not only been heard but also understood (Katz & Hemmings, 2009). In a fast-paced environment like sport, the thoughts and feelings behind a coach and athlete's communications can easily go unheard or unsaid (Cherubini, 2019), therefore the measured use of active listening skills can be critical in maintaining mutual understanding. Importantly, active listening should be facilitated in a non-judgemental way allowing individuals the freedom to articulate their perceptions of experiences and share their associated thoughts and feelings. The purpose of active listening and associated skill elements of active listening are outlined below.

Factual listening

The purpose is to seek clarity of gaining a full understanding of the content of the information shared in a communication exchange. There are three active listening skills which can be used to help achieve this.

Summarising – is the process of collating the information provided by the speaker and succinctly presenting it back to them for confirmation, therefore ensuring mutual understanding.

Paraphrasing – is re-expressing some of the salient information that the speaker has shared back to them in a purposefully reorganised manner. This provides the speaker with the opportunity to glean new or greater understanding of their own perspective.

Clarifying – is to ask specific questions of the speaker about what they have said, to clarify that both parties have the same understanding of what has been described.

Emotional listening

The purpose is to gain empathic understanding about how the speaker feels emotionally about the information being discussed. This provides the listener with an appreciation of the speaker's experiences and associated thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and is typically facilitated through:

Reflecting – is expressing back to the speaker the feelings that they have shared, implied, or exhibited. The listener needs to clarify their interpretation of these association emotions ahead of any reflective response or feedback.

(adapted from Katz & Hemmings, 2009, p. 22-24, 33-35)

The success or failure of a communication can be largely determined by the congruence or lack thereof, across the interpretation and selective meaning each individual ascribes to the interaction.

Luhmann's (1995) social systems theory suggests that communication is a selection process comprising of three elements; information, utterance and understanding. Consistent with the constructivist viewpoint, Luhmann's theory recognises the complexity of communication, and explores the levels of internal and external influences that may affect the individual's subjective interpretation of the interaction. Understanding coach-athlete communication through this socio-ecological lens (Cherubini, 2019) presents a greater opportunity to contextualise coach-athlete communication at a personal level (i.e., respective personalities, sex, age, cultural background) and the systemic team, organisational, sporting culture, and societal levels within which it is embedded (Borggrefe & Cachay, 2013). We will now explore the communicational challenges posed by some of these factors at an interpersonal and organisational level.

Parents, stakeholders, and organisational influences

In addition to developing clear communication strategies with their athlete(s), coaches should also consider the influence of other key stakeholders such as parents, other coaches and support staff, the policy makers of their organisation, sponsors, and particularly their employer, upon coach-athlete communication (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014). For example, a parent may have strong opinions about when and at what level their child should compete, or a sponsor's financial contribution may be determinant upon performances being maintained at a certain level. The extent to which each of these stakeholders can or will influence coach-athlete communication will vary. However, there is consistent evidence from coaches of all levels and sports that stresses the associated pressures and importance of fostering productive working relationships with athletes, sporting organisations and their wider support team (Cassidy et al., 2016).

Team culture and its influence on coach-athlete communication

Whether it is grassroots participation at the local leisure centre or professional competitive sport, sport brings people together from diverse ethnic, sociocultural and religious backgrounds. This can create communicational challenges of not only a potential variety of spoken languages but also "culturally specific behaviours and attitudes" (Borggrefe & Cachay, 2013, p. 17), which may influence individual's subjective experience and understanding of teammates and the coach's intended communications. Research conducted by Morgan et al. (2019, p. 4-7) on the conscious processes of high-performance teams, suggests some constructive ways to collectively develop a shared vision and understanding of a positive team culture;

- Inspiring, motivating, and challenging team members to achieve performance excellence
- Developing a team ethos based upon ownership and responsibility

- Cultivating a team identity and togetherness based upon a selfless culture
- Exposing the team to challenging training and unexpected / difficult situations
- Promoting enjoyment and keeping a positive outlook during stressful periods.

These openly communicated strategies highlight that identifying roles and responsibilities, establishing cultural values, norms and protocols, and recognising the team's collective efficacy and shared goals, enhances a sense of "confidence, competence, connection and character" (Côté & Gilbert, 2009, p. 316); there is, therefore, a heightened collective sense of self-efficacy in the athletes and coaches. It is in this unity that challenges like interpersonal conflict, which we will discuss later in this chapter, can be met with positive regard (Vealey, 2017).

The subjectivity of understanding and response

On a personal level, successful mutual understanding of a given communication is subject to both the coach and athlete deriving the same meaning from the information. Borggrefe and Cachay (2013) asserted that "achieving understanding is a highly self-referential process; the meaning of a message will always be constructed based on system-specific structures and criteria of relevance" (p. 13), and challenges may occur when there is disparity between the coach's and the athlete's intentions and/or motivations. Respective interpretation can be influenced by internal factors such as residual feelings about previous interactions or other prior unrelated experiences, personality, age, sex, and cultural backgrounds. It can also be affected by situational factors within the context of the communication, for example whether or not teammates are present during an altercation between a coach and athlete, or even be influenced by personal responsibilities outside of the confines of sport, such as family issues or work commitments (Borggrefe & Cachay, 2013).

Mutual understanding alone, however, is not sufficient for successful communication. An individual's response behaviour is indicative of whether the communication has been effective, and where communication is not successful this could lead to conflict within the coach-athlete relationship, the management of which we shall now explore in more detail.

Interpersonal conflict within the coach-athlete relationship

Interpersonal conflict in sport has been defined as "a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions or objectives that is manifested through negative, cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions" (Wachsmuth et al., 2017, p. 5). It has been described as orientating either a specific task (training/performance aspect) or social issue

(relational/personal), the latter having more challenging long-term implications for the relationship itself (Jehn, 1997). Conflict can easily occur in the coach-athlete relationship, be it through unmet expectations, lack of effort, training schedule disagreements, or more personal issues. Yet whether it has a detrimental or constructive effect on performance, the relationship and/or individuals' well-being, will be greatly determined by the coach and athlete's communicative approach to the situation. This section will explore the determinants and consequences of conflict, strategies to prevent and manage conflict, and the incorporation, where necessary, of third-party interventions.

The determinants and consequences of conflict

In 2013, Mellalieu et al.'s study explored conflict during competitions and revealed that it was primarily a result of communication breakdowns and a jostle for power in the relationship. However, the reported outcomes of conflict reflected a broad continuum of positive - neutral - negative impacts in terms of performance outcome and emotional reactions. Wachsmuth et al.'s (2017) subsequent critical review proposed an exploratory conceptual framework for understanding interpersonal conflict (see Figure 7.1), both in the coach-athlete relationship and within peer groups (e.g., teams). The framework identifies determinants and consequences which reflect conflict as a layered and multidimensional construct. As explained by Wachsmuth et al. (2017), on the left-hand side of the framework are the *determinants* such as intrapersonal (e.g., personality experience), interpersonal (e.g., poor communication) and external factors (e.g., the situation) which can cause, or influence, conflict. The central section of the framework presents the *cognitive*, *emotional* and *behavioural* *processes* associated with conflict (including initial reactions and management behaviours), that can influence the use of *conflict prevention* and *management strategies*. The right-hand side of the framework highlights the *consequences* of conflict be it intrapersonal (e.g., wellbeing), interpersonal (e.g., cohesion), and performance (e.g. competition placing).

<Figure 7.1: Conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport (Wachsmuth et al., 2017, p. 3)>

Using this conceptual framework, Wachsmuth et al. (2018a) sought to further understand the nature of coach-athlete conflict, through interviewing twenty-two coaches and athletes. The research proposed several mitigating factors which could contribute to individuals' perceptions and interpretations of any conflict episode. The findings identified five factors involved in interpersonal conflict; characteristics (e.g., frequency, timing), topics (e.g., lifestyle, misconduct, sport), cognition (e.g., appraisal, uncertainty), emotion (e.g., positive, negative, neutral), and behaviour (e.g., escalation, communication strategies). Practical implications of the research findings included the importance of

increasing coach and athlete self-awareness of the consequences of conflict by adopting a "more problem-oriented, caring approach connected with a sense of calmness and relief [which] potentially facilitates coping and conflict management" (Wachsmuth et al., 2018a, p. 1960).

Managing conflict in the coach-athlete relationship

Rhind and Jowett (2010) proposed the COMPASS model of coach-athlete communication (see Figure 7.2 below), which offered seven strategies to promote and maintain high-quality coach-athlete communication. The strategy of 'conflict management' suggested that endeavouring to identify potential conflict(s) in advance and creating an open dialogue of communication to either resolve or monitor these issues would assist coaches and athletes in either preventing conflict or settling the conflict with a more positive outcome.

<Figure 7.2: The COMPASS model of coach-athlete communication (Rhind & Jowett, 2010, p. 118)>

Whilst this sounds a very logical and proactive approach, other researchers have noted that in reality, conflict avoidance is actually a common strategy for athletes (e.g., Mellalieu et al., 2013), particularly when there is a significant imbalance of power in the relationship (Predoiu & Radu, 2013). Indeed, one previous investigation has cited coaches as using controlling behaviour or punishment to overpower athletes during altercations (d'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998), whereas other research has suggested that some athletes thrive on aggressively motivated behaviour from their coaches (Sagar & Jowett, 2012). In the spotlight below, some preventative measures and conflict management strategies for coach-athlete communication are outlined.

Spotlight on: Conflict management strategies

Wachsmuth et al. (2018b) explored strategies used by coaches and athletes to "minimise dysfunctional and maximise functional outcomes of interpersonal conflict" (p. 371). Coaches and athletes were found to use both intra- and interpersonal strategies to *prevent* conflict:

Implicit Conflict Prevention – efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of the coach-athlete relationship through closeness, commitment and complementarity, which in turn generates an optimal performance environment.

Explicit Conflict Prevention – the use of self-regulation to manage their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and engaging in empathic accuracy to understand others' perceptions and intentions, and then responding appropriately.

The study also identified five strategies to *manage* conflict:

Role Responsibilities – engaging in and adopting appropriate roles to begin the process to work towards conflict resolution and taking ownership of their personal role responsibilities.

Intrapersonal – regulating emotions prior to engaging with a conflict partner, enabling a priori reappraisal and reassessment of the situation.

Interpersonal – the process must include both parties using open lines of communication and with invested engagement in collaboration and compromise, acknowledging each other's point of view.

External Support – often sought from friends, family, or teammates, although it is difficult to find an independent third party.

Conflict Management Barriers – acknowledging and managing the potential for an unwillingness to work together towards resolution due to poor relationship quality, obliviousness to conflict, and lack of follow-through on the agreed process.

The findings of this study suggest that the implications of conflict behaviour in the coach-athlete relationship, has the potential for both dysfunctional and functional outcomes. On an intrapersonal level in terms of individuals' well-being; on a performance level in terms of commitment, motivation, and satisfaction; and on an interpersonal level in terms of the strength of the relationship and the ability to move forward. The research also highlighted that implicit conflict prevention strategies were not sufficient in isolation, and should be supported by explicit conflict prevention strategies and, where necessary, independent mediation.

Third-party interventions

Beyond the world of sport, in other social and professional domains, mediation has been cited as an effective strategy for resolving challenging conflict situations (Kressel, 2014). Wachsmuth et al. (2018b) highlighted that when engaging a third party in coach-athlete scenarios it can be difficult to find someone who can remain impartial, let alone be equipped to mediate difficult conversations. The role is skilled, requiring the capacity to provide a safe space for both parties to speak freely, to act as an interpreter, and to identify the root cause of the problem, rather than "treating the symptoms" (Rhind & Jowett, 2012, p. 236), as well as to assist parties in working towards a mutually agreeable

solution. This unenviable task often falls to a sport psychologist either operating independently or already working within the organisation.

Wachsmuth et al. (2020) explored what the perceived challenges might be for the sport psychologist when adopting the role of mediator in the coach-athlete relationship. This research identified several roles that sport psychologists already adopt; educator, consultant, analyst, action planner, counsellor, facilitator and protector. The perceived challenges reported by the interviewed sport psychologists on mediation reflected concerns about procedural factors, their own role within the organisation, the ability to remain objective, coping with inflexible parties, and their own negative perceptions of their self-efficacy as a mediator. The researchers also acknowledged that in order to provide an effective intervention, the sport psychologist would need to have considerable contextual knowledge of the conflict and knowledge of the individuals involved, therefore necessitating both individual and dyadic sessions. However, negotiating the "(micro)political landscape" (Wachsmuth et al., p. 22) of the sporting organisation was perceived to impose a very significant influence on the likelihood of a successful intervention for the sport psychologists. Indeed, the impact of sporting organisation's socioecological and cultural climates on the personal and professional well-being of individuals within their environment is increasingly being scrutinised (e.g., Rowley et al., 2018). This highlights the profound impact of the social systems (Luhmann, 1995) within the organisation not only upon the coach-athlete relationship but also upon the ability of other individuals to successfully facilitate positive change.

Whilst it has been established that conflict is indeed inevitable, efforts made to create an environment where coaches and athletes perceive conflict as valuable for personal growth and developing resilience, and share a willingness to seek out opportunities for resolution, can only be beneficial (Wachsmuth et al., 2018b).

Closing thoughts

What brings a coach and athlete together is an interdependent goal, born out of a passion for sport. We have established that such passion can present challenges in terms of communication and conflict. However, these challenges can be met positively when efforts are made by the coach and athlete to create a working relationship with a strong sense of authenticity, self-awareness, and empathic accuracy. Through fervent reciprocity of trust, respect, and appreciation, coaches and athletes can develop the skills for open communication from a foundation of psychological safety, acknowledging without prejudice the other person's perspective and the legitimacy of their associated emotions. It is this mutually perceived strength in the coach-athlete relationship that will underpin a proactive and

positive approach to conflicts, as they inevitably arise, which will ultimately foster the harmonious passion for facilitating constructive resolutions. Moreover, steps taken to foresee and plan for potential conflict issues in advance, whilst exercising positive communication strategies, can only be beneficial and would likely ensure greater receptivity to solution-focused communication orientation. Most pertinent to the success of the coach-athlete relationship, however, is the clear message that effective communication is not in what you say, but in what the listener takes away.

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