

HOW TO CREATE A RELATIONAL COACHING ENVIRONMENT

By Sophia Jowett

To be a technically good coach is one thing, but what gives the coach the “edge” (i.e., the extra effectiveness) in this unforgiving and relentless competitive sport environment is the connection developed between the coach and athlete.

It is this connection that makes a difference to technical coaching because it supplies us with the key to opening the door to our athlete’s capabilities, capacities, and potential.

This unique partnership or relationship developed between a coach and an athlete, we call relational coaching. Relational coaching is the ways coaches and athletes connect to bring about performance success and personal satisfaction.



Over the past 15 years, we have studied in depth the content, quality and functions of the coach-athlete relationship. We found that there are three key properties that correspond with the definition’s main characteristics of the interdependence of coaches and athletes’ feelings, thoughts and behaviors:

1. Closeness
2. Commitment
3. Complementarity

In this blog I have provided some tips to help you build better relationships with your athletes/participants for these key properties, which will help you to create a relational coaching environment.



1. Tips for building closeness in the coach-athlete relationship

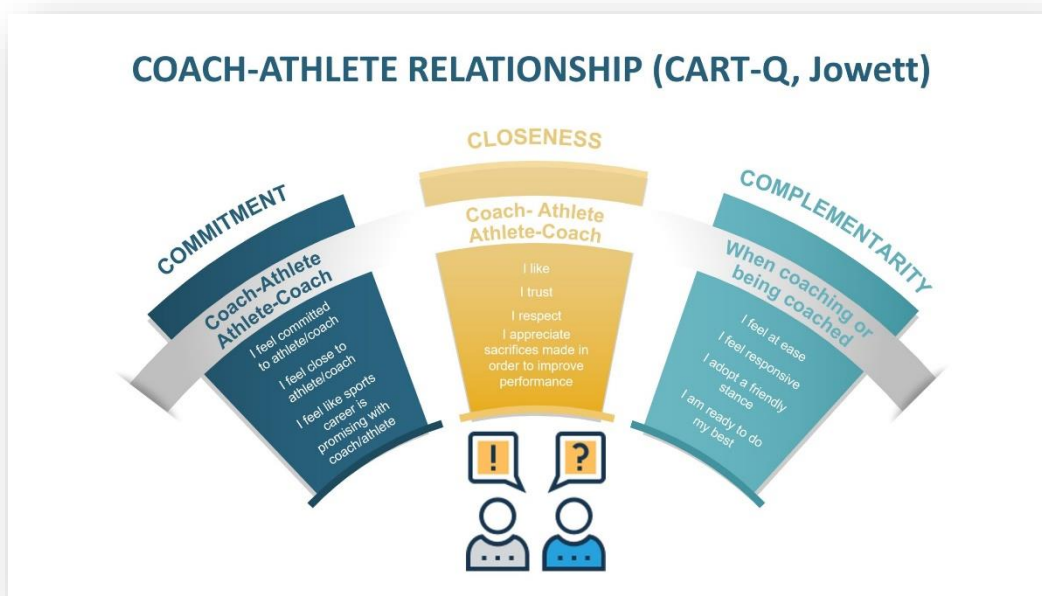
Closeness reflects the affective bond developed between coaches and athletes and is manifested in mutual trust and respect, emotional caring and support, as well as interpersonal liking and appreciation. In our research affective closeness was thought of as the bedrock of the sporting

- Be open – offer information, show you have nothing to hide, don't omit, mask; openness is reciprocated
- Keep confidences – keep secrets imparted to you. No gossip is allowed. NEVER blab someone else's story.
- Display loyalty – protect your athletes, be on their side both in their presence and absence
- Be competent - display your skills to gain your athletes' admiration and respect
- Be neutral when placed in difficult situations – don't choose sides until you have all the facts
- Be reliable/consistent/predictable – if you cancel or fail to follow through it will create cracks in your trustworthiness
- Honor your promises – if you make promises you cannot keep your athletes will think you are not dependable
- Do not belittle the promise – however small you think it is your athletes may think it to be significant
- Be honest – not always easy
- Speak from the heart – focus on the person by doing this you make clear you don't judge the other
- Speak your feelings – people who only convey facts come across as cold and distant (be compassionate/understanding)
- Pay attention and notice your athletes doing good things – give/receive recognition (purposeful appreciation):
 - Focus on individual accomplishment – it is much more powerful than acknowledging the whole group. Acknowledge an athlete in the team or squad who has done a good job in front of others
 - Be as specific as possible – when you offer appreciation – describe the impact of what has been done. (For example, “You did a great job – getting the team together, organizing the equipment in ways that can be more effectively be used by all. I appreciate took the lead on that...it is making a difference in...)
 - When you see it, say it – timeliness is important don't wait.
 - Be sincere – don't fake it.

2. Tips for building commitment in the coach-athlete relationship

Commitment reflects the intentions of coaches and athletes to maintain a bond or a connection that is both close and long-term. This long-term orientation toward the relationship is considered important as it takes time to develop skill and bring about success.

- Map out individual developmental plans for each one athlete in your team or squad (they need to feel there is a plan for them) – it motivates them to stay and to work hard
- Have a program of performance based on well-defined and mutually agreed goals
- Make athletes' committed to team's goals
- Create opportunities for development/advancement
- Involve them in the coaching process by
 - Asking them what do they need to be more effective
 - Asking them what will it make them more committed
- Communicate – make effort to continually exchange information
 - Asking them what do they need to be more effective
 - Asking them what will it make them more committed
- Listen and learn from your athletes.
- Need to be seen to take action, making changes to improve, prioritizing.
- Ensure responsibilities (roles and rules of expectations) are clearly defined.
- Spell the benefits of staying with you (coach).
- Make sure everyone knows what is valued and understood.
- Commitment and responsibility are associated – it is both coach and athlete's responsibility to make things better/resolve issues – this can be achieved with continuous dialogue and working for improvement.





3. Tips for building complementarity in the coach-athlete relationship

Complementarity reflects coaches and athletes' behaviors that are complementary or co-operative. Accordingly, there are two sets of complementary behaviors that coaches and athletes show:

(a) *corresponding* refers to the same behaviors that the coach and the athlete are expected to display in training and competition such as, responsiveness and openness (see Jowett & Ntoumanis 2004)

(b) *reciprocal* refers to different behaviors that the coach and the athlete are expected to display in training and competition such as, when the coach directs or instructs and the athlete follows or executes instructions in training (see Yang & Jowett, 2013).

These two sets of behaviors are thought to determine the efficient conduct of interactions between coaches and athletes.

- Work together through well-coordinated actions
- Lead/follow by example
- Improve communication
- “Simple communication” is best and more impactful
- Ensure all members in the team/squad know one another (group spirit)
- Clarify roles and reinforce rules
- Explain consequences if rules are not met
- Meet regularly
- Address issues quickly
- Be well prepared for training/competition (mentally and physically)
- Create an environment that is positive, engaging, motivating, creative and innovative
- Make an impression by showing your competency and expertise
- Create a friendly and supportive environment
- Provide structure, challenge and organization – instill a hard work ethos
- Show flexibility and adaptability (adopt a flexible management style)
- Display responsiveness

- Clarify and recap the goals each individual wants/needs to accomplish
- Promote individual goals
- Promote team goals and make sure everyone knows
- Celebrate every success (large and small)
- When “failure” – don’t see it as liability but as a learning opportunity
- Exhibit, and expect from each athlete, responsive, patient, determined, driven, ambitious, enthusiastic, disciplined and focused behaviors.

WHAT DO GREAT COACHES THINK, SAY AND DO

What do great coaches think, say and do?

- If plan A doesn't work what does plan B look like?
- How clear are you on your role?
- What strengths do you want to practice today?
- What do you expect and need from me as your coach?
- What does great look like for you?
- What sort of performance do you need to lay down today?
- What do you want to learn from today?
- What does great performance look like for this person?
- They work behind the scenes to always bring analysis and direction each day
- I believe in the performer
- They learn from their mistakes
- Performer first rather than ego
- They share their expertise with passion
- How do I need to be to help them most effectively?
- They behave in a way that constantly builds trust
- They create a positive motivational climate
- How are they going to be better off because I'm their coach?

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