

## **Bringing Creativity to the Coaching Session**

### **Reflections for the Modern Coach**

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“Coaches who outline players are a dime a dozen...The ones who win get inside their players and motivate.”

Vince Lombardi

Coaches are always learning throughout their lives. Coaching is not simply describing the technique of soccer and drilling the player to play it as other successful teams have played it. You must do much, much more besides in order to be a really good coach. My argument in this article is that creativity and coaching are sisters in blood. They cannot be separated. As coaches, we are looking to find something special in our players so that they can use it to become really great. However, that “special something” is no good if we stifle the natural creativity of our players.

Think of yourself as a parent for a second...parents love their children dearly and give them all the advantages in life so that they can succeed. However, after 18 years they want their children to be independent...or at the very least working towards independence. You cannot claim to be a successful parent if your 40-year old son cannot make a single decision without instructions and relies on you for guidance on everything in their life. That analogy applies to coaching. It should be an embarrassment to the coach if the player has to get on-field coaching in order to deal with every little problem they face.

Your role as a coach is to let the player fly, not to turn them into a carbon copy of yourself or even to spoon-feed them for the rest of their career. For this you need the players to be able to think and creatively solve any problems they find throughout their career.

Over the course of this article, we will be exploring how and why you should coach creativity. Hopefully you can learn something that will change your attitudes to coaching for the better. The starting point is always knowing what you are actually doing. It is the definition of coaching. For these we need to know what good coaching looks like as opposed to bad coaching.

#### **What is and What is Not Good Coaching?**

“Coaching is taking a player where they can’t take themselves.”

Jose Mourinho

Straight off, we must dispel the myth that somehow coaching is only for failing incompetent players. Even the biggest stars need coaching. The crucial difference is that between good and bad coaching. Traditional coaching was not necessarily bad...it was just inadequate. Players were taught to enact and re-enact the set pieces by the stars of the glorious past in the hope that they could replicate their glory.

Of course that worked until some teams from South America started doing things on the pitch that nobody expected or was trained for. That is when the old powerhouses such as the English soccer team were shown up. They could not cope with the unexpected. Their learning was not from adversity or problem-solving. Rather they were perfect enactors of a bygone era. In other words, they were prepared for a game that no longer existed.

So what do you need for the modern game? You need creative and dynamic players who are able to cope with change. They are confident and well-prepared such that they are able to deal with unfamiliar and challenging situations.

The next question you are probably asking this moment is: “How do I do that? There is not obvious and final answer. Rather we can learn from what has worked. You may want to make use of the 4Cs paradigm to aid in your process of becoming an effective coach.

### **The 4Cs of Great Coaching**

There are four core competencies that you need in order to coach skills effectively. They are collectively known as the “4Cs” and they can be broken down as follows:

**Communication:** Essentially this refers to the ability to transmit coherent messages which are understood by the other party. It is an important conduit through which the coach can understand what the player is feeling and thinking. It is also a conduit through which the coach can share their esoteric knowledge with their player. The coaching relationship must be underpinned by effective communication...otherwise it will break down.

**Collaboration:** New style coaching has moved away from a paradigm in which the coach is the know-it-all who hands down unanswerable instructions to the player. The new mode of coaching calls for a high level of collaboration between the two parties. They both want the player to succeed so they work together in order to make this happen.

**Critical Thinking:** Soccer and sports in general is recently being recognized as a thinking game. It is imperative that both the coach and the player reflect on the various concepts and notions within the game so that they understand the what, how and why of soccer. It is the same skillset that is important for developing strategy. The era of brainless gym rats is not appropriate for a sophisticated game like soccer.

**Creativity:** Perhaps this is one of the most important parts of the quartet of skills. Coaching is all about enhancing creativity. In fact, one of the criterion for identifying bad coaching is when the player remains dependent and unable to think for themselves. Modern soccer is riddled with new tricks and technical configurations. A player that is not creative is going to find it hard to cope, let alone succeed in the modern game.

The underlying principle is that the players, more often than not, are able to work things out for themselves once you give them the right support. Here is a checklist you might want to consider even as you coach:

## Great Coaches:

- Implement the 4 Cs including communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity
- Stand back and allow the player to learn as well as to perform
- Facilitate the learning process in any way that they can
- Engage in intelligent and critical questioning in order to stimulate interest
- Bring a sense of fun and spontaneity to the game

All these elements are designed to assist in natural skill development. We need to unpack what natural skill development really is as opposed to manufactured and temporary competencies.

## Difference Being a Rehearsed Skill Vs Creativity Problem Solving

“Coaches, I always knew how to play soccer, but you taught me how to win. Thank you.”  
Cristiano Ronaldo

Nature has provided us with some basic abilities including instinct and imagination. The problem with artificial skills acquisition is that it either suppresses or completely ignores these abilities. That means that the eventual product in terms of the player is only half-way of what they can really do. If you really want the zenith of a player’s capabilities, you need to focus on natural skill acquisition.

Natural skill acquisition is not easy even if it makes use of capabilities that are already present in the player. Initially the coach must have and maintain faith in the natural ability of the player not only to learn, but also to execute what they have learnt. If you are always worried about the capability of your player, that is when you pressurize them with endless drills. Trust their instinct and you are on your way to natural skill development.

Let us take the example of the example of the “*Cruyff Turn*”. That was a magnificent moment in soccer, full of magic and flair...but it was just for that moment. You can train the Cruyff Turn all you want, but if the player is not able to come up with solutions; they will be left helpless in the face of adversity. After all, virtually every soccer player worth their salt knows what the Cruyff Turn is. That means that they are prepared to defend against it and disrupt it. You will essentially be bringing something that is old and can easily be neutralized by a competent opponent.

Natural skill development looks for players to use the same creativity that was necessary to develop their own “Cruyff Turn” so that the player themselves comes up with new moves that are magical for the specific moments that they experience on the pitch. The advantage in this is that the tactics that they come up with will definitely be new. Nobody will know about them and they will not be able to defend against them.

The other benefit is that skills that are acquired naturally will last longer because they are born out of interest and natural talent. They are not forced. However, you must remember that this does not occur in a vacuum. Having understood the importance of natural skill acquisition, we might then want to consider how the coaches actually achieve this.

## **How do we coach this?**

It is all very well describing what coaching should ideally be or what it should achieve. However, it is equally important to explain how coaches can achieve this natural skill acquisition. A number of situations, tools and approaches have emerged in the methodology of sports coaching towards this end. These include the development of a supportive learning environment, use of play (unstructured and deliberate) and the careful design of a coaching program. Let us begin with the supportive environment because that is the context within which effective coaching takes place.

## **What is a Supportive Learning Environment?**

"A truly great coach does not tell people that they are a truly great coach."  
Ellis Byrd

In reality, the supportive learning environment consists of all those things that allow for creativity, learning and problem-solving to take place. It is a very different environment from that which is coercive and rehearsed. The coaching session is not about you the coach, but instead it is mainly about the player. One of the questions that routinely come up with coaches is: what should I do to achieve this level of effectiveness? The answer lies in the players themselves. They have all the natural talent and inspiration to do it as long as you are there to support them in that endeavor.

The supportive environment is one which accepts the player as they are and attempts to get the best out of them. It does not dictate but engages in consultation in order to ensure that learners are fully involved. In fact, some of the really good coaches actually set the agenda based on their observations during the warm-up sessions for each coaching unit. In that way, they are forced to engage with the player as an individual rather than coming in with a pre-set plan.

The player tends to have the answers but you have to coax them out of them through supportive and nurturing coaching. That leads us to the issue of excellence. The ultimate aim of developing a supportive environment is to be able to achieve excellence. Many coaches are looking for that elusive pathway so it might be a good idea to explore it further.

## **Optimal Learning Environment**

The Holy Grail for any coach is creating an optimal learning environment. These are some of the core characteristics of the ideal learning environment for coaching:

- It is safe and supportive
- It gives the player the freedom to be creative
- It accepts the player as they are
- It is respectful and considerate
- It fosters independence and self-direction
- It calls for responsibility and accountability
- It is challenging but also appropriately paced
- It is inclusive and participatory
- It involves lots and lots of fun

If your coaching sessions include all the above elements, then you are well on your way to success. In order to emphasize the importance of turning theory into practice, we might want to unpack one of the new theoretical paradigms in soccer coaching which is known as the Pathway to Excellence.

### **Pathway to Excellence**

If a club or coach would like to adopt a philosophy based on learning they should consider a Pathway to Excellence. The Pathway to Excellent (PTE) is a new type of coaching philosophy that is based on durable learning and player development. PTE focuses on learning that is based on context as well as playing the game. It differs from traditional coaching in as far as prioritizes the player and is centered around them as well as their needs. PTE makes use of a sound theoretical framework that includes aspects of pedagogy, bio-physiology, sports psychology and psychosocial functionality.

One of the unique features of PTE is the combination of solid theory with practice. Players are encouraged not only to conceive, understand and conceptualize; but also to execute. Match play and “live” conditions are an essential part of PTE. Before delving into the intricacies of PTE, it is important to define the key concepts that underpin the curriculum.

### **Concepts Underpinning PTE**

There are a number of concepts and paradigms that will be essential to opening up the full range of possibilities under PTE.

**Prioritization of Learning over Coaching:** One of the core advantages of PTE is the focus on learning. In order to achieve this, there is an implicit recognition of the multiplicity of teachers within the coaching program. These teachers actually include the learning because they participate in the design and delivery of the curriculum.

**Developing both the Child and Player:** The child-centered holistic approach that is favored by PTE has also shown that it is desirable to develop the child as well as the player. Coaches must understand that they are in a position of trust and responsibility in relation to the child as well as their parents or guardians. Therefore, coaches do not just impart knowledge, but also life values to the player. Coaches must lead and guide by example throughout the sessions.

This then leads us to the process of learning new techniques and resilient soccer skills. How are coaches supposed to figure that one out? Here are some pointers that you may want to consider as a coach.

### **Learning New Techniques and Skills**

According to Baechle et al. (2000), learning can be achieved through specific adaptation to the demands that are imposed on the learner. This means that problem-solving is at the heart of the learning process. The anatomical complexity of a child’s brain is a thing of wonder but a good

coach must try to deploy all the elements of that brain in order to bring about positive durable change in the child's abilities and competencies.

The challenge is to deploy intellectual-cognitive abilities to muscular performance. For this, the coach needs to make use of the billions of neurons that act as message transmitters in the human body. Hence, the development of the notion of SAID which can be broken down into its constituent parts as follows:

### **Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demands**

In other words, the problems and challenges are the pathways to effect learning. You learn by confronting and solving. The purpose of these obstacles can be summarized as follows:

“specific training elicits specific adaptations which create specific training effects and specific performance capabilities.”

Baechle *et al.* (2000)

### **Definition of Target Activities**

In order to achieve the learning that has been described above, there are a number of target activities that must be put in place. The challenge for the coach is in defining these activities and then preparing a plan that allows them to execute well. This calls for a process of going “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 2001, p. 168). That essentially means a back to basics approach that appreciates the interplay between these three fundamentals which determine the agenda for any given coaching session:

- **Specificity:** This means that you choose an activity that specifically targets the skill that you want to impart to the player.
- **Transfer:** This means that you select an activity that has the highest or most efficient capability of improving competition performance.
- **Loading:** This refers to the most effect and least harmful stressor (internal or external) that has to be applied to the athlete in order to elicit the learning response.

In reality good coaches sometimes change things round in order to achieve other identifiable objectives such as conditioning, longevity and the prevention of injury. You will need to manage your coaching sessions appropriately and that subject needs further exploration in the next section.

## Key Principles of Coaching Session Management

A number of key principles can be used to enable the coach in making decisions of how to run their session:

- **Nonlinearity:** Modern coaching emphasizes the use of non-linear approaches so as to better reflect the non-linearity of learning processes in sports (Araújo, et al., 2016). Training must be specific and bespoke to the sports and the player in order to be optimally effective.
- **Complexity:** PTE makes use of the Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework. This is an explicit acknowledgment of the complexity of not only the sport but also the training process and the player. The complex systems and sub-systems that make up the human body are coordinated and deployed for purposes of learning.
- **Pedagogy:** Coaching is a form of study and an act of teaching. This means that the environment and its participants must be configured in such a way as to support teaching, studying and learning. This role of coach-educator calls for moving beyond the old traditions of focusing on the “what” of players do. Instead it looks at the how with particular reference to desirable knowledge, attitudes and practices.

The use of small-sided games (SSGs) is an important tool when rebalancing coaching orthodoxy away from drills-based work such as the one advocated by Gladstone and Ericsson. For example, the 10,000-hour rule of intense practice would be complemented by a more qualitative experience for the player.

The traditional quantitative approach of reproductive practice has been successfully challenged by modern coaches. That does not mean that practice is abandoned. Practice is still very important, particularly for the younger players who are still becoming familiar with the basics of the sport. One compromise is to work on the ball skills on an individual basis and then game-related contextual learning should be prioritized during team development.

## Constraints-Led Practice Manipulation

Another trick that is used by coaches is that of constraint-led development that depends on practice manipulation from time to time in order to change the degree of difficulty accordingly. The *Constraints Theory* of Renshaw *et al.* (2010) provides some useful insights. The tenets of this theory have been historically applied to soccer coaches in constructs such as the “two-touch only” rule for practice. In this case the constraints are all the barriers that are deliberately placed in the way of the learner in order to aid the learning process (Passos, et al., 2008). They may trigger certain responses such as specific movements, self-organization, decision-making and mindful attention to the events taking place on the field. There are three types of constraints that can be used for players including:

- **Performer Constraints:** These are based on the individual player. The coach can manipulate the actions of the player in order to bring about the desired results. The SSG is a very good context within which to achieve this. They focus on motivation, fitness, technical skills, mentality or attitude.

- **Environmental Constraints:** These change the immediate and wider environment within which the player has to practice. For example, they can cover things like weather, lighting, field surfaces, field dimensions, space, spectators, noise and the presence of significant others.
- **Task Constraints:** In this case, the constraints focus on the goals or objectives of the game. Some of the examples of this type of constraint include the rules, equipment, opponents and even momentum.

Having discussed some of the ways in which you can achieve natural skill acquisition for your players, we then look at what coaches actually do in order to achieve this competency and effectiveness in their coaching sessions.

### **What can we do as a coach?**

At this stage, most coaches are looking at the specific relevance to their own practice and situations. Some of the key things you must do as a coach include: intelligent questioning, using a Plan-Do-Review process, moving away from prescribed answers and allowing players to be creative. We cannot obviously provide a prescription without actually sitting in on the session. However, you would do very well to take on board the following considerations:

What is your learner's paradigm? This is where you really think about what the learner enjoys doing and how they learn best. There should be an element of cognitive fidelity which implies that what they are learning makes sense to them and is actually sensible from their point of view. Things make sense when they reflect the reality of the world that the player will be dealing with on the pitch.

What is your esoteric knowledge? Think about the competences, experiences and skills that you have which may not be available to the player. This could be because they are too young or unexposed. The challenge for you is finding ways of sharing that knowledge and expertise in a way that does not damage or stifle the innate creativity of the player.

What resources do you have? It is always best to work within your context and with the resources that are readily available to you. Not having a state-of-the-art training facility is not a barrier to player development. Otherwise the likes of Ecuador and Brazil would not be winning great prizes on the world stage. Think about SSGs as a relatively convenient go-to solution when you want to facilitate learning.

These are underpinning principles that will guide your practice. However, we need to break them down into specific interventions. Let us begin with the notion of intelligent questioning in order to facilitate learning.



## **Socratic Questioning**

The Socratic method has been used in pedagogy for quite some time now and can also be applicable to coaching which is ultimately a learning process. The main underlying principle is that you question intelligently in order to elicit answers that inspire the learner to think more about their own thought processes as well as the concepts that they are learning. The main questions under this paradigm are as follows:

1. **Clarification of Thinking:** In this case the question is designed to clarify why and how they think the way that they do. For example, you might ask: “Why do you think regular training is important in soccer?”
2. **Challenging Assumptions:** This type of question is meant to inspire the learner to detail and explain their assumptions so that they can be scrutinized intelligently. For example, you might ask: “Why do you think that those who do not do drills regularly will not do well in their games on the pitch?”
3. **Evidence Gathering:** These questions seek to focus the arguments that the learner makes to only those that are provable by virtue of empirical evidence. For example, you might ask: “On what basis do you state that only physically fit players can perform well in soccer?”
4. **Alternative Perspectives:** In this case, the question is designed to inspire the learner to think more about how alternative points of view might be and their validity. For example, you might ask: “Are there any alternative counterarguments to the idea that conditioning is essential for soccer performance?”
5. **Implications and Consequences:** These questions are designed to inspire the learner to think about the logical conclusions of their arguments and perspectives. For example, you might ask: “What would happen if a player focused on drills alone when preparing for a soccer match?”
6. **Questioning the Question:** This is the final stage in which the learner begins to consider the underpinning principles that drive the questions being asked. For example, you may ask: “Why do you think I have been asking all these questions?”

The questions are necessarily penetrating and provocative so that they can force the learner to think instead of merely taking on any knowledge that is given to them. This is also an important tool for building expertise and accuracy in a particular field or subject area. As the players continue thinking logically, they will eventually come to the right answers. They will also be able to challenge and correct any misconceptions that they have about a given problem or solution.

Nevertheless, questioning is not enough without action. This leads us to the Plan-Do-Review.

## **Plan-Do-Review**

The Plan-Do-Review cycle is an important tool for structuring the learning process. As a coach, you might consider this to be an easy option for ensuring that you cover all the things that you need to cover while at the same time giving the player a chance to participate in the design and implementation of their learning. The sequence can be broken down as follows:

- **Plan:** This always starts with a detailed assessment of the situation in terms of the perspectives of the main stakeholders (parents, learners, coach and management) with regards to a possible learning program. The coach will also look at the current achievement or attainment levels of the learner so that they can be compared to other people in the same group or category and national minimum standards. This will facilitate when designing an intervention that is meant to cover the gaps. The plan will set out long term goals and short term objectives for the coaching session or program.
- **Do:** This is the action part in which the player or learner is supposed to be dominant. The player needs to know what they are supposed to do it before they actually perform. That means involving them in the planning process so that they are aware of the gaps that they have and what they need to do in order to achieve them. A good coach gives the player an opportunity to perform rather than micro-managing them at every turn. The things that they do must be differentiated and personalized so that they meet the individual needs of the players. Encourage as much interaction and communication as possible.
- **Review:** This is the final part where the coach (working together with the player and other significant stakeholders) look at what has been done and how far it has met the specific objectives that were set out at the beginning. The review process is not an opportunity to engage in negative judgements. Rather it is an opportunity for further learning and reconfiguring the program so that it can better fit the objectives that were set out during the plan. The outcomes of the review can help you plan once more, hence beginning the cycle from anew.

Throughout this process, the coach must ensure that they are open to concepts and feedback. It is the feedback loop that we have already talked about previously. If the coach is a dictator with no input from the player, chances are that the players will not own the coaching. They will perceive it to be a chore that must be avoided at all costs. It is therefore important to understand what it means to be amenable to new ideas.

### **Being Open to New Answers and Solutions**

Coaching operates within a system of internal and external resources. Each of these systems and subsystems has a recognizable boundary, input, throughput and output. Insular coaches operate within the context of a closed system. This will eventually lead to what is known as entropy, where the system has used up all its information and is unable to process anything else. This stage is the bankruptcy of ideas that can befall the most conservative coaches. Some of the best ideas can come from the players themselves, not least because it is the players that actually make use of the body and have to perform out there on the pitch. Besides, being open to new ideas fosters the kind of creativity that we are looking for in modern coaching. It is all tied in with the idea that players should be allowed to be creative.

### **Allowing Players to be Creative**

Modern coaching emphasizes creativity because it is precisely what is required in order to deal with unexpected situations. Creativity is the ability to come up with appropriate and effective solutions to unexpected problems. It means thinking imaginatively and being able to organize your ideas in such a way that they are relevant to the problem that you are facing. The problem with

conservative coaching is that it tends to emphasize control over creativity. That means that drills are used in order to focus the players' energies towards specific targets that are set out by the coach. That is not what we are looking for in modern coaching. Instead we need players that can think on their feet and deal with any adversity that comes their way.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is worth noting that although this article may appear to be advocating for radical changes to the coaching approaches; many of the things that it talks about have been done before. The idea that you “learn through doing” is not a radical concept. In fact, it has underpinned practice and fieldwork even in the most academic disciplines. The main take home from this article is that soccer is much more than doing a set of drills as many times as possible. It is about thinking, creativity, imagination, collaboration, communication, style, individuality and of course...lots of fun.

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