



# Coach-player communication: What, why, when and how?

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reviews the critical skill of communication and addresses the what, why, when and how of effective communication. Using the illustration of Andy Murray and his previous coach, Ivan Lendl, this paper proposes that coaches can take a proactive approach to develop and nurture effective communication that leads to mutually rewarding outcomes for coach and player.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*"He's made me learn more from the losses that I've had than maybe I did in the past. I think he's always been very honest with me. He's always told me exactly what he thought. And in tennis, it's not always that easy to do in a player/coach relationship. The player is sometimes the one in charge. I think sometimes coaches are not always that comfortable doing that. But he's been extremely honest with me. If I work hard, he's happy. If I don't, he's disappointed, and he'll tell me. And, yeah, when I've lost matches, last year after the final he told me he was proud of the way I played because I went for it when I had chances. It was the first time I played a match in a Grand Slam final like that. He's got my mentality slightly different going into those sorts of matches."* (Andy Murray about his coach, Ivan Lendl, 2013).



After capturing the 2013 Wimbledon Men's Singles Championship Andy Murray paid glowing tribute to his then-current coach, Ivan Lendl, as an outstanding mentor and communicator. It was evident that their professional relationship was based on respect and trust. It was a relationship in which the coach was honest and acknowledged his player's strengths, achievements and efforts. This illustration of a coach-player relationship serves as a reminder to coaches that to succeed in their profession they must be effective communicators. However, merely reminding a coach

to '*communicate effectively*' is like a school teacher telling a student to study for a test without providing guidance as to how and what to study. To be an effective communicator, a coach must have a full and clear understanding of the objective of communication, what should be communicated and how and when to best do so. These issues relating to the '*what*', '*why*', '*when*' and '*how*' of effective communication will now be explored together with some tips for coaches who are keen to optimise this critical skill.

## COMMUNICATION DEFINED

'Communication' is "a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the transmission or exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, or information through verbal and non-verbal channels" (Yukekson, 2010, p.187). Building on this definition, effective communication involves mutual sharing and understanding. It is a dynamic two-way process when individuals connect in a meaningful way. As such, effective communication between a coach and player goes beyond merely talking and listening. Rather, it implies that the challenge for a coach is to ensure that their player feels like the only, or the most important, person in the world!

## Purpose of communication

Coaches communicate with players for a number of reasons (Weinberg & Gould, 2003) including to:

- Persuade
- Evaluate
- Inform
- Motivate and inspire
- Solve problems

Several purposes may be involved in any single communication. For example, a coach may use motivation and persuasion to convince a training squad as to the benefits of a new program and then inform them of the program's details.

## Types of communication

Communication includes not only verbal (spoken or written) content but also nonverbal cues known as body language (e.g., facial expressions, body positioning, signals, gestures, voice intonations etc.). It is estimated that as much as 50% to 70% of all communication is nonverbal (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). This estimate has significant implications for coaches who may be unaware, or forgetful, of the information they are imparting with facial expressions, hand gestures and tone of voice for

example. There is good reason for the well-known adages, “*it’s not what you say but how you say it*” and “*a picture tells a thousand words*”!

#### When and where to communicate

Interestingly, communication is always occurring. As explained by Burke (2010), “*We cannot not communicate. Whether or not we speak, gesture, acknowledge others, or return emails and text messages, we are communicating*” (p. 315). Many communication avenues are now options for coaches and players (e.g., mobile phone, email, instant and text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, blogs etc.). One possible drawback of engaging in the current technological communication boom is that coaches are ‘on call’ 24 hours!

Understanding a player’s personality and circumstances can guide a coach as to when, and where, coaches and players might exchange thoughts, advice and/or feedback. As a general guide, feedback is best provided at the time or shortly after an action, event or activity (Burke, 2010). However, some players prefer to take time out after a difficult loss or training incident/session and, for these players, delaying constructive feedback from the coach may be a sound approach. In terms of where to communicate, it is generally advisable to seek face-to-face contact in a quiet place away from distractions (Anshel, 2003). This however will depend on the circumstances at the time.

#### How to communicate effectively

A central principle of effective communication is to seek first to understand the individual, then seek to be understood (Covey, 1990). To this end, here are some general suggestions for coaches:

- Devote time to know to get to know a player – gain sufficient information (e.g., tennis background and goals) to enable a sound understanding of that player’s perspective on learning the game. Listen attentively to what a player wants and his/her issues and suggestions.
- ‘*Be present*’ at all times and give a player your full attention. This involves direct eye-to-eye contact if in the presence of a player.
- Treat each player as unique - no two players are the same (e.g., different reasons for playing the game, different personalities and abilities). Tailor your approach to the individual’s need(s) but remember that prioritising a player’s well-being and enjoyment of the game should be common to all players.
- Take a genuine interest in a player and how you can best help, guide and mentor them. Adopt a ‘*partnership*’ approach where both the coach and player build on each other’s strengths towards a mutually agreed goal.
- Adopt an ‘*open door*’ policy but also proactively contact a player for discussions and, particularly, if you suspect there are pressing or outstanding issues.
- Show and share your passion for the game – be enthusiastic but realistic, practical and honest in what you say and do. Be a role model and mentor and lead by exemplary actions. Be positive and provide constructive comments and feedback highlighting what is being achieved and what might still be possible for a player to achieve.
- Know your trade - keep updated with professional development activities and be clear and fully conversant with what you want to share with a player. Clear thoughts make for clear messages!
- Be mindful that, to a large extent, coaches set the tone, atmosphere and environment. Coaching needs to be a place where a player wants to be and feels comfortable, appreciated and respected. Do not take this responsibility lightly but rather

ensure your engagement with a player and their support group (e.g., parents, partners) is of the highest standard.

- As a general guide, treat each player in a manner that you would like them to treat you. A good sense of humour and a smile generally go a long way!

Interested coaches may wish to refer to (Egan, 2010), (Murphy and Murphy, 2010) or (Young, 2006) for further suggestions for improving one’s use of the ‘*micro skills*’ of communication (e.g., active listening, paraphrasing, open-ended questioning, giving feedback etc.).

#### CONCLUSIONS

There are different ‘coaching styles’ but all good coaches are effective communicators who adopt a range of strategies – developing mutual trust, empathy and understanding, actively listening, providing positive feedback and being honest and consistent – that keep players optimally engaged in the game. It is not an easy task for any coach but one that undoubtedly requires a coach’s on-going full attention and commitment. The reward for coaches and players who consistently communicate effectively is knowing that, together, they have both achieved something very special. Just ask Andy Murray and Ivan Lendl and also the tennis community who witnessed Murray’s memorable 2013 Wimbledon triumph.



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