

The tennis coach as a leader

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ABSTRACT

Tennis coaches are leaders! Success as a tennis coach involves far more than simply hitting balls over a net daily as the role involves leading diverse stakeholders such as club managers, parents, committees, and most importantly players. The development of leadership skills has received growing interest in recent years, and it is widely accepted that there is a link between leadership skills and corporate success. Sports researchers have recognised the ecological system that surrounds an athlete and the multiple stakeholders connected to their development. However, little is known about how the tennis coach should be educated and prepared to deal with the coach's leadership demands, and the softer skills needed to become a more effective sports leader. The aim of this article is to provide tennis coaches with a brief context surrounding the necessity for leadership skills as a tennis coach. Secondly, the article provides a three-step process based on self-reflection and self-awareness to help coaches consider their individual leadership development.

Key words: Tennis, coaching, leadership, behaviour.

Received: 27 February 2023

Accepted: 30 March 2023

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of tennis, coaching is often viewed as a one-on-one relationship between a coach and a player. However, the reality is that effective coaching extends far beyond the player and involves managing a complex web of stakeholders, including parents, other coaches, sponsors, agents, schoolteachers and many more. In this research article, we discuss the multifaceted nature of tennis coaching and how managing stakeholders is an essential aspect of effective coaching. We will examine the different types of stakeholders involved in the coaching process and their various needs and expectations. Ultimately, our goal is to highlight the importance of stakeholder management in tennis coaching and provide practical guidance for coaches seeking to develop their leadership skills in this critical area. Whether you are a seasoned coach or a new one, this paper will provide valuable insights for coaches on how to manage the many stakeholders such as other coaches (in and outside your program), parents of your athletes and ultimately help players achieve their goals on and off the court.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Talent development (TD) is "a multi-faceted process of optimally nurturing athletes over time within a sport-system" Cobley et al., (2001, p.8) defined. The reference to the "sport system" recognises the significant role of various macro, meso, and micro factors that influence the development of athletes. Researchers have recognised the importance of the environment and contextual influences on overall talent development (e.g., Gledhill et al., 2017; Henriksen et al., 2010). Rather than focusing on methods of developing the individual themselves, Henriksen et al. (2010) proposed a more holistic ecological approach to talent development, shifting the



Figure 1. Sample adapted tennis ecological system (adapted from Henriksen, 2010).

emphasis from the athlete themselves to the environment in which they develop. This expansion of the literature by Henriksen was centred on seminal work by Bronfenbrenner (1977, p.3), who introduced the ecological environment on child development (non-sport specific). Bronfenbrenner described the ecological system as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls. At the core of this immediate setting is the developing person, or in a sports context, the athlete. Bronfenbrenner also hypothesised that a person's development is profoundly affected by events occurring in settings where the person is not even present. Indeed, these somewhat invisible macro-level factors contribute significantly to sporting success (e.g. De Bosscher et al., 2006; De Bosscher et al., 2003, Henriksen et al. 2011).

These macro-level influences include environmental factors such as national culture, general sporting culture, and the specific sport (Henriksen et al. 2010). Every context is different; they all have their own unique intrigues that make it highly unlikely that a copy and paste approach can apply in TD (Green & Oakley, 2001; De Bosscher et al., 2006; Bosscher et al., 2007). Therefore, coaches must adapt to these many characteristics and stakeholders.

ROLE OF THE TALENT DEVELOPMENT COACH

Lyle (2002, p.40) described coaching practice as the full range of behaviours, activities, interactions, processes, individual and organisational functions that result from the operationalisation of the coaching role and the coaching process. In tennis, a talent development coach is responsible for identifying and nurturing talented players and guiding them through the various stages of their athletic careers. These coaches typically start off work with individuals and groups of players providing direct intervention to develop their technical, tactical, physical, and mental skills. As players progress through the ranks, coaches must offer intervention support off the court as well as the normal day to day coaching. This intervention support includes roles such as planning sessions, annual planning, and general administration responsibilities. As the player/players develops further the coach must provide constraint management. This involves managing situational factors like support services, schedules, funding and third parties such as sparring partners. Finally, the coach must manage strategic operations such as strategic planning, monitoring, judgment regarding inputs. Therefore, in addition to their technical expertise, TD coaches in tennis must possess strong communication, interpersonal skills and particularly leadership skills.

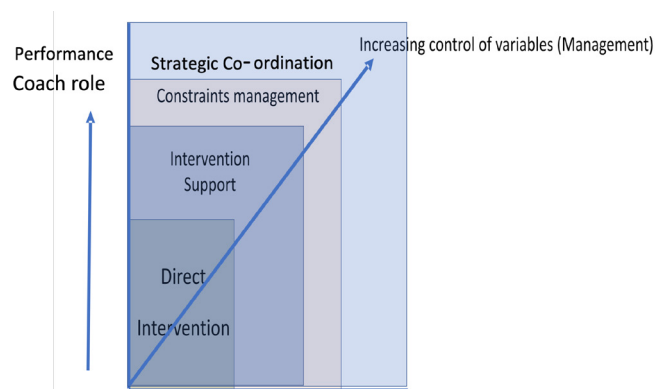


Figure 2. Progressive role of the TD coach (Lyle, 2002, p.64).

THE COACH AS A LEADER

There are various definitions of leadership, but one widely accepted definition comes from John C. Maxwell, a leadership expert and author, Maxwell defines leadership as "influence - nothing more, nothing less." This definition is particularly relevant to coaches within TD system where they must influence so many other important stakeholders. Coaches must develop a broader set of skills beyond simply technical expertise. They must be able to communicate effectively with athletes, influence parents, and other stakeholders, manage team dynamics and interpersonal relationships, and provide guidance and support to athletes in both their athletic and personal lives. Overall, the role of coaches in the ecological context of tennis is multifaceted and constantly

evolving. Effective coaches must be able to adapt to changing circumstances, contexts, and stakeholders, and provide leadership and mentorship to athletes as they progress and develop.

STYLE OF LEADERSHIPS

It is important to know your leadership style because it can impact the way you lead and influence others. Understanding your leadership style can help you identify your strengths and weaknesses as a leader, which can assist in developing strategies to improve leadership effectiveness. Daniel Goleman, a well-known author, and psychologist proposed six different leadership styles in his article "Leadership That Gets Results" based on his research on emotional intelligence and leadership. Here are the six styles (Goleman, 2017):

Coercive

This style involves demanding immediate compliance and punishing those who do not meet expectations. It can be effective in times of crisis but can also create a negative environment. For example, in tennis this could mean blaming support staff, or players for lack of results.

Authoritative

This style involves setting a clear vision and goals, inspiring and motivating people to achieve those goals. It works well in times of change and uncertainty. For example, if the player is achieving poor results and the coach decides to adapt goals and re-set the program.

Affiliative

This style involves creating a positive work environment and building strong relationships between people. It can be effective in increasing morale and fostering teamwork. For example, in tennis this style may mean creating closer relationships with parents, other key stakeholders and working together towards a goal.

Democratic

This style involves involving people in the decision-making process and seeking their input and feedback. It can lead to more creative solutions and increased engagement. For example, in tennis asking assistant coaches, sparring, science support for input regarding the athlete's plan.

Pacesetting

This style involves setting high expectations for people and leading by example. It can be effective in driving high performance but can also lead to burnout and high turnover rates. For example, in tennis, this could mean setting very high goals for staff and coaches that mean increasing workloads both on and off the court.

Coaching

This style involves developing people through ongoing feedback, mentoring, and coaching. It can be effective in increasing people's skill sets and motivation. For example, in a tennis TD environment, this could involve educating younger coaches, parents and other key stakeholders. Acting as a support rather than dictating the role of support staff.

SO WHICH STYLE SHOULD I USE?

When it comes to leadership styles, certain styles may be more suitable in certain situations depending on the context. The key is to be able to flex your style depending on the context. Here are some examples of the styles within a tennis context.

Scenario 1

Ann is a new coach in my program, she has just qualified but has little on court practical experience. In this scenario I may choose to have a less democratic and more authoritative style in the beginning until the new coach becomes more familiar within the environment. For example, I may show Ann exactly what is needed to warm up the athletes and teach the shots, with the intention of increasing responsibility with time.

Scenario 2

I am sitting on court with my athlete during a match, my player John is a set down seems lethargic and uninterested. Therefore, I am looking for an immediate reaction, so I could use a pacesetter style "come on, we John have higher standards than that, fight", or "John this is not acceptable, I want more than this from you".

Scenario 3

Paul is a pushy parent! He arrives at my office and claims his Johnny is better than all the other players and should be in the best group! The natural tendency can be to lose the cool and end up in a tetchy conversation. However, in this scenario, letting the parent vent and using a more affiliative approach may prove more productive. For example, we both want the best for Johnny, we both have the same goal, we need to work as team etc.

Scenario 4

Judy is a new young coach that has just started in my program, she arrives onto the court looking for his session plan for today's groups. Rather than providing her with the weekly

plan, I may decide to use the coaching style. Judy, this week I would you like you to arrange the warmup part of the session, I will act as an observer and at the end of the session I will provide you with feedback".

Scenario 5

I know that I need to raise the standards of our program. At the Friday morning meeting, I explain this to the coaching team. Rather than telling them what I want to do, I take the following approach. Can everyone write down how they feel we can improve? Can you present this back to the group? This Democratic style approach gains greater buy in and is more likely to achieve higher results.

TO BECOME A BETTER SPORT LEADER "KNOW THYSELF".

Leadership books and articles are plentiful and, in many cases, provide useful tips for becoming a better leader mostly within the corporate world. Having a greater understanding of the leadership styles and theory alone will not necessarily help you to become a better leader. Becoming a better leader is a personal journey that requires self-reflection, introspection, and a willingness to make changes. The first step is to understand that Leadership development is not one size fits all and starts with a greater understanding of 'self'. "Know thyself" is an Ancient Greek aphorism that means "know thy measure". According to the Greek writer Pausanias, it was the first of three Delphic maxims inscribed in the courtyard of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. When it comes to leading players, coaches, parents within a sports system, firstly, it helps to have a greater self-awareness and in particular clarity of personal strengths and weaknesses. Like coaching itself, leadership is an ongoing process in which we are constantly evolving with experience, these three steps provide a useful guide to begin this personal journey.

How do I currently lead?

What are my strengths and weaknesses as a leader? (Reflect on use of styles, skills, and behaviours). This step is useful

Style	Coercive	Authoritative	Affiliative	Democratic	Pacesetter	Coaching
•The leader's modus operandi	•Demands immediate compliance	•Mobilizes people toward a vision	•Creates harmony and builds emotional bonds	•Forges consensus through participation	•Sets high standards for performance	•Develops people for the future
•The style in a phrase	•"Do what I tell you."	•"Come with me."	•"People come first."	•"What do you think"	•"Do as I do, now."	•"Try this."
•Underlying emotional intelligence competencies	•Drive to achieve, initiative, self-control	•Self confidence, empathy, change catalyst	•Empathy, building relationships, communication	•Collaboration, team-leadership, communication	•Conscientiousness, drive to achieve, initiative	•Developing others, empathy, self-awareness
•When the style works best	•In a crisis, to kick start a turnaround, or with problem employees	•When changes require a new vision, or when a clear direction is needed	•To heal rifts in a team or to motivate people during stressful circumstances	•To build buy-in or consensus or get input from valuable employees	•To get quick results from a highly motivated and competent team	•To help an employee improve performance or develop long-term strengths
•Overall impact on climate	•Negative	•Most strongly positive	•Positive	•Positives	•Negative	•Positive

Figure 3. Leadership styles (Goleman, 2017).

but only as a steppingstone. Seek feedback: Ask for feedback from your team members, players, and parents. This helps you understand how others perceive your leadership and identify areas for improvement. Consider that some colleagues may not feel comfortable providing honest feedback so using a confidential analysis may be a more useful strategy.

Some useful reflection questions.

Why would someone want to be led by me?

Who do I admire as a leader? What qualities do I like about them?

What are my personal values? Do they align with my leadership style?

Find a trusted mentor or executive coach.

The critical piece is to have a trusted mentor or executive coach to work on during the behavioural change process. Awareness alone will not guarantee change and setting goals, just like we would with our players, is a useful strategy when making changes within our leadership skills. The Prochaska model (Prochaska et al, 2015, pp 98-99) of behavioural change provides an interesting insight into how to go about behavioural change. They identify the steps of behavioural change as pre-contemplation, contemplation, determination, action and maintenance phases of behavioural change. Even though this model is portrayed as linear in nature, change is often a process of forward and backwards steps.



Figure 4. The stages of behavioural change (Prochaska et al, 2015).

Regular reflection, re – asses' goals

Regularly reflect and measure the progress on your personal leadership goals. In our busy coaching lives this can be difficult, but it is amazing the difference a few minutes each day can make. Keep a diary to log situations or daily happenings can be extremely useful during conversations with your mentor or coach. For example,

Which styles of leadership did I use today?

If I was in the same situation again, would I do the same thing?

If no, why not?

Finally, after a period of months, compare the thoughts of some people that participated in the original self-evaluation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, effective leadership is crucial in any organisation and tennis coaching is no different. The role of a tennis coach evolves with the development of the athlete and as coaches we need to prepare ourselves for this evolution. A good leader can inspire and motivate, while a poor leader can demotivate and demoralise. Leadership is not just about being in charge; there are many styles, it's about empowering others to achieve those goals. Leadership is not a one-size-fits-all, and different situations may require different leadership styles. A great leader knows how to adapt their style to fit the needs of the people around them. Finally, leadership is a continuous learning process. No one is born a great leader, and even the best leaders must constantly work and reflect on developing their skills and knowledge. By seeking feedback, been self-aware, and seeking out new opportunities for growth, leaders can continue to improve and inspire people around them to achieve greatness. Enjoy the journey and remember, the answers to becoming a better sport leader are not on google, they are within!

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS WITHIN YOUR COACHING PROGRAM

- Have an affiliative approach to working with parents by building strong relationships. Meet the parents on a regular basis to explain what and why you are focusing on within your program. Invite them to attend sessions, explain the rationale behind the type of exercises you are choosing on court.
- Involve your athletes in the decision-making process as much as possible. This Democratic style approach fosters buy in, gains trust and insures alignment of goals.
- Don't just coach the players, coach and mentor each other! Take the time to give and provide constructive feedback to and from the other coaches in your program.
- Regularly communicate with the people off the court! Make a what's app group that includes all key stakeholders that surround your players, for example, parents, physical trainer, sparring partners etc.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest and that he did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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