

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online

Synergistic Communication: A Collaborative Discovery with Female Coaches

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Since our first issue in November 2000, the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* has consistently focussed on achieving certain benchmarks:

- Speaking up with a strong and positive voice for Canada’s women coaches. ✓
- Spotlighting the unique and daunting challenges women coaches face day to day. ✓
- Drawing realistic and accurate portrayals of what the coaching profession can and should be for women. ✓
- Tackling pressing and systemic issues. ✓
- Addressing inequities and offering workable solutions that can lead to professional success. ✓
- Breaking new ground with each article. ✓

In their instructive article, authors Elaine Cook and Gretchen Kerr successfully hit a number of the Journal benchmarks. Notably, they break new ground in introducing a provocative concept that challenges coaches to step outside traditional coaching methodology and explore what they call “synergistic communication”. In the coaching context, this means the communication of shared (or synergistic) ideas and feelings with the athlete. According to the authors, synergistic communication “has the potential to positively and dramatically influence coach education and development;” surely this is a desirable outcome for coaches and their athletes.

As always, the *Journal* welcomes readers’ feedback. - Sheila Robertson, *Journal* editor

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Synergistic Communication: A Collaborative Discovery with Female Coaches

By Elaine Cook and Gretchen Kerr

This story begins with an action research intervention study, which involved working alongside two female coaches of a female interuniversity sport team for an entire year. The goal of the intervention was to teach the coaches communication skills that would improve the personal and performance development of the players and themselves. What emerged from this study has the potential to positively and dramatically influence coach education and development. The findings revealed how coaches' roles, or what we call their 'way of being', are dramatically influenced by particular discourses that are normalized in sport culture. Their 'way of being' and these powerful discourses strongly affect coach behaviour and were challenged by the competing discourses introduced through the intervention.

In this research, a model of synergistic coaching was implemented. Synergistic coaching evolved from a solution-focused coaching model, which has its origins in humanistic psychology and uses language to enhance self-awareness, self-perception, positive emotions, autonomy, agency*, and goal striving. Most noteworthy perhaps is the fundamental principle of solution-focused coaching: the coach leads from behind. This principle turns upside down our current model where the coach is the expert and athletes are docile. Instead, coaches lead with questions and approach problems or challenges with curiosity and, significantly, they believe that athletes have the innate wisdom, experience, strengths, and resources to solve their own problems.

Essentially, a synergistic coach aims to discover and uncover the athletes' wholeness since it is every human being's purpose to become their whole best self. A synergistic coach must learn to nurture, respect, and strengthen that wholeness. One way involves complimenting – a fundamental solution-focused practice. Every day, athletes need to hear or learn something that is true about them, something the coach appreciated about them. If they failed, they need to know how much their effort was recognized; if they made mistakes, they need to know their risk-taking was appreciated. A synergistic coach recognizes that there is no such thing as a problem that is such one hundred percent of the time. There are always exceptions and coaches ask questions at those times because such questions improve coping, resilience, and critical thinking.

Synergistic coaches ensure that their athletes know they are already enough as human beings. Their athletes' self-worth is not contingent on approval or wins. When athletes' wholeness is facilitated, they perform from a deep, safe place of self-efficacy and agency. When diminished, they function below a level of wholeness that can incite fear, anxiety, depression, and alienation. Dr. Daniel Siegel calls this a no-brain state, where our nervous system puts us into a reactive frame of mind that prevents us from processing information effectively, which in turn prevents us from being able to follow directions and make good decisions. Synergistic coaches are aware of their power with regard to the hidden wholeness of their athletes and create the conditions that enable the athletes to make their own discoveries. Through the art of question asking, key words, and solution-focused talk, synergistic communication helps coaches to develop the eyes to see and the ears to hear through an approach known as E.A.R.S.: *elicit, amplify and reinforce, strengths and resources.*

**Agency in this context means the athlete's ability to advocate for themselves*

Significantly, the need for such an approach couldn't be more apparent as researchers recently presented results of a study indicating that 67% of current national team athletes and 76% of

retired national team athletes have experienced at least one instance of harm, with coaches being the most prevalent source of that harm, especially psychological harm. Most frequently reported psychologically harmful behaviours included being criticized in an angry manner, receiving demeaning or humiliating comments, and being criticized as a person.

In preparation for the study, discourses with a focus on sport were studied. Discourses are systematized, cultural communicative practices that, through their strength and prevalence, influence behaviour because they determine what matters within social systems and represent whose voice is valued within particular cultures. Analyzing discourse allows us to illuminate behaviours and practices that may contribute to harmful, or even abusive, systems. One dominant discourse is that of the power, privilege, and authority of the coach. In this discourse, coach power and authority are normalized, and a culture is reinforced that expects athletes to conform, be the recipients of expert knowledge, be compliant, and even experience this as ‘fun’.

Limiting discourse about a phenomenon to one language, one narrative, or one way of talking about ourselves can be socially and culturally dangerous. Without meaningful reflection and critique, single discourses can perpetuate faulty assumptions, myths, bad ideas, and moral compromises. Sport tends to celebrate heroic stories and winner-focused cultures without acknowledgement or recognition of the darker sides of humanity. The result is a depleted vocabulary of morality and worth. Most significantly, it is the unreflective use of language, language that camouflages the real problem, which is most problematic. We have come to believe that sport is impoverished as a result of entrenched narratives and a limited vocabulary. However, we also believe that coaches are the key to an enrichment of the sport narrative.

To further explore discourses, media sources and related literature were reviewed along with an in-depth analysis of themes in *Sum It Up: A Thousand and Ninety-Eight Victories, a Couple of Irrelevant Losses, and a Life in Perspective* by Pat Summitt, the winningest and highly revered female basketball coach of an American Division One college. Five predominant discourses were discovered: the hard work theme (HWT); the great sport myth theme (GSMT); the coach as expert theme (CET); the ends justify the means theme (EJMT); and good players want this theme (GPWT).

The hard work theme (HWT). This was one of two themes that included a sub-theme: the tough coach theme (TCT). The HWT claims that today’s athletes are softer, less respectful, and less tough mentally than those of previous generations; subsequently, the lessons of a ‘tough’ coach are considered valuable and many proponents believe a tough coach prepares athletes for life.

The great sport myth theme (GSMT). From the media — newspapers, social media, websites, blogs — perspective, this theme was produced by the maxim that un-coachable kids become unemployable adults. In academic literature, the GSMT speaks to the inherent purity and goodness of sport and the inevitability that it fosters positive personal and community development.

The end justifies the means theme (EJMT). This theme expresses the belief that it is essentially a coach’s job to get the most out of her athletes and by whatever means necessary to

achieve those ends. In the literature, EJMT is revealed through the sub-theme of disciplinary power, which often construes the athlete as docile.

The coach as expert theme (CET). In all circumstances, coaches are the technological and psychological experts. The coach must know what athletes need and how far to push them. It is the coach's job to break the players down and to build them up again. In the media, this theme is portrayed as the belief that players (or parents) should never question or challenge the coach. Similarly, in related literature, the coach is the expert while the players are the recipients of their expertise.

Good players want this (GPWT). This was the most surprising theme and the most consistent across media, literature, and Summits. It implies that athletes must be positively compliant, that athletes don't really know what they want or what they are capable of, and that there are three types of athletes: excellent, good, and rejects. From the media, we learn that good athletes want to be coached and great players want to be told the truth. Athletes should also accept criticism with alacrity and want to be challenged because good athletes accept coach authority and are therefore more greatly valued by the coach; there is also a positive bias toward athletes who are submissive; the more talented the athlete, the tougher they are expected to be.

Implementing a synergistic coaching model

The study involved working closely with two coaches throughout a year-long season to implement a synergistic coaching model. At its most basic function, coaching involves communication. As such, much of the work involved helping the coaches use solution-focused communication with their athletes. Pre-season, a series of six two-hour learning seminars were conducted. During the season, that learning was supported by weekly meetings with the coaches to discuss their experiences and best practices. Bi-monthly reflections were also involved. Additionally, audio recordings of pre-game, half-time, and post-game audio recordings were made and analysed for communication patterns.

This work with the coaches is part of a dramatic story, with a jagged profile of successes, near successes, and failures; but the arc, we feel, is positive because there were moments of illumination, particularly for the athletes who refined their self-reflection and agency skills. Despite the athletes' success, however, it became apparent that the coaches need a new and enlarged vocabulary which enables conversations that expand the strengths and resources of athletes.

Our findings revealed that the coaches' abilities to revise their communication approaches was strongly influenced by their 'way of being'. The 'way of being' is their autobiographical life scripts or personal narratives which create a sense of self that is consistent across time. Through analysis of notes, observations, meetings, retreats, emails, texts, and pre-game, half-time, and post-game audio recordings over the course of an **entire season**, we discovered that the five discourse themes act as master narratives for coaches and that there is a mutual reinforcement between their personal narratives and these master narratives. As a result of how deeply the self is rooted in this way of being, behaviour change that is often sought as an outcome of coach education and development is unsuccessful. The principles introduced through education and development often conflict with coaches' 'way of being' and the master narratives of sport,

creating dissonance or competing discourses. We found that it wasn't until the coaches were able to resolve the conflict between the intervention model and their 'way of being' that a shift occurred, and they were able to more fully integrate the skills into practice. For example, early in the season the head coach said, "This stuff isn't working ... it's too positive. I need to be able to coach hard!", reflecting a belief that reinforces the tough coach theme. However, by season's end, she felt synergistic coaching had become second nature. Our observations indicated that for the other coach, change was limited. Despite the dedication of significant effort and many instances of synergistic coaching, her authoritarian coaching patterns returned under periods of high stress, highlighting the power of her 'way of being'.

For the athletes, the results of the intervention were far more positive. By changing how the coaches engaged in conversations with them, the nature of their conversations changed. In the highly competitive sport context, in which power and authority is hierarchical and compliance of athletes is highly valued, conversations are typically parent-child in nature. As the language tools and principles associated with synergistic coaching, which is characterized by questioning rather than directives and is respectful in its assumptions that the individual (or team) has the capacity to solve their own problems inherently, an adult-adult manner of communication is promoted. As a result of thinking deeply about the questions posed, the athlete's critical thinking and self-reflection skills are enhanced. Although the changes to the coaches' communication were limited, our results indicated that synergistic coaching amplified the athletes' self-awareness and personal growth through more adult-to-adult conversations.

Synergistic coaching reveals that words matter. Researchers suggest that positive words and language create neural pathways that enable more whole brain thinking. Such thinking allows athletes to process information more quickly and effectively and enables them to be more flexible and creative. In addition, language and culture influence how we think about ourselves. Therefore, changes to how language is used brings about changes in practices and conduct; getting people to think differently changes behaviour. In fact, language is how change is initiated and then is itself changed. In effect, changing our language changes our culture; new language alerts listeners to a new story. Establishing new conversations within an organization is the most effective and under-used manner of effecting long-lasting change. Importantly, part of this change involves recognizing and acknowledging the nature of our conversations.

As society becomes more dependent on technology, researchers indicate that face-to-face communication skills amongst young people are declining at an alarming rate. Researchers suggest that children and youth are becoming less adept at understanding eye contact, reading body language, understanding spatial awareness, focusing, and perhaps most importantly, having conversations. Significantly, correlations have been made between these declining skills — due to social media, technology, and a lack of play — and increased rates of anxiety and depression in children and youth. Dr. Rachel Remen suggests that we have become distracted from the world within us and, as a result, we fail to see the web of connection that unites us as human beings. Sport has the power to strengthen that web, to illuminate that spark when synergistic coaches collaborate with that dream of wholeness and ask themselves, if this athlete were to see themselves through my eyes — what would they see?

Changing the language and nature of the conversation acknowledges the lived experience of the individual. Ultimately, synergistic coaching helps to expand the vocabulary of coaches with reflective language creating new value and meaning that enables coaches to differentiate themselves from the dominant master narratives and competing discourses of sport. The language enriches team culture, athlete development, and performance. Coaches *and* athletes are grounded in their own wholeness, competence, and agency.

About the Authors

Elaine Cook is a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto and a certified Solution-Focused Coach. Over the past five years she has worked intensively with female inter-university coaches to implement and embed generative communication practices as a means of supporting athlete growth and development. Currently, she works at a children's rehabilitation hospital — where discourses of power, authority, and control are similarly normalized — and is responsible for training doctors, nurses, clinicians, and families in solution-focused communication practices.

Gretchen Kerr is a Professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education and Vice-Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto. Her research program has two primary strands, one on athlete maltreatment and the other on advancing women in coaching. Gretchen prioritizes the intersection of research and practice through her work with coaches, athletes, and sport organizations.

References available upon request.