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COMMUNICATING WITH CLARITY
Guidelines to Help Women Coaches Succeed

By Penny Werthner

Many leading coaches say that their ability to communicate skilfully is key to their success. They believe that the quality and effectiveness of their communication is directly linked to the building of mutually respectful relationships with their athletes and their colleagues.

What are the specific skills that enable you to become an effective communicator? How do you go about using and sharing these skills with your athletes and those you work alongside?

Why is it crucial for you, as a coach, to be able to communicate well? Simply stated, skilful communication is crucial because so much of what you do involves providing information to your athletes, your head coach or assistant coaches, your club, and your provincial or national sport federation, as well as exchanging information with a variety of individuals or groups such as sport scientists.

After all, you direct daily practices or training sessions with your athletes. You intervene during those practices to give feedback to your athletes in the form of corrections, encouragement, and changes in training direction. You listen to questions or comments from your athletes or your head or assistant coaches in order to make changes in a training session or to the yearly training and competitive plan. You meet with your athletes to discuss issues and concerns and, by doing so, build a cohesive team. You work closely with your club executive and/or your provincial or national sport federation to clarify your job description and roles and responsibilities and to make plans for the future. All of this, and much more that you do as a coach, involves communication.

Now that we understand why it is important and relevant to communicate effectively, we can begin to look at the specific skill sets you need to become an effective communicator and how to develop and use those skills in working with athletes and colleagues.

Effective Communication Skills

- Being Assertive
- Communicating Non-Verbally
- Knowing How to Listen Well
- Speaking Clearly and Concisely
- Giving Constructive Feedback

- Being Able to Receive Criticism
- Choosing the Right Words
- Resolving Conflict Effectively

Being Assertive

In thinking about good communication, it is important to understand the differences between being assertive and being aggressive or passive. Skilful communication is all about two individuals, or groups, who are engaged in a discussion, being able to remain assertive. The danger, particularly when something contentious or difficult is being discussed, is that one of the individuals – you or your athlete or colleague – falls into the trap of becoming either aggressive or passive.

What does it mean to be assertive rather than aggressive or passive? According to Webster's Dictionary *assertive* means "to state positively, to affirm." *Aggressive* is defined as "to undertake an attack, to begin a quarrel" and *passive* is defined as "being the object of rather than the subject of action; unresisting, submissive." Being assertive in communicating with your athletes means you value and care for each one of them as an individual. (Over the years, many athletes have said to me that they wish their coach had treated them as an individual, and not always as just a part of the team). Being assertive means you treat your athletes, their parents, and your colleagues with respect, even when you are not in agreement. Being assertive means that you take action and initiate meetings and discussions, rather than waiting for something to happen and reacting to it. Being assertive means you stand up for yourself and speak about your beliefs and vision for the team, and yet are willing to listen to what your athletes have to say. And after listening well, you are able, in a clear and direct manner, to explain how the team will be run and what your decisions were based on. You are able to do this without attacking or belittling an athlete or colleague who may question a decision.

These examples illustrate how to assert yourself, which, in turn, increases your confidence, your professionalism, and your ability to deal effectively with the many issues that you face as a coach. Most importantly, you will be able to develop athletes and colleagues who are comfortable coming to talk with you about their suggestions, thoughts, and concerns. And with that information, you are able to make better decisions with an athlete or a colleague and for your team as a whole.

Communicating Non-Verbally

You want your athletes to come to practice every day, ready to work and keen to be there. You can encourage this kind of behaviour by modelling it yourself, and often in a non-verbal way. How you present yourself in your coaching environment has great potential to influence your athletes and the coaches you work with. Look at each of your colleagues and athletes when

you arrive for a training session. Smile. Ask a few questions about how they are. Wait for the answers. These are effective ways to set the tone for the daily practice. You will be effectively modelling the very behaviours you want your athletes to exhibit at every session – upbeat, ready to practise, and with complete concentration on the training. (If you notice one of your athletes displaying poor non-verbal behaviour, such as rolling her eyes, not looking at you when you are addressing the team, or talking while you are talking, you will need to address it or it will become destructive to the team. Look at the examples in the section on speaking clearly and concisely to see how to do that well).

Knowing How to Listen Well

One of the more difficult and least understood skills of effective communication is the ability to listen well to what is being said by another individual or group. When you are listening well, you listen to understand what the other person is thinking or feeling, rather than focusing on your response. And you have to remember that understanding what someone says does not necessarily mean agreement. To listen effectively, you need to permit yourself to really listen to who is speaking – whether it is one of your athletes, a parent, your club president, or your head coach – to clearly hear what they are saying before you respond or even begin to think about how to resolve a problem.

Why is it so important for a coach to use this skill of listening? First of all, so much conflict between individuals or groups results because of incorrect assumptions – and incorrect assumptions often happen because we are eager to respond and solve rather than listen first, e.g. “Oh, I thought the practice was at 3 o’clock. “I thought we were practicing *this* play.” “I thought you meant …” “I thought my job was to …” These are examples of what can happen when one does not listen well – whether it is you not listening to your athletes or your athletes not listening to you. When you are able to listen first to what the head coach or an athlete is saying and then clarify those thoughts, comments, or concerns with an appropriate question or two, there is a lot less misunderstanding and therefore a great deal less conflict.

Second, and equally important, when you listen to your athletes, you are better able to understand what they are thinking and feeling and you can then make specific and effective corrections to a training session or create a better plan for a future competition. You certainly cannot do this well if you are guessing what an athlete is thinking.

Third, when you regularly allow your athletes to express their thoughts and concerns, they begin to take responsibility for their actions and think for themselves. Taking personal responsibility and becoming, to a degree, an independent thinker, is what they need to be doing, and exactly what you need them to be capable of doing on the field or track, or in the pool, in

training, and particularly during competition. After all, it is the athletes who ultimately have to get out there and run the race or play the game.

Habits of Good Listening

- Remind yourself that you and your athletes and the other coaches are all trying to accomplish the same goal: to perform well at the upcoming trials; the provincial, national, or world championships, or the Olympic Games.
- Look at who is speaking to you and focus on what they are saying, really listening to what they are saying, and not immediately coming up with a response. You will get to a solution; you just want to make sure first that you are solving the right issue!
- Ask questions to ensure you understand the issue (and in the case of your athletes, to help them discover their own solutions).
- If an athlete or parent is emotional, listen first, then acknowledge her feelings, and then try to guide her in finding a solution. (If the emotions are directed toward you, in the form of an attack, you need to be assertive and set a time to talk when things are calmer.)
- Do your best to be empathetic and non-judgmental. You may not agree with what is being said. You simply need to ensure that you are clear on what the issues or problems are before making any decisions!

An important note. Allowing yourself to listen to your athletes does not mean that you then allow them to make all the decisions. What it does mean is that when you are able to listen well, you are able to make an informed decision. You can decide if a change is warranted, and if it is not, then you can clearly explain your reasoning.

Speaking Clearly and Concisely

Two significant aspects of your job are giving direction and instruction to your athletes during training sessions and competition and dealing with issues or conflicts as they arise. In both situations you must speak clearly and concisely. However, it is more difficult to be clear and concise when there are problems.

For example, one of your athletes is late for training three days in a row and you are beginning to feel quite angry. What is the best way to deal with such behaviour?

- Name the behaviour. “You have been late three days in a row.”
- Name what **you** are feeling. “I’m quite upset.”
- Say what you need. “I need to talk with you about this because we cannot get the practice done effectively when you are a half hour late.”

Here’s another example. Your club executive has not completed a job evaluation on your work on the agreed-upon date.

- Name the subject. “I wanted to talk with you about my coaching evaluation.”
- Name what **you** are feeling. “I’m feeling frustrated.”
- Say what you need. “I would like us to sit down and talk about how and when this evaluation will be done.”

‘I’ messages such as these are clear, concise, and come from what you feel and what you need. Name the issue in an even tone of voice, with no judgment or sarcasm attached. Name the emotion you are experiencing, but stop there. Do not go on with all the concurrent feelings you might be having. State what you need, because only you know what that is.

The guiding assumption here is that your goal is to effectively resolve the issue or conflict. In order to do that, the other person needs to listen to you, and they can only do this if you do not put them on the defensive. (When you are on the defensive, you are busy thinking up excuses for your behaviour, rather than listening to what is being said and trying to come up with a solution).

Giving Constructive Feedback

Your coaching job, simply stated, is to help each athlete you work with to become increasingly better at executing the speed, skills, or game strategies of your sport. As a result, you are constantly feeding back information to your athletes. What is important to understand, in terms of feedback, is that almost every athlete needs a “healthy” balance of **critique-to-praise ratio.** What that healthy ratio is varies from athlete to athlete and varies according to the proximity to a competition.

Generally, as you probably well know, what helps an athlete most is to clearly state the problem. If, for example, it is the execution of a specific skill, it helps to break the skill down into manageable chunks, both by using words and by executing the technique or tactic physically. If the athlete is experienced, ask her to think about what would work well. Certainly, such dialogue in the middle of a practice is not always possible, but when it is, it pays off immeasurably. You end up with a thoughtful, resourceful, and responsible athlete.

Generally speaking, the closer to the competition, the more you need to shift your feedback to what the athlete is doing well, and away from what is not going well. You do this, first of all, because at some point it is too late to fix something. You have to go with what you have until after the competition. Second, and perhaps most importantly, you do this because the level of confidence of most athletes is fragile and the fragility increases as competition nears. Most athletes will begin to question their readiness, their skills, their ability. This is a natural reaction to stress. A significant part of your job as a coach is to alleviate that stress and reassure each of your athletes or your team that they are well prepared.

Another important note. Shifting your feedback ratio toward "what we are doing well" does not mean that you do not critique. It means you are doing less critiquing close to a competition. Shifting that ratio and being positive means intentionally observing what your athlete or team is doing well and specifically feeding back that information to them.

Being Able to Receive Criticism

Part of becoming an effective coach is developing a good working relationship with your athletes and colleagues. Nurturing such relationships is helped immeasurably by a willingness on your part to listen to suggestions or criticism from an athlete, group of athletes, or from colleagues. The ability to receive criticism without getting defensive is a difficult skill to acquire.

One of the parts of this skill is to not take the criticism too personally, to step back a bit from the comment (sometimes easier said than done), and to look at it from the perspective of how the information might help the team or help you in your coaching role. When you are being criticized, ask questions for clarification. If an athlete attacks you by saying "You are always picking on me" or "You're not fair to everyone," ask for an example so that you can understand the actual behaviour you are being accused of exhibiting. You may have been unfair, but perhaps not. You need to ensure you actually did something poorly or unfairly before you take ownership and apologize. It may be appropriate to apologize, and it can be powerful in building your relationship with your athletes, but only if you are at fault.

Choosing the Right Words

I

Sometimes there is a tendency to avoid using "I" because it might appear boastful. It is important to understand that using "I" means that you are taking responsibility for what you say. It allows you to take ownership without putting anyone down.

You

Be cautious about using this word. Saying "You are always the first to complain" can sound like an accusation. (A clear directive such as "I want you to …" is not usually a problem.)

They

The use of "they" can be an indirect way of speaking. If an athlete says, "They all feel this way" or "They all agreed we should take the day off training," you need to ask, "Who are 'they?'" Is it really the whole team, or just this athlete?

But

When an athlete or colleague says, “Yeah, but,” it almost invariably means she is not listening well and has already made a decision on the issue or problem. Or, at the very least, she is confusing two issues, and you need to help her deal with one at a time.

Always, Never
Seldom is anything “always” or “never.” These words take on an emotional emphasis, e.g. “You always yell at me” and “You never listen to me.” These are emotional statements, laden with guilt, that do not encourage good communication.

Should, Ought
These are words that trap, and often signify finger pointing, e.g. “You should have known.” “I ought to have been better.” Athletes’ bodies get tight when they hear or use these words because they start believing something is not right with them and they begin to lose self-confidence.

Always pay attention to the words you use. Making the wrong choices may restrict your ability to communicate effectively and skilfully.

Resolving Conflict Effectively

Coaches regularly encounter situations that have the potential to escalate into a conflict. Athletes within your training group or on your team may not like each other. An athlete may not like your way of coaching. You may have difficulty in getting an assistant coach to do his job well. Your vision for the team may be quite different from that of the head coach. Perhaps you have problems with your club executive. These are just a few examples of the countless potential problems or issues you might face throughout your career as a coach.

The very nature of conflict is an interesting and sometimes misunderstood concept. Conflict is a natural occurrence in our lives and some degree of conflict is often inevitable whenever two or more individuals come together. It is important to recognize and understand conflict and to seek, first of all, to prevent as much conflict as possible and, when it occurs, to work toward resolving conflict effectively.

Conflict can be **constructive** when it opens up discussion on issues of importance, when it results in solutions to those issues, and when it increases the involvement of individuals in the discussion. But conflict can be **destructive** when it begins to take too much energy and diverts focus from more important activities (like training and resting), destroys an individual’s sense of self-confidence, and polarizes a team into two groups.

How does conflict occur? There are many ways that conflict might begin on your team, or between you and another coach, or between your club and

provincial executive. One way that conflict begins relates to information**.** There is a misunderstanding, a miscommunication, or a lack of information. “I thought we were going to start at nine o’clock.” “I meant to tell you I couldn’t make it, but I forgot.” “I thought the head coach was responsible for the entries.” “I didn’t know that was part of my job description.”

Conflict also occurs over how things are to be done – the methods**.** If you want to run your training sessions in the morning with a certain level of intensity, and the head coach wants the intense sessions in the evening, you have a conflict. If you and your strength coach disagree over the kinds of strength training your team should be doing and the frequency, you have a conflict.

Conflict also occurs over what is to be done or achieved, such as goals for your team. You as the coach (along with many other individuals involved, such as parents, coaches, club executive, and volunteers) want to ensure that consensus is built around not only how your team will train or practise, but also what the long-terms goals are. If you think your team has the talent and tenacity to succeed internationally and the parents don’t have the willingness or the financial resources to support the travel, you have a conflict.

Conflict can escalate over differing values, and this is probably the most difficult type of conflict to resolve. For example, you may believe that athletes can compete successfully at the national and international level and still get an education or hold down a part-time job, and in fact believe that this is a necessary element for a successful life after sport , but you are faced with a parent who actively encourages her daughter to do nothing else but train.

These are some of the ways that conflict might begin. The good news is that through learning and effectively using all of the skills of effective communication, you will be able to prevent a great deal of conflict within your team and with those you work with and for. When you listen well, when you speak clearly and concisely, when you are able to give and receive feedback and criticism well, and when you can share these skills with others on your team, you prevent a great deal of conflict. And when conflict or issues do arise, you will be able to manage them well and resolve the issues effectively, using those same skills.

What is most relevant in becoming a skilful communicator is that you take the time to regularly reflect on how you are doing in working with your athletes, their parents, your club executive, your provincial or national sport federation, and your coaching colleagues. Develop your communication skills. Learn to listen well, to not fear what you might hear, to ask questions effectively, to speak clearly, and to give and receive feedback and criticism effectively.

Skilful communication is a flowing, ongoing process. The speaker, the listener, and the message are ever changing. For you as a coach, it is a continuous dialogue. You can't speak one time only with your athletes or your colleagues about an issue and assume that it will never come up again. Inevitably, it will. And new issues, concerns, and ideas will also arise. Be generous in sharing these skills with your athletes and colleagues. After all, if everyone you work with becomes more skilful at communicating, all of you will be much more effective. And you will be "successful" as a coach – not only in terms of results, but also in developing thinking, independent, responsible athletes.

PENNY WERTHNER

Penny Werthner, PhD, is a practising sport psychologist who works with many national team athletes and coaches. She is also a professor in the school of human kinetics at the University of Ottawa and is responsible for the graduate program in sport administration. She was the sport psychologist for the canoe/kayak team and the women's water polo team at the 2000 Olympic Games. A leader and innovator in international sport and in women and sport issues, Penny is a 3M NCCP Level 4/5 presenter for Task #7, #8, and #17. A former Olympic track and field athlete, Penny represented Canada internationally from 1970 to 1981.