

MOTIVATION FOR EFFECTIVE COACHES

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The beginning of the year is an excellent time to review the motivational climate within your club or team.

Motivation refers to the energising function that drives a person's behaviour - what they do and how long they do it.

So what are the tools that coaches can use to increase or sustain motivation in their athletes and themselves?

In this month's edition of *The Coaches' Edge*, we get the answers from sports psychologist Paulette Misfud - a founding member of the College of Sports Psychology who has worked successfully with Commonwealth, World and Olympic champions over the past 15 years.

Positive, relevant, reinforcement

A basic behaviour principle says that positive reinforcement of a behaviour increases the probability that that behaviour will be repeated. This is true for athletes just as it is for any person. However, the reinforcement needs to be relevant to each individual athlete.

For example, if a team member has a need for recognition and challenge, then asking them to demonstrate a drill or take the lead in training will match this need and repeated behaviour will result.

But if a coach consistently puts that person in a situation where they cannot stand out or have a say, then their motivation will be suppressed.

Therefore, take time to understand what factors motivate and suppress your athletes and plan how to incorporate this knowledge in your training and competition environment.

Positive reinforcement should be individually relevant, specific, based on performance, and given immediately after a task is finished.

Goal setting

This is a fundamental tool used to direct and sustain motivation. The specific, challenging, individual nature of goals help focus attention on what is required.

By setting a variety of goals ranging from the immediate to long-term, the athlete can be simultaneously focused on the present as well as having future direction.

Goals should be flexible and determined by attitude, performance potential, and the available facilities. They should be set for a specific time frame and be reviewed periodically.

For example, a football team may have a season goal to make the finals, a first half of the season goal to have a positive win / loss record, individual game goals to shut down specific opponents and training goals to improve certain drills.

The same kind of stratified approach can be used with individual athletes.

Goals must also be measurable against some set standard to ensure that progress can be mapped and problems identified.

When a goal is reached, celebrate it!

Control and responsibility

Helping athletes become responsible for themselves is the key to improving their self-motivation. Athletes are more likely to commit to a program they have helped design, understand, and believe in.

But this doesn't mean giving them free reign. A major responsibility of a coach is still in structuring the situation. Ideally, the athletes are given choices within that structured situation. When they feel responsible for their actions, they will develop stronger feelings of self-belief.

The issue of control is very much a perceptual one. Athletes choose to be involved, they choose to train, but they often forget this and take the approach of "I have to". Be aware of compulsive language such as "I have to", "I don't have a choice", "I can't help it", and encourage a perception of choice and responsibility.

Create a positive mindset

Develop a positive vocabulary that is used consistently. Doing this can turn around a crippling "can't do it" attitude.

When working with a football team, I noticed a significant difference in the motivational levels of the players after they became aware of their negative talk during half time.

They were always focusing on their negative play and the strengths of the opposition. Understandably, they returned to the field focused on the negative rather than the positive. A simple method of encouraging positive talk is to ask players to comment on the good plays that they saw one another do.

Positive imagery works in the same way as positive self-talk. Get your athletes to visualise what they want to do. It helps develop a "can do" attitude and also triggers the appropriate neural firing in the brain, which is needed for the muscles to do what is being asked of them.

Build a motivational climate

As a coach, you must be a great motivator, but the environment surrounding an athlete, such as their family, club administration, and other coaches may suppress that motivation. Over time, this suppression can erode the athlete's motivation and your own.

To create an overall supportive environment, you should include the athletes' family and the administration staff, etc. in some team activities. For example, get them involved in the team's mission statement, have an inspirational supporters' code rather than a draconian one, organise partner or parent gatherings, or run educational sessions on the physiology or psychology of the sport.

Let the club rooms reflect the kind of atmosphere you want to instill in your athletes. Photos and inspirational quotes are frequently placed in clubrooms, but when was the last time they were updated or added to! Ask the athletes what they would like around them.

Explore other options

A lack of motivation is not always a simple result of not being interested. The athlete may be fatigued, burnt out, or be overloaded by home or work

issues. Their diet may not be balanced or they may simply not be rehydrating during training. Explore all options, and where necessary, send the athlete off to a relevant specialist such as a sports dietitian or psychologist.

Summary

- Effective coaches understand that individual athletes are motivated by different methods. Pep talks, no matter how vigorous, appeal to a limited number of athletes and their effect is usually short lived.
- By positively reinforcing correct behaviour, for example, like tackling properly during a drill, you will increase the chance of this behaviour being repeated.
- Goal setting is essential. Goals should be specific, realistic, challenging, relevant and measurable. Achieved goals should be recognised and rewarded.
- Athletes should also be given control and responsibility, in order to develop a sense of self-determination within the structure imposed by the coach.
- Use positive talk and imagery to maintain team and individual motivation.