



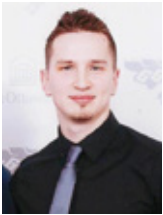
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The Journey from Competent to Innovator: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Enhance High Performance Coaching

The three of us combine decades of experience in the sport coaching field, first as athletes who have been coached, then as coaches, coach educators and coaching scientists. Increasingly we have been asked to act as consultants to guide sport organisations in the development of their coaches. In the high-performance coaching context, a shift from a 'fixing problems' approach to a 'flourishing' approach cannot happen without guidance.

Our intent with the present article is to share where we are in our reflection (combining our research work and practical experience) about "How to help coaches in their lifelong learning journey". We first describe how coaches learn to coach using a model and, specifically for coaches operating in the high-performance coaching context, the tendency by sport organisations to use a deficiency-based approach in their attempts to develop better coaches. Then we argue that a growth-based approach, based on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and strengths-based reflective learning framework principles, will lead to a more positive learning environment both for coaches and the sport organisations that employ them.

How sport coaches learn to coach

In an effort to provide a global view on how coaches learn to coach, we published a model (Trudel and Gilbert, 2013) that has been slightly modified since for the present article (see Figure 1). The model contains three components: coaching contexts, learning situations and the evolution of a coach's identity. The dotted lines stress that these components must be seen as continuums rather than well-defined categories. Regarding the first component, it is now well accepted

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that coaching is context specific, meaning that the coaches' competencies (what they need to know and do) will vary depending on the setting in which they are coaching (recreational, developmental or high-performance (H-P) sport).

The second component, the different learning situations, is separated into three types. In mediated learning situations, such as coaching courses and clinics, the material to be learned is decided upon and directed by a person other than the learner. In unmediated learning situations, the learner takes the initiative and is responsible for choosing what/how/when to learn, such as discussing with colleagues, searching the internet, reading books etc. In the third type of learning situations – internal learning situations – the learner is not exposed to new material, but instead reorganises existing ideas. The expression “cognitive housekeeping” is used to illustrate this type of learning situation. Examples of internal learning situations are scheduling time to reflect, having a personal coach and writing in a reflective journal.

Coach identity evolution

The third component of our coach learning framework is now labelled “Coach identity evolution”. The advantage of using the term “identity” is that it links the individual and the social environment to better understand the learning processes. The previous title, “Stages of expertise”, and the stage categories (beginner, competent, proficient and expert) were based on David Berliner's work. However, after three years of using the model we decided to make some modifications as we encountered some issues when using this terminology. When a coach starts to coach in a specific coaching context, specifically in the H-P context, people seem to be more at ease referring to a coach as a newcomer instead of as a beginner. Also, in many studies, especially in novice-expert literature, researchers have qualified anyone who coaches in Elite/H-P settings as an “expert”.

We kept the term competent and linked it with the certification of coaches. When a group of coaches are certified after completing a specific coach education program, it is assumed that these coaches are more alike in terms of competencies to coach in a specific coaching context. Also, there is a growing push to make sport coaching a profession and part of this endeavour implies developing a specific curriculum to prepare coaches to meet specific standards/competencies. Defining proficient was not easy and even Berliner recognises it is a challenge. We opted for the term SuperCompetent, inspired by the work of Laura Stack. While competent coaches can reproduce what they were taught, SuperCompetent coaches have the ability to adapt knowledge and skills to develop their own coaching style. In addition, to become more consistent in what they do, these coaches will adopt a new mindset: “Placing yourself in a new frame of mind requires stepping back, soul-searching, rethinking priorities,

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possibly defeating old personal roadblocks, and developing entirely new thought processes you can apply in all sorts of situations” (Stack, 2010).

Finally, as coaches gradually become more confident, the need to challenge the way things are usually done increases and they strategically will work toward innovation. For Dyer and colleagues (2009), innovators are particularly good at:

1. Associating – the ability to successfully connect seemingly unrelated questions, problems or ideas from different fields;
2. Questioning – asking questions to challenge the common wisdom;
3. Observing – carefully and intentionally looking around to gain insights about new ways of doing things;
4. Experimenting – trying on new experiences and exploring; and
5. Networking – connecting with others to get different perspectives.

The Coach learning model in action

At this point in the article we believe it is useful to illustrate the model by telling the story of a fictional – yet representative – coach we’ll call Tom. This story is based on our consulting practice and academic work.

Tom’s story

As a player, I was good enough to play a few games with the National team. Then I got injured and went back to school to complete a business degree. At beginning of my second school year, I joined the university football team as an assistant coach. Then the head coach was fired and I took over. The first year was not easy and I quickly realised the difference between being an athlete and being a coach. As a newcomer in this coaching context, I had to learn so much, especially about the sub-culture of varsity sport. I contacted some former coaches and met occasionally with professors in the Kinesiology department. Looking for more coaching material, I also bought books and searched the internet. The latter was often frustrating because of the amount of information and not knowing how to evaluate the quality of the information.

One day I was informed I had to be certified by my National Sport Governing Body. Taking into consideration my athletic experience and my coaching context, I was “fast tracked” to Level Three. After 80 hours of courses spread over a few weekends, I successfully passed the written exam and the onsite evaluation. How useful was it? I felt that some coaching topics were useless, or I should say not pertinent to me, while other topics met my needs.

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Tom

As years passed, I was feeling more and more competent and periodically attended a few workshops to accumulate the required professional development units to retain my certification. My coaching record showed an acceptable level of success, but I always felt limited in my personal development. I wanted to push my coaching to another level by doing things differently, but the environment did not provide me with adequate support. After seven years, I accepted an offer to coach the National team. Being a newcomer again, I had to adapt to this new environment: different type of players, the required coaching style, the busy agenda (lot of travels), and the politics of high-performance sport. I was strongly advised to take Level Four of the certification program, which I did. I also attended many one-day courses on different hot topics (doping, selection procedures, etc.). By participating in these formal gatherings, I learned a lot but, more importantly, I met new people and enlarged my coaching network.

I deeply believe that in order to be among the best coaches in the world, I need to be able to explain why I am doing things the way I do and then ask this big question "Is there a better way of doing it?" It doesn't mean I question all my coaching, but I certainly should be more creative and innovative on some aspects. Innovation implies risk taking, and to do so I need the support of my sport federation and the other organisations involved with the National team. I need a positive learning environment.

What Tom's story is telling us is that coaches can learn to coach on their own and this is what they probably mean when they say "I have learned to coach by coaching". However, in an attempt to produce competent coaches, sport governing bodies have developed coach education programs, often mandatory for coaches in each of the specific contexts. As we live in a world that is often referred to as a knowledge society, where knowledge changes very rapidly, a certification attests only to our competencies at a specific moment.

Using deliberate reflection

We argue that the main factor influencing the progression of coaches on the continuum from newcomer to innovator is the ability to use "deliberate reflection" (see Figure 1). This means that as coaches' identities evolve they will become more likely to reserve time to reflect on their practice and maximise learning opportunities. While deliberate reflection is an individual act, it is often done/stimulated by discussing with others. H-P coaches have to interact with several people, the closest being the ones in their sport federation and also all the "ists" (nutritionist, psychologist, physiologist, etc.) supporting the team. Therefore, to help coaches on their journey to becoming SuperCompetent and Innovators we need to provide a learning environment where all actors feel recognised as contributors to the ultimate goal of helping athletes reach their full potential.

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Figure 1. How sports coaches learn to coach

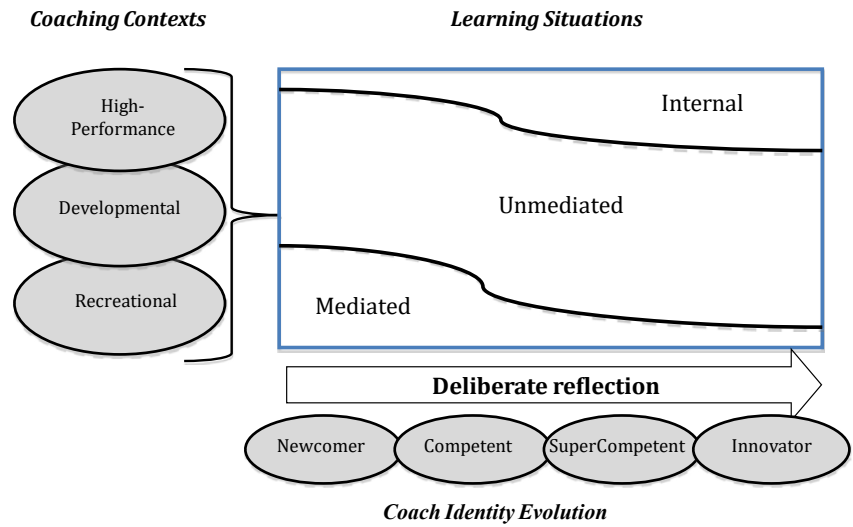


Figure 1. How sport coaches learn to coach

A shift from a fixing problems (deficiency-based) approach to a flourishing (strengths-based) approach

Anyone involved in the H-P coaching context knows that the pressure to perform is very high and when success is slow in coming, organisations are quick to look for problems to be fixed. In these moments two options often are considered. In the first option, the sport organisation can search for the saviour H-P coach, sometimes from another country, who will come in to fix the problems. In the second option, called the “best practice strategy”, the sport organisation creates a template of the “ideal” H-P coach by combining characteristics of several coaches who have had success. Thereafter it is simply a matter of identifying the gaps between this ideal coach and their current coach to fix the coach’s weaknesses.

These two options are based on what we call a deficiency-based approach. The main limit of this approach is that by focusing so much on the problems, the discourse is a series of deficit-phrased questions leading to deficit-based conversations leading to deficit-based actions. This working climate is not compatible with what is needed to be innovative: “...innovation becomes a product of gathering the best talent, working together in the best way, in an organisational structure most conducive to individual and collective flourishing. When the process is systematized, innovation becomes a regular rather than a heroic occurrence” (Hoque, 2014).

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To help sport organisations focus on what is working instead of what is not working, we need to propose an approach that does not ignore the problems, but rather helps to reach a healthier balance. We believe that the AI approach will provide the right environment to facilitate coach and organisational learning. For Cooperrider and colleagues (2005), AI is based on the assumption that:

Every organisation has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, vision, and action for change.

Ongoing coach development

AI is often described as a circular process known as the 4D model: Discovery (stories about the best of what is), Dream (imagining the best of what could be), Design (statements of intention) and Destiny (action planning). Selected people from an organisation will, during a gathering called an ‘organisational summit’, exchange their views following well-structured positive questions. However, doing these types of gatherings a couple of times per year will not be enough to instil an in-depth flourishing approach to ongoing coach development. The “strengths-based reflective learning framework” proposed by Ghaye (2011), which includes concepts such as reflective conversation, reflective organisation, collective wisdom and appreciative reflection and action, can be used to guide coaches and organisations in their individual and collective deliberate reflections. In closing, we have noticed an increasing number of coach education programs available to develop competent coaches, along with a growing body of scientific literature to guide their design, implementation and potential outcomes. In contrast, how to help coaches in their journey from competent to innovator has rarely been addressed, neither by the sport nor the research community. It is our hope that in the near future we will be able to more fully realise the benefits of using AI and the strengths-based reflective learning framework for developing coaches in the H-P coaching context.

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