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OpenLearn course: Coaching others to coach
OpenLearn url: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/coaching-others-coach/content-section-overview>

Is coach observation worth pursuing?

Dave Keelty

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I have been a big advocate of coach observations as a beneficial way for coaches to learn ... because I believe it is;

1. more specific to the coaches needs
2. more relevant to the environment they are coaching in
3. a better use of their time (especially if they are a volunteer).

To challenge [my assumptions], I ... asked the following question: should coach observations be based on what the coach wants to improve, or based on what the observer sees, or a mixture of both?

I often wrestle with this question, as I believe the answer to be context specific. As a rough rule of thumb, the more 'novice' the coach I am observing the more likely I will observe the whole environment to pick up key things that will make a positive impact. The more 'expert' the coach, the more I will narrow the focus to an area they have identified.

Coach observation of the whole

Coe (2014) states, "observation produces a strong emotional response". When we observe a coach, we know inherently what we like and what we don't. It is hard not to project our own preferences for particular styles or behaviours onto the situation... Doing this starts to negate the wider context of why a coach may be coaching in a particular way, and starts to take the observers attention away from [context] cues.... I know I have been guilty of [my own bias] in the past when observing coaches. If I see behaviours that my mental models state are "good coaching behaviours" that coach goes up in my eyes, and vice versa if I see behaviours I associate with poor coaching. I have done this without taking in to account any of the wider context that coach is operating in

I mentioned above that when I'm observing more novice coaches, I tend to observe the whole. The reasons I do this are:

- I believe there may be things I can identify as the observer that could make a significant positive impact to the coach with relatively little effort. The truism 'people don't know what they don't know' comes to mind.
- I may be able to identify some key behaviours that the coach should prioritise in their long term development that the coach hasn't considered.
- It will allow me to discuss with the coach some strengths that I identified which will help in building trust and credibility.

Observing the whole can be a more gentle way to 'initiate' a coach into being observed and the benefits of this. A key skill for the observer ... is their ability to question first and try to understand the coaches thinking and decision-making before jumping in to 'giving advice' mode. ... The observer should approach every observation they conduct with the mindset of learning. ... If this is a strong belief, the ability to ask questions and listen first will come more naturally and frequently.

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Coach observation with a narrow focus

The flip side, having a checklist or observing with a narrow focus has its challenges too. I was recently at a coach development day where I was asked to observe a coach ...based on a check list of 'ideal coaching behaviours' created by an organisation. The 15 minute session I observed was fantastic in terms of athlete engagement, flow, and numerous other things. It was very hard to find fault. In fact, it was so effective that the coach had very little interaction with the athletes. They understood the activity AND were engaged throughout the session. However, the 'ideal coaching behaviours' checklist highlighted different behaviours based on interaction. Because I had seen very little of these 'checklist' behaviours, did that mean the coach was 'poor' in that session?... Herein lies a dilemma around coach observation based on a checklist.

The other dilemma around narrowing your focus during observations is that it may lead to inattention blindness (i.e. an event in which an individual fails to recognise an unexpected stimulus that is in plain sight). For example, if all we are looking for is the questions the coach is asking, are we missing the feedback they are (or aren't) giving, the engagement of the athletes, the time on task of the athletes etc.

However, the benefits of narrowing focus during an observation, particularly if that narrowing of focus is based on what the coach wants feedback on, can be hugely beneficial. The connection an observer has with a coach prior to the observation is critical in making the observation as meaningful as possible. That is where the observer can find out what the coach is wanting to improve ...the overall vision of the coach plus all the other important contextual factors that go in to shaping that particular session.

References

Coe, R. (2014) 'Classroom observation: It's harder than you think' [Online]. Available from <http://cem.org/blog/414/> (Accessed 17 June 2019).

The original blog post can be found here: <https://medium.com/@CoachngUnleashd/is-coach-observation-worth-pursuing-aed805d911aa>