

Title:

Personality theory in coaching: positive reinforcement.(Psychology).

Author(s):

Cliff Barker.

Source:

Coach and Athletic Director 73.2 (Sept 2003): p68(7). (1721 words)

Document Type:

Magazine/Journal

Bookmark:

[Bookmark this Document](#)

Library Links:

[Article Express](#)

Full Text :COPYRIGHT 2003 Scholastic, Inc.

While providing positive reinforcement to their athletes, coaches must allow them to set the pace. They must refuse to take shortcuts in accelerating the learning curve or punish the **athlete** for failing to progress quickly enough.

Both of these things can slow down the learning process or cause a regression or erosion of skills.

Once shaped, the reinforcement schedules can also play a critical role in maintaining performance levels. Most importantly, any reduction in reinforcement can seriously impair the **athlete**.

COMMON EXAMPLES:

First, if a player begins reporting late for practice and goes unpunished or if there is no reward in place to reinforce punctual attendance, the unwanted behavior is likely to continue.

Second, if the **coaching** staff's reinforcement of the team habits (established in preseason practice) begins to wane as the season progresses, the team's practice habits and intensity will also decline.

The **coaching** staff must assume responsibility for whatever behaviors are being reinforced, or being punished, or being ignored.

Coaches have the opportunity to redefine the reward structure by eliminating all entitlements. Any coach who promises anyone a place on the team or playing time or a starting position should begin drafting his letter of resignation.

He will only have punishment left as a means of reinforcement. The only way to change the **athlete's** environment and get his attention will be by taking something away.

Positive reinforcement can be ensured by clearly defining basic behaviors such as: arriving on time for practice, working hard everyday, playing hard every game, and showing respect for others. The athletes who do these things will be given the opportunity to make the team, practice every day, play in the next game, and participate with the team throughout the season.

Negative or undesired behavior can be penalized by seating the offender on the end of the bench and having him watch rather than participate in the game.

"When you're ready to play, let me know."

Anytime a player feels that his coach is unlikely to compliment him for anything, he isn't going to expect any positive reinforcement or value any of the feedback he gets from him.

Truism: The simplest and perhaps most effective kind of motivational tool (praise) will work as long as it isn't overdone and there is a positive player-coach relationship.

Fear of the negative stimulus may initially inhibit or prevent the **athlete** from achieving peak performance. But once the player is put into a relaxed and confident frame of mind and exposed repeatedly to the negative stimulus in the form of game competition, he can ultimately have a breakthrough game in which he will overcome his performance anxiety and look the powerful positive reinforcements associated with successful play into the desired behavior.

The primary hurdle to overcome is performance anxiety, and the primary variable to consider is time. As long as the **coaching** staff continues giving the players a regular role in each game, the breakthrough game will come. By applying sound psychological principles, the players will eventually maximize their development.

This philosophy was applied successfully by the Indiana Pacers' head coach, Isiah Thomas, who never lost patience in his first season: "What we were trying to do was get the young players to go out on the floor and play comfortably.

"The only way we could really do that was by throwing, them into the fire, letting them make mistakes, have some embarrassments and painful moments, and learn from them. We learned from all our mistakes and kept getting better. Despite our very young roster, we had a successful season."

For over 80 years, psychologists have established the optimum approach to learning and modifying behavior. Although all the variability in human behavior cannot be explained, behavioristic theory is perhaps the cornerstone of this science. Its lessons must be learned and applied by anyone involved in training regiments with other individuals, including parents, employers, and coaches.

Coaches have the responsibility to teach the skills of their games and how to execute them in competition. The teaching process--overcoming anxiety and

performing at peak level--is a systematic process that cannot be rushed.

Throughout this process, as we have said, a positive bond between players and coaches will produce a psychologically sound approach to a successful program. The final two pieces of the **coaching** puzzle involve the individual differences in personality and the interpretations of the teaching environment.

Every successful leader and teacher must recognize the individual differences in thought, feeling, and behavior associated with social interaction. It will help him develop a positive interaction within the group, motivate the individual, and ensure a full contribution to the team effort.

A word about the psychopathic personality. It regularly emerges in the form of an incredibly talented player who cares about no one but himself and is completely undependable. Since even the professional psychologists have been unable to manage the psychopathic personality, coaches cannot be expected to do better.

Any coach who consciously decides to live with a psychopathic personality should understand what he is taking on. There will be little rhyme or reason to a lot of what the player does. It will be impossible to count on him to do anything, including showing up for a game. He will be capable of causing great psychological damage to the team.

Only coaches who enjoy Russian roulette will risk exposing their players and themselves to a psychopathic presence.

All coaches in team sports face the dual challenge of maintaining consistency in standards, routine, and preparation for competition while also helping each **athlete** achieve his full potential.

Players have physical differences in height, weight, and athletic ability as well as psychological differences in personality and behavior. A coach must not only recognize these differences but also utilize reliable tools to measure them and mold the players into a cohesive group that will enable them to achieve their full potential.

SOCIAL COGNITION

Having implemented all of these concepts, what else can be done to eliminate any lurking psychological glitches in the psyche of each player and the learn as a whole?

The wise coach will never shut both eyes once he believes his team is ready to venture into the exciting but sometimes toxic world of competition. That "psychologically sound" team that he believes he has assembled may only be a house of cards waiting to collapse at the first stiff breeze of competitive adversity.

Much of what happens to the players is impacted by what they are and how they react to the course of events.

According to Seligman, a pessimist assumes that the problem is never-ending or "stable," while the optimist believes that the problem is "temporary."

Pessimists also believe the cause of their problem is global--it will ruin every aspect of their lives. Optimists assume that personal challenges are specific, or relates only to the problem at hand.

Finally, pessimists blame themselves when trouble arises, while the optimists believe that that external factors are the cause.

The defense of self-esteem may also impact individual social cognition. "In general, people tend to make internal stable attributions when accounting for successes... (and) make unstable attributions when accounting for failure...(because) an unstable attribution has the advantage of suggesting things are likely to change in the future. Therefore... explaining failure in terms of momentary causes such as effort or luck helps protect one's self-esteem" (McAdams, 2001).

At the outer edge, pessimism can lead to feelings of helplessness and depression. It is essential for the coach to take special note of the players' behavior.

Whenever a player believes that no matter how well he is playing, he is going to be criticized or punished, he may simply stop trying. When a whole team is no longer willing to put out, its coach is doomed.

That is why a coach must be reasonable and positive in his motivational and disciplinary style. Punishment alone isn't going to enhance motivation. It is going to destroy it.

"Competitive depression" is a cognitive mindset that has to be watched. It has the potential to cause individual slumps, both short term during a season or long term over a career. Losing can actually become a state of mind, an expectation that perpetuates itself season after season.

Case History: Somewhere over the past decade, the high school basketball program had suffered an extreme case of "hopeless mindset." When the new coach took over, the varsity had lost 23 league games in a row and 32 straight losses overall. It had been 11 years since the team had posted a winning record.

The feeling was highly pessimistic: "We can't beat anyone and we're never going to get any better." Morale was at an all-time ebb.

Despite raising expectations and doing everything he had learned in 14 seasons of **coaching**, the new mentor couldn't turn things around.

After losing his first three games by more than 20 points, he managed to win one league game and two others.

That was three more games than they had won the year before, but it did not make a dent in the community pessimism. A delegation of parents decided to see the new coach fired.

They didn't win either. Since losing was less painful than change, the coach retained his job.

The departure of six players and the infusion of new attitudes and a new energy produced a five-win improvement and a climb from last place to fourth in the league.

The head coach had done it not so much by a change of players or a change in playing style, but a change in expectations. He sold a new premise to his players. If they practiced hard and played hard, they could expect to improve, compete against everyone on their schedule, and win more.

And that's exactly what happened... game after game all through the season. And it was the head coach-not the assistants, not the starters, not the seniors--who set the tone. It was he who made the players believe in everything they were doing from the first game to the last.

Moral: The head coach must be positive and proactive in establishing a continuing confidence in his team's ability to bounce back from a loss or continue the momentum from a win, play hard every game, and stay on the path of success for the entire season.

BY CLIFF BARKER Basketball Coach Avon Grove (PA) High School

Source Citation:Barker, Cliff. "Personality theory in coaching: positive reinforcement." Coach and Athletic Director 73.2 (Sept 2003): 68(7). Academic OneFile. Gale. University of Delaware Library. 6 Aug. 2008

<<http://proxy.nss.udel.edu:2104/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE>>.

Gale Document Number:A109567916