How to develop a coaching philosophy

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Developing a coaching philosophy is a journey of self discovery.
Your philosophy should be aligned with the core values that underpin how you live your life.
Traditional formal learning methods are flawed, says Ed Cope, as a ‘a one-size-fits-all curriculum’ means coaches’ individual learning needs are not being met.
That makes it harder for coaches to align their beliefs with their actual practice.
New coaches should immerse themselves in an array of learning platforms, so they can share knowledge and ideas and test them out, which will help shape their philosophy.
Establishing a habit of self reflection will help you become more aware of your coaching principles.

Picture the scene. You are a new coach, who will be operating, like the majority of coaches in the country, at grassroots level, working with 5-12 year olds.

You are bursting with ideas and cannot wait to put the theories you picked up on your entry level coaching course into practice.

As you mull over the structure of your first pre-season session with your new team, and the drills you are going to implement, you slam on the mental brakes.

‘Hang on,’ you think to yourself. ‘Maybe now is the time to settle on a coaching philosophy.’

Whoa there! Not so fast. There’s a little more to it than that.
A coaching philosophy is not something you choose from a list, like an expectant mother and her partner huddled together on an armchair, gleefully scanning the pages of the *Unabridged Book of Baby Names* looking for a flash of inspiration.

It is a process, and a potentially lengthy one at that, before you can say with absolute conviction that you have become fixed on a set of coaching principles that are in tune with the core values that underpin how you live your life.

Some coaches may never be able to properly describe what their coaching philosophy is. For others, it may be constantly evolving, in line with the progression of their own careers. Many more will feel the need to modify their coaching ideology depending on the context or environment they find themselves in.

Whatever group you think you fit in to, the message is, there is no rush to ‘find yourself’.

**Flaw in the system**

ConnectedCoaches member Ed Cope is a lecturer in sports coaching at the University of Hull, with a PhD in sports coaching pedagogy.

He has carried out painstaking research into coaching ideologies and the importance of reflecting on your beliefs – a belief being defined as the *confidence* we have in something, which can shape our motivations, *feelings* and judgements.

He believes that developing a philosophy is very much a journey.

He also believes that novice coaches are hampered at the start of this journey – when they actively embark on a process of formulating a nucleus of coaching beliefs – by fundamental flaws in traditional formal learning methods.

‘The big argument with a lot of coach education is that an intrinsic feature of these qualifications is an assumption that all coaches need to know the same things,’ he says.

The fact that coaches have no input over content – ‘a one-size-fits-all curriculum’ – means that coaches’ individual learning needs are not being met, Ed argues.

‘We want coaches to align their beliefs with their actual practice. The evidence in coaching suggests that doesn’t happen very often,’ he adds.

So while workshops and qualification courses help expand the knowledge banks of individuals, they should not be the be-all and end-all of their education.

**New coaches** should immerse themselves in a variety of learning platforms, where they can share knowledge and ideas, test them out for themselves and, importantly, reflect on their experiences.

‘There needs to be a shift in provision away from generic, centrally prescribed content to be learnt, towards content that is meaningful and relevant to the practices and lives of individual coaches,’ says Ed.

**Challenging beliefs**

So no plumping for a philosophy from a website, copying a colleague’s, or deciding that, after reading all about a famous coach in a magazine, their ideology would make the perfect coaching template for you, as it just so happens to be in tune with your own way of thinking.

And don’t fall into the trap of so many coaches, who replicate in their practice what they themselves have experienced as players.
Get some more experience in the field, experiment and learn from your successes and mistakes. Remember, training sessions are a safe place to fail. That motto applies to coaches as well as athletes.

Don’t base your coaching doctrine solely on knowledge gleaned from a qualification course – the long-accepted, standardised knowledge that is woven into the fabric of coaching culture. Don’t allow conditioned attitudes and beliefs to rule your thinking.

‘It is through years of exposure to a particular culture that a coach’s habitus becomes embodied,’ says Ed. ‘We want our coaches to reflect on their coaching against the beliefs that they have stated. So if their philosophy is based around giving players the opportunity to make decisions and solve problems, and we have some video of them coaching, we can ask them to reflect on the extent to which they currently do that.’

Ed expands on why it is important for coaches to become autonomous learners, capable of taking ownership of their own learning.

‘The evidence says that if a coach doesn’t have a good idea of what they want to achieve then they aren’t going to adopt that practice. So the first thing that needs to happen in coach education is that their beliefs need to be challenged.

‘Often, they are unconscious. They need to become aware of what they are, brought to the surface, and it’s only then that we can start to think about changing current practice.’

He adds: ‘A blended learning approach is a move away from more traditional formal education, where contact is face to face, to considering additional and alternative methods of educating learners away from classroom-based activity.’

Challenging dogma and being an active and participative learner will only get you so far. Coaches must also reflect on their methods if worthwhile changes in their practice are to occur consistently.

The importance of reflection cannot be overstated, says Ed.

In his research on the subject, he writes:

‘If coaching practice becomes so deep-rooted in a non-reflective manner, coaches are likely to be unable to even detect what their beliefs are (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). This has been found to be particularly so for inexperienced coaches (Strean et al, 1997). Because coaches are indoctrinated into thinking and acting in certain ways they find it difficult to then change their thinking (Bailey, 2010).’

Coaches must get into the habit of asking themselves, on reflection, the question: ‘Have I ever stopped to consider how my coaching beliefs look in practice?’ Or, put another way, ‘Is my coaching practice actually reflective of my coaching beliefs?’

Becoming more aware of your own coaching principles is another part of the process as you work towards the end goal of successfully imposing your core values on your athletes.

**Modifying your approach**

The process of forming a coaching philosophy is not simple then. It doesn’t just drop into your lap.

And even when all the pieces of the jigsaw are coming together nicely thanks to the mixture of a well-rounded coaching education and experiential learning, there are other factors to consider that can complicate matters.
Developing a philosophy is an individualised process. In basic terms, some coaches will want to specialise in individual sports, some team sports, some will coach women only, some may enter disability sport, others may mix and match, and may end up teaching adults one week and young children the next.

‘Coaches need to be thinking about some of the complexities of coaching and the socio-cultural elements which could maybe impact on them transmitting their philosophy,’ says Ed.

‘They may think, "This is what I stand for, this is what I am going to try and achieve," but there could be factors that could prevent them from achieving that, or which require them to change their way of thinking.’

Ed uses the example of a tennis coach getting paid for delivering private coaching lessons to junior club members.

They feel they have to modify their coaching style to satisfy the parents’ expectations – who are watching with interest from the sidelines. They normally favour a player-centred approach, where club members take responsibility for their own learning and are encouraged to ask questions, challenge and suggest new ideas.

But now someone is paying for their expertise, they feel they must radically alter their approach. The parents will be sure to grumble if they remain silent during the lesson so they become more vocal and resort to methodical instruction to justify the expenditure.

‘It comes down to the context, what you are trying to achieve, what’s appropriate for that context in that point in time,’ says Ed. ‘So the tennis example, that’s very much a performance environment, where there is perhaps a little bit more emphasis on competition and preparing for competition.’

Core values

So while it is vital to have some core beliefs at the foundation of your coaching philosophy, it may also be necessary to tweak them in certain situations, while endeavouring not to stray too far from those values.

This view is echoed by ConnectedCoaches member Sara Hilton, who, in the excellent forum thread ‘What is Your Coaching Philosophy?’, writes: ‘A coach's philosophy should always relate and be relevant to the environment in which they coach. That is, a philosophy of a grass-roots coach would be rather different to a premier league first team coach.’

Chris Chapman adds: ‘The approaches and methods I have used on the field and off have changed depending on the players’ experience, ability, aspirations and stage/environment but my values have remained the same.’

While Lawrie O'Keefe writes that, as his knowledge has expanded, and his experience grown, so his philosophy has been tweaked rather than changed – ‘The words may have been altered but the sentiments are enduring.’

Proceed with caution

So, to summarise, don’t run before you can walk. Developing a coaching philosophy is not a straightforward process. You don’t simply pick the one that you find enticing off a shelf.

It must be personal to you, intrinsically linked to your values as a person, but allowing for the fact that it will be shaped through your learning as you explore your coaching beliefs through practice and across a variety of platforms.

And be mindful of the fact you may have to make some modifications depending on the varied situations
you find yourself in.

There may be no such thing as a checklist for guaranteed success in coaching, but hopefully, the advice contained in this article should at least help new coaches avoid becoming ensnared by the pitfalls that threaten to plague their journey.

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