Conflict in coach-athlete relationships: A necessary evil?

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The coach-athlete relationship is essential for high sport performance and individual well-being. However, conflicts, disagreements and misunderstandings are an inevitable part of this relationship. **While conflict is generally viewed as negative, it can in fact have positive consequences if managed constructively:**

**background** Conflict promotes self-reflection (e.g., Do I communicate clearly?)
- Conflict enhances social skills (e.g., Can I understand the feelings of others accurately?)
- Conflict provides an opportunity for an open exchange of information that would have not been shared otherwise (e.g., How about we talk as we seem to be affected by what’s going on?)
- Conflict initiates a productive discussion about the problem itself and may pave a new way forward (e.g., How does this disagreement can move us forward?)
- Conflict strengthens relationships and increase mutual trust (e.g., the opportunity to talk, listen, understand, resolve can bring us closer)

In a recent study, we found that if conflict is not managed successfully, it may lead to strained and tensed relationships that can negatively impact coaches and athletes’ motivation, mood and self-esteem. In addition, it was evident that conflict is a stressful experience and persistent conflict is capable of increasing the risk for injuries, burnout and performance slumps. In another study we conducted, it was found that coaches and athletes facilitate constructive conflict management by:

- Ensuring open channels of communication and sharing potential topics of conflict early on
- Not taking conflict personally, but focussing on the topic and situation in which the conflict arise
- Showing interest in understanding the other’s point of view and caring for the other’s needs
- Preparing for honest, problem-focussed conversations (e.g., knowing what you want to achieve, articulating your side and being flexible to negotiate)
- Taking time out to reflect - conflicts are best solved when emotions are settled down

Furthermore, our research has shown that athlete participants perceive the coach to be the main “conflict resolver”. The coach is often viewed as one who is “responsible” for identifying or recognizing and addressing the conflict with her/his athletes. On the other hand, coach participants perceive that the athlete needs to be reflective and thoughtful of their behaviours. Coaches expected athletes to view conflict from different perspectives (e.g., How do you feel about it? How do you think I feel about it? etc). Both athletes and coaches emphasized the benefits of establishing a sport culture in which disagreements and disputes would be considered as an expected part of relating, communication and interacting. Therefore, individuals did not perceive conflicts as something fundamentally negative, harmful, damaging or wrong which needed to be avoided. Developing a sport culture, where conflict could be approached and managed constructively is clearly beneficial for the athlete, coach, team or squad as it can potentially reduce stress and other undesirable consequences for performance and wellbeing.

In order to establish a sport culture where conflict is ordinary and part of any coach-athlete interaction, it is useful to know the circumstances under which conflict may arise. The findings of our study suggest that the onset of conflict
is often the result of a multiplicity of situational factors, such as unmet role expectations, under-performance, lack of clear roles, distant or detached coach-athlete relationships. The findings further highlight that these factors cultivate a ripe environment within which conflict grows and develops and conflict manifests itself through such actions as confronting, shouting, and rebelling or avoiding, withdrawing and disengaging with one another. The findings further reveal that when the topic of conflict is considered relevant and either the coach or the athlete is identified as the source of interference, coaches and athletes manifest emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to conflict. These immediate responses seem to determine the further process of the conflict. Responses such as aggression, sarcasm, anger or blame escalated conflict. In contrast, responses such as worry, disappointment or relief de-escalated conflict. In turn such responses were associated with self-regulatory behaviours (e.g., self-reflection, contemplation, consideration) and conflict management attempts. Overall, being mindful of how coaches and athletes respond to conflict may be central for its effective management and resolution.

As our goal is to generate more knowledge in this area, we are kindly asking you to take part in our present study. It aims to examine how your responses to conflict with your athletes affect important outcomes (e.g., performance). Participation involves the completion of the following questionnaire (max 15 min): https://loughboroughssehs.eu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_eu1xCDjBbsCuTml

We would be grateful if you could also encourage your athletes to fill in the online questionnaire which is anonymous and confidential. Please feel free to get in touch with my PhD student Svenja for further information (S.Wachsmuth@lboro.ac.uk).

A blog report with the results of this current study will be supplied to ConnectedCoaches in due course. We thank you in advance.

For further readings, please refer to:


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