

# Communication: the fuel of effective and successful coach-athlete relationships.

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The coach-athlete relationship is central to coaching. It is not coincidence that behind every successful athlete or team there stands a coach! Athletes who have achieved the highest levels of performance (e.g., Olympic or World performances) acknowledge the work and support of their coaches. These are the coaches who recognize the significance of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and make every effort to connect with each one athlete in their team or squad. Ultimately, the relationship coaches develop with their athletes becomes a vehicle that takes them on a journey of growth and development.

Considering the important role this relationship plays for both performance success and personal satisfaction, the question many coaches may be asking is, “How can I develop and maintain quality coach-athlete relationships (i.e., relationships that really work)? Effective communication is the fuel of relationships; it helps enhance and maintain its quality, while lack of it is likely to lead to inefficient, unproductive and dissatisfying working partnerships (Rhind & Jowett, 2011b) regardless of type of sport context (i.e., performance or participation).

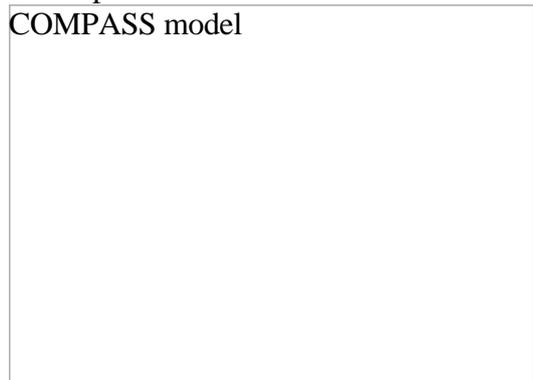
## The COMPASS model

Rhind and Jowett (2008, 2010, 2012) investigated the strategies coaches and athletes use to develop and maintain high quality connections with one another. Their research revealed that coaches and athletes employ the following 7 strategies:

- [1. conflict management](#)
- [2. openness](#)
- [3. motivation](#)
- [4. assurance \(positivity\)](#)
- [5. preventative \(advice\)](#)
- [6. support](#)
- [7. social networks.](#)

These 7 key communication strategies comprise the COMPASS model (see Figure 1 below) and are found to facilitate and maintain relationship quality. For example, Rhind and Jowett (2011a) have indicated that COMPASS and its strategies can help maintain close, committed, complementary and co-orientated relationships (i.e., better quality relationships and high quality bonds). Their research findings also suggest that the absence of these strategies can lead to relationships which are characterized by distance, indifference and interference all of which are characteristics that prevent progress and development.

COMPASS model



**COMPASS** is a communication model highlighting key strategies that coaches and athletes use or can use to develop better working relationships (see Rhind & Jowett, 2011b). COMPASS can help navigate the coach-athlete relationship ensuring its journey is both successful and satisfying.

**Conflict management** - reflects efforts to identify, discuss, resolve and monitor potential areas of disagreement or misunderstanding.

Ask yourself (and your athlete):

1. Am I calm during disagreements or misunderstandings with my athlete/coach? Yes No
2. Am I patient during disagreements or misunderstandings with my athlete/coach? Yes No
3. Do I listen to my athlete/coach when he/she tries to raise an issue of concern for him/her? Yes No
4. Am I prepared to work with my athlete/coach to resolve the disagreement or misunderstanding? Yes No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider “what do you do” or “how”, for example, HOW do you show your athlete/coach you are calm, patient, good listener, prepared to resolve issues?*

**Openness** - includes conscious efforts to engage in open lines of communication

Ask yourself (and your athlete):

1. Do I explain my opinion and thoughts when we are setting Yes No
2. Do I give my athlete/coach honest and constructive feedback? Yes No
3. Do I provide my athlete/coach praise and recognition when appropriate? Yes No
4. Am I open about my feelings with my athlete/coach? Yes No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider “what do you do” or “how”, for example, WHAT do you do to explain your viewpoints, provide feedback and recognition and accessible or approachable?*

**Motivation** - highlights efforts from both coach and athlete to develop and maintain a partnership that is rewarding, ambitious and dynamic; provides reasons for maintaining and staying the relationship.

Ask yourself (and your athlete):

1. Do I show that I am motivated to work hard with my athlete/coach? Yes No

2. Do I show my ability as a coach/athlete? Yes No
3. Do I show that I am motivated to achieve? Yes No
4. Do I work hard to achieve the goals set? Yes No
5. Do I show that I am passionate about coaching/the sport? Yes No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider “what do you do” or “how”, for example, HOW do you show you are motivated to work hard and achieve, you have the skills required to achieve the goals set and passionate about what you are doing?*

**Assurance** - includes showing one’s commitment to the relationship (e.g. making sacrifices that will assist the relationship to be purposeful, functional and successful)

Ask yourself (and your athlete):

1. Do I show my athlete/coach that he/she can rely on me when things are not going well? Yes No
2. Do I act in ways that my athlete/coach can count on me to achieve our performance goals? Yes No
3. Am I approachable enough so that my athlete/coach feels that he/she can talk to me about anything? Yes No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider “what do you do” or “how”, for example, HOW do you make sure that your athlete/coach can rely on your when things are not going so well or that he/can approach you with anything that may he/she is concerned about?*

**Preventative** - underlines efforts to discuss expectations, rules, roles and what should happen if these are not met

Ask yourself (and your athlete):

1. I make sure my athlete/coach knows what I expect from him/her Yes No
2. I frequently talk about where we stand Yes No
3. I ensure my athlete/coach is aware when he/she has/has not met my expectations Yes No
4. I like to have regular reviews about progress and how we get on with one another Yes No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider “what do you do” or “how”, for example, HOW*

*do you make sure that your athlete/coach know what you expect from him/her and the potential consequences if expectations are not met? How do regular talks and reviews are being held and how helpful and constructive are they?*

**Support** - is reflected in helping one another (coach/athlete) through difficult times; support can be emotional, informational, tangible

Ask yourself (and your athlete):

1. Do I give my athlete/coach support when they are going through a difficult time (e.g., set back, illness)?      Yes   No
2. Am I considerate of events in my athlete's/coach's personal life?      Yes   No
3. Am I prepared to spend time to understand the type of support my athlete/coach may require to help him/her?      Yes   No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider "what do you do" or "how", for example, HOW do you give support when needed and what do you do to appreciate the support that is needed?*

**Social networks** - the relationship built between the coach and the athlete is not disconnected from other relationships and people (e.g., assistant coaches, teammates, scientific support providers, parents, partners); subsequently, creating opportunities to develop strong bonds with others is paramount to the success of the coach-athlete relationship and maintaining a common social network

1. Do I like spending time with my coach/athlete and mutual friends (e.g., other coaches, fellow players/athletes, support staff, each other's family)?      Yes   No
2. Do I talk to my athlete/coach about our mutual friends (e.g., fellow athletes and coaches, support staff) as well as personal interests, likes and dislikes that may be relevant to our sport?      Yes   No

*For each question, you may also wish to consider "what do you do" or "how", for example, HOW do you use your social networks to benefit your relationship and the goals you have set out to achieve?*

### **Concluding Remarks**

To conclude, relationship maintenance is important. Coaches (and their athletes) can actively strengthen their relationship bonds: Closeness, Commitment and Complementarity (i.e., 3Cs). COMPASS can serve as a framework that helps ensure that through its strategies you develop a coaching environment within which there is (a) appreciation for one another, (b) fun and cheerfulness, as well as (c) co-operation, team work and support. [Moreover, the very characteristics that describe the quality of relationships \(i.e., 3Cs\) can serve as strategies to maintain and further enhance them.](#) For example, within **Closeness**, trust and respect are important relational properties and among others underline that you, as coach, are sensitive to your athletes' feelings. You can of course still disagree but never disregard

your athletes' feelings as well as thoughts, views, opinions and beliefs. Athletes are more likely to appreciate their coaches' non-judgmental ways, compassion and understanding towards them. These are important indicators for your athletes that coaches value them as an athlete but also as a person. Athletes who are valued by their coaches are likely to want to work with them, persist, and give their very best.

**Commitment** is another characteristic of the relationship quality and signifies your thoughts that the relationship is strong and sound and has promise. Creating a committed relationship is easy if you are prepared to invest time, effort and energy. High quality coach-athlete connections that last the test of time require investing time in them (e.g., planning a training and competition programme to suit the individual athlete)! Coaches who wish for responsible and accountable athletes, they need to show them that they accept responsibility and accountability for their own actions first.

Finally, **Complementarity** is a relationship quality that is synonymous to collaboration and cooperation. As a coach you need to make sure that athletes understand that you are there to help them and that you have their best interest at heart. Subsequently, everything you do is to support each one athlete within your squad and team to reach their potential. Athletes look up to their coaches for direction and leadership and as such coaches need to find ways to positively influence their athletes to improve and develop. Both coaches and athletes' behaviours of responsiveness, receptiveness and friendliness can make a significant difference in the pursuit of sporting excellence.

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## Next Steps

If you found this blog helpful you might also be interested in:

- [How to Create a Relational Coaching Environment](#)  
- Evidence based tips to help you build closeness, commitment and complementarity with your athletes and improve your coach-athlete relationship. [The tips have also been produced as infographics.](#)
- [At the heart of effective coaching leadership lies the dyadic coach-athlete relationship](#)
- [The vehicle to success: CAR can transport coach and athlete on a journey of fulfilment](#)

If you enjoyed this you can find all my other ConnectedCoaches blogs [here](#).

## References

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