

Dealing with feelings: The importance of getting your head around emotion perception

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emotion perception

Emotion perception is a key component of emotional intelligence. In the third chapter of our series, we explore the inner world of emotions, and discover how recognising and managing them in yourself and others can significantly improve your coaching.

A good sound bite can be a highly effective means of communication.

It is the reason film trailers are teeming with them, why politicians reel them off thick and fast, and why they trip off the tongue of sports coaches, songwriters, university lecturers and conference speakers.

Those pithy words that encapsulate the essence of your message in such a concise, clever way can stay with you forever.

‘Ask not what your country can do for you but rather what you can do for your country.’ John F Kennedy’s inauguration speech.

My personal favourite is associated with the theory of emotional intelligence (EI). It is snappy and memorable, as sound bites should be, but the words carry great significance and are hugely beneficial in helping coaches understand why the study of emotions is so critical in sports coaching.

So without further ado:

Emotions drive thoughts, thoughts drive behaviour, and behaviour drives performance.

Now, let me put that into context.

Emotion perception is the ability to identify emotions in yourself, and in those around you, and is a key facet of EI.

Understanding and honing your emotion perception will enable you to perform at a much higher level as a coach.

The ability to pick up on and influence your own and other people’s emotions will also empower you to influence your players’ behaviour. And as the maxim above makes clear, therein lies the secret of improving their performance.

The chimp and the antenna

So it makes sense to make sense of people’s emotions. But if you still think I’m making no sense, behavioural performance and training expert [Catherine Baker](#) reinforces the significance of emotion perception below with several easy to understand scenarios.

It can become boring for coaches to keep being reminded of it, but the fact is, the mental side of sports coaching is just as important as the technical and

tactical sides.

The last time we delved into [emotional intelligence](#), we examined how [self-awareness](#) was the first step towards understanding EI in yourself and other people.

In this third part of the series, Catherine argues that, to become the complete coach, you must also have a good perception of the emotional struggles that take place within your athletes' heads, as well as your own head.

'I refer to the two sides of emotion perception as the chimp and the antenna,' begins Catherine, who explains how to use emotion perception as an indispensable performance tool.

'Focusing on yourself first of all, and how good you are at recognising emotions in yourself, that is where the whole concept around [The Chimp Paradox](#) comes in (the book written by Professor Steve Peters based on the work he did with Sir Chris Hoy).

'What that's looking at is the ability to perceive emotions within yourself and then deal with them appropriately. So, how good are you at realising that you are feeling nervous today, unconfident, insecure, tired, angry, demotivated etc?

'Or it could be the opposite? You may be feeling really happy today, incredibly optimistic, and therefore more likely to be optimistic in the way you go about your day. It's about picking up on those emotions.'

Picking up emotions in others may be more of a challenge. For this, Catherine uses the term antenna.

A good analogy is to think of an old-fashioned black and white TV set. Those of a certain age will remember the aerial with two rabbit ear prongs sticking out of a plastic base that you had to move around the room to pick up a decent reception and get rid of the interference.

Think of having to move that antenna around as you attempt to tune in to the emotions of people around you. That should give you a clearer picture (pun intended!).

Go ape

So go ahead, release the emotional side of your brain – your inner chimp – and give it free reign to interpret the feelings and sentiments circulating inside your mind.

Imagine that you are the coach of a local boys' youth rugby team and that you have reached the cup final. You are hoping to go one better than last season, when you lost in the final.

Catherine develops the scenario:

'It is the night before, you are worried and are lying in bed, dealing with lots of emotions. Have you given the players enough training? Have you given them adequate pep talks? Has the gameplan been worked through properly? You are also worried because your mum hasn't been very well, and that has added to your stress levels.

'When you wake up the next morning, how good are you at recognising those emotions that were, and still are, flooding your mind, as well as appreciating that you are going to be tired because those emotions have caused you to have a sleepless night?'

When you arrive at the ground and enter the dressing room, it is important that you have taken the time to reflect on what you have been experiencing and are now starting to pick up on the emotions of your players by setting your antenna in motion.

Catherine adds: 'Yes, you are going to be going through the game plan and focusing on the technical elements, but that people side is also really important. Which boys are quieter than normal – which might suggest they are extremely nervous – and which boys are louder than normal – which again may be a symptom of nerves?'

'Looking around and seeing how they are reacting to the situation will guide you in dealing with those emotions appropriately.'

You may feel it is necessary to psych up certain individuals who respond well to passionate pep talks, and who don't seem to have grasped the importance of the occasion, or put an arm around the shoulder of others to tease them out of their shell so they don't carry that nervousness into the biggest game of the season.

'It's about understanding what those individuals need as individuals,' says Catherine.

Leicester City coach Claudio Ranieri epitomises this piece of advice.

He has guided the top-flight minnows – 5000/1 outsiders to win the Premier League at the start of the season – to the title in arguably the biggest achievement in sporting history.

Claudio Ranieri

LIP SERVICE: Claudio Ranieri plants a kiss on the Premier League trophy

One of the many reasons behind his Midas touch this season has been his ability to tune his antenna in to the minds of his players, to ascertain their individual needs and to act accordingly.

‘He has a fantastic understanding of what is required in that dressing room in terms of atmosphere and emotions,’ says Catherine.

As Ranieri said himself: ‘They so need to be relaxed and not harassed. They expect calm and respect in the dressing room so, if you want to be a prima donna, they won’t forgive you for it.’

Remember too that sport can also be about taking emotion out of situations.

‘When you listen to British tennis ace Johanna Konta speaking, it’s very much growth mindset language,’ says Catherine. ‘So in a pre-match interview, she will say, “I’m going out on court today to try to play the best tennis that I can play,” rather than, “I’m going to go out and win in straight sets,” which will just heighten the pressure on her shoulders.’

Self-analysis sessions

The process of emotion perception can be easier to employ if you coach individual athletes.

Often, you come to understand the rhythms, patterns and moods of the person, helping you identify the occasions when you need to step in.

One day, they might need gearing up. Other days, they might be particularly focused. Another time, they might arrive for training distracted, and you have to spend time sharpening their concentration before you embark on any technical instruction.

‘You may feel you are better at coaching certain people in the morning because your moods seem to fit better,’ says Catherine. ‘In the evenings, when you are tired, those same people may retain their exuberance, and you might find you have to push yourself that bit harder to match their mood or emotions.’

Emotion perception, then, is the precursor to emotion regulation. And you won’t be able to manipulate any emotions if you haven’t pinpointed them in the first place.

But isn’t it the British way to run from our emotions – keeping our chimp locked in its cage? The idea is that, if we ignore them, maybe they will just go away and stop bothering us.

‘That’s fine, but if you think it’s affecting your performance, then you should deal with it,’ is Catherine’s advice, and she urges coaches to take the following ‘what’ and ‘why’ approach.

‘Imagine a situation where you are nervous about something. Say to yourself: “What is it exactly that I’m nervous about, and why am I nervous about it?”’

It might be that you are giving a presentation, and you are particularly anxious because there is a really important person in the audience, or you are not 100% confident in your material and are worried people might think you are out of your depth.

Identifying your anxieties gives you a starting point. You can then begin acting on those feelings.

If you have asked yourself the question far enough in advance, you will have recognised the need to be better prepared and so brushed up on your material. If it’s just before you go on stage, remind yourself of the fact you were asked to speak because you are an expert on the subject, and remember your flawless dress rehearsals in front of the mirror the night before.

Train your brain

There are some very simple tools you can use to train yourself in the art of emotion perception.

‘One of the really basic things you can do is to try to start taking notice of your own inner emotions before you worry about other people’s,’ says Catherine.

‘So after each session or coach’s meeting, reflect. What have I perceived in myself? What emotions did I go through in that meeting? Was I aware of them at the time, or was it only afterwards that I became aware of them?’

‘Maybe after a week of doing that, when you have got into the habit, begin writing down at the end of the day the emotions you had as you went through the day and the impact they had on the sessions you coached.’

‘The next week, start adding in another column, the emotions of those around you. Did I notice, for example, or acknowledge that one day I had a group of five-year-old girls who were really giggly and excited because it was their lunchtime session, but then, when I had them again at the end of the day, they were actually really tired and flat? Did I, first of all, notice that and, secondly, adapt my session accordingly?’

Another technique Catherine recommends is asking colleagues for their thoughts.

‘I don’t think many of us are very good at that. Ask them: “Do you think I am good at reading people’s emotions, or do you think it is something I need to work on and improve?”’

‘Watch and observe anyone in the workplace you think is really good at it. Maybe ask them how they manage to pick up on things so well.’

Keeping up with the Joneses

Interpreting people’s emotionally significant stimuli will only come with practice, but you should understand by now how important it is to do just that – practise.

As Catherine concludes: ‘It’s that classic motto that when I get on the start line, I want to know in myself that I have done everything possible to make sure I’m in the best place to perform at my best.’

And it seems to be working for Eddie Jones, who guided the England rugby union team to their first Six Nations Grand Slam triumph since 2003.

In one of his first interviews since taking over the hot seat, he was asked: 'What three things make a great coach?'

Knowledge, enthusiasm and an ability to manage people was his response, explaining that understanding and responding to each player's emotional needs is an instrumental part of being a good coach who is driven to achieving success.

Read more about Catherine and her work (including how to get in touch with her and her team) by visiting her [coaching profile](#).

Please join the debate by leaving a comment.

Next steps

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