

# Failed Communication

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I recently got fined for forgetting to pay a toll on one of the UK's major highways.

You drive on their road, visit their website within 24 hours, and pay your fee.

And I forgot.

Wonderful.

What's interesting about this is that they have a fair few signs in place to ensure you don't forget. You can't go through the toll without seeing at least a dozen of the signs.

But here lies the problem with instructional communication. It's not just about what you see or hear, *it's what you remember*. Or perhaps what you follow.

After seeing the 2nd or 3rd sign I switched off to it. I was tired of seeing the same message over and over again. By the time I was home. I'd already forgotten, nothing had been retained.

The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished

There's a lesson here for us as coaches. Only the information that our athletes retain is of any use to them, and the best way to get retention is:

- A) Repetition
- B) Giving information in digestible chunks
- C) Having the athlete think for themselves, and
- D) Giving the same message in a variety of different ways.

We want to achieve learning that's 'sticky.'

If you've driven near a school in the UK or through construction areas, you'll see a variety of different ways of communicating that you should be driving at an appropriate speed. Including signs that say:

- 'My Daddy works here, please slow down.'
- 'Kill your speed before your speed kills.'
- '50 accidents were reported here in the last 12 months.'
- 'Children play here. Slow down.'
- 'There's no need for speed.'

Throw in some flashing lights, speed bumps and a couple of cameras and you have a pretty effective way of enforcing and communicating your message. These message use *emotion* and *fear* to get their point across and they are very effective in doing so.

But they often only work 'in the moment.'

We don't necessarily *forget* the rules, we always know what they are, but we ignore them.

It doesn't matter how good your message is if people aren't receiving it

It makes me wonder. What percentage of communication with our athletes is:

### **Not heard**

In busy, loud gyms, this is more common than we might think. Or perhaps you don't have the athlete's attention.

### **Not remembered**

Often occurs when coaches give multiple bits of feedback in the same instance, or too much information in general. Most information is not retained. The brain acts like a sieve, filtering out certain information and in many instances, the primary/recency effect kicks in, where the brain remembers the first and last bit of information, yet forgetting the bit in the middle.

### **Mis-understood**

By giving feedback in language and terminology that is not appropriate to the gymnasts age, technical understanding or ability.

### **Ignored**

I'd like to think this happens the least, but there are times when this does sadly occur, raising concerns for either A) Motivation or B) Athlete : Coach relationship. This can also occur when athletes are tired of hearing the same message over and over again. (I've lost count of the number of times coaches have shared their frustration when an athlete responds better to me giving the exact same feedback as the personal coach. Same message, different person.)

If the information has been heard **and** understood, it is down to our ability to help the athlete 'connect the dots' of understanding and application.

Sometimes the athlete just can't 'feel' the error, or the way in which they can resolve it. In which case, a 'diversion' is often appropriate. ([\*You can see a short video about this by clicking here.\*](#))

It's not for the lack of trying.

It's not for the lack of will.

The message given isn't always the message received

Take an athlete performing a round off > back flick > layout for example.

There are few kids who actually have the technically correct head position on take off and flight, but it's not that their coach isn't saying the right things. They're often giving the right feedback. Maybe the coach says 'keep your head in' or 'don't throw your head back' (both correct in principle.)

But months and months will go by without any correction of the error. The coach may be communicating a message but they are failing to do three things:

1. **Enforce the message.** If the athlete throws the head out, they'll continue doing more reps anyway with no intervention. They'll even move on to higher skills.
2. **Change the language** to try an alternative way of ensuring the message is understood.
3. **Create a diversion** by finding an alternative approach to the skills methodology.

In my work, one of the greatest qualities I see in the best technicians is their ability to **communicate** and **enforce** a message.

They have a benchmark standard in their mind of what a skill should look like, and they continue to work until it is achieved.

Anything less is sub-maximal, and that's not the name of the game.

We should all strive to achieve communication that is heard, understood and retained. Without all of those, we have failed.

Thanks for reading.

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