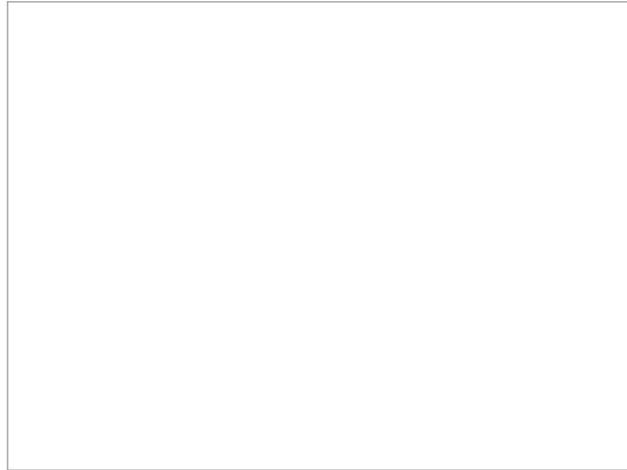


Righting "the Righting Reflex"

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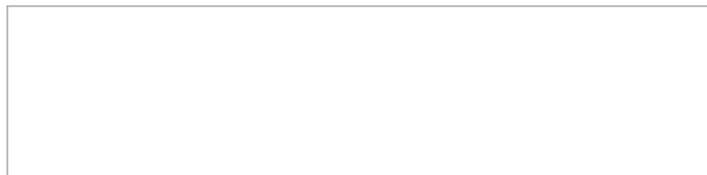
Mike coaching...but is it art?

This post is about the “righting reflex”. It draws its inspiration from three sources: a super book about Motivational Interviewing in sports that includes the term; an insightful coaches’ workshop I recently ran; and my own attempts to put theory into practice in the busy, full on, organised chaos of one to one swimming lessons with young people with disabilities.

The connections are weaved into the following three steps to right “the righting reflex”.

Step 1: “The Righting Reflex” and Self Awareness

The term “righting reflex” comes from the co-founder of Motivational Interviewing, Professor Stephen Rollnick, in his new book *Coaching Athletes to Be Their Best*.



He and the other co-authors suggest that, as coaches, we often instinctively jump in and want to fix what we see as not right.

One of the key principles of Motivational Interviewing (first developed in the world of healthcare) is, instead, to listen with an “uncluttered empathy”, even (or especially) when we think we know what will put things right – to hold back from offering solutions, to have a curiosity to understand more, to listen and ask questions that help connect with those we are with. That way the coach and coached together feel their way to what will work best and the athlete has a much greater sense of commitment to the way forward. I find this approach very powerful in my own coaching, though it doesn’t always come naturally.

At the start of a workshop I ran at the end of January, the first in a new series on confidence and self-belief in coaching, I asked the participants to agree we would listen to each other to understand and not to offer quick fire “you should do...” or “I had the same and I did...” solutions. Everyone adhered to

this, listening to each other without judgement or ready-made solutions. However, what struck me, as we shared experiences in pairs or trios, was how quickly almost everyone tended to slip into prescribing their own solutions to their stories – “I should have done...” – as if wanting to quickly fix and put right what happened, rather than staying with what it had felt like.

It also brought to mind how I had reacted to an immensely positive experience that week with a young swimmer I’ve been teaching through the charity Level Water for children with disabilities. She had taken part in her first gala and came away with a medal. When her mum recounted the success and started thanking me, I found myself instinctively unwilling to accept any praise, all too ready to give all the credit to her and her daughter – as if unable to acknowledge any part in the last eighteen months or so.

Yet how can we attune ourselves to the feelings of those we’re coaching – their sometimes contradictory mix of emotions, highs and lows and ebbs and flows of confidence and self-belief – if we don’t allow ourselves the time and space to stay with our own feelings, positive and negative?

So the first step is a self awareness of how we react in the moment and a readiness to sit with those feelings. In this way I believe “[coaching the person in front of us](#)”, to pick up on one of the UK Coaching’s excellent mantras, actually starts with knowing ourselves and being alert to our instinctive reactions.

Step 2: Creative Coaching Relationships

The second step goes to the heart of the coaching relationship. Traditionally we would think of this as essentially a one way process: the expert coach leads and commands and the coached follow. When things don’t go right, whose fault is it? We might automatically say it’s with those being coached – they’re the ones lacking motivation to apply themselves or just not listening to instructions. The righting reflex digs its heels in. Firmer, clearer instructions are given to put it right, but often with even less effect and more often than not some push back. And before you know it both sides are stuck on a path that only leads to more frustration and disengagement.

It doesn’t have to be that way, though. I’ve written in a [previous post for ConnectedCoaches that at the heart of coaching, like any relationship, lies the potential for a creative interaction](#) – “a creative interplay, the coach and coached sharing in making something new and fresh, with a depth and energy of its own that leaves both enriched.” Rather than being the provider of instant fix-its, think how it would be to see coaching as a shared creative endeavour, in tune with the person or people we’re coaching and the art of our coaching having a relaxed spontaneity, never predictable or the “same old same old.”

So what might this look like? [In the earlier article for ConnectedCoaches](#) I suggested that, particularly in Club sessions I coach, I see at least four distinct points of creative interaction between the coach and those being coached. I used an analogy of a jazz improvisation, with the music of coaching taking over as we get into the swing. Let’s try the analogy of a visual artist to bring a splash of colour to the four points of creative interaction:

- **connecting:** think of how a painter will start by looking deeply at his or her subject, to seek out a connection or the essence of what is before them. There’s a curiosity and disciplined clearing of the mind to focus on what’s ahead.

In a similar way, by giving undivided attention to the person or people in front of us, a connection can be made and clear the way for something creative to follow. Nothing needs to be rushed – the coach holds the time to allow the initial contact to be made. In coaching those first few moments of contact are key – just around 10 seconds to make someone feel welcome. Then an unhurried readiness to listen and question in order to understand.

- **energy and engagement:** the artist also comes with their energy and passion, ready to lift themselves for the creative task ahead and thereby feed off and get to the heart of their subject.

Similarly, the coach starts with what Brené Brown would call “showing up”, bringing a wholehearted focus and energy, conveying their serious intent and purpose, to animate and encourage engagement – “we’re here to work on...” “our focus this evening is on...” I’ve found the shared energy and engagement feed off each other, making the sessions flow and prepares our canvas for the next part.

- **exploring:** the analogy to a painter is perhaps getting more tenuous, but as he or she makes each brush stroke there’s an attentiveness and concentration not just on how what’s emerging looks – but also how it feels, what emotions or sensations it evokes and how every stroke, each mix of colour and shade come together to form the painting as if it had a life of its own.

So too, as the session gets underway, the coach’s attention can turn to using the space to explore the possibilities. Unlike our lone painter, though, we’re looking for a shared endeavour, a co-creation. Together coach and coached explore and feel their way to what works: what it feels like for the athlete to make that extra effort, to adapt the technique, to push harder or faster, with more control or a heightened sense of form, intensity of effort or movement. All the time asking how something felt, before offering observations along the lines of “I saw... is that right? Did it feel different to you?”

- **capturing:** the final point of creative interaction is that sense of capturing what has been experienced, as if framing our new masterpiece.

We can do this simply by asking people what they got out of the session. In effect we are asking them to reflect on whether they found something new that can be taken to the next practice. “Hold on to that new found sensation – it’s yours to keep.”

Step 3: The “I” in Praise

Finally, a related idea in Motivational Interviewing is, in some ways the other side of the “righting reflex” coin: the over-use of praise. Just as instinctively we’ll want to jump in and fix what we see as not right, so we can too readily shower on praise when things look right to us. I’ve been trying to be more alert to these instincts and to develop the subtle art of affirmation. I’m finding it’s not always easy.

Praise is of course necessary and valuable, especially when delivered with a clear indication of the particular action that is being acknowledged. Yet it can also sometimes carry with it an implicit judgement: I as the coach am hereby acknowledging that you have followed my instruction and met my standard. Well done. Good for you.

Affirmation subtly shifts the centre point of this interaction to the athlete, creating the space for him or her to look more deeply and take in the positives of what they have done, affirming their ability or achievement. I’m finding it can also bring out more of the sheer pleasure of that creative process, of realising something new.

“When affirming, you are more a curious and admiring witness to what you observe than the arbiter or judge of what you want to see in your athletes.” S Rollnick, J Fader, J Breckon & T Moyers: *Coaching Athletes to Be Their Best*, Guildford Press, 2020.

Back in the pool with my young Level Water swimmer and she’s putting all her energy into some super widths, first using our adapted stroke on her front, then on her back. As we get to the wall each time I’m bursting to say “Well done!” Or some similar enthusiastic praise.

Instead I’m trying to get into the habit of just holding back, looking to see her reaction first and then maybe asking “how different did that feel?” (with an admiring, animated tone of “wow” coming

through). “Could you feel a difference by doing...” whatever we’re trying out. Then maybe adding something like “let’s see if we can take it even further in the next width.”

My intention behind the somewhat faltering search for a different way to respond is to encourage her to be more attuned to the sensations of the stroke – her position in the water, the effort she’s making, the fluency of movement – so that the sense of what is “right” comes from her rather than me or anyone else watching. That way she’s also far more likely to be able to judge for herself when something’s not quite working and be able to put it right.

It would be great to hear from other coaches on a similar journey what works and doesn’t work for you – **please use the space for comments below to add your reflections and experiences.** Though watch out for the “you should do...” righting reflex!

Big thanks to Professor Rollnick for the book and for his generosity in exchanges we’ve had over the last year; to the coaches who take part in my workshops for their readiness to share experiences (next one in May); and to all my inspirational Level Water swimmers, from whom I learn so much.

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