

Emotional intelligence is integral to becoming a great coach

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- **Emotions drive thoughts, thoughts drive behaviour, and behaviour drives performance.**
- **Coaches need to understand when to scale up and when to scale down their empathy levels.**
- **It is important that coaches feel comfortable discussing and evaluating their experiences as a means of improving their self-awareness.**
- **The more you know your player, the better you are going to be at coaching them.**

This article deals with some important emotional issues.

Not the ones traditionally served up for discussion, like anxiety, depression or [eating disorders](#). We shine the spotlight on the term ‘emotional intelligence’ and examine the gamut of everyday behavioural patterns associated with it.

Some coaches may have never heard of it, some consider it to be a myth; there are those who pay lip service to it without really understanding it, while others deem it the Holy Grail for sports coaches.

To the uninitiated, the ‘it’ in question might seem at first glance to be an intellectual concept probably best left to sports science degree students to investigate. But the principles of EI are actually quite simple to grasp. Putting it into practice – now, that’s the difficult part.

A definition

[Catherine Baker](#) delivers education seminars on EI. She is the founder of Sport and Beyond – a behavioural profiling, training and performance company.

She is an EI disciple and defines it as the ability to understand and control your emotions in order to be able to perform to your absolute potential.

Embellishing on that abridged interpretation, she adds: ‘I explain to people that emotions drive thoughts, thoughts drive behaviour, and behaviour drives performance.

‘In a sporting context, and a coach dealing with an athlete, again, it’s that ability to understand and control your emotions and those emotions of the people you are working with and manage your relationships accordingly.’

EI has been a big theme in business leadership over the last five or 10 years, with advocates of EI claiming the more emotionally intelligent you can be, the more effective you can be as a leader.

It is being picked up more and more now in the world of sport and more specifically the coaching sector.

Take Joe Bloggs as an example. He is the newly appointed coach of Someplace Wanderers semi-professional football team. He is charismatic, has boundless enthusiasm and is highly intelligent. He is passionate about coaching, has his Level 2 badge and has more ideas for developing his squad than you can shake a stick at. He is going places as a coach. Everyone thinks so.

But just months into the job, Wanderers are stuck in the relegation zone and morale in the team is low. Why? Because Joe lacks EI. His changing room banter is upsetting several players who are intimidated by his caustic ‘wit’, he has fined his star striker for failing to turn up for training, not realising he has been going through some marriage problems. His assistant manager resigned a few weeks ago, upset that Joe would not share any responsibility for the coaching sessions, despite his assistant’s vast experience. Joe is perplexed. How did things go so wrong?

Failure to spot his weaknesses and an inability to put himself in the shoes of his players in order to gauge their emotions resulted in him ‘losing the dressing room’. All his undoubted qualities were rendered all but worthless.

Not so much emotional intelligence as emotional unintelligence.

‘It is understanding where you are on a scale and in which situations you might need to dial up your empathy levels, or dial down,’ says Catherine, who recognises that the role of a sports coach can be something of an emotional roller coaster.

But it’s not just a matter of buckling up and waiting for the inevitable highs and lows. It is about exercising the brain in the use of EI so you are better equipped to deal with and adapt to any given situation.

The brain is a muscle, after all, and can be strengthened so it is time coaches began exercising their minds too.

Are you self-aware?

Coaches must understand that their actions and behaviour can have an effect on their players or athletes and should look to nurture a strong relationship with their protégés.

‘It is important for coaches to know the person before the player,’ says Catherine.

‘I think it comes down to the basic premise of the more you know your player, the better you are going to be at coaching them.’

I ask, with that in mind, if it is easier coaching an individual than an entire team, bearing in mind the disparity of personalities and multiplied emotional scenarios likely to be encountered.

‘Yes, on an individual basis, you’ve got more of an ability to really get to understand that person and modify and adapt your behaviour accordingly.’

‘Having said that, in a team situation, players can feed off each other. A coach can then build on the vibe going around a team in a particular session or season.’

‘Every member of the team will have their natural behaviour and style, it’s about understanding where you need to modify or adapt your behaviour depending on particular players or even on how individuals are feeling that day.’

The key term in the psychological field of EI is ‘[self-awareness](#)’ – the clear understanding of your personality and how others perceive you.

Without self-awareness, how can you hope to recognise, understand and manage both your own and other people’s emotions?

‘What we are talking about is quite sophisticated and, like any section of society or occupation, I am sure there is a group out there who will probably have an attitude of, “It’s all a complete waste of time and I’m not interested,”’ says Catherine.

‘Other coaches will do it by instinct. We held a workshop this week where there were a lot of managers and coaches in the room. We were breaking down EI into different facets, and one experienced coach said, “It’s very useful to have that broken down, but I think I do a lot of that instinctively.” I think the more years of experience you build up, the more likely you are to have that larger awareness.’

The coaching connection

It might be that an athlete has the willingness and potential to learn and the potential to improve, but a coach just isn’t managing their relationship effectively.

‘This is where EI links to growing and sustaining participation,’ says Catherine. ‘Coaches need to understand how important their role is in terms of encouraging participation to start with.’

‘There may be all sorts of factors why they are coming back again and again to sessions. It might be their mates are there or their parents are pushing them, but one of the key influences is the connection with the coach and their ability to work them out quickly, work out what is going to motivate them and how best to deal with them to keep them coming on an ongoing basis.’

‘With children, obviously, the more enjoyable you can make the experience, the more likelihood that they are going to continue with it as an adult. Other factors, like success, will also have an influence, but, again, a key element is this connection with the coach.’

Catherine feels it is important for coaches to feel comfortable about discussing experiences they have had. By evaluating them, they will be able to pinpoint occasions when they showed too much empathy, maybe didn’t regulate their emotions enough or expressed themselves too much, making the other

person feel uncomfortable.

She cites the example of the Yorkshire Rows – a group of working mums from Yorkshire who are rowing the Atlantic in December as part of the [Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge](#).

‘We have done a workshop with them around behaviour and also EI,’ explains Catherine.

‘They have already broken one world record as they are the first all-female crew to have rowed across the North Sea. One of the crew got seasick on that crossing, and she felt absolutely terrible for a part of the journey.

‘When they row the Atlantic, it will be an 8–12-week expedition, two hours on, two hours off all the time so if you’ve lost one of your four crew members, and they can’t do anything, it will clearly have a huge impact on the whole team.’

By examining the emotionality factors involved in their North Sea expedition, the crew have devised a game plan that could prove invaluable next time they are on the ocean.

Catherine adds: ‘Empathy between the team members and also the ability to understand their own emotions and to pick up on the emotions of others are crucial.

Helen, the team member who was seasick, felt she was letting everyone else down. Nobody else had really picked up on that, they just thought she felt ill. One of the team members has huge levels of empathy and really wanted to sit down with her and tell her, “Oh, I feel so bad for you, are you all right?” but actually that was the last thing Helen wanted.

‘She wanted to be left alone. She felt so disappointed and felt so bad. So by having a conversation specifically around that, about emotion perception and empathy, now, the one on the boat with high empathy levels who is good at putting herself in other people’s shoes understands that, if that situation happens again, that isn’t going to be the right thing to do.

‘She might need to tone down her behavioural agility because it doesn’t work for everybody in every situation.’

I wish!

Put simply then, emotional intelligence is being intelligent about your emotions.

Those who successfully develop their behavioural agility will have the ability to maximise the capabilities and potential of the people they are working with, as well as their own.

They will have the mental skills to inspire people, helping to increase and sustain participation in their sport.

And whether you already possess it or need to work on improving it over time, one thing is undeniable, EI should be high up on every coach’s wish list.

Catherine's Top Tips for being an emotionally intelligent coach:

1. Understand your EI make-up.
2. Work on building up your behavioural

agility.

3. Reflect. A lot.
4. Practice adapting your behaviour to suit the person/people you are coaching.

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- ['Inside story: The value of self-awareness as a tool for improvement'](#)
- ['Dealing with feelings: The importance of getting your head around emotion perception'](#)
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- [Emotional intelligence: How to recognise and coach a nervous participant at your coaching sessions \(Video 1\)](#)
- [Emotional intelligence: How to recognise and coach an overconfident 'know-it-all' participant at your coaching sessions \(Video 2\)](#)
- [Emotional intelligence: How to recognise and coach a participant losing interest in your coaching sessions \(Video 3\)](#)
- [Emotional intelligence: How to approach coaching participants before 'the big game' \(Video 4\).](#)

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