

Group therapy: Reap the reward after a period of inactivity with a self-reflection and team-building day

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Matte



KEEPING EVERYONE POSTED: Coaches inspect each other's strengths and areas to improve on the sharing wall

- **Informal and positive: The focus should be on celebrating progress and embracing personal development, not making the day about problems and dilemmas.**
- **Approaching self-reflection in a negative way could deter people from opening up and fully embracing the tasks.**
- **Swap and share: Having an open line of communication in a group setting helps coaches connect and learn from each other.**
- **Set fun and challenging puzzles that get coaches to think creatively, are motivational and will inspire them to communicate.**
- **Self-reflection is the first step to change, and change can lead to improvement.**

We all need a relaxing holiday and time off from our day job once in a while to recharge our batteries.

If your employer told you they were cutting your annual holiday quota to one paltry week, there would be tears and tantrums – and a frantic phone call to your union!

But just as acute as the feeling of contentment as you begin to unwind is the feeling of lethargy when you return to work. It takes time to rekindle your enthusiasm.

Coaches are no different than the rest of the working population.

Athletes need periods of rest to avoid burnout. The flip side to that is, on their return to the fray, they will have lost a sliver of sharpness. It may take several days, or indeed weeks, before they regain their optimum fitness levels and become the fully functioning machine they were at the point they hightailed it out of the club.

With coaches, it is their mental sharpness, not their physical fettle, that needs refreshing, and [Matte Hart](#), head coach of 1066 Gymnastics in Bexhill, East Sussex, has hit upon a solution.

The British Gymnastics Level 5 coach holds an annual self-reflection and team-building day after the Christmas break, which reinvigorates his team of 25 coaches, **besides having much wider benefits for their professional development.**

Blow away the cobwebs

‘Our club is open 51 weeks of the year,’ explains Matte. ‘It’s really just Christmas that we close. It’s a hard pace all year round, seven days a week, and it used to take everyone a few days to limber up when they returned.’

The gym only shuts up shop for a week, but he noticed his coaches were not firing on all cylinders in those first few days back in the daily routine.

So, for the past few years, ConnectedCoaches member Matte has kept the doors closed to the public on that first day, choosing instead to gather all his coaches together for an informal day of self-reflection and team building.

‘I wanted to try to come up with a day that would blow away the cobwebs so we could hit the ground running when all the participants came back, ensuring that we provided a quality service right across the board, from toddlers through to adults.’

‘First and foremost, it works as a great platform to inform coaches of any updates heading into the new year.’

‘Some clubs may do a summer shutdown, and I’m already thinking about maybe doing something similar before or after the summer holidays, when we may have price changes to implement and amendments to make to the different timetables.’

Matte runs through the format and explains why it is important for someone to drive the discussions by taking on the role of MC, or head mentor, for the day.

‘We have a coaching team where not everyone works together. Some don’t really know each other as they work on different days. So we’ll grab a cup of tea or coffee and have a catch-up to begin with,’ he says.

‘Then I’ll go around the room and ask people to reflect on the year that they’ve just said goodbye to, and come up with some highlights and stand-out moments from the previous 12 months. It may be competition results or a pride in athlete who has been selected on to a talent identification squad, or maybe they have passed a qualification or had some useful feedback from a peer.’

Matte – who says you should never lose sight of the bigger picture – will get everyone, from those who have coached gymnasts at a national level to the trainees and volunteers, to share how these memorable moments made them feel.

‘After that, we move on to their goals for the new year,’ he continues. ‘They may be looking to attend a particular course or be targeting a specific opportunity for their gymnasts, such as breaking a record or helping them earn selection for a squad.’

Matte 2

THANKS FOR SHARING: The coaches are put to the task by Matte

Teamwork

Matte will challenge them to think about how they are going to achieve their goals. They may identify the need for extra on-the-job support through a mentor, or request another means of gaining additional training.

He admits it can be daunting to be put on the spot. But any fear factor is alleviated by maintaining a positive atmosphere, where the focus is on celebrating progress and embracing personal development as opposed to isolating problems and dwelling on dilemmas.

Approaching self-reflection in a negative way could deter people from opening up, thereby diminishing the potential benefits of the practice.

‘What I like about doing it in a large group is that we can then all support each other,’ says Matte. ‘The trainees reported back to say they felt supported and confident of speaking up. It’s important to foster that supportive environment.’

All Matte’s coaches have personal development folders. By vocalising their objectives for the year ahead, it helps him formulate an impression of the type of coach they want to be.

Some coaches may want to focus their efforts on getting results inside the gym. For others, it could be more about competition results and getting gymnasts to qualify for a certain competition.

‘It creates an interesting perspective and good fodder for when we sit down in our appraisal meetings during the course of the year,’ he says.

Reflective practice can be a challenge for an inexperienced coach if there is no support network there to help them devise new strategies or guide them as they learn to experiment in their sessions and evaluate the results.

In addition to their one-on-one sessions with Matte (in the form of regular appraisals), this open line of communication in a collective setting helps the coaches learn from each other.

It affords coaches the opportunity to casually bounce ideas off each other and brainstorm ways of integrating techniques into their sessions.

Working with such a large team, who coach varied hours over different days, it is difficult to get everyone in the same place at the same time.

So, on the rare occasions when this is possible, typically once or twice a year, he will fully exploit its potential.

‘I try to get the maximum crossover between people,’ says Matte. ‘Junior and senior staff will have different timetables and will not coach together so it is good that they can have this opportunity to brainstorm ideas.’

‘Those, for me, are the best moments so I can step back for five or 10 minutes at a time.’

The writing’s on the wall

I ask Matte if the coaches are encouraged to write things down.

He says he provides a worksheet to allow them a bit of reflection space after the completion of each activity.

Some of these will take the form of simple games, with a communication and team-building focus, where coaches can jot down their thoughts in a box.

The form is added to their development folder and can then be referred to in appraisals.

‘By them noting a few things down, it makes my life a lot easier when it comes to keeping track of their development and helping drive discussions in our meetings,’ says Matte.

One task involves asking them to write down things they are good at in their coaching delivery on a yellow Post-it, and scribbling their name on the back.

Matte will write a few ideas down himself, for the benefit of some of the junior coaches, such as timekeeping, leading a

warm-up and observing technical areas for improvement.

After a while, there will be a wall full of yellow Post-its with different strengths on. The coaches have a quick scan of everyone else's strengths before being asked to write on a different colour Post-it the thing they want to get better at. It may be voice projection, talking to parents, problem solving, says Matte.

'If anyone's strength is someone else's goal, then I've got a match, and it opens up a potential new relationship.'

The person skilled in a particular area is encouraged to offer guidance to their colleague, to help them turn their weakness into a strength.

'I try to make things bite-sized and facilitate a process where everyone can get involved, and where the more senior coaches are appreciative and supportive of the trainee coaches. It's a vibrant mix where everyone helps each other.

'After all, who's to say that one day you're not going to become a Level 2 or 3 coach and an integral part of the club?'

A golden harvest

Matte will swap tips and ideas with other head coaches and club managers as he constantly refines his portfolio of team-building games and group activities that best stimulate communication and motivation among his coaches.

Any fun puzzle or challenge that gets them to think creatively is likely to be tested out to gauge its impact on coach development.

Of course, this whole exercise needn't be restricted to head coaches or mentors who lead a team of coaches. Try it with your players before they start a new season, or at any pivotal point during the campaign, to invigorate your athletes and refocus their minds.

The beauty of group reflection is that it pulls together all the theories and opinions of individuals who practise self-reflection on an ongoing basis – it harvests ideas. It also extracts information from those who haven't got into the habit of self-reflection by urging them to do so – hopefully showing them the error of their ways.

Without reflection, you can never hope to change, and if you don't change, how can you ever hope to improve?

Has this blog given you some ideas on the benefits of group self-reflection sessions? Please leave a comment below.

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