

Reveal skills rather than set out the key factors

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I want to share with you some mentoring outcomes with a coach I've been working with lately.

He works as a senior manager in business. He hasn't played rugby since school, but has been coaching his son since his son was 7. As a coach, he is extremely well-organised and produces detailed and well thought-out coaching plans for each session.

Initially he came to me for my rugby expertise with coaching under 10s. Inevitably, it's morphed into coaching as a whole, not just which skills to work on.

Coach interventions has been one area we've been discussing.

We've identified that the players need to have cues they can understand. It was great to see this idea explored further with [Andrew Beaven](#) in his blog '[It ain't what you say, it's what gets heard](#)'

There are two threads to this outcome.

1. Training cues

We started with the technique of tackling. We decided that "ear tight" was the key term to help players perform the technique more effectively. Instead of going through key factors like eyes open, get close, shoulder contact, the player simply needed to put their ear as close as possible into the shorts of the ball carrier, or "ear tight".

This cue to action led to other key factors "revealing" themselves. To get the "ear tight", the tackler has to use the correct footwork. What is that footwork?

Well, imagine explaining the detail to a nine-year-old, and outside on the training pitch, and possibly on a wet and windy day. I think we would all struggle to maintain the concentration of a group as we highlight the key points.

However, get them to play a little game where they have to chase a walking or jogging partner and then get their ear tight to win. Then they soon work out for themselves the best footwork. Or certainly the footwork that suits them individually.

The cue, verbal and visual, makes them concentrate on one thing. Because it's a game and they want to win, they adjust themselves. Or, in some cases, their team mates encourage them to adjust.

It happens with adults too. I recently coached a group of teachers where one of them had not played any rugby before. She put her ear in close and her feet naturally when into the best position. When I asked her in front of the group what had happened with her feet, she said she had no idea. I asked a more experienced rugby player and they immediately told us the importance of close feet.

The less-experienced coach then realised that close feet helped with the "ear tight", but didn't know how her feet got there. Nor did she need to know. Perhaps when she had played and coached more, then yes it would help to know. But for now, with all the other information to assimilate, just getting the ear tight was more than enough to concentrate on.

2. Match day improvements

But this “reveal” is only one half of the story of our original coach’s learning journey. Delighted with the outcomes of “ear tight” cue, a few weeks later he asked me for a different cue for the same outcome. “It looks like they need another reminder. The current expression seems to wash over them because they’ve heard it so many times”.

It turned out that the coach had been constantly shouting “ear tight” as each match progressed, frustrated that some of the players hadn’t translated their good training into matches.

First, I reassured him that it can take many weeks and months to develop a habit, especially one where they are so many dynamic elements involved.

Second, it’s not the coach who should be saying “ear tight”. At half time, we’ve decided that the coach will say something like this: “Okay guys, the tackling wasn’t as good as it has been. Get yourself into groups of three quickly and come up with some solutions.”

Fifteen seconds later, he will ask for answers. Hopefully one player will say something like “tight ear”, or come close to that expression. Not quite finished yet though! The coach will get a player to show the rest of team what they mean. Then he will ask each player to quickly practise on a partner. That’s far more powerful. The team might not have listened to the coach, or the player who gave the answer, but they will certainly have think about it when they are practising it.

The improvement is real because the onus is now on the players. They are more aware of helping each other out. And we know that they pretty much tune out of what the coach is shouting from the sidelines anyway.

Key takeaways:

- Find cues that help reveal skills rather than tell the player what to do.
- Find ways to help the players remind themselves.
- If a player “says” a technique, get them or another player to demonstrate it.
- Make sure the players have a chance to practise the actions of the words, if possible.

What do you think? Can we coach without explicitly talking about the key factors? Is this style of coaching only applicable for developing players?

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