

CREATING THE OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT

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Words make worlds. A coach's demeanor and attitude is very infectious, and will quickly spread to the athletes on the team. As a coach, you want to ensure you are setting the right environment for your athletes to learn and perform in. But what is the *right* environment? Is it individual specific or are there general conditions that every athlete flourishes in? Or are there multiple ways to reach the same end? Coaches differ widely in their philosophies and styles (Bennie & O'Connor, 2010), and so do athletes (Cassidy & Kidman, 2010); but decades of research on sport and exercise psychology has shown that while there are many styles of coaching that can bring about the same results, there are a few necessary conditions that ought to be foundational to an effective climate (Bennie & O'Connor, 2010),.

First and foremost, athletes need to enjoy time spent at practice and/or competition. An athlete who does not enjoy practice will lack the motivation to focus and commit to the hours of deliberate practice needed to improve performance (Chambliss, 2002). So what can a coach do to ensure athletes enjoy their time spent doing an activity? Cumming *et al.* (2007), found that the strongest and most consistent predictor of enjoyment in youth basketball [10-15 yr olds] was the motivational climate established by the coach. To obtain the most valuable experience for athletes, coaches are advised to create a mastery-involving motivational climate that *encourages athletes to focus on their own personal development* (Ames, 1992; McArdle & Duda, 2002). Coaches can do this by reducing the ultimate importance of winning relative to other participation motives (e.g., skill development, effort, and affiliation with teammates) (Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985; McArdle & Duda, 2002; Smoll & Smith, 2006). In contrast, an ego-involving climate (Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000) occurs when the coach promotes intra-team rivalries, favours the most talented players, and punishes players for making mistakes. This is not to say that winning shouldn't be a goal, simply that it shouldn't be the primary goal; as Vince Lombardi said "winning isn't everything; it's the only thing left to do." But when coaches take measures to mould athlete behaviour, they should ensure that those actions are justified. For example, the football coach who gets his player to do pushups when the athlete drops a ball; what is actually happening, is the coach is punishing the athlete for not doing what the athlete is trying to do – catch the ball. What often occurs as a result of this is the athlete becomes preoccupied with not dropping the ball to avoid doing pushups, instead of the healthier and more effective focus on actually catching the ball (Perry, C. (2004).

Athletes with a mastery focus are intrinsically motivated; that is, they "strive inwardly to be competent and self-determining in their quest to master the task at hand" (Weinberg & Gould, 2007. p.139). Not only do these athletes strive for excellence for its own sake (as opposed to seeking the approval of others, or trying to avoid failure or punishment), but there is much evidence showing that a mastery focus fosters beneficial character attributes such as persistence in the face of failure, increased and more focused effort, and selecting challenging goals, regardless of one's level of perceived competence (Chi, 2004; Duda & Hall, 2001; Roberts, Treasure, & Kavussanu, 1997).

In developing a mastery climate and intrinsically motivated athletes, coaches must ensure that the athletes' feelings of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are met. An autonomous athlete is one who feels like they can act independently and have a sense of control over their

environment (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Now I'm not suggesting that you let the clowns run the circus, simply that there is a measure of democracy and opportunity for the athletes to have input and be heard. Competency is vital to athlete's feelings of self-efficacy, which is vital for success both in and out of sport (Bandura, 1977a). This is one of the most central areas for youth sport, because feelings of competence are often directly tied to feelings of self worth (Harter, 1988). Enhancing perceived competence in athletes is as simple as selecting skill level appropriate drills, and ensuring that they have success built in. Moreover, coaches should ensure that they attribute an athlete's success to factors such as skill, ability, work-ethic, and effort; as opposed to luck or ease of the task (Horn, 2002). Relatedness, or a feeling of belonging and acceptance to a group, is crucial for athlete buy in and prolonged commitment (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). Team building exercises or social events are great ways of explicitly doing this, but day to day reminders of the social bond between team mates are ideal.

Overall, coaches should desire for athletes to want to engage in practice activities, and should not feel the need to entice athletes with external rewards and punishments. To do this, coaches ought to create a mastery oriented environment, that fosters athlete perceptions of competency, autonomy, and relatedness. See below for a table of abbreviated recommendations.

Facilitative coaching styles or behaviours	Detrimental coaching styles or behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ High frequency of training and instructional behaviour ✓ high level of social support and positive feedback ✓ Democratic or autonomy-supportive leadership style ✓ Creation of a mastery-oriented (task-involving) motivational climate ✓ Provision of positive, supportive, and information based feedback in response to athletes' performance successes and failures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Ignoring athletes' skill errors × High frequency of punishment-oriented feedback (especially feedback not accompanied by skill-relevant information) × Autocratic or controlling leadership style × Creation of a performance-oriented (ego-involving) motivational climate × Failure to recognize or respond to athletes' performance successes

From: Horn, T. (2002). *Advances in sport psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Feedback Do's	Feedback Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ In the case of failure: emphasize the need to try harder and exert effort. However, link such attributions to individual goals and capabilities ✓ In the case of success, attribute success to both ability and effort. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × In the case of failure: don't make low attributions signifying a lack of personal improvement isn't possible × In the case of success, don't attribute success to luck or easiness of task. × In general, don't make insincere or false attributions

Adapted from American College of Sports Medicine, 1997, *ACSM's health/fitness facility standards and guidelines, 2nd ed.* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics)

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