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LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE: USING ANECDOTE CIRCLES TO IDENTIFY COACHING SHORTCOMINGS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD COACH

Abstract:

Over the past decades sport has been occupying increasing amount of attention from both a spectator as well as a participant viewpoint. It is closely linked human, social and economic development impacts significantly on the lives of individuals and communities. Sport is seen as a vehicle to harness the energy and spirit of youth toward constructive and formalised activity. In many instances this requires guidance and instruction otherwise the youth would wander aimlessly in activities without achieving the benefits associated with their participation in sport. In this regard sport coaches play a vital role. Despite the critical role that they play in youth sport, very little attempt has been made to identify coaching shortcomings and the characteristics of a coach from the coach's perspective. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the afore-mentioned qualitatively. A narrative research approach using anecdote circles was employed. Narrative research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. Anecdote circles were used as it is convenient, saves time and costs in terms of gathering stories and data is obtained from the most appropriate source. Eight male volunteer coaches who coached at high schools constituted the sample for the study. These coaches also coached the youth voluntarily in their communities. Two coaches were initially identified for the study and the balance was identified through snowball sampling. Twelve clusters emerged through the content analysis of the data. They were ability to learn, problematic athletes, response to pressure, coaching shortcomings, coach characteristics, external role players, resources, coaching roles, player optimism, work/family balance, incentives and teamwork. For the purpose of this paper the coaching shortcomings and coach characteristics clusters were considered. The issues regarding coaching shortcomings were associated with planning, managing teams and players and building confidence in players. There were several characteristics of coaches that emerged during the anecdote circles. The common threads which emerged through an examination of the characteristics were coaching behaviours, interaction with others, and dedication and commitment to coaching and the sport being coached. The findings of the study highlighted significant life experiences of the coaches which contributed to their problem solving skills, planning of coaching sessions and maintaining strong relationships with their athletes.

Keywords:

Coaching, anecdote circles, work/family balance, pressure, incentives, teamwork

Introduction

Over the past decades sport has been occupying increasing amount of attention from both a spectator as well as a participant viewpoint. It is closely linked human, social and economic development impacts significantly on the lives of individuals and communities. Sport is seen as a vehicle to harness the energy and spirit of youth toward constructive and formalised activity (Suter, 2013). In many instances this requires guidance and instruction otherwise the youth would wander aimlessly in activities without achieving the benefits associated with their participation in sport. In this regard sport coaches play a vital role.

Most coaches associated with youth sport are volunteer coaches. The role of these coaches is complex and influenced by many factors which determine the success they achieve (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999). Despite the fact that these coaches do not have extensive formal training or highly structured work environments they are known to contribute immensely to the development of life skills in the youth through sport. Gilbert and Trudel (2004) comment that volunteer coaches are therefore often left to their own experience to develop their coaching strategies and programmes.

The role of the sport coach has evolved in recent years and has become more defined (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011). While sport coaches have diverse roles such as instructor, organizer, planner, counselor, communicator, trainer, appraiser, psychologist and motivator in the past (Surujlal, 2004), most of the current volunteer coaches' roles are more focused on the development aspects of coaching. Among these are to get the youth to participate, to teach a particular sport and to develop life skills. The coach is also required to address ethical issues such as drugs in sport, abuse of power, harassment, cheating, eating disorders and respect for officials (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011). McAllister, Blinde and Weiss (2000) posit that the coach may be regarded as the most significant individual in instilling outcomes such as fair play, respect for others, cooperation, decision-making, skills development, leadership and moral development, which the youth learn through participation. These issues have a significant influence on athletes and their future participation in sport. Previous research on the characteristics and attitudes of volunteer youth coaches showed that the major objectives relative to coaching young athletes focused on physical, psychological, and social development, as well as fun (Gould & Martens, 1979).

Despite the critical role that volunteer coaches play in youth sport, very little attempt has been made to identify coaching shortcomings and the characteristics of a coach from the coach's perspective. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the afore-mentioned qualitatively.

Method and procedures

This exploratory qualitative study adopted narrative research using anecdote circles as a research approach. Creswell (2009) describes narrative research as a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives.

Anecdote circles were used as it is convenient, saves time and costs in terms of gathering stories and data is obtained from the most appropriate source. An anecdote circle is a gathering of people with the purpose to generate and collect anecdotes about some issue or topic. It is a naturally occurring story, as found in the 'wild' of

conversational discourse. In contrast to a purposeful story which is long and complex as well as deliberately constructed and told many times over, anecdotes are usually short and about a single incident or situation.

The general operating principle of the anecdote circles is: because you only know what you know when you need to know, it is difficult to get at aspects of knowledge, values and beliefs that are held in common but rarely talked about (Fourie & Surujlal, 2011). According to Fourie and Surujlal (2011) when people tell stories to each other in an anecdote circle about their experiences, the social negotiations that take place create conditions which recreate to some extent the feeling of being in the state of needing to know. By thinking about the incident and focusing on the question being asked hidden knowledge surfaces and becomes available in ways it could not otherwise do so. This exercise culminates in a body of anecdotes that together represent the true situation better than a few stories one might gather in simple interviews without such complex social exchange (Snowden, 2011).

Sample

Eight male volunteer coaches who coached at high schools in the Southern Gauteng region of the Gauteng Province in South Africa constituted the sample for the study. These coaches also coached the youth voluntarily in their communities. Two coaches were initially identified for the study and the balance was identified through snowball sampling.

Procedure

A trained research assistant was responsible for all arrangements pertaining to the study. This involved arranging the venue, contacting and inviting the coaches to the workshop and arranging refreshments during the breaks. A researcher experienced in facilitating anecdote circles facilitated the workshop. In order not to create pre-determined conditions in which participants may provide responses which they perceive that the researcher is after rather than providing accounts of real life experiences, none of the participants in the study was informed about the nature of the workshop prior to it. This also prevented the participants from developing any pre-set condition or agenda prior to the workshop. The success of a workshop of this nature lies in the emergence of 'knowledge' as participants interact as spontaneously as possible, therefore an environment conducive for comfortable interaction was created.

At the outset ground rules for the workshop were set. These included providing honest and real accounts of their experiences from their perspective, being precise and providing their anecdote within the time limit provided (five minutes), showing respect to other participants, listening carefully to other participants without interrupting and refraining as far as possible from giving opinions.

A pre-determined set of questions to elicit anecdotes from the participants were designed prior to the workshop. Specific themes were evaluated during the development of questions stage in order to arrive at anecdotes that could generate data for the purpose of the study. Among the themes which were identified were when the coach was successful and not successful in teaching life skills; the most enjoyable and least enjoyable aspects of coaching; situations supporting and hindering coaches in their roles; and personal characteristics required of coaches to

succeed. Some of the questions to which the coaches were requested to respond to were:

1. What do you love about coaching? Provide an example of what happened.
2. Give me examples of when you did not enjoy coaching an individual and/or team. What happened?
3. Tell us about your most successful coaching experience. What happened?

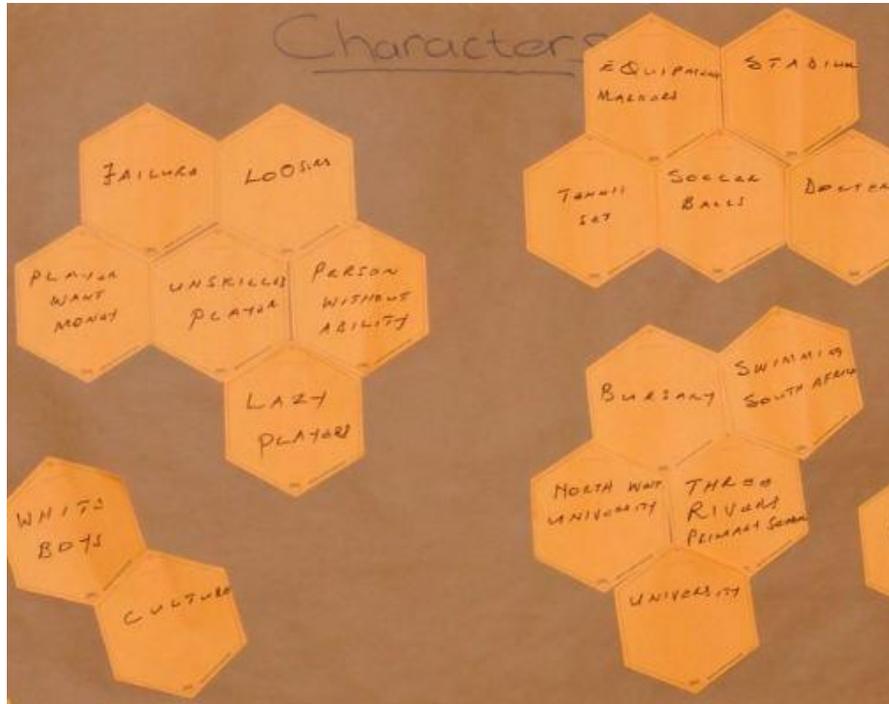
Volunteers assisted in extracting three data elements, namely *the observed behaviour*, *the characters in the anecdote* and *the issue or subject of the anecdote* on post-it notes. A data element was recorded on a post-it note, i.e. if there are three characters in the anecdote, there would be three post-it notes. Once sufficient anecdotes were collected, participants were requested to take a short break. During the break the three different data elements were then placed on separate wall panels in the room. Figure 1 illustrates the observed behaviour.

Figure 1: The observed behaviour



Immediately after the break participants were requested to refer to all three sets of data and assist in clustering similar ideas. The clusters were pasted on another wall. Each cluster was then provided a label on which they reached consensus. Figure 5 provides an illustration of the behaviour cluster.

Figure 4: The character cluster



Upon completion of this phase participants were requested to leave the room. During their absence the original data elements were removed and only the cluster labels were retained. The participants were then called back into the room and requested to provide at least three negative and three positive attributes for each label. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Positive and negative attributes of the characters

Ethical considerations

Prior to the participants being invited to the workshop they were informed of the purpose of the study. At the workshop their consent was obtained to participate in the study. All participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage without victimisation. They were assured that they would remain anonymous at all times. The results of the study would be freely available to them if they required it.

Results

The average age of the coaches was 40 years, and the average number of years coaching experience was 17.5 years. All coaches had at least the basic qualification to coach at high school level. The average group size that they coached was 38 learners. Seventy five percent of the participants coached teams at Higher Education level, 12.5% coached at Primary School level while 25% coached teams at both High School and University Level. Approximately 13 percent of the coaches also coached individuals in addition to teams.

On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 represented very dissatisfied and 4 very satisfied, the average satisfaction the coaches experienced with being a coach was 3.29. An average of 3.29 was also derived from the coaches' opinion of their effectiveness as coaches. The level to which they believed the strategies they employ develop life skills rendered a satisfaction level of 3.43.

In addition, the coaches were very positive about the workshop they attended as it assisted them in viewing their role as coaches a new light, helped them to develop new ideas in terms of strategies they could employ. They coaches also felt that the workshop added value to their lives.

In the final analysis twelve clusters emerged. For the purpose of this paper the *coaching shortcomings* and *characteristics of a good coach* clusters were considered. These clusters are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Cluster name and issues

Cluster name	Issues
Coaching shortcomings	Coaches without a coaching plan
	Lack of team cohesion
	Disjointed teams
	Not comforting players
	Lack of confidence
Characteristics of a good coach	Bring people together
	Interaction with other coaches
	Perseverance
	Behaviour associated with coaching
	Patience
	Coaching across cultural differences
	Human relations
	Getting to learn about others
	Dedication of coach
	Dedication to sport

Discussion

The issues regarding coaching shortcomings were associated with planning, managing teams and players and building confidence in players. Martens (2004) argues that for coaches to bring out the best in their athletes it is important that they plan and implement suitable training programmes. Cote, Young, North & Duffy (2007) add that there are various factors such as the athletes' needs, the purpose of the coaching, athletes' ability levels and the available time that need to be considered when planning coaching sessions. Also, given the fact that the coach's role has become more demanding and multi-faceted (Surujlal, 2004), planning has taken on more importance. The coach is required to have the ability to assist athletes by developing and preparing different training programmes, assist athletes to develop new skills, communicate effectively with athletes, use and create evaluation tests to monitor the training progress and process and predict sport performance (Szabo, 2012b). This implies that sport coaches need a variety of skills in order to succeed in coaching.

In their coaching role some coaches are expected to develop cohesive and successful teams. They are therefore required to consider several factors which include goal setting, roles and responsibilities, communication, cohesion and trust. De Meuse (2009) argues that if the afore-mentioned are inculcated in the athletes, teams will become stronger and will work better together. Coaches who are unable to instil a team culture in their athletes may be prone to failure and this could result in the coach's diminished confidence. Coaches with low confidence levels and without an effective coaching plan could influence teamwork negatively.

There were several characteristics of coaches that emerged during the anecdote circles. The common threads which emerged through an examination of the

characteristics were coaching behaviours, interaction with others, and dedication and commitment to coaching and the sport being coached. The interpersonal behaviour of the coach influences different aspects of the athletes' behaviour (Baker, Cote & Hawes, 2000) which impacts on the athletes' performance. Jowett and Cockerill (2002) and Martens (2004) posit that sport coaches play a significant role in an athlete's physical and psychosocial development. Although the coach is in a position of authority it is important that the relationship is a two-way process so that maximum benefit can be derived through it.

In their multi-faceted roles the coach has to interact with a number of different stakeholders such as parents, the media, fellow coaches as well as one's local organisation. Besides interacting with external stakeholders and management, coaches must be exceptional communicators with their athletes so that they can achieve their potential (De Klerk & Surujlal, 2014). The interpersonal behaviour of the coach with each of the stakeholders is different and therefore demands different communication skills from the coach (Trninić, Papić & Trninić, 2009).

Commitment emerges from the desire to achieve success (Falcao, 2015). It is an inner drive to put heart and soul into achieving one's set goals. Sport coaches who set realistic and achievable goals during the planning of their coaching sessions are likely to achieve those goals if they are dedicated and committed. During the anecdote circles there was consensus among all participants that this was an essential ingredient in the coaching process. Another important characteristic is perseverance which, coupled with dedication and commitment, helps the coach achieve the objectives set out in the coaching plan. By leading by example the coach is likely to rub off many of his/her positive characteristics on the athletes.

Limitations of the study and implications for further research

One of the main limitations of the study is the small sample size from a small geographical area. Due to the exploratory nature of study and the sample size the findings cannot be generalised to the greater population of volunteer coaches. Further research could employ a quantitative research methodology and participants can be drawn from all nine provinces in South Africa. A potentially interesting study could include female volunteer coaches as well to ascertain similarities and differences regarding the coaching experience.

Conclusion

The coaching styles, interpersonal behaviours and coach characteristics stem from the accumulated experiences of the volunteer coach. It is important for coaches to realise that in most instances they are the role models for their athletes. Their relationship with their athletes do not start and end on the training fields but continues well after the training sessions. The coach-athlete relationship, especially in the context of volunteer coaches is a symbiotic one which provides lessons for life for both parties. The findings of the study highlighted significant life experiences of the coaches which contributed to their problem solving skills, planning of coaching sessions and maintaining strong relationships with their athletes.

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