

Environment – Communication and Goals – Three Keys to Coaching Success

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This paper examines the concept of creating an *ENVIRONMENT OF EXCELLENCE* and the role that effective communication and goal setting play in achieving a winning formula.

Philosophy?

What is swimming excellence?

Everyone talks “winning”, “excellence” and “success”. But what is it? *The person who aims at nothing is sure to hit it*, so if winning, excellence and success are your coaching goals, what exactly are you trying to achieve?

Competitive Swimming excellence: What are you trying to achieve?

Swimming Excellence: Defined

THE ABILITY TO MAINTAIN TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE AT SPEED UNDER PRESSURE AND WHEN FATIGUED: (mental, physical, technical and tactical interaction).

Philosophy - Excellence

Therefore if excellence in competitive swimming is technical proficiency at speed when under fatigue and under pressure, training activities need to reflect this attitude and philosophy.

The more effectively training standards reflect competitive desires, the greater the chance of success.

Question: When does this philosophy need to be adopted in a swim program, ie age of athlete?

Coach Ken Wood’s lesson....

As the Twig is Bent so shall it grow.

Current thinking suggests that attitudes, technical standards, pool discipline, training behaviors are developed most effectively between 6 and 12 years of age.

Compromises made with athletes between 6 and 12 years of age will reflect on their long term competitive careers.

Creating a culture of excellence

The Biggest step in coaching is to try to create a culture of excellence – *an environment where excellence is embraced, expected and encouraged.*

What does this mean on a day to day basis?

What is an Environment of Excellence in practical terms?

In a typical age group Training set, e.g. 10 x 100 freestyle on 1:50 cycle with a hold PB time plus 10-15 seconds.

Putting the philosophy of an Environment of Excellence into practice.

What would an Average Age Group Team do when asked to complete this set?

- Push off late or early
- Walk first few steps
- Breathe first stroke / inside flags
- Poor or no streamline
- Breathe last stroke before turn.....
-sound familiar?

Why does this happen?

- Your fault as coach.
- Their fault – no talent, not committed, not motivated.
- Mum and Dad's fault – interfering, nosey, and stupid.
- Their previous coach.

Who is responsible?

Answer.....All of the above.....but basically you. Leadership entails responsibility.

The frustration for coaches is that compromises in their training environment manifest themselves in the competitive performance of athletes – it is a case of *as ye sow, so shall ye reap.*

Swimming Myth Number one.

It will be all right on the day.

Aristotle: *We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, it is a habit.*

Many swimmers believe that training standards do not reflect on competition performances.

Successful Formula One drivers appear to jump into their cars and drive fast with little or no effort. However, in the weeks and months leading up to the drive, the vehicle is meticulously studied, engineered, tested and retested and the car's speed in competition is a direct representation of this attention to detail in preparation.

Similarly, excellence in swimming racing is a direct representation of the attention to detail in training.

Over the past ten years I have conducted over 100 swim clinics in Australia and around the world. What are the most common things I am asked to do?

- Motivate athletes
- Develop Confidence in athletes
- Improve skills using F.F.A.S.T – Fast finishes, Aggressive Starts and Turns.
- Talk to them about their Nutrition and diet habits
- Improve the athletes' Butterfly technique

All of these are things that coaches can have a direct impact on in training everyday. More importantly, swimmers can themselves be taught to make an impact on each of these areas in their daily training environment by their approach to training and preparation.

Environment and habit

People under pressure fall back on their strengths while their weaknesses are exposed.

Similarly, under pressure (ie final 25 metres of a 100 metre race) swimmers will fall back on what they have learnt to do habitually – what they do every day.

If the training environment encourages poor technique and allows poor skills to develop, racing will follow the same standards and under the pressure of the final stages of racing athletes will fail on their weaknesses – weaknesses which have been allowed to develop in training.

Swimming myth number 2: Physical pain = mental toughness

Typical – end of training session all out sprint – ostensibly to teach mental toughness. Many coaches use an all out sprint at the end of training to teach athletes to sprint fast when tired. Yet, in the end of training “all out”, most coaches will accept “close enough is good enough” and will accept poor technique, poor turns, lack of breathing control, poor skills and other bad habits.

If swimming excellence is great technique and skills at speed, under pressure and fatigue, then this practice is not teaching swimmers what they need to learn.

How do you change this?

The secret to success.....Yes, there is one.

To have each athlete complete every task to the best of their ability every day AND

To teach them to do every task with commitment and excellence because they passionately want to do so for their own benefit.

This is creating the *ENVIRONMENT OF EXCELLENCE*.

Homework example

Ask a Year seven class to do a homework assignment about Australia.

What do you get?

- C STUDENTS
- B STUDENTS
- A STUDENTS

C students will hand in hand written work and little of it.

B students may present a three page paper completed on a word processing program.

A students may present a five page paper, completed on a word processing program and add some pictures, maybe put in a map of Australia and submit the work neatly stacked in a folder.

The instruction was “**do an assignment about Australia**” yet the students themselves determined the standard that they would attain.

Swim Squad Example – Apply the same principle to a training environment.

Ask your team to swim 400 freestyle

What do you get?

- C SWIMMERS
- B SWIMMERS
- A SWIMMERS (and rarely)
- A PLUS SWIMMERS

C Swimmers swim 8 laps (long course).

B swimmers swim 8 laps with strong turns.

A swimmers swim 8 laps with strong turns, controlled breathing and good streamlining.

A plus swimmers swim 8 laps with strong turns, controlled breathing, good streamlining, a fast finish, take their heart rate without being asked to and sip on a drink to help them recover from the 400 while they start thinking about the next training activity.

Once again, the instruction was simple, yet the swimmers themselves determined how they would complete the task.

Your greatest challenge.....but potentially biggest pay off:

Turning your C students (C swimmers) into A students (A swimmers).

Teaching them HOW to THINK and not WHAT to THINK

The importance of developing swimmers capable of thinking for themselves can not be over stated. To achieve the transition from C swimmer to A swimmer depends largely on the swimmers' ability to think at a different level.

This comes from:

- Teaching swimmers to think differently.
- Developing a culture of excellence through a long term process of getting swimmers to apply the same (or greater) commitment, focus and enthusiasm to training as they do to racing.
- Teaching swimmers to see every activity as an opportunity to improve.

Controversy!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

How they do it is more important than what they do.

Coaches around the world have vastly different training and preparation techniques. Some are passionate about strength training – others dead against it. Some believe in utilising swimming equipment – others use swim gear sparingly.

Regardless of the philosophy or methodology of the coach, the consistent factors exhibited by great swimmers and winning programs are in the way the athletes commit to doing everything they do to the best of their ability.

Understanding this one thing is more important than anything else you will learn in coaching.

How does it work in practice?

Warm up is:

Great skills, excellent technique, stroke counting, great turns, breathing control, perfect streamlining....done slowly.

In contrast what do your team warm ups look like?

Start as you want to finish!

Excellence begins with the first moment the team steps into the pool. Stretching, lane preparation, equipment preparation....everything sets up the standards that will be accepted in each practice.

What does a successful performance look like?

- Explosive, powerful start
- Streamlined water entry with controlled breathing
- Long, strong, powerful strokes with relaxed recoveries.
- Powerful, rhythmic, driving kicks
- Fast, aggressive, powerful turns with a streamlined exit and controlled breathing.
- Controlled stroking and breathing in the final 25% of the race
- Fast, aggressive, powerful, driving finish with controlled breathing

Now....what does your team workout look like? *Excellence breeds excellence.*

By allowing your team to do whatever they feel like doing – ie by not encouraging (enforcing) and embracing an environment where high standards are the norm, you are condemning them to fail when fatigued and under pressure.

Success comes when the desire to achieve excellence in competition is directly reflected in the daily training activities of every athlete in your program.

Summary

The environment you create and accept has a direct impact on the competition standards you and your athletes achieve.

Whilst your leadership establishes the environment, the swimmers need to think differently – to lead themselves!

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