

Learning to be a Successful Coach

As research in the field of sport science continues to grow, we as coaches are continually bombarded by the latest and greatest training secrets. As a coach, one of the toughest things about coaching is relaying the information that you know to the athletes. As a coach it might feel as if you are trying to teach the athlete a skill or concept, but nothing is sinking in. To more effectively teach a skill to an athlete it is important to understand the learning processes involved in skill acquisition. By better understanding how athletes learn skills, we are able to cater to their style of learning and achieve our goals as a coach.

The fact is athletes, just like anyone else, can't learn everything at once. It happens in stages. Research has shown that the process of learning can be broken down into four stages; and that every learner will begin at stage one and end at four, without exception. The fundamental reason for the failure of a lot of training is that the coach fails to recognize where the athlete is in the learning process. A simple skill that has become second nature may make it difficult for a coach to explain exactly how they do it. In this article, we learn to break a skill down for easier learning, as well as learn to recognize where our athletes fit into the learning process.

Stage 1 “Unconscious Incompetence”

During this stage the athlete may not even be aware that this skill exists, or why it is important. For example as a coach we know that it is important to get in front of a ground ball. However, until the athlete learns that this is important and recognizes their inability as a weakness; they will not see the need for learning. The athlete will not respond to training, despite the possible benefit. It should be the coach's goal during this stage to educate the athlete on how this skill is relevant and the reasons why it will benefit their performance.

Stage 2 “Conscious Incompetence”

After the athlete understands that getting their body in front of the ball will help them field balls more cleanly and make better throws, they now understand the need to learn the new skill. Within the second stage the baseball player understands the need for proper fielding, but lacks the ability to perform it. As a coach, here is where we can begin to instruct the player. During this stage the coach has the opportunity to mold the athlete to perform the skill correctly before they develop bad habits on their own.

Stage 3 “Conscious Competence”

Pel ot Performance Coaching

Now that our baseball player understands the reason for using proper fielding mechanics, and has started to practice and learn the new skill; he can now begin to use this newly learned technique. However, although our infielder can now field the ball properly he will not be able to do it reliably without thinking about it. The skill has not become “second nature” or “automatic.” To reach the next stage the fielder needs to continue to practice and commit to becoming “unconsciously competent” or making the skill automatic.

Stage 4 “Unconscious Competence”

Eventually our athletes will practice so much that it becomes second nature and enters the unconscious part of the brain. It becomes possible for a baseball player to perform their skill while doing something else. For example, an outfielder catches a fly ball while thinking about where he will make the throw to the infield.

It is important to understand the significance of practice throughout this learning process. Athletes can actually regress to previous stages if they do not practice their new skill. Once an athlete regresses to a previous stage they must go through stages once again. By knowing the four stages of the conscious competence learning model a coach can better understand how an athlete grasps a new skill. This will allow the coach to accelerate the learning process by taking the athlete through the stages. One common fault among coaches is that they try to teach the skill to an athlete starting in the second or third stage. When this happens the athlete will not be able to absorb this information or see the relevance of the skill. With this said it is important to recognize which stage each individual athlete is on. By knowing this a coach will be able to cater to each individual athlete. This will result in more skillful athletes and a more successful team.