

## CHAPTER

# 8

## Communicating Effectively

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*I wish my coach was a little clearer with me. I wish I knew where I stood with her. I wish she believed in me more. Right now, I feel like I'm working really hard but nothing ever seems to be good enough. Anytime I go into my coach's office to talk, things get turned around and I'm always on the defensive. I wish the communication between us was better; more open and authentic.*

*—Penn State University student-athlete*

In my work with intercollegiate student-athletes, I often am asked to address the topic of communication, particularly as it pertains to group cohesion, interpersonal relationships, and team culture. Effective communication is critical to the success of any team or organization and its members. The ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs effectively and reciprocally to be able to understand the thoughts, feelings, ideas, and needs of others is central to good communication.

One day following a workshop on communication and team building, a football player came up to me and remarked that, to him, communication is what teamwork and group chemistry are all about. From a group perspective, it is tied to oneness of thought, synchronization of roles, and everyone being on the same page. He elaborated by saying,

If I can walk up to the line of scrimmage and know that the offensive tackle next to me is thinking the same thing I am, has internalized what needs to

be done on this particular play, transmits to me a nonverbal signal indicating it's time to take care of business, then I know with great confidence, we are going to execute the upcoming play with precise timing, intensity, and cohesiveness.

His remarks reminded me that there is much more to communication than meets the ear. From a global perspective, communication goes beyond talking and listening; rather, it's about connecting with people, verbally and nonverbally, in a meaningful way.

Although coaches, athletes, and sport psychology consultants talk about the importance of effective communication in team success, surprisingly very little has been written about the subject, particularly as it pertains to sport. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to explore what effective communication is as it relates to sport, identify barriers to effective communication, and develop strategies for improving communication processes within athletic environments.

## *Communication Defined*

The philosopher and social theorist John Dewey notes the word *communication* shares the same etiology, or root, as the word *community*, and is the result of people feeling engaged in shared projects and meaningful social interactions (Stuhr, 1997). At the core of this statement is the notion of engaged communication processes and connecting with people in a meaningful way. When an individual feels engaged in conversation, it connotes a feeling the other person is listening and genuinely cares about what is being said. The quote at the beginning of the chapter points to the importance of engagement and the athlete's desire to connect with her coach on a meaningful level.

Communication is a multidimensional process that involves sending, receiving (encoding), and interpreting (decoding) messages through a variety of sensory modalities (Crocker, 1990; Harris & Harris, 1984). These messages can be verbal (as in written or spoken communication) or nonverbal (facial expressions, body language, body positioning) and can be distinguished in terms of content and emotion. The way a message is expressed will influence how the message is received and interpreted. From a social psychological perspective, both person and situation variables influence this dynamic process. An individual's personality, values, upbringing, beliefs, personal mannerisms, and style of communicating interact with a variety of situation-specific circumstances to influence the way messages are transmitted and received. Contextual factors come into play, such as your relationship with the other person (e.g., history you share, perceived level of trust, power and control issues), the environment you find yourself in (e.g., office, practice field, public or private setting), and the cultural context from which communication is to take place (e.g., learned rules and behaviors that are supposed to be followed). Although there are individual differences in the way people respond, understanding the dynamics that surround these contexts can attenuate misunderstanding and influence individuals' interpersonal effectiveness (Clampitt, 2005).

Other factors such as stress, perceptual filtering, and psychological expectancies can all influence the way messages are expressed, received, and interpreted (Henschen & Miner, 1989; Vealey, 2005). In the process of interpreting verbal and nonverbal messages, information may be lost or distorted. Sometimes we think we hear a person say one thing when, in fact, he or she said something different. We then act on the basis of what we think the person said. Many communication problems are rooted in this kind of misunderstanding.

The following example provides an illustration of how a compliment can be misinterpreted due to stress, selective filtering, or emotional mood states: During a practice, an athlete misses an offensive rebound, yet the coach compliments him for demonstrating good positioning, footwork, and intensity. Stressed over a variety of things going on in his life (e.g., two midterms, limited playing time recently, breaking up with his partner), the athlete processes the compliment as an insult. For reasons not apparent to the coach, tension builds and tempers fly. Angry over the turn of events, the coach verbally denounces the athlete's reaction as stupid, mumbles to himself, "I can't control how he took it," and benches the athlete. Consequently, a wall is formed, communication is blocked, and the intent of the message is never received.

Likewise, during the course of a long competitive season, coaches also are susceptible to heightened job stress and emotional mood swings (Dale & Weinberg, 1990; Smith, 1986), which in turn can have an adverse effect on their relationships and ability to communicate effectively. I recall a situation midway through the course of a season where a coach was not happy with the way her team was playing. The pressure to win, coupled with increased travel demands and injuries to key personnel, resulted in the coach being extremely stressed. Frustrated and impatient toward the end of practice, the coach chastised a young, inexperienced first-year player for making a mistake. The coach's comments were so demeaning, her tone of voice so penetrating and hurtful, her nonverbal body

language so piercing that the athlete shut down and tuned out anything positive that was said thereafter. The whole situation was unfortunate because the athlete, talented yet low in self-confidence, began to fear failure, was scared to make a mistake, and never quite recovered for the rest of the season.

These examples show how communication is an attitude that goes beyond the content of what is said. How one sends the message is just as important as what is said, especially when one is stressed. Coaches and athletes must make certain the message conveyed is the message received. Practically speaking, it has been my experience that many interpersonal problems in teams result from individuals' lack of understanding of each other's needs and feelings. As Orlick (2008) astutely notes, "It is difficult to be responsive to another's needs or feelings when you do not know what they are" (p. 283). Consequently, an important goal of interpersonal communication is to learn how to express oneself so the other person is in a position to better understand. This entails active listening and engaged conversation, both from a verbal and nonverbal perspective. Tone of voice, facial expression, body posture/spatial distance, and eye contact are some of the nonverbal cues that influence communication. As a general rule, become aware of how you come across to others, and make sure you say what you mean and mean what you say.

### *Communication in Sport*

With regard to sport, so much of what goes on in athletics revolves around communication. Research in this area predominantly has looked at leadership and communication styles as they relate to variables such as motivation, individual and team expectations, coaching effectiveness, reinforcement and constructive feedback, team cohesion, and conflict resolution skills (Connelly & Rotella, 1991; Horn, 1985, 2008; Jowett & Chaundry, 2004; Martens, 1987, 2004). Although styles of communication vary from coach to coach, it is important

to communicate in a manner consistent with one's own personality and coaching philosophy (Wooten, 1992). Similarly, Martens (1987) notes that clear, honest, and direct communication with no hidden agenda is what coaches should strive for in developing successful coach-athlete relationships. In addition, empathy, approachability, consistency, and responsiveness to individual differences have been shown to be critical elements for effective communication in sport settings (Lorimer, 2013; Yukelson, 1997).

As noted earlier, communication is a dynamic process that involves mutual sharing, which implies reciprocal participation (e.g., two parties sharing thoughts, feelings, ideas, or information about a particular subject). To truly understand or comprehend another individual's perspective, people need to be adept at the art of listening. At its purest level, the essence of communication involves mutual sharing, which leads to mutual understanding (through sharing, the other person is in a better position to truly understand). In the context of a team, if a group is to function effectively, its members must communicate openly and honestly with one another about the efficiency of group functioning and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Yukelson, 1997). Effective communication is apparent when team members listen to one another and attempt to build on each other's strengths and contributions (Sullivan, 1993; Yukelson, 1997).

For coaches, the foundation for effective communication skills is having credibility in the eyes of their athletes and having developed trust and respectful relationships (Orlick, 2008; Yukelson, 1984). Credibility is reflected in the athletes' attitudes about the trustworthiness of what you say and do (Martens, Christina, Harvey, & Sharkey, 1981; Vealey, 2005). Trust is linked to the concepts of honesty, integrity, authenticity, and respect. Lack of honesty and betrayal of trust can lead to many interpersonal problems within a team, including feelings of tension, anger, hostility, resentment, divisions, and jealousy. It is very difficult to regain someone's trust once it is broken.

Athletes seem to be motivated most by coaches for whom they have a lot of respect (Lynch, 2001). Respect often is not communicated directly in words; rather, it is demonstrated through actions, sincerity, genuineness, and social influence (Egan, 1994). Athletes will lose respect for their coaches if they feel betrayed, manipulated, and deceived or perceive their coach is not listening, or worse, does not care. To illustrate the point, I remember a situation where a coach “heard through the grapevine” that a particular athlete violated a long-standing team rule. The coach, who liked to be in control of everything, failed to garner all the facts. She solicited information from other teammates as to what had happened, but never talked directly to the person in question. As a consequence, the athletes felt betrayed and angry, respect for the coach was shattered, and interpersonal relations among the athletes became strained. A good rule is to solicit all the facts before passing judgment and treat people exactly the way you want to be treated. Putting yourself in the shoes of others and seeing things from their perspective (i.e., empathy) helps build credibility, trust, and mutual respect.

As noted earlier, coaches who are good communicators have credibility with their athletes. They establish open lines of communication; they are honest, fair, authentic, sincere, and consistent. They accept individuals for who they are and genuinely care about them as people outside of athletics. This values-based perspective is consistent with applied research by Janssen and Dale (2002), who found credible coaches to be character based, competent, committed, caring, consistent, confidence builders, and good communicators. From a tactical standpoint, coaches who are good communicators explain, clarify, and individualize instruction to meet the athlete’s needs as well as the team’s needs. They observe performance analytically and are able to help athletes improve performance by providing clear and constructive behavioral feedback in a nonthreatening manner (Martin & Hrycaiko, 1983; Smith, 1986). The following discussion between a coach and a fencer between competitive bouts

highlights the point: “Kathy, you are too anxious on the strip. You are telegraphing messages to your opponent as to what your intentions are. Relax, see things develop, trust your decisions and actions, and when you see the window of opportunity open up, go for it!” The importance of giving constructive tactical feedback in relation to training methods and goals an individual or team is striving to accomplish cannot be overstated..

Athletes react in various ways to how coaches communicate with them. They know the characteristics they like and dislike in coaches. From a developmental perspective, research in the area of youth sports indicates young athletes like coaches who are knowledgeable and instructive, supportive and encouraging, enthusiastic and motivated, reliable, fair, and consistent (Martens, 2004; Martens et al., 1981; Smith, Smith, & Smoll, 1983). In contrast, young athletes dislike coaches who are judgmental, manipulative, capricious, inconsistent, or constantly negative. Personally, I believe the same principles hold true for older athletes. My observation has been that intercollegiate athletes respond best to coaches who are open, honest, sincere, approachable, and caring. Most athletes do not mind being yelled at as long as they know the coach cares. One of our coaches at Penn State notes,

I have a tendency to raise the decibel level in my voice because I am trying to get their attention, but that does not mean I don’t understand or that I don’t care. You want players to feel comfortable around you, but at the same time, realize you are the authority figure.

He goes on to say, “A coach can gain trust with their athletes by being honest, consistent, and approachable. I try to get my athletes to respect me by attempting to be fair in my decisions and truthful when giving assessment and advice.” Again, from a philosophical perspective, this example points to the importance of engaging athletes in the communication process, creating an atmosphere that reflects a *community of caring*. Athletes work hard to achieve their goals and want to feel a sense of connection

with their coach on a genuine and meaningful level. They expect to be treated with dignity and respect and should give the same in return. Similarly, athletes (and people in general) want to know their role is valued and contributions appreciated.

### *Communication and Groups*

One of the most gratifying experiences a coach or athlete can have is to be a member of a team that gets along well and works together efficiently in a cohesive, harmonious, task-oriented manner (Orlick, 2008; Yukelson, 1984). Communication lies at the heart of group process. If a group is to function effectively, members must be able to communicate easily and efficiently with one another (Shaw, 1981). Because communication directly affects group solidarity, role internalization and team coordination, collective efficacy, and successful team performance (Eccles & Tenenbaum, 2004), I spend a great deal of time talking with athletic teams about group process and synergistic team functioning, communication and the dissemination of information and shared knowledge, role clarity and team culture, and methods for improving harmonious team relations. Team building comes from a shared vision of what the group is striving to achieve and is tied to commitment, individual and mutual accountability, collaboration, communication, and teamwork (Yukelson, 1997). A shared vision that has meaning and purpose creates synergistic empowerment. In successful teams, coaches and athletes talk openly and honestly about task-related issues that affect them directly, and everyone works together to develop a positive group atmosphere and team culture conducive for team success (Collins, 2001a; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Pain & Harwood, 2009; Yukelson & Weinberg, 2016).

Business leaders point to the importance of clear and transparent communication in building a healthy team culture and organizational structure (Collins, 2001b; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Lencioni, 2012; Scott, 2017). For instance, in his

book *The Advantage*, Lencioni (2012) proposes a four-prong communication model that has relevant application for coaches and staff development:

1. Put together a cohesive leadership team that is aligned in principle and purpose.
2. Be clear and consistent with cascading messaging directly from the leadership team throughout the organization.
3. Reinforce clarity with shared knowledge and feedback at all levels.
4. Adopt a transformational perspective: the leadership team needs to be humble enough to listen to what others have to say without an egocentric filter distorting the process. (See Chapter 6 for more information on transformational leadership.)

Similarly, recognizing the importance of clear messaging, collective accountability, valued roles and responsibilities, and a concept she refers to as *radical candor*, Scott (2017) offers a variety of leadership strategies and communication tools for building collaborative relationships and an effective team culture that is based on listening, sharing, caring, and mutual respect. Starting with understanding what motivates each person on a team and distinguishing between ruinous empathy and authentic listening, the author offers concrete recommendations for providing guidance, direction, and constructive feedback in a credible and consistent manner. For example, Scott suggests that leaders embrace collaboration and share opinions that are consistent with an organization's philosophy and mission. She also suggests a leader needs to be humble enough to listen to what others have to say without an egocentric filter distorting the process. As for radical candor, Scott's message is care personally and challenge directly.

Unfortunately, not every group functions cohesively. Several teams I have worked with have had their fair share of interpersonal communication problems and conflict, ranging from interpersonal jealousies within the team to power struggles,

control issues, and perceived injustices, as well as coach-athlete and/or athlete-athlete inequities. In my experience, many interpersonal problems on teams stem from poor communication, oftentimes the result of misunderstanding or miscommunication between the coach and the team, a coach and an athlete, or among athletes themselves. Over the course of a season, a variety of contextual factors can influence the way relevant information is disseminated or received (e.g., emotional disappointment following a tough loss, concerns about diminished playing time, interpersonal cliques that may exist within a team, or other perceived barriers that make someone apprehensive about communicating). Henschen and Miner (1989) have identified five types of misunderstandings that often surface within groups:

- A difference of opinion
- A clash of personalities in the group
- A conflict of task or social roles among group members
- A struggle for power between one or more individuals
- A breakdown of communication between the leader and the group or among members of the group itself

Misunderstandings are also the result of inaccessibility to relevant information (not being privy to certain sources of information); inattentiveness (failing to listen, not paying attention, being distracted); lack of assertiveness (failure to speak up); or misperceiving someone's motives, intentions, or behavior (inference mind reading). Similarly, people often are afraid to express how they truly feel for fear of being ridiculed or rejected for saying what is truly on their minds (Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Orlick, 1986).

Learning how to express oneself in a constructive manner and communicate effectively is an important initial step in preventing and solving problems. It has been stated that the more open

you can be with each other, the better your chances are of getting along and achieving both individual and team goals (Orlick, 1986). Thus, it is important for coaches and athletes to learn how to express their thoughts and feelings about various issues that affect them directly. Team building requires a group climate of trust, mutual respect, openness, and genuine support in which airing problems and matters of concern is not just appropriate but encouraged (Orlick, 2008; Yukelson, 1997).

### Team Communication Dynamics

Harris and Harris (1984) offer an interesting framework to examine communication processes in athletic teams. The framework consists of three different communication configurations: coach-team, coach-athlete, and athlete-athlete interactions.

**Coach-team communications.** From a coach-team perspective, group synergy and team chemistry are of vital importance. According to DePree (1989), group synergy comes from leaders (in this case, coaches) sharing a vision of what could be if everyone puts their skills and resources together to achieve team goals and objectives. Individual and mutual accountability, passion and belief, and a genuine commitment to a common team goal are needed. Athletes unite behind common goals, so it is important to get athletes to think in terms of the philosophy, operating procedures, and values that govern the team (Yukelson, 1984). Similarly, homogenous attitudes and expectations (e.g., unity of purpose), as well as shared ideals and covenants to live by, are required (Walsh, 1998). In terms of shared ideals, it is important to obtain *consensus and commitment* from the team regarding team goals, operating procedures, rules of engagement, and normative behaviors, including appropriate methods for achieving them (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002; Holt & Dunn, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2009; Yukelson, 1997). To this end, the coach should solicit input from team members regarding their perceptions of what needs to be

done for everyone to come together and be an effective team. Everyone on the team must be on the same page, working together with a collective desire to be successful. To achieve these ends, a coach may find the following communication principles useful: impart, inspire, monitor, clarify, and reinforce.

- *Impart* relevant information regarding team rules, expectations, operating procedures, and goals the group is striving to achieve. Clarify the team's mission and purpose, outline strategies and action plans to reach team goals and objectives, and involve staff and athletes in decisions that affect them directly.
- *Inspire* everyone to reach for their best. Communicate with a sense of inspired enthusiasm the effort and focus required to reach team goals. Be honest, direct, clear, and empowering. Instill a sense of pride, passion, belief, and team spirit. Strive to make everyone on the team feel valued and significant.
- *Monitor the progress the team is making.* Set up a constructive goal-setting program with short-term process goals and action plans leading to long-term visionary objectives (e.g., performance goal boards are often very helpful). Monitor, evaluate, and adjust goals as needed. Give athletes feedback on how they are doing in relation to individual and team goals. Challenge everyone involved to improve and become better. (See Chapter 11 for more information about goal-setting.)
- *Clarify* how things are going. Talk openly about the commitment required to achieve team goals and what needs to be done to keep things on task. Challenge everyone to take responsibility for their own actions and to work hard with passionate determination, meaningful effort, and sustained focus.
- *Reinforce* behavior that you want repeated. Catch people doing things right; provide lots of informational and emotional support, encouragement, and positive reinforcement; discipline

athletes according to your coaching philosophy and team mission statement; and correct errors in a positive way.

*Coach-athlete communications.* As for coach-athlete lines of communication, coaches should build a psychological and social environment conducive to goal achievement and team success. They should take the time to get to know their athletes as unique individuals and find out their strengths, talents, interests, and needs. The principles of transformational leadership and reciprocal influence are applicable here in the context of athletes and coaches working together to clarify goals, expectations, and need fulfillment (Goleman et al., 2002; Martens, 1987; Yukelson, 1993, 1997). Coaches should be open, honest, and up-front with athletes about various decisions that affect them directly. Likewise, as already noted, athletes need feedback as to where they stand and how they are progressing in relation to individual and team goals. Research indicates that *evaluative feedback* is an important part of communication and the goal-setting process (see Chapter 11 and Locke & Latham, 1990). Unfortunately, some coaches are not very good at giving feedback in a positive and supportive manner (Orlick, 2008). Similarly, some athletes have difficulty internalizing feedback for what it is and, as a consequence, take feedback personally as opposed to constructively. Developing strategies to improve coach-athlete communication processes can rectify many misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

In terms of coaching for accountability, four-time national coach of the year Russ Rose has a unique way of providing feedback with his athletes on the Penn State Women's Volleyball Team, something he refers to as *The One-Minute Drill*. At various times during the season, Coach Rose will pull aside a player individually in the gym for a one-minute meeting and point out, "This is what I think you are doing well, this is what I think you need to work on, and here is where I see you making the best contribution to the team during the next training

cycle. Do you have any questions?” The One-Minute Drill provides open, honest, and direct feedback in a forthright manner. It clarifies expectations, alleviates uncertainty, and lets the athlete know exactly where she stands. The volleyball players may not like what the coach has to say, but afterward they know what is expected and what they have to work on to improve (Yukelson & Rose, 2014). Likewise, recognizing the importance of composure, emotional self-control, and body language on team performance, Penn State women’s soccer coach Erica Walsh and her staff periodically will splice together video snippets of the team demonstrating poor body language in game situations and point out the destructive impact it can have on team energy and team synergy during competitive contests. Although Coach Walsh is a master tactician and a very positive coach, the example highlights the importance of a coach using feedback creatively to get her message across about the significance of nonverbal communication and its influence on concentration, role responsibilities, and team composure. She puts the ownership and responsibility on the team to make appropriate in-game adjustments and holds them accountable for maintaining high standards of performance effectiveness throughout the year.

Positive coach-athlete relationships are so important at all levels. In addition to providing tangible feedback about performance accomplishments, many athletes will seek out their coach to talk about things outside of sport that affect their lives and self-esteem. In intercollegiate settings, this might include concerns about various transition and adjustment issues, academic and time management problems, and ways to navigate interpersonal relationships. Thus, a coach often is asked to take on many mentoring roles (e.g., counselor, confidant, teacher, friend, role model, and sometimes substitute parent). For these reasons, it is important that lines of communication be open between athlete and coach and that a trusting relationship be established.

As for breakdowns in coach-athlete communications, many athletes are not confident

approaching a coach if they do not feel valued, included, or respected. Although it is common for coaches to have a so-called open-door policy, many athletes find it difficult to walk through the door if they feel the coach is not going to listen to their concerns with genuine interest, fear retaliation for opening up, or perceive there to be hidden agendas. Connelly and Rotella (1991) note that some athletes go so far as to fake honesty—tell coaches what they think coaches want to hear so the athletes don’t have to deal with the situation at hand.

Situations often arise during the course of a season that can exacerbate coach-athlete communication problems (e.g., general frustration associated with not performing well, decreased playing time, personality clashes, stress, fatigue, and injury, to name just a few). In situations like these, athletes often perceive the coach as being insensitive, unappreciative, unapproachable, or uninterested. As a consequence, it is not unusual for an athlete to feel apprehensive about approaching the coach. Rather than clam up, athletes need to learn how to express themselves in an assertive manner. A practical technique I have found to be useful is to have athletes write on a cue card three main points they would like to express to the coach. We then role-play and simulate potential scenarios. Athletes visualize themselves communicating their message in a confident and successful manner. This type of preparation helps build confidence and desensitize athletes to situations they perceive to be stressful.

Proactively, coaches also should consider developing an individualized communication plan with their athletes for interacting effectively at the competition site (Orlick, 2008). Because athletes prepare and respond differently in competitive environments, it is suggested coaches assess ahead of time their athletes’ needs and preferences and respond accordingly. Prior to competition, some athletes like to be left alone; others appreciate a word of encouragement or a task-oriented cue that reminds them to concentrate and bring their best focus forward. The same holds true for post-competition feedback. Some athletes are very emotional after

competition and don't want to be disturbed; others want feedback immediately. Thus, a coach-athlete communication plan for competition helps to alleviate stress and possible misunderstandings that may arise.

A number of studies by Jowett and her colleagues have highlighted the central role empathy plays in developing and maintaining strong coach-athlete interpersonal relationships (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Empathy is reflected in the four key constructs (closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation) at the core of relational coaching, and a communication model, COMPASS, has been advanced to highlight key intervention strategies coaches and athletes can use to develop improved ongoing relationships (e.g., Conflict management, Openness, Motivation, Preventative, Assurance, Support, and Social networks). Since communication is an ongoing interactive process, and over the course of a long season, some kind of intrateam conflict is inevitable, both the coach and athlete have a responsibility to make it work. As stated earlier in the chapter, effective communication involves mutual sharing, which ultimately leads to mutual understanding. Efforts to develop an authentic partnership based on mutual trust, mutual respect, sharing, and empathetic listening is a positive step in the right direction in creating a culture of caring and improved interpersonal relations (Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2016; Yukelson & Weinberg, 2016).

In summary, communication is a two-way street; hence, both the coach and the athlete have a responsibility to make it work. Following is a summary of tips for improving coach-athlete communications (Janssen & Dale, 2002; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; Martens, 2004; Orlick, 2008; Vealey, 2005). If these suggestions don't work, it might be appropriate for a sport psychology consultant to intervene.

- To communicate successfully, understand that each person with whom you communicate has

had different experiences and perhaps different cultural upbringing from you. Hence, recognize individual differences in the way people respond. Do not assume that you (the communicator) and the other person(s) (the receiver) will interpret the information in the same manner.

- Use a style of communication that is comfortable for you. Whether you are laid back, animated, relaxed, vocal, or somewhere in between, communicate in a manner that is consistent with your personality and coaching philosophy.
- Characteristics of effective communication include being open, honest, direct, sincere, and consistent. Sarcasm, ridicule, and degrading or demeaning comments are poor communication techniques and should be discouraged.
- Convey rationales as to why athletes should or should not do certain behaviors.
- Never underestimate the power of positive social influence techniques. Focus on being positive and consistent. Catch people doing things correctly. The skillful use of positive reinforcement can increase motivation and strengthen a person's confidence and self-esteem (see Chapter 3).
- Reduce uncertainty; clarify expectations and be supportive. As a coach, strive to create a supportive atmosphere in which athletes feel their efforts and contributions to the team are valued and appreciated.
- Work to improve nonverbal communication skills. Remember the axiom: "Your actions speak louder than words."
- Work on developing empathy skills. Put yourself in the other's shoes. Listen attentively to feelings and concerns. Collaborate to find appropriate solutions.
- Evaluate and monitor group process. Set aside time with the team to discuss openly how things are going (e.g., what is working, what is not,

what you need more or less of from coaches, teammates, trainers, support staff). This is an excellent way to show athletes you care about their feelings and opinions.

- Recognize the impact stress and losing can have on emotions, both from a coach and athlete perspective. When stress builds and coaches and athletes lose control of their emotions, frustration may distort or override the content of what gets heard.
- If you have an open-door policy, show athletes (and your assistants) that you are sincere about using it!

*Athlete-athlete communications.* As for intrateam athlete communication, it is important that teammates establish and maintain harmonious working relationships with each other. Ideally, they should have each other's back and show genuine support for each other both on and off the athletic field. In reflection, some of the most cohesive teams with whom I have ever been associated had a special relationship off the field (i.e., a "bonding together feeling") that propelled them to be successful as a team during competitions. Athletes can be a great source of social support for one another; they often spend a lot of time together and share common experiences that are unique to their own peer subculture. For teams to get to know one another better, I often employ team-building activities at the beginning of the year that promote personal disclosure through mutual sharing. As an example, I might have a team go around a circle discussing individual and team assets and strengths, or have them do a timeline exercise depicting life events that significantly influenced them as a person or team. For instance, in basketball, I had each member of the team reflect on three to five critical events that have shaped their life as a person or basketball player. On a horizontal axis depicting their life span (one to current age), positive influential experiences are marked above the line (e.g., instrumental coach at age 14) and negative experiences below the line (e.g., overcoming

adversity). In front of the team, each player discloses why the events listed were unique and instrumental to her or him. This interpersonal team-building exercise is a great activity for learning unique things about each other and developing team camaraderie. Likewise, drawing on my business consulting experiences, I have found the Johari Window (Luft, 1970) to be a useful heuristic communication exercise and feedback tool in helping athletes discover their own interpersonal strengths and weaknesses and how they come across to others. Athletes choose 5 adjectives from a list of 56 that best describe their own personality. Teammates rate each athlete on the same list of adjectives with responses mapped onto a four-window grid: open area known to self and others, hidden area not known to others but known to self, blind spot known to others but not known to self, and unknown quadrant not known to self or others. Through self-disclosure and feedback, the idea is to make the open area known to self and others as large as possible, which in turn builds greater interpersonal trust among participants. The benefits of using personal disclosure/mutual sharing team-building activities have been well documented in the literature (e.g., Dunn & Holt, 2004; Holt & Dunn, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2009; Yukelson, Sullivan, Morett, & Dorenkott, 2003; Yukelson, 1997). In summary, I believe these team-building activities are excellent at promoting inclusion and team cohesion, lending depth to better understanding teammates, interpersonal relationships, group processes, and team culture.

Along these lines, athletic teams are very much like families. Some degree of tension, frustration, and conflict is inevitable. At the intercollegiate level, several teams I have worked with have had their fair share of interpersonal communication problems and conflict. Problems have ranged from roommate problems (e.g., incompatibility, intolerance, general needs not being met), to interpersonal jealousies within the team, to coach-athlete inequities, to first-year adjustment and other transition issues. Typically, the underlying issues revolve around misunderstanding, insensitivity, distrust, betrayal, and athletes feeling,

in general, like they are not being heard or listened to. Likewise, in a diverse and multicultural athletic environment, some degree of conflict or misunderstanding may occur. When teammates have different racial, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, or social class identities, misunderstandings can occur (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). Because values, beliefs, relational roles, and attitudes may differ, athletes need to learn to be accepting, respecting, and understanding. See Chapter 19 to learn more about becoming culturally competent.

Learning how to communicate effectively is an important first step in developing satisfying interpersonal team relationships. Recognizing that it is difficult to be responsive to someone else's thoughts, feelings, and needs when you don't know what they are, here are some suggestions derived from Orlick (1986, 2008) and from my personal experiences to help improve interpersonal communication processes within a team:

- Make sure everyone is pulling in the same direction (team comes first). Recognize that the more open you can be with each other, the better your chances are of getting along and achieving your goals.
- Discuss strategies for improving team harmony, including ways to support and help each other on and off the athletic field.
- Listen to others; they will listen to you! Put yourself in the shoes of others; try to understand the other person's perspective.
- Learn how to give and receive feedback or criticism constructively. Listen to the *intent* of what is being said; avoid taking things personally.
- Accept team members for who they are, including their flaws, personality quirks, idiosyncrasies, and funny little habits that make them unique.
- Avoid backstabbing and gossiping about teammates. Interpersonal cliques and petty jealousies will destroy team morale quickly.

- Keep confrontations private—deal with the person directly in a respectful manner.
- Recognize that not all conflicts can be resolved, but most can be managed better if both parties communicate.

### Active Listening and Empathy

Whether you are a sport psychology consultant, coach, athlete, or friend, listening is an essential interpersonal skill to develop. Many of us have heard the axiom “listen to others, they will listen to you.” It seems so simple, almost intuitive, but it has been my experience counseling coaches and athletes the last 30 years that most communication problems in interpersonal relationships stem from lack of listening.

Rosenfeld and Wilder (1990) have identified three levels of listening, each representing a different degree of listening effectiveness. **Active listening** is the preferred mode of listening in which the listener is attuned, connected, and engaged, demonstrating a caring attitude and desire to truly understand what the other person has to say. The second level of listening, **superficial** or **inattentive listening**, occurs when listeners tune out quickly once they think they have enough information to decipher what the speaker's intent is. Although listeners at this level may grasp the basic meaning of the message, they often fail to comprehend the emotional feeling or underlying concepts of what is being communicated. The third level of listening could be characterized as **arrogant listening**. Here, listeners seem to be more interested in what they have to say as opposed to what the other person is saying. These individuals often wait for pauses in the conversation so they can jump in and hear themselves speak.

By far the most useful tool for improving communication is active listening (Martens, 1987). When people talk about themselves, they do so in terms of experiences (things that happen to them), behaviors (what they do or fail to do), and emotional affect (the feelings that accompany these experiences and

behaviors). Elements of good listening skills include attending physically and psychologically to the person with whom you are communicating (e.g., adopt a posture that indicates active involvement), listening to become more aware of what it is the person is really trying to say (both verbally and nonverbally), paraphrasing or clarifying to ensure your understanding is correct, and some form of summarizing statement to pull everything together in a respectful, empathetic way (Egan, 1994). Along these lines, the acronym SOLER outlined by Egan (1994) has proven to be a very useful nonverbal technique facilitating the attending process:

- *Square* and face the client (adopt a posture that indicates involvement)
- Espouse an *Open* posture to communicate openness and availability to the client
- *Lean* toward your client (this connotes you are interested in what the client has to say)
- Maintain good *Eye* contact (this deepens your level of engagement)
- *Relax* body position (being natural puts people at ease)

**Reflective listening** is one of the most powerful methods of demonstrating to the person you are working with that you are actively listening and striving to understand. It has been said that reflective listening is to verbal communication as video feedback is to physical skill instruction (Henschen & Miner, 1989). The skills of questioning, clarifying, encouraging, paraphrasing, reflecting, empathetic understanding, and summarizing make up the basic listening sequence. The following reflective listening techniques (Egan, 1994) may facilitate better communication between athlete and sport psychology consultant (or coach):

- *Questioning*. Use open-ended questions and statements that encourage the athlete to continue speaking. (“How are you feeling about the injury?” “Tell me more about what happened.”) As a general rule, avoid initial “why” questions.

This may put the person you are talking with on the defensive. Wait until he or she has reached an appropriate comfort level.

- *Clarifying*. Make clear to the other person what has been heard. Clarifying does not mean “I agree with your opinion,” but rather, it lets the speaker know someone cares enough to truly listen. Some good lead-ins include “What I hear you saying is . . .”; “I am not sure I quite understand, but it sounds as though you are angry with the coach because she benched you. Is that it?”
- *Encouraging*. Use a variety of verbal and nonverbal statements or mannerisms to prompt athletes to keep talking. These include head nods, gestures, a phrase such as “uh-huh,” or the simple repetition of key words the athlete has uttered.
- *Paraphrasing*. Checks whether the responder understands the message. Similar to reflective listening, paraphrasing involves using one’s own words, in concise comments, to feed back to the athlete the essence of what has just been said.
- *Reflecting*. Let the person know you hear the content and feelings of what is being said. (“You’re sad because . . .”; “You feel confident of your ability to play at this level but worry about getting in.”)
- *Empathetic Understanding*. Use empathic statements to keep the person you are dealing with focused on the task at hand. (“It must be hard for you to sit and watch teammates practice while you are recovering from arthroscopic knee surgery. Stay committed to your rehab, you will be back at practice soon enough stronger than ever.”)
- *Summarizing*. Pull together all the main ideas and feelings of what has been said. (“It sounds as if you have mixed feelings about the situation. On one hand, you have more time for yourself, but you’re also concerned about getting your starting job back.”)

The skills of attending and listening are not always sufficient in and of themselves to provide

quality relationships with people. Of primary interest is the concept of **empathy**. Empathy is a special kind of mindfulness and understanding. In essence, it means putting yourself in the shoes of the other person, trying to understand and feel what the other person is experiencing from his or her own perspective. Empathy is not the same thing as sympathy. Rather, it is an acquired skill that reflects an overall attitude of genuine concern, caring, and interest (Egan, 1994). Empathetic listeners reflect what they hear by restating ideas heard in their own words and by asking good probing questions (Rosenfeld & Wilder, 1990). Through active and reflective listening, a coach will be in a better position to accurately infer the psychological state of an athlete and thus be more responsive to athletes' changing needs, something researchers refer to as empathetic accuracy (Lorimer, 2013; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). The following example gives two responses, one low and one high in empathy:

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### Example

*Athlete describes presenting problem: I really get mad when my coach criticizes me without letting me explain anything. I get angry not because he criticizes me, but because he does it in such a degrading way.*

*Sport psychology consultant (low empathy): "You don't like being criticized."*

*Sport psychology consultant (high empathy): "You get really mad when he criticizes you, and his insulting manner makes you feel personally attacked."*

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It is important to remember that not all problems can be resolved and not all people want help. Listen to what the athlete is asking for, and respond accordingly. Perhaps the following guidelines will help you be a more effective listener:

- *Focus* on the person who is talking. Be attentive, nonjudgmental, and supportive.
- Be attuned to *body language* and listen for both *content* and *feelings*.
- Show *empathetic understanding* by paraphrasing and summarizing main points.
- Set *goals* and develop concrete *action plans* based on what it is the individual is striving to achieve. Introduce role-playing scenarios and coping rehearsal techniques to help the individual feel confident and prepared to take immediate action.

### Assertiveness Training: The Need for Expression

At times athletes need to stand up for their rights and be able to express themselves in a forthright yet respectful manner. **Assertiveness** refers to the honest and straightforward expression of a person's thoughts and feelings in a socially appropriate way that does not violate or infringe on the rights of others (Connelly & Rotella, 1991; Lazarus, 1973).

Assertiveness is a learned social skill that takes time and practice to be perfected. Learning to assert oneself in a respectful and considerate manner comes easy for some, yet is difficult for others. Reasons people have difficulty include lack of confidence (i.e., it takes courage to be assertive), vulnerability (i.e., risk of making oneself known has potential negative consequences), interpersonal concerns (e.g., being hesitant to speak up for fear of hurting someone's feelings), and lack of awareness (i.e., failure to learn how to be assertive) (Connelly & Rotella, 1991; Egan, 1994; Holt, Knight, & Zukowski, 2012). As an example, some first-year players may be afraid to speak up in team meetings for fear of looking bad in the eyes of others or may be intimidated or hesitant to ask for help. Sociocultural upbringing and other socialization factors may also affect one's decision to be assertive (Schinke, Yukelson, Bartolacci, Battochio, & Johnstone, 2011).

The following *DESC* formula proposed by Greenberg (1990) is a good example of how people can express themselves more assertively:

1. *Describe* the situation as you see it, paint a verbal picture of the other person's behavior or the situation to which you are reacting: "What I see

happening is this . . .”; “When my play is criticized, I feel. . . .”

2. *Express* your feelings regarding the other person’s behavior or the situation you have just described: “When you do this, it makes me feel like . . .”; “I get angry and frustrated when you talk behind my back.”
3. *Specify* what changes you would like to see take place: “I would prefer you give me feedback in a more constructive, less degrading manner”; “I would appreciate it if you did not talk behind my back.”
4. *Consequences* to expect: “If you don’t get off my case, I will ask coach to meet with us to straighten this situation out.”

In terms of resolving team conflicts, Vealey (2005) offers an innovative communication strategy called

the “Four Olves”: invOLVE, resOLVE, absOLVE, and evOLVE. Involve: make the group the target of change, begin by having the team talk about what constitutes an effective team culture and the commitment required from each member to make it work. Resolve: as problems or conflict arise during the season, have them collaborate and come up with collective solutions for problems discussed and hold each other accountable and responsible for their actions. Absolve: once the issue is resolved, move on free of any lingering repercussions (e.g., do not make them feel they are in the doghouse once things are resolved). Evolve: always find positive lessons, use each episode as an opportunity to learn and grow into a smarter, more experienced, cohesive unit. Most people do not enjoy confrontations, but by communicating honestly and directly in a respectful manner, good things will occur (Vealey, 2005; 2017; Yukelson, 1997).

### Summary

Communication is a multifaceted process that involves the transmission or exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, or information through verbal and nonverbal channels. Effective communication involves mutual sharing and mutual understanding. Its foundation is based on trust and mutual respect. Open lines of communication can help alleviate many problems that arise within sport environments. An important aspect of communication that has been highlighted is the need to be honest, sincere, direct, and consistent. Because messages transmitted are not always received and interpreted the same way, coaches, athletes, and sport psychology consultants must strive to be consistent in their verbal and nonverbal communications. Often when incongruent messages are transmitted, the receiver can become confused as to the true meaning of the message, thus leaving the door open for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Although much of this chapter has focused on coach-athlete communications, many principles discussed carry over to the applied sport psychology consultant working in an athletic environment. The communication skills we teach coaches and athletes are the same skills we use as effective consultants. Gaining entry, building rapport, developing trust, and individualizing a mental skills training program based on the needs and desires of coaches and athletes all require good listening and communication skills.

### Study Questions

1. Why is communication an important tool for a coach and sport psychology consultant to possess?
2. What factors interfere with effective communication processes in sport?
3. Give some behavioral examples of verbal and nonverbal communication in sport.
4. As a sport psychology consultant, what are some things you would do to improve coach-athlete communications?
5. As a coach or sport psychology consultant, what would you do to intervene if interpersonal conflict arose among team members that resulted in disruption of group cohesion and team harmony?
6. The volleyball team at Nike University tends to clam up when the going gets tough (i.e., communication breaks down; the team loses its intensity, enthusiasm, and focus in critical situations and fails to make appropriate adjustments to things that are going on during competition). How would you intervene as either a sport psychology consultant or coach to deal with this situation?
7. Why are active listening and empathy such important skills for a sport psychology consultant to develop in working with coaches and athletes?
8. What are some things you could do to become a better listener?

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