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Helping Create Service ‘Experts’: The Opportunity for an Athletic Approach to Coaching in Service Organisations

*Dr. Michael J.B. Read
Dr. Mark Colgate
Dr. Vivien Corwin
Dr. Steve Tax*

University of Victoria, Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

Recent research on expertise in organisational contexts strongly indicates that coaching, mindset, and deliberate practice have a greater impact on achieving high levels of proficiency than innate talents. We examine the opportunity for service firms to adopt an athletic based approach to coaching, ensuring employees serving customers become service ‘experts’ and consistently deliver excellence. Highlighting 13 main coaching practice categories that exist in athletic and organisational coaching, we found that athletic coaching seems to use a wider range of coaching techniques. This investigation paves a way for service organisations to understand how they can best incorporate well-established athletic coaching practices into their businesses.

Keywords

organisational coaching, athletic approach, service excellence

Introduction

Work on the role of coaching, practice, and mindset, particularly by Ericsson and Dweck (Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson, 2006; Dweck, 2006; Ericsson, Prietula & Cokely, 2007; Ericsson & Ward, 2007), has recently caught the attention of many high-profile business thinkers (Gladwell, 2008; Coyle, 2009; Syed, 2010). This research, and its popularising, has started to shift thinking toward the conclusion that high levels of performance has less to do with innate talent –an idea that we are often raised to believe by parents and teachers – and more with obtaining expertise through effort and mindsets. This shifting of beliefs is critical “because the notion that genius is born, not made, is deeply ingrained” (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007, p. 118).

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Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, (2007) summarise expertise as being mostly explained by a combination of: time, deliberate practice, and coaching, where the coach guides the deliberate practice. The coach enables the coachee to focus on his practice and provides the coachee with critical and timely feedback. This allows coaches to engage in quality training exercises by selecting the right practice activities, the ones that stretch the coachee beyond their current level of abilities. Self-serving bias (Miller & Ross, 1975), a strong tendency to perceive ourselves and our strengths favourably, suggests that it is unlikely we will be unbiased in our assessment of the gaps in our capabilities. Taking this view, coaching becomes an essential element of employee self-development toward domain expertise.

An adjacent stream of research, which has surprisingly not yet seen overlap with the research on expertise, has been undertaken on fixed and growth mindsets (Dweck, 2006). Dweck has shown that people have a tendency to have either one mindset or the other. People with a growth mindset tend to set learning goals, in which individuals seek to increase their competence, to understand or master something new. In contrast, those with fixed mindsets¹ tend to have performance goals, where they seek to gain favourable judgments of their competence or avoid negative assessments (Nicholls & Dweck, 1979; Dweck & Elliott, 1983). Clearly, from a coaching perspective, both the coach and the coachee need to have a growth mindset for coaching programs to succeed. Entering into the coaching partnership without such a mindset destines any coaching activity for failure and a waste of company resources.

Significantly, Heslin, Vandewalle, and Latham (2006) analysed the importance of implicit person theories (IPTs) and coaching. They state that “results suggest that variance in the extent and helpfulness of managers’ coaching is explained by their IPTs” (p. 896). They discovered that persons holding a fixed mindset are more likely to believe that human attributes are innate and unalterable, making them less inclined to invest in helping others to develop and improve. Conversely, individuals who hold the growth mindset believe that personal attributes can be developed. They are more likely to make such investments in others. Importantly, they also discovered that those with a fixed mindset could be persuaded to adopt a more growth mindset to increase the quality and quantity of their coaching.

¹Prior to coining the term *fixed* and *growth* mindsets Dweck used the term implicit person theories (IPTs) to explain these differing perspectives

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In many ways this perception of expertise through effort and a growth mindset is closely aligned to Theory Y and intrinsic motivation. The principles of Theory Y represent a self-fulfilling managerial philosophy that employees can enjoy working and gain satisfaction from work. Employees will self-regulate if committed to the organisation and also seek and accept responsibility. Theory Y is described as, “A process primarily of creating opportunities, releasing potential, removing obstacles, encouraging growth, providing guidance” (McGregor, 1957, p.183). Theory Y was the origin of a new perspective on employees – a managerial attitude which “relies heavily on self-control and self-direction” on the part of employees. These descriptions of Theory Y appear to mirror the current aspirations of coaching in organisations. In accordance with McGregor’s view of self-fulfilling managerial philosophies, Goldsmith (2003) suggests coaches can create positive self-fulfilling prophecies for coachee performance.

As a result, for coaching to be effective, Dubrin (1995) believes a coach must have a growth mindset and trust in the process and the ability of the employee to learn and develop through coaching. A manager-coach must really believe in the employee’s potential (Fournies, 2000). These statements match the message that management must have confidence in the abilities of the employees. McGregor suggests that, “only the management that has confidence in human capacities and is itself directed toward organisational objectives rather than toward the preservation of personal power can grasp the implications of this emerging theory. Such management will find and apply successfully other innovative ideas as we move slowly toward the full implementation of a theory like Y” (McGregor, 1957).

As stated at the outset of this paper, the objective of this work is to explore the opportunities that an athletic approach to coaching can offer service businesses. In this respect we are suggesting that service organisations, and in particular their frontline leaders, adopt a growth mindset, one where managers hire people for the potential they have, and not only for the talent they felt the employee demonstrated in the hiring process. This is a fundamental shift in thinking but one that can create the most fundamental of changes in how service firms engage their front-line employees to deliver service excellence.

We also believe this research, which links athletic coaches and organisational coaching, is important for three other reasons. First, as Greenberg and Baron (2008) state, athletic coaches and organisational coaches share many commonalities of

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practice, including: analyzing performance, creating a supportive climate for development, and offering encouragement. Second, sports are a central part of our lives – many of us are first exposed to the notion of a coach through sports and athletics. Historically, the coach's role has been connected with sport as early as 1868, with an association to rowing (Stec, 2009). Third, this long, rich history of coaching in sport has led to research findings, which suggest organisations have not fully utilised athletic-based high-performance coaching practices and that service business can learn immensely from these activities (Read, 2011).

Furthermore, we believe the more specific focus of this paper, opportunities that athletic coaching can present to service businesses (e.g. banking, hospitality and consulting), is a compelling context for two more significant reasons. First, employees in the service context frequently have to perform in 'real time' in front of the audience (the customer), which is akin to what an athlete does, and coaching can help them perform more effectively. Secondly, service-specific academic research has not adequately looked into coaching. As an example The Journal of Service Research, which publishes the highest quality service research, has never published any papers on coaching. In contrast, handling customer complaints after service failure has been the subject of over 20 papers in this journal. While recovering from service failure is a critical subject, coaching would seem as critical and certainly more ubiquitous.

The balance of the paper breaks down into the following: we first look at the literature that has linked the athletic approach to coaching in the business and service business context. Second, we introduce thirteen coaching practices that are thought to be common in athletic and organisational coaching. Through the results of expert interviews and open-ended surveys, we can highlight which of these practices are prevalent in both types of coaching. Finally, we discuss the results by focussing on which practices service businesses should seriously consider adopting to increase employee performance and yield better organisational outcomes.

Athletic Inspired Approach to Coaching within Service Organisations

Though athletic coaching analogies are widespread within organisational coaching literature, omission of key athletic coaching practices in organisational coaching is likely to impact employee performance and slow down development. Peltier (2001) suggests that a good deal of the athletic coaching literature aimed at business is based on clichés and simple motivational strategies. Ievleva and Terry (2008) report that even when sport coaches get involved in business, they tend to give motivational speeches

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to organisational audiences, rather than offering ongoing coaching or consulting. Consequently, the full application of athletic coaching practices to organisational coaching is potentially an area of huge performance gains for businesses.

In the context of service organisations, there is no evidence to suggest that these types of businesses are doing a better job of executing high-performance coaching practices. There is some evidence that service firms such as American Express, which uses individual coaches to develop employees for future success (Greenberg & Baron, 2008), are using coaching critically. Also, in the financial services context, both Commonwealth Bank of Australia and Royal Bank of Canada have been successful in using a professional sports coaching approach to coaching (Cohen Brown, 2011). Similarly, the Canadian-based JOEY Restaurant Group began a coaching initiative with the strategic selection of the most senior leaders in their organisation, so they could be coached and trained as internal coaches while running their restaurant regions. With hundreds of hours invested into coaching (Busse & Hemmingsen, 2010), in the last 30 months they experienced more than 30 percent revenue growth, reduced turnover, and made the Top 100 employers in Canada list for the first time (ICF, 2011). In addition, MacMillan (2011) reports that some library systems have started to utilize peer coaching to develop their employees.

While there are some examples of service businesses applying effective coaching practices, they are few and far between. Similarly, as noted earlier, service research on this topic is surprisingly non-existent. In this respect we believe understanding how service businesses can learn from high-performance athletic coaching practices holds much promise for service managers and researchers alike. Further, there is much to be gained from distinct disciplines learning from each other. Brewer and Hunter (1989) remind us that applying theories from other disciplines may “provoke new questions, provide useful insights, and suggest new ways of looking at a phenomenon”. In the next part of the paper we draw on 13 coaching practice categories, and discuss which among them offer the most immediate opportunity for service businesses to adopt.

Data Collection and Analysis

As part of data collection for this research, the first author obtained materials from both athletic and organisational coach certification courses to help create a list of essential coaching practices. To investigate what organisational coaches are trained to do, two introductory-level coach training manuals were analysed. One course was taught by International Coaching Federation (ICF) certified coaches while the other course was

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given by a Coach Training Institute (CTI) certified coach. For sport, the first two levels of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) were analyzed. This Canadian coaching certification program has trained over one million Canadians. The NCCP started giving certifications in 1974 and was one of the world's first national coaching certification programs (Crocker, 2011). In addition, several coach evaluation instruments, available with NCCP training, were analysed.

To construct a list of coaching practices, content analysis was undertaken. In the initial stage of content analysis, detailed notes were made of the coach training reference material. Line-by-line the content from the documents was condensed. The second stage of content analysis occurred using NVivo qualitative analysis software (Version 8, QSR International), where focussed coding was then performed on the notes created in the initial phase of analysis. This stage of coding resulted in 13 main coaching practice categories. To be considered as a category, at least five coded units of text were needed.

To determine whether athletic or organisational coaches utilised these practices similarly, the first author completed an online survey and conducted expert interviews with both types of coaches. In total, 37 organisational coaches completed lengthy, open-ended surveys, yielding a response rate of 13.3%. For the athletic coaches, 46 coaches completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 17.2%. Regarding the expert interviews, 17 athletic coaches participated, giving a response rate of 48.6% while 16 organisational coaches participated, giving a response rate of 33.3%.

Results

Data was combined for analysis, so the results of the survey and expert interviews could be aggregated and analysed. Several items on the survey and interview could be scored or coded quantitatively. Descriptive statistics were given on the response frequencies to the surveys and interviews. Data were arranged into categories and the results were used to compare organisational and athletic coaches. Contingency tables in a 2 by N matrix were arranged for coach type and the categories within each variable. An alpha level of less than .05 was chosen to indicate a significant difference between coach types. Mean comparisons tests were run on the data. Table 1 shows the 13 coaching practice categories, a brief description, and whether the practice was equally utilized.

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Table 1
The 13 Main Coaching Practice Categories

Coaching Category	Description of Practice Category	Usage by Coach Type
Bioenergetics	Coaches should know the nutritional needs of the coachee and provide information on nutrition and hydration.	Athletic
Coaching Effectiveness	Coaching creates better outcomes for the coachee such as increased focus, motivation, better relationships and collaborations. Attempts are made to measure these outcomes.	Both Athletic and Organisational
Demonstration	Coaches demonstrate their knowledge by acting out or simulating the desired skill. Leading by example and demonstration is as a good way for the coachee to model behaviour after the coach.	Athletic
Confidentiality	Coaches maintain strict confidentiality during coaching and the delivery of feedback.	Organisational
Subject-matter Expertise	The coach has the ability and knowledge of the domain being coached to analyze individual technical weaknesses and prescribe practices to correct these areas of weakness.	Athletic
Feedback	Coach gives honest, specific, and positive feedback, which recognizes the coachee characteristics that led to a better outcome for the coachee.	Both Athletic and Organisational
Goal-setting	Coaches help coaches set effective goals and plan of action to achieve these desired goals.	Both Athletic and Organisational
Handling Injury	The coach is concerned about coachee health and safety.	Athletic
Mental Training	The coach helps the coachee to prepare mentally and encourages the use of mental training tools to enhance learning and performance.	Athletic
Peripheral Resources	Coach helps the coachee by facilitating stakeholder cooperation, required resources, and coordination with other professionals.	Both Athletic and Organisational
Philosophy	A coaching philosophy represents a well-developed, pre-determined set of guidelines a coach follows throughout a coaching program.	Both Athletic and Organisational

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Coaching Category	Description of Practice Category	Usage by Coach Type
Physical Training	The application of exercise physiology is an important part of coaching. Coaches are advised to have knowledge of coachee physical training so as to optimize it.	Athletic
Practices	Practice may also be essential to coachee performance. In sport, planned practice is thought to be an important aspect of elite coaching. Consistent and prolonged practice is one strategy to improve coachee expertise	Athletic

Discussion

Overall, organisational coaches in the sample did not utilize athletic coaching practices which dealt with *demonstration, subject-matter expertise, practice, physical and mental training, bioenergetics and injury management*, while businesses tend to practice confidentially more than athletic coaches – which is logical given the sensitive nature of topic being coached. Overall this emphasizes the possible expansion of athletic coaching practices into organisational coaching. In particular, it would seem that the practices that have the best opportunity for immediate implementation into service businesses are *mental training, demonstration, and practice time* (subject-matter expertise, physical training, bioenergetics, and injury management also offer opportunities for organisations, but perhaps less immediate than the three we have highlighted).

In regards to mental training, psychological arousal management skills in the sport psychology tradition, such as self-talk and refocusing, and physiological skills such as progressive relaxation and meditation, offer incredible opportunities for service business. For front line positions, management of an employee's mental state can make a huge difference to the employee and the customer. Griffith (2007) feels that "most successful coaches are psychologists of no small ability". The coach can dedicate time and resources to mental skills training, which may enable the coachees to perform under pressure, overcome obstacles and persist, narrow their focus of attention and immersion in activity, and better manage energy in all areas of life (McNeil, 2010). Clearly these are all skills from which service employees could benefit. Critically, mental training can enable employees to continually maintain their growth mindset, which is so important to continual career growth (Dweck, 2006). To ensure

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employees are focused on skill development, coaches must get coachees to remind themselves periodically that expertise comes from deliberate practice and is not an innate skill. Visualisation of career goals and self-talk in tough situations can remind employees that they *can* reach their goals and stop the fixed mindset from dominating.

In respect to demonstration and in accordance with social learning theory, athletic coaches usually demonstrate their knowledge by acting out or simulating the desired skill (modelling); organisational coaches do this much less frequently. This is significant as leading by example and demonstration is recommended by Dick (2002) as a good way for the coachee to model behaviour after the coach. In doing so, the coach could demonstrate effective behaviour directly to the coachee. Bandura (2000) suggests that instructive modeling as the first step may aid in building self-efficacy. In the service context, a team leader can demonstrate the skill they would like an employee to deploy, which would again seem to be an area of much promise. A call-centre team leader displaying how to handle a frustrated customer or retail store managers demonstrating how an employee can build rapport with a customer in a face-to-face context are two examples of how a coach can guide the employee in the right behaviours, as well as provide credibility to the leader who displays this skill.

Finally, practice will also be essential to service employee performance. As noted at the outset of the paper, deliberate practice plays a critical role in becoming an expert.

The perspective of deliberate practice attributes the rarity of excellence to the scarcity of optimal training environments and to the years required to develop the complex mediating mechanisms that support expertise...until most individuals recognize that sustained training and effort is a prerequisite for reaching expert levels of performance, they will continue to misattribute lesser achievement to the lack of natural gifts, and will thus fail to reach their own potential (Ericsson, 2006).

Consistent and prolonged practice is a key strategy to improve individual expertise (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). Katz and Koenig suggest that managers should find what sport coaches do in practice and attempt to emulate these strategies in the workplace – such as practicing in a familiar, low-risk, and low-arousal context. As a major part of learning, Katz and Koenig feel that experimentation and failure are essential: “Practice is an opportunity for experimentation and innovation, when a team can develop and test new plays, making mistakes along the way” (2001). In self-efficacy theory, Bandura (2000) alludes to practice as ‘guided skill perfection’ in

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simulated situations or role rehearsal. The use of practice is also advocated by Belcourt et al. (2000) as it positively influences employee retention of training.

No athlete would consider 'performing' without practice time, even an amateur athlete, yet businesses rarely allow their employees hands-on practice, role-plays, or simulations. This practice time could well be the difference between delivering good service and excellent service.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the opportunity for service firms to adopt an athletic-based coaching approach to employee skill development, to ensure employees serving customers become service 'experts' who consistently deliver excellence. Research in the service field has mainly ignored the role of coaching, so we felt it was a worthwhile endeavour to see how athletic coaching practices can help us understand where service researchers and managers need to go next.

The research on expertise strongly indicates that great coaching, time to practice deliberately, and mindsets (growth over fixed) are critical. In the service context, expertise means delivering service excellence one interaction, one customer at a time. This is mastery. To achieve this mastery, research findings suggest that mental training, practice time, and demonstration of skills are three broad coaching areas that service researchers and managers should more closely examine.

Athletic coaching has such a rich history. It would be a missed opportunity for service businesses not to learn from the best practices this discipline has developed. We believe that adopting high-performance coaching practices from athletics will simultaneously build employee engagement (through development of their key skills, intrinsic motivation, a greater sense of self-efficacy and, through time with their leaders, a greater sense of self-importance) and customer engagement (through the delivery of service excellence through more proficient and confident employees). The adoption of an athletic approach to coaching could immensely help service firms achieve greater levels of service excellence. We hope this paper inspires further work in this area and helps by providing a foundation for future research.

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About the authors

Dr. Michael J.B. Read is a Post Doctoral Fellow at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, British Columbia, Canada. His main research interests include coaching in organizations, group design and diversity, improvisation, and informal networks. Michael possesses a PhD in Organizational Behaviour and Human Resources from the University of British Columbia, an MBA in International Management, and a Bachelor in Engineering. Michael can be reached at mread@uvic.ca

Dr. Mark Colgate is Associate Professor in Service Excellence at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, British Columbia, Canada. His main research area is the intersection of sports coaching and the delivery of service excellence. Mark has published in *Sloan Management Review*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* and *Journal of Service Research* amongst others. Mark can be reached at colgate@uvic.ca

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Dr. Vivien Corwin is Associate Professor in Service Excellence at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include human resources and leadership in the context of services management, organizational culture and leadership, and alternative work relationships. Her research has been published in *Harvard Business Review*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vivien can be reached at vcorwin@uvic.ca

Dr. Steve Tax is Associate Professor in Service Management at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, British Columbia, Canada. Dr. Tax's research interests focus on interdisciplinary issues in services management, notably service recovery, service design, customer performance and service networks. This work has produced a host of articles appearing in such journals as the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Sloan Management Review*, the *Journal of Marketing*, and the *Journal of Retailing*. Steve can be reached stax@uvic.ca

Website: <http://www.uvic.ca/gustavson/>