

Coaches Competencies - Nordic Skiing

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Abstract

One purpose of the present study was to investigate athletes' perceptions of their coaches' coach competencies in world cup A in Nordic combined. Another purpose was to investigate how their perceptions relate to their results. Coach competencies were measured by a Coach Competence Scale (CCS) that captures important coach capabilities in five dimensions in terms of different competencies which coaches must possess in their roles as coaches. Seventy-two percent of the athletes participated in the investigation that was conducted during two world cup competitions. The results show that the athletes are satisfied with their coaches' coach competencies and the results indicate a relationship between the athletes' results and their perceptions of their coaches' coach competencies.

Elite athletes' perceptions of their coaches' Coach Competencies in Nordic combined

Research within sports reveals that the coach is an important factor in developing successful athletes (Blom, Watson II, & Spadaro, 2010; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). The coach-athlete relationship is therefore at the heart of the coaching process and it is the interactions between coaches and their athletes that generate the athletes' learning and results (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). The coaching process has therefore occupied researchers in the field of sports for several years (Abraham, Collins & Martindale, 2006; Chelladurai, 2007; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Horn, 2002; Myers, Chase, Beauchamp & Jackson, 2010; Myers, Feltz, Maier, Wolfe & Reckase, 2006; Myers, Wolfe, Maier, Feltz & Reckase, 2006). Interestingly, during the last few decades, coaching has also developed as its own profession outside the sport arena (Gallwey, 2000; Whitmore, 2002). The coaching profession claims that coaching is a new and effective route in the process of achieving growth and development of others (Grant, 2006; Hall, Otazo,

& Hollenbeck, 1999). The importance of relationship issues is highlighted, and it is the conversation between the coach and the coachee that is the central element in the coaching process (Moen, 2010).

Since coaches in sport are found to be crucial in the development of athletes, there should be a relationship between coach competencies and athletes' performances and results. An interesting issue in sport psychology is therefore to investigate how coaches' coach competencies relate to athletes' performances. The question to be addressed in this study is:

How do athletes in sport perceive their coaches' coach competencies and how do their perceptions relate to their results in world cup Nordic combined?

Theoretical background

Helping relationships are common in the way that they are aimed at helping the person who seeks help to achieve growth and development (Kvalsund, 2006; Lavoie, 2002; Moen, 2010). A successful helping relationship between a coach

and an athlete in sport should stimulate to grow and develop the athlete's talents (Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007). Interestingly, the coach-athlete relationship is found to be particularly crucial in terms of creating a positive outcome or not for the athlete (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Lyle, 1999). Numerous studies have investigated how leadership behaviors of coaches can affect athletes satisfaction, performances, self-esteem, confidence and anxiety (Chelladurai, 1990; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Olympiou, Jowett & Duda, 2008). Other studies that have investigated this relationship claim that effective relationships include basic ingredients such as empathic understanding, honesty, support, liking, acceptance, responsiveness, friendliness, cooperation, caring, respect and positive regard (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). On the other hand, research claims that ineffective relationships are undermined by lack of interest and emotion, remoteness, even antagonism, deceit, exploitation and physical or sexual abuse (Balague, 1999; Brackenridge, 2001; Jowett, 2003).

Thus, needed competencies for elite coaches have earned attention in the field of sport coaching (Abraham, Collins & Martindale, 2006; Chelladurai & Doherty, 1998; Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998; Demers, Woodburn & Savard, 2006; Durand-Bush, Thompson & Salmela, 2006; Jones et al., 2004; Kirschner, VanVilsteren, Hummel & Wigman, 1997; Westera, 2001). Coach competencies are an important area in sport and needed competencies seem to be crucial in order to build effective relationships (Duffy, 2008; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2002; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Salmela, 1996).

Coaching as a profession

Gallwey (1974) and Whitmore (2002) are recognized as two important contributors to the development of the coaching profession outside the sport arena (Stelter, 2005). The former tennis

player and coach (Gallwey, 1974) and the former race car driver (Whitmore, 2002) brought their experiences and knowledge from sport into the workplace to develop professionals in business. The profession of coaching has developed outside of the sport arena during the last few decades (Gallwey, 2000; Grant, 2006; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Whitmore, 2002). Whitmore (2002) even claims that the quality and effectiveness of coaching in sport is now far behind the coaching that happens in business (p. 7-8).

Coaching is about establishing a helping relationship between the coach and the person with whom the coach is engaged, the coachee (Gallwey, 2000; Grant, 2006; Whitmore, 2002). The power of the individual as capable of finding solutions to his or her own problems with the help of a facilitating coach is highlighted in coaching (Moen & Kvalsund, 2008). This approach is a client-centred one influenced by humanistic psychology, which emphasizes the importance of listening to the subjective beliefs of the client (Kahn, 1996). This optimistic and trusting view of human nature is central to the field of coaching today. In this study, the following definition is used:

Coaching is a method that aims to achieve self actualization by facilitating learning and developmental processes to promote the resource base of another person. The method is characterized by its active involvement of the coachee through powerful questioning and active listening (Moen & Kvalsund, 2008).

Thus, in this study coaching is defined as an approach and a tool that can be used to fulfil people's potential and improve their talent through goal oriented conversations.

Coach competencies

Researchers have noticed that practicing coaches and coachee's are lacking a well-established,

reliable and valid instrument for measuring coachee's perceptions of coach competencies (Moen & Federici, 2012). A coaching competence scale (CCS), consisting of five dimensions, was developed to help fill this void in the field (Moen & Federici, 2012). The dimensions in CCS are emphasized by several contributors in the coaching profession: The International Coaching Federation (ICF), The Coaches Training Institute (CTI), professional coaches (Auerbach, 2005), research (Grant, 2006, 2009; Moen, 2010; Moen & Kvalsund, 2008), and literature (Gallwey, 2000; Grant, 2006; Whitmore, 2002). The CCS consists of five different dimensions of coach competencies;

- 1) Creating the relationship,
- 2) Communication attending skills,
- 3) Communication influencing skills,
- 4) Facilitating for learning and results, and
- 5) Making the responsibility clear.

Creating the relationship. The true nature of the coaching relationship is based on mutuality. Mutuality is a relation that is built upon respectful understanding and responsive listening and interacting (Kellett, Humphrey & Sleeth, 2006; Kvalsund, 2005; Lavoie, 2002; Moen, 2010; Zeus & Skiffington, 2002;). To create such a relationship, the coach must be able to meet the coachee with trust and respect.

Communication attending skills. The ability to ask the right questions followed by the use of active listening are key techniques in coaching (Moen & Kvalsund, 2008). The coach's attending skills are supposed to give the coachee an impression that he or she has the coach's full attention and is seen, heard and understood. Listening skills, both active and passive, are important as they enable the coachee to continue to discuss and explore the case in focus (Ivey & Ivey, 2006). Therefore, a core competency for coaches is the ability to use attending skills.

Communication influencing skills. Once the coachee's stories have been truly heard and understood, the coachee will be much more open and ready for change (Ivey & Ivey, 2006; Moen, 2010). The coach's influencing skills are supposed to influence the coachee's motivation and behaviour in order to help the coachee to achieve changes. Asking powerful questions that are open-ended (beginning with an interrogative who, what, how, where and when) are important because such questions encourage descriptive and detailed answers (Ivey & Ivey, 2006). Therefore, another competency for coaches is the use of important influencing skills.

Facilitate learning and results. The coaching process is supposed to encourage the coachee to be active, involved and to participate in his or her learning process as facilitated by the coach (Moen & Kvalsund, 2008). The aim is to explore the case in focus from many different perspectives, so that the coachee becomes aware of his or her relationship to this case and the potential for growth and learning in the situation. Another important competency for coaches is the ability to facilitate learning and results.

Make the responsibility clear. Awareness is a prerequisite for being able to take responsibility (Moen, 2010). Responsibility cannot be taken for something of which one is unaware. It's essential for coaches to clarify that the coachee is responsible in his or her learning process. In addition, extended use of attending skills, especially in the beginning of the conversation so that trust is established stimulates the coachee to open up, speak and explore the case in focus. Then, influencing skills are used to achieve a deeper understanding of the case, and both the coach and the coachee will achieve better knowledge of the case and its forming. This helps them both to become more prepared to take responsibility and make optimal decisions regarding the case. Another core competency for a coach is therefore defined as the ability to

make the responsibility clear between the coach and the coachee.

Interestingly, studies that investigate the interpersonal dynamics between the coach and the athlete in sport have received little attention and until recently researchers have demanded that more attention must be paid to coach-athlete relationship issues (Jones, et al., 2004; Jowett, 2003; Lavoie, 2002; Taylor & Wilson, 2005; Olympou, et al., 2008). Also, to our knowledge, it seems that research within Nordic combined is almost non-existent in sport psychology journals. Thus, there is a growing need for knowledge on human relations in sport and in Nordic combined in special (Poczwardowski, Barott & Jowett, 2006).

The following research question was therefore developed:

What are athletes' perceptions of their coaches' coach competencies in world cup A in Nordic combined, and is there a relationship between athletes' perceptions of their coaches' coach competencies and their results?

Method

The participants in this study were asked to voluntarily participate in a questionnaire measuring coach competencies and athlete results. A questionnaire was chosen because both athletes and coaches are very busy planning, preparing, training, competing and evaluating their progress in sport, especially during the competition season. An investigation during the competition season, not after or before, was chosen in order to document perceptions about coach competencies when performances and results are emphasized.

Research participants

Coaches and athletes in the world cup A in Nordic combined were chosen as participants. The data was collected during the last period of

the world cup season 2011/2012, from February to early March. Forty one athletes and sixteen coaches participated in the investigation. The questionnaires were delivered and completed during the world cup competitions in Liberec (25-26. February) and Lahti (1-2. March). The athletes and coaches who participated in the investigation were from Norway (8/3), Finland (4/0), Austria (8/3), Switzerland (1/0), USA (5/2), Japan (2/2), Slovenia (2/1), Italy (4/1), France (4/2), and the Czech Republic (3/2). The athletes' average age were 25 years (the youngest 20 and the oldest 35), and the coaches' average age were 39 years (the youngest 30 and the oldest 54). Their experience as coaches at elite level varied from 12 months to 25 years. In the world cup competitions in Liberec and Lahti there were respectively 57 and 53 athletes that participated from 13 different nations. Thus, 72 % of the athletes participated in the investigation from 77 % of the nations that were participating in these world cup competitions.

The Coach Competence Scale

The CCS consists of five dimensions with different numbers of items on each subscale. The dimensions are:

- 1) Creating the relationship,
- 2) Communication-attending skills,
- 3) Communication- influencing skills,
- 4) Facilitating for learning and results, and
- 5) Making the responsibility clear.

It is important to note that the instrument primarily was designed to measure the coachee's perception of a coach's competency based on his or her experiences from a coaching relationship. Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from "Not at all" (1) to "Absolutely" (7). Creating the relationship consisted of two items. An example of an item is: "My coach expresses a fundamental thrust and respect in me". The second dimension focused on communication-attending skills. This dimension consisted of three items. An example of an item is: "My

coach seems to understand me well when we speak together”. Communication- influencing skills consisted of two items. An example of an item is: “My coach asks mainly open and direct questions”. Facilitating for learning and results consisted of three items. An example of an item is: “My coach brings out my solutions for challenges that I meet”. The last dimension was making the responsibility clear. This dimensions consisted of two items. An example of an item is: “My coach puts a clear responsibility on me in my learning process”.

Data analysis

The data were investigated by means of descriptive statistics using the IBM SPSS 20.0 software. This approach was chosen because of the small number of respondents, which made the data unsuitable for parametric analyses. The athletes in the investigation are ranked in groups based on their world cup ranking results. To compare the groups, Cohen’s *d* is used to measure effect sizes between the different groups (Cohen, 1992). Cohen’s *d* is not depended of the number of participants (*n*) in the same way as analyses based on testing the level of significance are.

Results

Table 1 shows correlations between the different dimensions in the CCS and world cup ranking, as well as number of items, statistical means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alphas. Note that the estimation of Cronbach’s alpha also included data from the sixteen coaches that participated in the study. The reliability coefficient is affected by sample size and they were therefore included in the analysis to increase the reliability. The reliability coefficients from the validation study are also included in parenthesis (Moen & Federici, 2012).

The correlations varied from strong (0.5- 1.0) to moderate (0.3- 0.5) and weak (0.1- 0.3). Thus, the CCS can both be regarded as domain specific and multidimensional. The Cronbach’s alphas in

this study for variable 1, 2 and 3 are all questionable, whereas the alphas of variable 4 and 5 are acceptable.

Table 2 shows the mean scores for the CCS and each dimension of the CCS grouped by world cup ranking, the number of athletes in each group (Rank 1-5), and the mean age of the athletes in the different ranked groups. The mean for all the athletes are also showed. Table 2 also shows the effect sizes (Cohen’s *d*) between the athletes in Rank 1(world cup rank 1-10), and the athletes in rank 2, 3, 4 and 5, based on the mean values and standard deviation of the CCS.

A 7-point scale was used to measure coach competencies in this study. The mean values for the dimensions in the CCS are all above 6, except for making the responsibility clear (5.50). In general, the athletes perceive their coaches coach competencies to be high. There is a tendency that the athletes in Rank 1 perceive their coaches coach competencies higher than the athletes in rank 2, 3 and 4. The athletes in Rank 5 seems to break this trend. Table 2 also shows that the mean age among the athletes in Rank 5 is younger than the athletes in the other groups. Cohen’s *d* shows that the effect sizes between rank 1 and the other groups are respectively medium (0.52), large (0.93), large (1.01), and small (0.18).

Figure 1 shows the trend lines based on mean values for each of the dimension of the CCS grouped by world cup ranking.

The trend is that the athletes who are ranked higher on the world cup ranking list perceive their coach competencies to be better than the athletes that are ranked lower on the world cup ranking list. The athletes that are ranked 41 and lower (Rank 5) on the world cup ranking list do not follow this trend. They perceive their coaches coach competencies higher than the trend.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for the CCS

| Description | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---|
| 1 Creating the relationship | - | | | | | |
| 2 Communication attending skills | 0.583 | - | | | | |
| 3 Communication influencing skills | 0.51 | 0.42 | - | | | |
| 4 Facilitating for learning and results | 0.677 | 0.521 | 0.688 | - | | |
| 5 Making responsibility clear | 0.279 | 0.148 | 0.31 | 0.25 | - | |
| 5 World Cup ranking | 0.215 | 0.203 | 0.016 | 0.128 | 0.202 | |
| Number of items | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | - |
| Mean | 5.92 | 6.11 | 5.71 | 5.77 | 5.63 | - |
| Standard deviation | 0.92 | 0.68 | 0.84 | 0.97 | 1.3 | - |
| ^a Cronbach's alpha | .63 (.86) | .66 (.89) | .59 (.82) | .77 (.86) | .74 (.83) | - |

Note. $n=41$. ^a $n=57$

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for the CCS sorted by world cup ranking

| Description | Rank 1 | Rank 2 | Rank 3 | Rank 4 | Rank 5 | Sum |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Creating the relationship Mean | 6.43 | 5.94 | 5.66 | 5.58 | 5.84 | 5.92 |
| Communication attending skills Mean | 6.45 | 6.12 | 5.8 | 6 | 6.02 | 6.11 |
| Communication influencing skills Mean | 6.06 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 4.92 | 6.07 | 5.71 |
| Facilitating for learning and results Mean | 6.2 | 5.87 | 5.2 | 5.22 | 5.89 | 5.76 |
| Making responsibility clear Mean | 5.5 | 5.62 | 4.91 | 5.08 | 6.3 | 5.63 |
| CCS Mean | 30.67 | 29.06 | 27.25 | 26.8 | 30.15 | 29.13 |
| Cohen's d | | 0.52 | 0.93 | 1.01 | 0.18 | |
| Mean age | 25.63 | 28.5 | 24.83 | 26.5 | 21.77 | |
| N | 8 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 13 | |

Note. $n=41$. Ranking in world cup combined: Rank 1 (1-10), Rank 2 (11-20), Rank 3 (21-30), Rank 4 (31-40), Rank 5 (41→)

Discussion and conclusions

Researchers have demanded that more attention must be paid to coach-athlete relationship issues, and studies that investigate the interpersonal dynamics between the coach and the athlete. The first purpose of this study was to investigate how athletes in the world cup A in Nordic combined perceive their coaches coach competencies. The second purpose of this study was to investigate if there is a relationship between the athletes' perceptions of their coaches coach competencies and their results.

In general, the results show that the athletes perceive that their coaches coach competencies are very good. The mean values are ranging from 5.63 to 6.11 for all the athletes (Table 2). This is an interesting finding that is in contrast with the claimed scepticism about the quality of coaching processes within sport (Whitmore, 2002). These results indicate that the effect of coaching within world cup A in Nordic combined is positive. The results also indicate that there is a relationship between the coaches coach competencies and their athletes' results. Thus, there is a tendency that the athletes that are ranked top 10 in the world cup ranking list perceive that their coaches coach competencies are better than the athletes ranked lower on the list (Table 2 and Figure 1). Cohen's *d* shows that the differences between the best ranked athletes and the others are from medium to large, except from the athletes that are ranked last on the world cup ranking list. They perceive their coaches coach competencies quite similar with the best ranked athletes (Table 2 and Figure 1).

In general, the relationships between the coaches and their athletes seem to be based on trust and respect (Creating the relationship). These are the best athletes in the world in Nordic combined, and the results indicate that the coaches have managed to build their relationships with their athletes on mutuality. Mutuality is built on respectful understanding and responsive listening and

interacting. Interestingly, the athletes with the best results (Rank 1) perceive their relationships with their coaches to be better than the other athletes (Rank 2, 3, 4 and 5). This indicates that it is the interactions between coaches and their athletes that generate the athletes' results. However, as seen in Figure 1, the trend is that the athletes ranked lowest on the world cup ranking list (Figure 1, Rank 5) perceive their relationships to be better than those who are ranked in group 3 and 4. This can be explained with their young age (mean=21.7) compared to the athletes ranked in the other groups (Table 2). Thus, they probably have been given the opportunity to compete at the highest level just lately, are enthusiastic about the future and have just started to build successful relationships with their coaches on the national teams. Interestingly, the athletes in this group score their coaches quite similar as the athletes that are ranked top ten in the world cup ranking list on three of the other dimensions; communication influencing skills, facilitating for learning and results and making the responsibility clear (Figure 1). The dimensions communication attending skills and creating the relationship are on the other hand scored lower than the athletes in Rank 1. This finding support the explanation above; the coaches are helping them by being good facilitators, influencing them and are clear about that the athletes are responsible for their own learning and development. On the other hand, the results might indicate that the relationships not yet are built on mutuality. Mutuality assume that the coaches truly have a deep understanding about their athletes through the use of attending behaviour such as open questioning and listening. For the youngest athletes (Rank 5) this could be what's missing in the relationship, and with time the relationship with their coaches will hopefully develop towards mutuality. There are the youngest athletes (Rank 5) that perceive that their coaches put the greatest responsibility on them in their learning process. This result support the explanation that the coach-athlete relationships in this group are not based on mutuality yet.

Figure 1 Illustration of perceived coach competences (CCS) sorted by rank in world cup combined

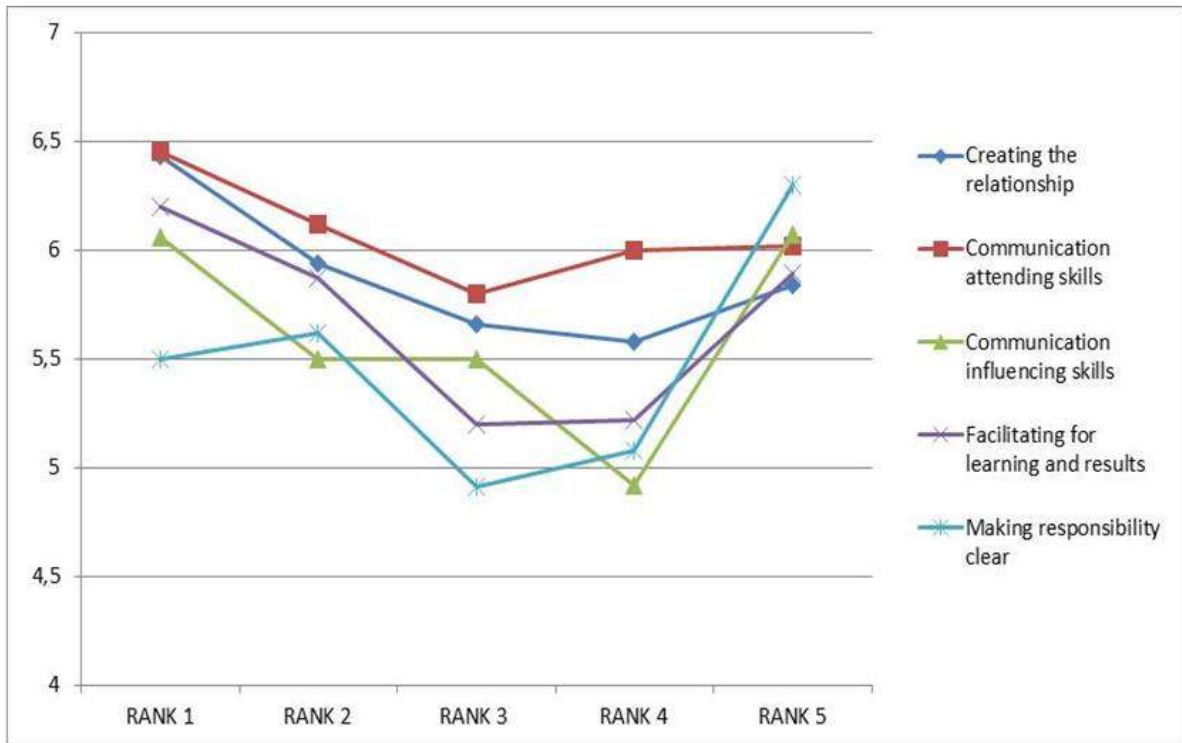


Figure 1. Illustration of perceived coach competences (CCS) by the five dimensions on the vertical axes, sorted by the ranked groups in world cup in Nordic combined on the horizontal axis. Rank 1 (1-10), Rank 2 (11-20), Rank 3 (21-30), Rank 4 (31-40), Rank 5 (41→)

The atypical scores for the athletes in Rank 5 are truly interesting; the trend for the athletes in rank 2, 3 and 4 is more linear (Figure 1). Thus, the lower the rank is on the world cup ranking list, the lower is the perceived coaches’ competencies score. Could this be explained with a theory that the coaches are more enthusiastic with their best athletes and their youngest athletes (future top athletes)? This must be investigated in future research in order to fully understand the results.

In order to create successful relationships, the coach and the athlete need to spend considerable time together (Moen & Verburg, 2011; Moen & Garland, 2012). Coaches need to engage in questioning, active listening, arrange for activities that are relevant for their learning, and they have to meet the athlete with a truly interest for helping him or her to improve their capacity within sport. This is not something that is easily achieved. These results are therefore interesting

and worth noting. The athletes in world cup A in Nordic combined are clearly satisfied with their coaches' coach competencies.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that the athletes in world cup A in Nordic combined in general perceive that their coaches' coach competencies are good. The results also indicate that there is a tendency that the best athletes are more satisfied with their coaches' coach competencies than the

athletes who are ranked lower on the world cup ranking list. However, this study has several limitations and further studies need to be conducted before clear conclusions are made. One limitation is the sample size which made advanced statistics not of current interest. Also, the CCS should be considered as a preliminary scale measuring coaching competence. We consider that the five dimensions constituting the CCS may apply to all coaches or coaches' but other possible dimensions of coach competencies should also be explored in future research.

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