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How The Best Get Better:

What I Learned Spending a Year With Canada's Top Coaches

BY GARRY WATANABE, PERFORMANCE COACHING PRINCIPAL TRAINER

At 8:00 AM on April 10, 2014, I was doing some math. The initial cohort of coaches for 'Coach 2 Leader' (a year-long leadership development program hosted in partnership with the [Canadian Sport Institute Ontario](#)) was filtering into the room. Despite a long history of working with elite sport—I was starting to feel slightly nervous. As each new participant arrived, my mental tally of Olympic and Paralympic Games attended and medals won rose. I ran out of fingers, then toes, before finally aligning on a cumulative 38 Games attended and 27 medals won—11 of them gold.

As I looked over my shoulder to the title slide behind me—which read 'Coaching for High Performance'—I started wondering if we had made a huge mistake. What could these individuals possibly have left to learn about coaching and leadership?

Here's the thing about the best though: they always want to get better. And over the course of the past year I've been lucky enough to be a part of their journey. We've spent a fair bit of time together—5 days of workshop time and multiple 1:1 coaching sessions in between (you can get full details on the program [here](#)). I have certainly learned as much from them as they have from me—and I wanted to share three of those lessons here.

HOLD A CLEAR PERFORMANCE MODEL—BUT CONSTANTLY REEVALUATE

Over the course of the year, the number one topic of informal conversation during breaks and lunch was some version of: *What does it take to medal at an Olympic/Paralympic Games?*

Every coach in the program had a clear and comprehensive model in their mind of what high performance looked like for the athletes that they coached. It included not only physical capabilities and technical skills, but also things like training habits, lifestyle choices, social relationships and values. These performance models helped the coaches know what they were working towards. And, they helped the coaches stay focused on the key priorities in the face of a million different things they could be trying to impact.

Interestingly enough, using these models enabled coaches to know when to adapt their approach to suit the unique needs of a particular athlete and when to draw the line and require that the athlete strictly adhere to the program. As Olympic Beach Volleyball Coach Steve Anderson remarked: “You need to make exceptions, otherwise you end up stifling the brilliance of certain athletes. You just have to make sure that you don’t have an athlete that consists of nothing but exceptions. If that’s the case then either your model is flawed or you’re making some bad decisions.”

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How about you? How consistently do you create and use a clear model of what you are looking for (beyond results) when coaching those you lead to their next level? And, how do you continue to update it and evolve?

THINK SMALL TO GO BIG

While the elite coaches were wide open to new ideas, they were very disciplined about choosing to focus on changing one specific thing at a time. Why?

One rationale was—quite simply—“don’t mess with success”. They wanted to make sure that they continued doing the fundamental things that brought them success in the first place, and were aware that incorporating too many changes at once could end up being a distraction both to themselves and to the athletes they coach.

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The other rationale was “conducting good research”. If you make 3+ changes, regardless of the results you get (good or bad) you’re no further ahead because you don’t know what drove the results. Trying one thing at a time gives you really good information about what to incorporate into your routines and what to discard. And at the elite level, because the margins are so fine, small gains make a big difference.

One example was the action plan initiated by Canadian Sports Hall of Fame rowing coach Al Morrow. Al does an outstanding job of creating clarity for his athletes, but during one of the workshops he realized that he could do better. He realized that it was not enough simply to provide information—he also needed to give his athletes the opportunity to run it through in their minds before they acted upon it.

So he committed to sending out a detailed email he called “The Daily Plan” to his athletes by 8 pm each night prior to workout the next day. The Daily Plan comprehensively outlines the workout and includes technical information, but also things like the weather report, the water conditions and small comments designed to manage the overall mindset of the team—lighten the mood or increase the intensity. It also provided an opportunity for athletes to pose questions and raise issues which could be dealt with ahead of time, rather than at the start of workout at 5 pm the next morning.

This small change yielded significant results. First of all, Al noticed that athletes were showing up better prepared for the weather conditions—which had both performance and health implications. Second, the crew was out on the water 10-15 minutes sooner because it took less time to explain the workout. Third, he noticed better attention to detail during the workout. Finally, Al found that he felt more prepared for, and calmer throughout, the workout. In the past, he had often needed to start the team off on their workout while he finished off a few last minute tasks before jumping into his motorboat to catch up. After implementing the Daily Plan he never once failed to leave the dock and head out onto the lake alongside his athletes. Needless to say, the Daily Plan is now a permanent part of his coaching routine.

How about you? Do you conduct small experiments with yourself to determine what changes will have the biggest impact before making them part of your regular routines moving forward?

STAY HUNGRY FOR TOOLS AND IDEAS

Initially, I was curious to see how open these coaches would be to the program material. Given the calibre of the group, I felt that they might rightly be skeptical that there was more that they needed to learn.

Instead of rushing to their mobile devices, they rushed to each other and used the time as an opportunity to ask their peers for insights, best practices, or advice on how to handle a certain situation.

Instead I experienced the exact opposite: the tables at the front of the room were the first to fill in, and throughout the workshops every coach was completely dialed in: listening intently, taking notes, asking questions and sharing personal insights. But it was what happened at lunch and breaks that really impressed me. Instead of rushing to their mobile devices, they rushed to each other and used the time as an opportunity to ask their peers for insights, best practices, or advice on how to handle a certain situation. In numerous cases coaches remarked how helpful it was to have an opportunity to talk things through with someone else who understood the unique challenges associated with trying to take a performer from the top 1% in their field to number 1 in the world.

How about you? How consistently do you capitalize on those rare face-to-face opportunities to learn from others who might hold a helpful perspective?

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Overall, what I learned from this elite group was that they approached their own development with the same deliberateness that they applied to the development of their athletes.

Despite their years of success they remained curious and hungry to find their next 'edge' in performance. They looked to incorporate new knowledge into an existing model or framework that provided coherence and was constantly evolving, and they took a scientific approach: testing potential changes to assess impact, before deciding on whether or not to make it part of their performance routines on a permanent basis.

Whether you're working on the fundamentals, or on the final 1% of performance—as this elite group is—consider these 'difference makers' when you're planning for your own development.

Garry Watanabe (@GarryWatanabe) is a Principal Trainer at Performance Coaching. He can be reached at garrywatanabe@performancecoaching.ca.

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