

THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES AND ROLES FOR COACHES

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One consistent theme across strength and conditioning research is that sport coaches are frequent sources of stress for strength and conditioning coaches (6,12). The basic job description and realities of the job for strength and conditioning coaches (e.g., relying on the athletes to train and perform well, long hours, multiple bosses) are generally simply accepted as part of the job (10,11,12,15). Accepted as they may be, that does not mean they are without stress (10). The purpose of this article is to help alleviate some of the stress between strength and conditioning coaches and sport coaches by considering the importance of boundaries as viewed through the lens of better identifying job roles with a specific focus on how omissions of communication can be detrimental.

In a general sense, a “boundary” in this article simply means some line of demarcation. There is a more clinical definition of “boundary,” though that is more of a clinical definition and is likely of less value to the day-to-day operations of a strength and conditioning facility. The research on roles and expectations can provide some guidance (4). Sport coaches and strength and conditioning coaches ideally work collaboratively and closely for the improved performance of athletes and teams, which often blurs the lines between personal and professional interactions. This is not a new conundrum for strength and conditioning coaches. The juxtaposition seems to be between historical precedents and traditions, and the more recent multidisciplinary of sport (5,9).

THE CONTEXT

As the strength and conditioning field has grown, there are more circumstances strength and conditioning coaches find themselves in, which makes it difficult to create any sort of exhaustive list of contexts or prepare an article to target all contexts. Assumptions on context for the purposes of this article are: a) the strength and conditioning coach knows who the sport coach is and there is a degree of collaboration expected between them, b) there is some level of administrator that exists on the organization chart above both the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach, c) the strength and conditioning coach wants to remain employed in a similar position within the strength and conditioning field and, d) the strength and conditioning coach truly wants to do a good job at helping athletes improve and perform their best.

The general solution to most all interpersonal problems is to communicate more. While that may be true in a general sense, it is also wholly nondescript for the strength and conditioning coach currently locked in a professional disagreement with a particular sport coach. It is likely true that some increased communication will be necessary on the strength and conditioning coach’s part, though that is not simply a frequency-only piece. The hope is that this article will provide some actionable topics for communication that perhaps have not been previously addressed by the strength and conditioning coach that can increase the frequency of the communication, while more specifically targeting the effectiveness of the communication. The frequency versus effectiveness topic has been examined in various settings outside

of sport (e.g., supervisor-to-supervisee) (1). Frequency versus effectiveness has also been examined within sport psychology research on intrapersonal self-talk (3). A simple example of the dichotomy is that an athlete repeatedly saying “I’m great! I got this!” may yield a large frequency count for self-talk while not believing those statements at all and thus the effectiveness is low. Similarly, a coach, either sport or strength and conditioning, that consistently “checks in” or “touches base” may have high frequency of communication. Though if there is little content beyond, “How are you?” “Getting your homework done?” included in those messages, the effectiveness may be rather low. Increasing effective communication that reaches beyond mere pleasantries or small talk from a strength and conditioning coaches to athletes was a key finding in a recent study (16). A reflective question for the strength and conditioning coach is to consider the balance between their own habits regarding the frequency and effectiveness levels of communication to the athletes, sport coaches, and the strength and conditioning coach staff colleagues.

ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

In group dynamics, a sizeable portion of frustrations can come from roles and the expectations associated with those roles (4). Two key components of roles are role clarity (e.g., the degree to which both parties understand the expectations of the role) and role acceptance (e.g., the degree of buy-in for both parties to accept and attempt to execute those expectations) (4). One of the most classic examples of conflict between strength and conditioning coaches and sport coaches is when a sport coaches instructs the strength and conditioning coach on how an athlete should be training—essentially thereby telling the strength and conditioning coach how to execute their own job tasks (6,12). Previous research has shown the sport coach is unlikely to have sufficient knowledge of strength and conditioning training principles and safety (13). At its heart, this is a role clarity problem. Both the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach believe it is within their role to provide guidance for how the athlete should train.

In considering whose role it is to provide guidance for the athlete training, the simplest answer is that both the sport coach and the strength and conditioning coach should have a voice. A starting point to making that successful is to have effective communication to establish boundaries that can lead to maximizing the athlete and team performance. Some potential situations or scenarios include: a) is it a case where the sport coach fully describes his/her hopes for athlete playing style in-competition, and then the strength and conditioning coach designs programs to develop the athletes to be better physiologically prepared to execute that style of play? or b) is it a case where the sport coach takes priority for on-field activities and the strength and conditioning coach takes priority for the strength facility activities? Those are both examples of boundaries that could be set. Similarly, perhaps there is a time component boundary wherein the strength and conditioning coach is primarily responsible for all athlete development until the last 20% of the competitive season, at

which point the sport coach takes priority. The reality is that there probably is not a single best way to approach this classic conflict between SCC and sport coaches. Equally as true though is that the communication to establish those boundaries must be present in any viable solution so that roles can be clearly defined. Even in the case when the strength and conditioning coach judges the sport coach to be vastly overstepping a boundary, the strength and conditioning coach can then have proper notes and documentation of that meeting to help with whatever problems may arise in the future.

Roles can change over time though, which continues to highlight the importance of effective communication. There are reported instances where sport coaches will deny or mandate a certain training activity early in the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach collaboration only to reverse course and allow the strength and conditioning coach to modify athlete trainings as they see fit in subsequent seasons (6). This has also been reported when sport psychology consultants work with sport coaches (8). As support personnel, it is important for strength and conditioning coaches, and other allied professionals, to remember sport coaches have the “win-loss record” attached to their name and job performance ratings. This has led to some strength and conditioning coaches commenting that sport coaches are their “real boss” even if the organizational chart shows differently (6). However, none of that means the strength and conditioning coach should simply be subservient to the sport coach in all matters (9). A successful professional collaboration between the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach must have identified boundaries and roles.

Two additional areas for frequent disagreement between sport coaches and strength and conditioning coach are the warm-ups before practices and whether or not the strength and conditioning coach travels with the team. In both cases, the concepts of role clarity and role acceptance seem relevant. Without taking a side here as to how these options “should” go, the critical piece again becomes one of effective communication leading to boundaries deemed by both the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach as acceptable. If the sport coach wants the strength and conditioning coach to lead and supervise the pre-practice warm-up for the athletes, then the strength and conditioning coach should probably oversee setting up that warm-up routine if other responsibilities allow. As a prerequisite to that design process for the warm-up, the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach should address whether the strength and conditioning coach even has the time to go to practice or not, and how long the strength and conditioning coach can stay. Few strength and conditioning coaches have only single team responsibilities and thus time at one place, such as a team’s warm-up pre-practice, inherently prevents that same strength and conditioning coach from training other athletes, designing trainings for athletes, supervising the strength facility, and any other responsibilities elsewhere. A logical source for poor role clarity on that topic is the strength and conditioning coach inadequately explained his/

her other responsibilities to the sport coach, which makes sense given the power dynamic often cited between sport coaches and strength and conditioning coaches. Essentially, the strength and conditioning coach is biased toward saying “yes” to the sport coach requests, which may yield stress and time constraints on the part of the strength and conditioning coach (9).

In many cases, the debate around the SCC traveling with the team to competitions also stems from this notion of role clarity. If the strength and conditioning coach has no identified role during competition, then why should the strength and conditioning coach travel with the team? If the pre-practice warm-up is typically executed without the strength and conditioning coach, then why would the strength and conditioning coach be present for the pre-competition warm-up? There may be alternative reasons the strength and conditioning coach needs to travel with the team, so the message here is not to avoid it entirely. Rather, the message here is to think more critically of the context and ask appropriate questions that promote more effective dialogue. The sport coach may also need to be explicitly reminded of the strength and conditioning coach’s other role expectations from other sport coaches or the head strength and conditioning coach. Much like the pre-practice warm-up removed the strength and conditioning coach’s opportunity to fulfill other responsibilities, traveling with the team for a competition removes even more opportunities for other home-based role expectations to be completed. Again, the point here is not to argue for a particular setup or outcome. Rather, the point is to encourage the strength and conditioning coach to ensure a more complete description of strength and conditioning coach roles within the facility and department to the sport coaches. That effective communication may need to come from the head strength and conditioning coach and go to the head sport coach to avoid undue pressures on assistant level strength and conditioning coaches and assistant level sport coaches. A final note on this may be to consider the budget implications. If a sport coach wishes for a strength and conditioning coach to travel with the team, perhaps that sport coach then covers the costs from his/her sport budget for the head strength and conditioning coach to have coverage in other areas due to the traveling strength and conditioning coach.

TECHNOLOGY COMMUNICATION

Technology has made communication simple and quick, thereby typically increasing communication frequency. Just as true though is that technology has also added layers of complexity to the effectiveness of communication. There is no debate about how easy it is to fire away a quick text or even an email. In both cases though, the initiator of the conversation typically does so on his/her own schedule without much thought given to the recipient’s schedule and much can be lost in simple text-based communication. This again highlights the need for certain questions to be asked early in the sport coach and strength and conditioning coach collaboration to improve the effectiveness of the communication. Below are a few scenarios for how this collaboration can be improved.

- **Scenario:** Sport coach sends texts at off-hours (e.g., early morning, late night).
 - » **Strength and Conditioning Coach:** Hey coach, what are your expectations for those 10:00 pm texts you send me? Are you expecting a response then, or is the next morning okay? And so you know, my morning usually starts around 4:30 am, so how early in the morning can I text you back?
- **Scenario:** Sport coach sends an excessively long text.
 - » **Strength and Conditioning Coach:** Thanks for that information coach. There's a lot going on there and I don't want to miss any of it. What's a good time for a quick phone call or in-person chat to get this squared away?
- **Scenario:** Sport coach sends sensitive athlete information or topics via text/email.
 - » **Strength and Conditioning Coach:** Thanks for including me in that coach. Does the athletic trainer/sport psychologist know that? Let's loop them in tomorrow and meet about this.
- **Scenario:** Sport coach wants to know why the strength and conditioning coach did not like/retweet/reply to a team-based social media post.
 - » **Strength and Conditioning Coach:** That was a cool post coach. Do you want me to like/retweet/reply all your and/or the team's posts?

The commonality across these scenarios is that the strength and conditioning coach likely felt a boundary was crossed that then prompted some degree of a stress response by not knowing how to best respond. If the sport coach is informally, at least, viewed as the boss, then the assumption is generally that a response must be adequate, useful, and timely; employees generally do not want to let down their supervisor. However, that cycle can get negative quickly due to most strength and conditioning coaches having multiple teams they provide services for, which means multiple sport coaches reaching out at off-hours of the day, with too much information, and information that is best suited to a verbal conversation.

CONCLUSION

Modeling the behaviors expected from strength and conditioning coaches is a key component of role clarity and mentorship within strength and conditioning and general sport coaching (2,7). If the formal organizational chart boss (head strength and conditioning coach) does the same thing, the informal boss (sport coach) does that has already been used as a what-not-to-do example, that strength and conditioning coach's role clarity will drop substantially. If the head strength and conditioning coach wishes to point out boundary, role, or communication complications from sport coaches to strength and conditioning coaches, the head strength and conditioning coach should then be diligent about also not repeating those same complications to his/her own staff. More research attention has been paid to developing strength and conditioning coach and part of advancing the field is to get rid of

some negative habits from the past (14,17). Thus, a challenge is presented to assess your own degree of boundary crossing and frequency versus effective communication as a leader amongst the strength and conditioning staff.

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