

# The Power Of Planning

In this coaching corner we're going to take a look at planning for our coaching sessions. Coaching and learning is not a predictable, sequential activity. We shouldn't be surprised if the activity that worked really well for one person, one day in one place completely fails the next time we use it. If we're coaching - that is actually reacting to the people in front of us - then we clearly can't just operate from a script written in advance. That said, the old adage 'failing to plan, is planning to fail' still holds true for many of our coaching sessions.

## Why plan?

It seems that across a load of different sports, the best coaches are often the ones with the best plans. The process of planning helps us get better as coaches, even if the session we ran comes out completely different to the plan. It gives us something to fall back on when we don't know what to do next. It frees up more headspace to notice what the paddlers are doing and adapt what we're going to do next - paradoxically having a plan makes us more able to react to the people in front of us and abandon the plan!

Planning forces us to have some expectations of the session, which gives us something to reflect on afterwards. A good plan should be like a menu of nice things to choose from, occasionally like a prompt for an actor who has forgotten their lines, but never like a straightjacket!

## So do I really need a plan for my next coaching session?

Only you can answer that question! If you're going to be coaching a familiar skill, to a familiar group, in a familiar environment then maybe not. Or perhaps it's better to say that in that situation you've already spent time thinking about the session, you've already run it a few times and you've already got a feel for what's going to work and the different ways you might adapt it if it's not working. It's not that you don't need a plan, it's more that you've already got a whole sheaf of plans stored in your brain, so you might not need to do anything else to prepare.

## What should go into the plan?

A good plan provides multiple answers to the question 'what am I going to need during the coaching session that I might



not remember or be able to invent on the spot?'. Clearly the answers to that question are going to vary from situation to situation. They could include:

**Where** am I coaching? Where am I going to find just the right conditions? Will they change during the session? If so, does that change the order I'm going to do things?

**Who** am I coaching? What are they like? What tasks/styles/types of feedback are likely to work for them? Will they work better as a group or individually? What duration & intensity will work best?

**What** are we going to be working on? Is that already decided, or do I need a range of options?

- Technical - what does a good one look like?

- Tactical - when and how will they actually use the thing we're working on?

- Profiling - what can I do to see where they're at and what aspects they need to work on?

- Activities - Once I've seen where they're at and thought about what they need. What things might we actually do?

- What are...  
The common things that people can't do?  
The common solutions?

- What if...  
They're better than I expected and they can already do the thing really well?  
They're worse than I expected and can't do the thing at all?

- The weather or water level is wrong?

- What things might I do next?

- How will I know it's time to move on to the next thing?

Answering these sorts of questions primes the coach to pick up cues from the learners and to know how to react to those cues.

They prevent us from simply planning a session and instead make us plan for a session.

## When to plan

Again this has to be up to you. If I'm coaching a familiar topic I'm often mentally shuffling the cards (i.e. sequencing mini-session plans that I've used before) as I'm driving to the venue; trying to find an order that I think might work well for the group and the environment. If it's something that's new to me - something that is going to involve creating some new plans - then I'll try to give myself plenty of time to think about it.

Experience has shown that session planning usually takes me longer than I expect it to. If I'm not sure about how to do something, it often helps me to sleep on it, to talk to another coach or to look online or in a book.

## How should I record my plan?

Yet again, this is all about finding something that works for you. Often people use some combination of the following;

### ● Mini-Scripts

These don't just tell you what tasks to use but even have the words that you're going to use to brief them. If (like me) you often find yourself using thousands of words to brief something that another coach manages to describe perfectly in a sentence, these might be useful. It might well be that having gone through that process of planning

precisely what you're going to say, you find that you don't actually need to use your scripts.

### ● **Bullet Points**

These are great for summarising the key technical points of a skill, helping you observe, analyse and identify weaknesses but leaving you free to improvise what you're going to do about them.

They're also good for summarising key points of a task, without getting bogged down in the words.

### ● **Pictures**

Great for describing the shapes of strokes, movements and lines on the water, how we're going to arrange people on the water during a session or during the setup for a game.

### ● **Mind maps**

Great for describing knowledge (e.g. how to do a move) with easy access to big picture and detailed information.

### ● **Flow diagrams**

Great for describing the options and choices

available to us within a session (a bit like 'choose your own adventure books' – apologies to anyone under the age of 30 – you can Google them!)

### ● **Mental rehearsal**

Simply running through the session in your head, without the need to write anything down. Just like a paddler mentally rehearsing a run down a slalom course or rapid.

As always in coaching there are no firm rights or wrongs. If you get the chance, have a go at planning using a different method to your usual one and see if it makes any difference to the session.

Some coaches feel embarrassed about consulting their notes when they're out on the water! For me I'd much prefer to take a few seconds out of a session to refer to my plan (which although it might feel awkward to me, probably doesn't even get noticed by the group I'm coaching), than to come to a juddering halt!

Having said that, experience has shown that trying to read papier-mache in the rain is tricky, so waterproof paper,

laminated notes, or notes on a phone in a waterproof case are a great help here.

### **Big picture or little picture?**

Everything so far has assumed that I'm planning for my next session. In a club environment, in a competitive environment or even on a commercial multi-day course, it makes sense to have a big picture plan. That could range from how the next five sessions fit together, to a macro-plan working with an athlete over the next four years.

If I can't promise that my one session plan is going to match reality, I can pretty much guarantee that a four year plan will need a load of adaptation. That's OK! The process of planning makes us look at the overall arc of a series of sessions. Like a project manager we're looking at what needs to be done before we can do something else, what to do when things don't work out, and which sessions we can swap over.

As General Eisenhower said "I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Happy planning!

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