

Why technical is less and communication is more

Sarah Claridge from Smartpro explains how innovative communication skills are a necessity in coaching and can set you a cut above the rest



Jack Nicklaus once said that: "For me, playing a shot is 50% mental imagery, 40% is my setup and 10% is my swing."

This statement draws similarities with recent winners, more notably McIlroy and Clarke, who both showed an abundance of mental strength and creative shot making prowess on the course.

What made the difference to Clarke this time around was his use of 'unconscious putting' a technique given to him by Bob Rotella, who he has worked with on and off for many years.

If the use of neuro linguistic programming, namely practical mental training to develop positive thought patterns and

habits, works for players at a high level, then coaching your players at club level using similar practical skills will definitely bring more fun and lower scores to their game.

If they have more fun and success during their lessons, leading to lower scores on the course, then they will keep coming back to you thus increasing your income.

So here are the controversial facts, using Nicklaus' formula: "For me effective coaching is 50% communication, 40% creating the correct learning environment and 10% technical coaching".

You may or may not agree, but after 18 years of coaching I have come to the conclusion that on the technical side less is more. What really makes 'the difference' is how you make the player feel, the environment you coach in and the way you communicate your knowledge.

If we expand on the areas of communication and the 'feel good' factor, it's what is known as good old-fashioned customer service that kicks off the relationship you must build between yourself and your player. How you make the player feel from the start of a lesson will have a lasting effect, especially if they are nervous about having a lesson.

'You' need to be the person they want to spend time with, so turn this around and think about professional people you like to spend time with and why? Are they happy? Are they interesting? Relaxed? Do you have fun when you're around

them? Are they reliable? Do they have something special that makes you feel good in their company? We all need to work hard as coaches to be that person because it's that person people want to have lessons with. I can guarantee that a miserable bugger won't have a full coaching diary.

Making your player feel 'looked after' is paramount from the beginning.

I always take time at the start of any first lesson with a new player to sit down for 15 minutes and do a 'get to know session' often known as profiling.

I take their contact details, injuries, hobbies, other sports, golfing history, lesson history, play and practice habits, but before finding out what they would like to work on I ask them one very important question – 'How do you think you learn the best?'

Do you learn through watching, feeling, listening or do you have an analytical preference? Combine this knowledge about your player with their occupation and their personality and makeup starts to unfold.

Now I know how to coach them, the more I know about what makes a person tick, the more I know how to get the best out of their game. By the way I can tell eight things about a person if I know their occupation, but I'll leave you to work that one out.

About a year ago a lady came for a lesson with me on her long game. I'd never met her before; she came from a

club about 50 miles away and I saw her arrive in a very clean swish car. She was dressed to impress on the golf course, not a hair out of place and even her golf equipment was colour co-ordinated and clean.

One of her fashion accessories was definitely a mirror. After profiling her and finding out my suspicions that she was a very visual learning type I asked her: "Would you like me to video your swing so you can see it?"

I was amazed at her response. "Sarah, I have been to see five coaches in the last 18 months and nobody has ever showed me my swing on video."

The last area I would like to touch on is how to create a good learning atmosphere.

We all know how to pitch our use of language and terminology at a particular ability of player, but one thing that really helps me is to 'sense' my player's body language, temperament and speed of routine to assist my management of the lesson, be reactive to help them retain confidence, stay relaxed and enjoy the learning experience.

Distraction techniques that take a player's mind away from 'trying too hard' are skills I regularly call upon or if their lucky I try out one of my two jokes.

- Sarah Claridge is director of Smartpro Coaching, website resources and business support for coaches.

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