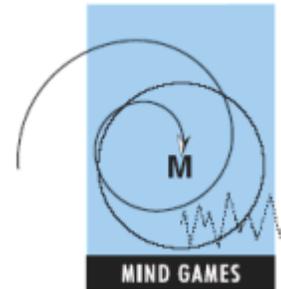




FEEDBACK TRAPS

By Cheryl Coker, Ph.D, New Mexico State University

The importance of providing athletes feedback regarding their performance is without question. Unfortunately, a number of feedback traps exist that coaches can fall into. These traps reduce feedback effectiveness or worse, create unintentional consequences that can hinder performance. Here are five common feedback traps that should be avoided:



Trap #1 - More is not better!

Feedback serves many purposes. It can reinforce a behavior, provide information about the correctness of a performance attempt, explain why an error occurred, prescribe how to fix an error and motivate athletes to continue working towards their goals. Accordingly, feedback facilitates skill development and performance. It stands to reason then that one might think that the more frequently feedback is given, the greater the gains in learning and performance. This however, is not the case and in fact, can be detrimental.

If feedback is given too often, athletes become accustomed to receiving it and can develop an overdependence on the coach. When this occurs, they are no longer actively engaged in processing and assessing response produced sensory information but instead simply wait for the coach to tell them what happened and how to fix it. The danger with this strategy is that the athlete is no longer forced to develop necessary problem solving skills to develop their own error detection and correction mechanisms. In other words, athletes will not learn how to ascertain the specific cause of an error nor will they be able to determine the adjustments necessary for its correction. Instead, prompt athletes to evaluate their performance prior to providing feedback. This strategy promotes reflective thinking that leads to superior learning.

Trap #2 – Offering Feedback Too Quickly

When feedback is provided too quickly, the athlete is not given the opportunity to attend to and process response produced sensory information. As discussed above, this inhibits the athlete's development of important error detection and correction mechanisms. Asking athletes to assess their performance before telling them what you observed is, again, a superior strategy for skill development.

Trap # 3 – Giving Too Much Information

Long, extensive feedback overloads athletes with too much information and can cause confusion and frustration. Likewise, attempting to correct multiple errors at a time can overwhelm and challenge an athlete's attentional capacity. Focus on one correction at a time and follow the KISS principle: keep it short and simple.

Trap # 4 – Interfering With Automatic Processing

When athletes reach elite levels, their movements are performed automatically with little or no conscious effort. Coaches, however, can disrupt these processes when the feedback they provide causes the athlete to consciously focus on a technical element of a normally automatically performed movement. To illustrate, try to determine your natural stride length as you walk several meters. It should be apparent that consciously focusing on a skill that you usually give little thought to changes the internal rhythm of the movement. Consequently, in competition, feedback should support the adoption of a non-awareness strategy. In other words, athletes should not be focusing on the technical execution of the skill while performing it but allow the movement to occur naturally.

Trap # 5 - Misdirecting Attentional Focus

Choose your words carefully when conveying information. Coaches often times unintentionally misdirect an athlete's attentional focus by the way they phrase their feedback messages. By telling an athlete not to worry about hitting the hurdle, you have actually planted that thought in the athlete's mind. Similarly, if you tell a goalkeeper not to let the opponent intimidate them, you have changed the athlete's focus from concentrating on blocking the shot to recalling past failures against that opponent.

Conclusion

Through feedback, coaches communicate to their athletes' information to enhance skill development and performance. To ensure feedback effectiveness however, coaches should recognize and avoid the five feedback traps presented above.