

The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme

The Think Coaching E-Link



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Introduction

This issue takes a look at the importance of innovation within coaching, and why it is important for coaches to be able to think outside the box and not be afraid to try new ideas.

Coach Development

Attached to this e-zine is an application form for the third Best of British Coaching Conference. This year's conference is again at Bolton Arena and takes place on October 14th – Grand Final day. The Conference runs 09.00 to 15.00 allowing delegates three hours to make their way to Old Trafford.

Keynote speaker this year is Bill Beswick who was recently appointed to the England football teams coaching team as Sports Psychologist. Also confirmed as speakers are John Kear and Dave Rotherham.



The need for innovation in Coaching Rugby League

By Denis Ward and Don Oxenham

Sports coaching and freedom of thought can often appear as two mutually exclusive entities. After all, isn't coaching all about a sequential chain of popular teachings? A mentor passes on instructions to a variety of coaches, who then impart that same information on senior athletes, who in turn pass it onto the less experienced athletes.

Well in many cases that has been - and still is – the way coaching systems are handled. Importantly though, if you take a look at any successful or forward-thinking development program, rigidity is not a common theme.

To take a phrase from contemporary language, sports coaching has become all about “breaking free of the Matrix”. Indeed Rugby League and popular sci-fi movie The Matrix have far more in common than the mere fact that a great deal of their respective action takes place in Sydney. The movie's catchphrase of “remove the blindfold on humanity” and subsequent themes are all transposable to the 13-man game.

Everyday life is full of copycats and followers who live out the thoughts of others, all the while conforming to a supposed set of standards. It is a lifestyle of comfort that offers very few lows. Yet despite its popularity, there is an alarming scarceness in the number of people who arise from such an existence to further or enlighten the plight of mankind. In Rugby League this can be seen from season to season. Players and coaches will think in a predetermined way so as to climb the ladder in a consistent fashion. But the number of which leave a lasting impression on the game is relatively minute.

Compare this to those people who take control of their own thoughts and actions, often riding out incredible lows before receiving any reward. In some cases this may involve ignoring the advice or opinions of figureheads traditionally viewed as more intelligent.

Both Albert Einstein and Salvadore Dali were dismissed by teachers as ‘dreamers’ in their formative years, while Michael Jordan was kicked off his High School basketball team. For others, recognition had to wait even longer. Van Gogh and Mozart were well into the afterworld before popular culture realised their genius.

Just as Keanu Reeve's Matrix character Thomas Anderson derived his ultimate power from thinking outside the square, so must Rugby League coaches. Over the last twenty years, Australia has seen coaches the calibre of Jack Gibson, Warren Ryan and Wayne Bennett emerge at the forefront of premiership winning teams. This isn't by chance or because they are the three that best fit society's label of ‘intellectual’. It is because all of the trio dared to defy convention and formulated ideas which negated traditional strategies, rather than beat them face-to-face.

WHY WE NEED INNOVATORS IN RUGBY LEAGUE

None of the current NRL coaches bare any resemblance to Matrix sage Morpheus - in fact a few would probably admit to looking more like Jedi master Yoda. However their message is one and the same - that people are solely responsible for the mental confines they work within.

Freedom of thought is clearly the directive, but why is it of such value to Rugby League?

There is a persuasive argument that the success of former Australian and Queensland halfback Allan Langer was largely due to the combination of him coming from an innovative background and then spending the

majority of his career under an innovative coach (in Wayne Bennett). Langer was neither the biggest, strongest, fittest or fastest of players – attributes commonly expected of champion League players.

Instead his rise to the top was characterised by an array of self-taught skills that conventional tactics could not control. And when it came to his greatest weakness - tackling - Langer devised a strategy that ultimately forced the game's controlling body to change the rules.

Many will argue his style was unsportsmanlike, but history will show two things. Firstly, he was given free reign by his coach to use it and secondly, it was greatly effective. In Langer's case it was a rare case of two like-minded people coming together, in himself and Bennett. But even without a star player like 'Alf', the importance of a coach's innovation to the game as a whole is paramount. In the last few decades Rugby League has seen defensive tactics such as 'turtling' and moving the five-eighth or centre up to the scrum and dropping the number 7 back when conceding the feed. In attack there has been the 'mouse trap' play from dummy half and the largest forward taking a hit-up off the scrum rather than using the backs. These examples have had various degrees of success and longevity, but noticeably they have all changed the face of the game.

The belief among the coaching fraternity is that innovation serves several purposes towards the betterment of Rugby League. It makes sure rules are constantly updated and improved, it demands greater athletes, it helps avoid monopolisation and most importantly, it keeps the viewing public interested.

"Innovation stops us coaches from doing the same old, same old," explains former Parramatta head coach Brian Smith, one of modern-day League's most creative thinkers.

"Without it, sport wouldn't be as exciting to watch. The more creative and the more educated coaches become, the harder each of us has to work. It's a cyclical process. You hear this saying of 'Going back to the drawing board', but sometimes you need to change the drawing board or get rid of it all together."

Another view is that creativity, besides its on-field benefits, also holds tangible goodwill in terms of luring juniors and supporters to the grassroots levels.

Essentially each and every coach is a salesperson for the game. Thinking coaches will inevitably attract more interest than following coaches, because their dynamism and ingenuity is vastly appealing. Players like to have a sense of individualism and it creates a sense of synergy if they see their coach employing the same attitude.

There is an old axiom that says the goal of a coach is to make themselves obsolete. What this means is that if a coach imparts his philosophies with sufficient mastery, the players will mould together in a manner that removes the need for external supervision. It is a somewhat Utopian concept, yet it presents an interesting model - the prevalence of widely innovative children who have been attracted to and succeeded peerlessly in Rugby League, because of the guidance of coaches stressing freedom of thought.

WHAT PREVENTS PEOPLE FROM BEING CREATIVE?

Naturally if innovation were so easy, it would not be such a special quality. As was stated before, society has bred generations of people with their lives mapped out from an early age. Changing direction on this path can commonly cause heartbreak and both physical and mental pain before any rewards are met. Not only is it the innovator who is effected either. There will be people close to the innovator whose lifestyles and concepts will resist change and favour familiarity.

Then there will be people at the other end of the spectrum that stand to lose some form of standing as a result of innovation and will oppose it forcibly. So more often than not, potential innovators will choose to stick with convention out of respect to those close to them and fear of those that oppose them.

Common theory estimates that 99 per cent of ideas in everyday life are rejected. It is an alarmingly high

statistic, but when you look at those who hold power in society, this figure is explanatory. Those at the top of the ladder have arrived there through strategies or concepts that are almost half a century old. While adaptability is a key to them remaining successful, most of their basic ideals will be ingrained from their formative years.

If we were to parallel this to Rugby League, club administration would be the most obvious example. Such is the changing face of League in regards to on field rules and off-field business, that the hierarchy are frequently caught clinging to outdated ideologies.

This occurs at all Levels of the game. For the benefit of League's progression, it is encouraged that all people involved approach decisions with a clean slate as opposed to bias or popular opinion. Understandably the hardest difficulty is not so much listening to new ideas, but removing the old ones. After 40-50 years, perception can be so deeply ingrained that it shackles you from seeing the benefits that others might so clearly see.

Quite often there is also a deep fear of failure or perhaps even a fear of courage. This last statement may sound particularly puzzling, for indeed 'fear of courage' is a contradictory term, at least in the literary sense. What it purports to is a characteristic well inbred in our culture – the reluctance to look like a lair, a smart ass, a show pony.

Few terms in the Aussie lexicon are more derogatory, for from a young age it is melded into children's psyche that upstaging others and doing things differently is anything but a badge of honour.

"I think it is something that is particularly sad in Australian sport," says Brian Smith.

"Anyone that shows a bit of ingenuity is castigated. I think the media encourage that negativity to an extent. So people don't put their neck out for the fear they will earn somebody's wrath. "I have had players who have given me great ideas, but they would rather I take the credit for it, because they don't want to be seen as an 'intellect' by their peers."

Linking this back to the Matrix once more, when Thomas Anderson's boss says "You have a problem with authority. You think you are special and the rules don't apply to you", he perfectly captures the negativity commonly placed on individualism. Call it an extension of the tall poppy syndrome or whatever, but it has become a worrying phenomenon particularly with adolescent males - the very same people League needs to be its next innovators.

SYSTEMS THAT ENCOURAGE INNOVATION

Discovering what processes nourish creativity is a topic of ongoing debate. Popularizing individualism becomes a self-defeating exercise, so there is a constant shift in what is considered innovative thought and what is considered conventional. However, at least one thing appears to be clear. Genius cannot be nurtured through competitive examination - that is merely a standard of conformity.

One theory is that the inclination to be innovative comes as a direct result of how much self-confidence an individual possesses. People that walk around as creative entrepreneurs; people where the world explodes with ideas, are most likely encouraged by innovation because they have a lot of security, whether that be in materialistic or psychological form. If they take a risk, they are confident of still falling on their feet at the end of the day. Although those who are successful probably attained a fair degree of their status through always being more receptive of ideas, it does appear that people are more open to innovation once they attain a fair level of confidence.

Of course not all of humanity can simply become millionaires in the quest for a bit of self-confidence. What can be done though, is to mimic certain characteristics of the environment from which such people arise and mentally implant those concepts.

BREEDING CONFIDENCE IN RUGBY LEAGUE PLAYERS

It is argued there are six components that can be used to breed confidence - success, experience, responsibility, recognition, autonomy and status. All of these traits have avenues of implementation in Rugby League.

With success and experience, it is a matter of achieving a delicate balance to nurture the growth of the individual. A player must feel they are competent enough at a particular level before attempting to conquer the next one. This is applicable to fitness regimes, skill drills or even moving from one grade up to the next. At the same time though, holding players back for too long can stunt their development and give them an obscured view of what expectations have been placed upon them. Essentially the aim is to create an environment that provides a fairly constant level of success with ongoing developmental experience.

Responsibility comes in many forms. It may be as obvious as making somebody captain or it could mean emphasising the importance of a certain position to the team. For example, the coach could stress how integral the winger's kick return is to setting up the next attacking possession. Obviously this wouldn't be enforced to the point of being a burden, but just enough to give the player a sense of importance within the team.

Recognition also lends itself to various modes of use. Quite often a heartfelt acknowledgment in front of teammates or parents can mean as much to a player as receiving a trophy at the end-of-year presentations. Factors such as timing, sincerity and personality of the player should all be taken into consideration to give the greatest impact.

One subtle way of encouraging confidence and, in turn, innovative play, is to have an unspoken rule of autonomy. This could apply to the whole team or just to certain individuals within the side. If there is a talented player who makes those around him/her better, than a mutual understanding of free reign can benefit the whole team. However stating this aloud could cause a number of problems. It may make teammates either resentful or overawed and it may also trigger the player to try things which aren't within their usual character. Some players tend to feel more respected and confident of their role if it is not explained to them anyway. Autonomy is about what is not said, just as much as it is about what is said, if not more so.

Out of all six characteristics status is the hardest to manage and replicate. Often people will have status within a group for uncontrollable reasons such as family or physical appearance. However, by combining all five other elements, there is greater chance that all players will feel of equal standing and capability, and be more inclined to think of their own volition.

FINDING THE RIGHT MIX

As with everything in life, there are upsides and downsides to preaching about freedom of thought. The first, as we have already touched upon, is that espousing innovation is a paradox. One man's innovation will soon become convention and fighting conformity cannot be a popularist cause. In itself it is ironic that an article on freedom of thought should appear in a coaching manual. However, pondering the philosophical morality of individualism is perhaps best left to science-fiction movies such as *The Matrix*, not sport.

It is the second downside that is of more interest to those in Rugby League.

Because innovative thought means expanding your horizons to an endless number of possibilities, a pile of useless strategies will build inside your mind. Not all concepts can be applicable to the one game. The important thing is not to be discouraged. The beauty in filtering through so much creativity is that the end result will be refined to a far greater degree than if it had been directly copied from another person.

Certainly the more knowledge and information that are considered, the more thoughtful your ideas will be. Even if something different is tried and it doesn't work, there is no need for fear. You are wiser for having opened your mind up and experimented with it. It's all about being yourself. Regrets only grow if you try and copy someone else.

Wayne Bennett best sums it up "My number one tip to all aspiring coaches is that you have to be your own man, no matter what," he says.

"If you try to change yourself to beat someone or something, it will eventually catch you up anyway. The pressure associated with pretending to be someone else will inevitably drag you down. The important thing to remember is that so many things in Rugby League are dependant on personal philosophies. There are no real answers to certain problems, so most times it is the situation and your own personal ideas which play a vital role in the outcome."

It is this final point which contains the essence of the entire topic of freedom of thought and innovation. Concepts such as confidence and regret are things that can be influenced by outside factors, but mastering them must always arise through an internal sense of individual power.

"Design life through the power of choices. We feel most helpless when we've made choices by default; when we haven't designed our lives on our own" - Richard Bach, author and philosopher.

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