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What could an Executive Coach do for an Association Football Manager? : A Commentary

Introduction

While occupational psychology has penetrated the world of business and sports psychologists are widely used by professional sports people, the impact of psychology based performance coaching on football management appears to remain unappreciated and undervalued. In this commentary on Simon Jenkins' article, I argue that business coaches in general and coaching psychologists in particular have a lot to offer football managers. Jenkins argues that leading coaching writers such as Marshall Goldsmith provide us with techniques such as feed forward which can easily be transferred from the board room to the changing room. He also argues that the high pressure world of the football manager is little different from the pressurised world of leadership in commercial organisations. I will argue that coaching psychologists might be able to offer football managers insights, competences and competitive advantage which their colleagues from the commercial world have been drawing on for over two decades.

Psychologist in Association Football

In Association football, a growing number of football clubs are adding psychologists to their staff. However, two major problems are present in the current use of psychologists which prevent them offering the service that executive coaches have offered in the commercial world.

The first of these is the focus of the in-house sports psychologist. Rightly, many work with players to help with the

psychological challenges of performing in front of 20,000-60,000 people, or crowds of millions if we include the television audience. Such individuals are often on the staff and like the physiotherapists are part of the team which the manager can draw on to help players maintain their pace throughout the season and to recover when confidence is affected or injuries occur. However, such individuals are rarely if ever invited to coach the team manager. In fact to do so would place the internal sports psychologist in an invidious position, just as it would if the internal human resources department's trained coach was invited to coach the operations director at a FTSE100 company. Coaching at this level requires an understanding of the challenges of leadership, an understanding of the sector and an independent perspective, which enables the coach to challenge the executive without fear or favour [1]. The second issue is that while many teams correctly recognize the value coaches and sports psychologists can play, managers have yet to recognize the contribution which an executive coach, and in particular a psychologically trained coach, might bring to their game.

Jenkins has suggested several specific ways in which Goldsmith's techniques might be useful for managers. Jenkins also highlights a host of techniques that managers in any context would find useful to help them consider their own behaviour, reflect on their effectiveness and develop stronger self-awareness. In my view, having personally worked to take coaching out from the board room in work with UK government ministers, police pursuit drivers and the British Army, coaching has a lot to offer. Rather than repeat Jenkins' arguments, I will briefly open this up to consider three more general themes which might apply to football managers throughout the premiership and football league and which have similarities with the challenges faced by senior managers in the commercial sector.

Building mental toughness

In simple terms, mental toughness is “the ability to consistently perform towards the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances” [2]. Clough et al. [3] have further enhanced our understanding of mental toughness through their research and the development of a psychometric questionnaire which helps individuals review their level of competence and from this develop a personal plan for enhancing or managing resilience. In short, they suggest that mental toughness has four components: control, commitment, challenge and confidence.

Individuals in successful roles often have one or more of these components, but rarely all four. For senior managers, the ability to bounce back after a restructure and redundancy, to cope with market pressures during a hostile take-over bid or share price falls, is a key skill. Losing confidence or focus may impact on the organization’s ability to survive, as much as on the individual. Football management is no different from share price movements. Pundits, chairmen and fans can all pile on the pressure for results and success. A run of drawn games by a high-profile team or a poor result in Europe can result in calls for a change in management. The most successful managers are resilient and are able to remain focused. In both times of challenge and times of stability, a coach can help the football manager be more self-aware of their traits and develop techniques to help themselves during the difficult times, just as they would for a FTSE 100 manager.

Managing Stress

There is no need to explain the stress involved in football management on the manager anymore than there is to explain the pressures in senior management roles at board level. Managers in Association football need to be able to cope with stress in the different aspects of their work. This includes

the stress during the game as well as when working with players, staff and the board.

There is good evidence to demonstrate that coaching can be an effective intervention to help managers develop coping strategies for dealing with stress [4]. One technique often used by executive coaches for helping individuals manage stressful situations is cognitive behavioural coaching [5]. The approach, when used with managers in organizations, helps place the challenges of the workplace in context through adopting an evidenced-based or rational-thinking approach. Football managers can benefit in the same way as organizational managers. Cognitive behavioural coaching can help managers develop techniques to manage the stresses of the game, whether on the touchline or during a press conference. Again I would argue that an understanding of the psychological elements of the processes will help the coach explain the approach to the manager, who in turn will be able to use the techniques for themselves when required.

Developing Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence may be defined as the ability to be aware of one's own emotions, to be aware of the emotions of others and the ability to adapt one's behaviour appropriately to the situation to achieve the outcomes one wants. Research evidence suggests that high emotional intelligence is a predictor of success [6]. In most work places, the ability to be aware of our own emotional state, sad, angry or happy, to be aware of another's state and thus adjust our behaviour to suit the situation, is so obvious a skill that it does not require much persuasion when discussing this with senior managers to get them to invest some time in reflecting on their emotions and how they use these at work.

Looking back into the world of football, there is an obvious need for such skills on the touchline as well as in the changing room. Association football places pressure on individuals and a

heightened emotional state is part of the process to generate peak performance. But being sent from the touchline to the stand or failing to understand the needs of a player can all have negative impacts. As in organizational management, the football manager needs to bring out the best in their team. They need to understand individuals, they need to adjust their behaviour to suit the individual's personality as well as their emotional state. They need to be able to make interventions which correct poor performance, stimulate good performance and foster a collective spirit. In organizational coaching, using questionnaires such as MSCEIT or EQi [6, 7] can provide useful insight and a basis for helping the manager to develop a language, a way of being more in touch with their own emotions and being sensitive and aware of others emotions. I would argue that developing higher emotional intelligence in the football manager will result in improved relationships, higher team spirit and better team performance.

Conclusion

In this short review of coaching's potential to assist Association football managers, I have argued that Jenkins is right to draw attention to this issue. Football managers can benefit from executive coaches, especially those who draw on psychological models, when addressing some of the challenges which their high-pressure role brings; i.e managing the tough times, managing pressure, and managing relationships with team members and other stakeholders.

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