

Be Kind When People Do It Wrong

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'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself' Can we take the fear out of the equation and realise that mistakes are just staging posts on the road to success. Can we learn to manage mistakes more effectively and to the players' advantage and in doing so cater for their needs while confronting and conquering our own fears?

How many of us ever really consider the needs of the young players in our care. Have we ever tried to cater for these needs or the uniqueness that each individual possesses? How much do we really understand about what is going on when we watch our young players during matches or in training, and therefore how much relevant help and support are we actually giving them, and is it the kind of support they really need?

In a previous article I spoke about uniqueness in terms of 'learning styles' – as unique as an individual's fingerprint – which need to be nurtured and supported if players are to learn effectively and efficiently.

During the recent Under 16 Victory Shield International Tournament against the home countries John McDermott, Tony Parks, Martin Thomas, myself, and the rest of the staff aimed to create a 'positive learning environment' for the players, catering for their unique learning styles via video, DVD, power – point, group work with tactics boards, lap-tops, one to ones, diaries for feedback & reflection and technical work plus the creation throughout the training phase of a learning room full of their work and ideas. Our overall objective was to get the players to kick off happy, purposeful and ready for the challenge.

I soon realised that if I viewed the matches as simply ENGLAND V NORTHERN IRELAND, ENGLAND V WALES or SCOTLAND V ENGLAND, the players may not benefit from any input I may have.

I had to be very clear why I was there, and that my personal objective should be to cater for the players' individual needs as much as possible. So from my point of view I viewed the matches as another learning opportunity in what had been several days worth of learning opportunities for the players and the staff. Now from the players' view-point it was vital for me to understand that the matches were certainly ENGLAND V NORTHERN IRELAND, ENGLAND V WALES and SCOTLAND V ENGLAND – internationals they wanted to win and rightly so.

During the whole event the players were encouraged to get out of their comfort zone, to try new things, to push out their boundaries, to extend themselves and see where it took them. We trusted them, with our support to find their own way, to become increasingly self-reliant and to take more responsibility for their own learning.

During practical sessions we aimed to be less directive, prescriptive and intrusive but more inventive and imaginative in our work with them.

So if we aimed to provide a unique learning experience for the players, what were they experiencing from their perspective as learners. The answer could lie in the basic diagram of a 'cycle of learning' outlined below

There are a number of these models but I find this particular one helps me. For example when an individual begins to learn a new technique, skill or concept they need time to consolidate that new knowledge, they need to practice and try it out, to test themselves with the ultimate test in the players' mind being the match.

This test [consolidation] is the individual's chance to explore the limits of what they can currently do. As such, it should be viewed, by both coach and player, as an opportunity rather than a threat.

So do we, the coaches, **trust** ourselves enough to give our players those opportunities, as well as **trusting** our players enough to take them?

We said to the players in the England Under 16 squad. We trust you to try things! Winners take responsibility for their learning – Be a Winner! We encouraged the players to replace 'fear of failure' with 'freedom of expression' and said we hoped they would leave the event with no regrets at an opportunity missed. We also encouraged them to change their 'mindset', to be more self-confident, assured,

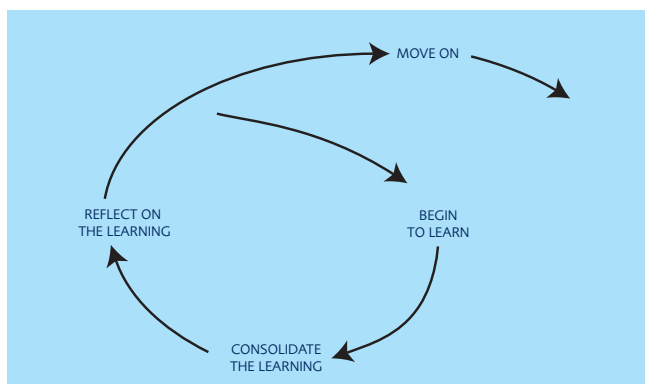


Figure 1 Cycle of Learning

secure, braver, more willing to experiment – a trusting environment which allowed for their creativity.

But we had to make a conscious decision to be different, we also had to have the right 'mind set' and be prepared for the mistakes. Mistakes that will happen. Why? Because the players are 'sorting out' all the new concepts thrown at them in group work and training.

It is how we manage these mistakes, hopefully to the players' advantage, that will determine the purity of their 'learning environment' and be our acid test as coaches and facilitators of their learning.

What do I mean by the 'purity of their learning environment'? Well, talk is cheap, you have to believe in 'thought, word and deed' anything less is not good enough. The players will see through it.

80% of communication is non-verbal, and players are very aware of the coach and his behaviour. The coach is very powerful. The players want to please the coach. It is the coach who decides on selection, whether they get another call up, a scholarship or a contract.

If the players 'pick up' that the coach does not understand their needs [their need to be free to learn and make their mistakes] they will quickly modify their behaviour and begin to 'play safe'. Freedom of expression will quickly be replaced by fear of failure – usually a reflection of the coaches' own fear.

Another interesting model is the 'Stages of Learning', which are outlined below:

- 1 Unconsciously un-skilled [incompetent]
I have never seen a football.
I don't know what football is.
Therefore I don't know I cannot do it.
- 2 Consciously Unskilled [incompetent]
'I know what football is.
I have tried to play but I am useless.
Many people drop out at this stage.
- 3 Consciously skilled [competent]
I know what football is.
I am constantly learning new skills/Concepts but I have to think about them while I try to execute them
- 4 Unconsciously skilled [competent]
I know what football is.
My skills and decision-making are so advanced that I see things and can execute the appropriate decision and skill without thinking.

[When reading through these stages, think back to what it was like to learn to drive a car, to ride a bike, or learn to ski. Think of a skill you cannot do –eg juggling three tennis balls. Try to learn – see what stages you go through while you are learning]

Young players are constantly in a state of flux, moving from consciously skilled to unconsciously skilled and back as they add to their knowledge base. As they move they need their mistakes in order to learn.

Coaches can support them by asking what they notice when they get things right, in this way the players can internalise their successes rather than their failures.

If a learning environment is constructed correctly players will know when they have made a mistake and often put it right without the coaches' intervention. So try not to hover waiting for errors to show everyone what you know. Rather think of the players' needs and let it flow to **let the players show you what they know**. Let it be about them and their needs rather than about you and yours.

Aim to be less intrusive, give the players the time and opportunity to sort it out. Give them the responsibility for their learning. It is the

coaches' call as to how mistakes are handled with individuals but if mistakes are highlighted too often or in the wrong way it may result in negative messages being given out adding to the climate of fear. So it is vital to manage mistakes appropriately and use them to the players' advantage.

So in summary:

- Recognise and understand the individual's needs
- Reflect on your own performance and acknowledge how your actions impact on the players in your care
- Support the players when they feel they have let you down
- Trust is vital to success. But trust is a two way street. You need them to trust you. So you must trust them to try things
- Replace fear of failure with freedom of expression
- Encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning
- You have to believe in 'thought' word and deed'
- 80% of communication is non-verbal and players will very quickly detect your fear and quickly become inhibited and robotic
- Mistakes are just staging posts on the road to success. Aim to manage mistakes to the players' advantage
- Be secure in your knowledge base and the strategies you employ to be an effective facilitator of learning

Recently a letter came to my notice sent into the FA by a coach working with 8 and 9 year old players. He had asked what they wanted from their coach. These are some of the answers he got:

- Good language
- Encouragement
- Don't tell them off if they miss a chance
- Fair
- Don't criticise the ref
- Always have a first aid kit
- Don't teach children to play dirty
- Don't put pressure on players
- Don't join in playing football
- Be kind when people do it wrong
- Be a good example – have fun

Pretty clever these 8 and 9 year olds nowadays

So can we.....

- 1 Cater for individual needs
- 2 Help individuals to learn how to learn
- 3 Use football as our vehicle to do so

...and learn to **trust** our players to become increasingly self reliant and take more responsibility for their own learning.

If we don't they won't

And remember the 8 and 9 year olds – 'be kind when people do it wrong'.

If you have any comments or observations regarding this article please e-mail John Allpress at john.allpress@TheFA.com