

New Approach Needed

In the West Indies team the support team has grown over the years. Several head coaches and specialists have worked with the team, but did they make a difference to its growth and performance?

Specialization improves performance but only if the specialist units are well organized and closely integrated to align their activities towards the team's goals.

Could poor performance of the head coach and specialists, and their bombardment of players with excessive information confuse team members and interfere with their thinking, concentration, judgment and confidence? That is a question that they should seriously consider. An honest self-examination is required. They cannot continue to do the same things and expect to get different results.

Wasim Akram the great Pakistani bowler thinks that coaches too often confuse their players by overloading them with information. He feels that information overload and task overload are very bad things for the young mind. He believes that coaches could speed up player development by freeing up the players' minds; by keeping things as clear and simple as possible; by highlighting first important priorities; by exposing young players to just a few things at a time; and by ensuring that what they teach is heard and understood.

In Medicine, specialization and technological development have revolutionized the treatment of disease. Although specialists do a fantastic job treating problems related to their specialty, they sometimes get trapped in their confined area and fail to pay enough attention to the whole body or to the 'human being' inside the body.

The same is true of the specialists in sport. Instead of stimulating and motivating the 'human being' inside the player they often ignore, discourage or devalue him. Every West Indian cricketer is first and foremost a valuable human being who just happens to be able to bowl, bat or field better than other players. He grows up in the same environment and has the same aspirations, concerns, weaknesses, fears, needs, and pressures as other people.

How much better would our promising young players perform if the coaches and specialists treated the 'human being' inside them with more respect,

understanding and commonsense? Motivation of the player is one of the specialists' most important jobs because the level of the player's performance depends on the depth of his motivation and discipline. Vince Lombardi, a great American Football coach once said that coaches who can outline plays and strategies on a blackboard are a dime a dozen; the ones who win get inside players and motivate.

According to Lombardi, coaches will only motivate their players effectively if they first get into their heads, hearts and belly. Some coaches don't understand this. They don't know that motivation depends more on the needs, concerns and aspirations of the players than on the needs and goals of the coaches, specialists and administrators. This is also true of change. People in authority who suggest the change know of its importance and benefits but the players who have to accept and implement the change might not see its value because it might not meet their needs or address their concerns. Understanding the player and knowing what makes him tick are critically important.

How committed are the West Indies players to team success? For many years, this has been a major concern of Caribbean people. Players are never fully committed unless they become co-owners of the team's goals and share responsibility for their achievement. Instead of just handing down instructions, goals and strategies to the players West Indies coaches and specialists should go out of their way to involve them in a meaningful way in the goal setting process, the formulation of strategy and the review of performance.

What about the players' self-reliance? Does it improve performance? How do we get our players to rely less and less on their coaches and more and more on themselves?

Jacques Kallis, the great South African all-rounder, is a strong advocate of self-reliance. He once said, "In some ways coaching today is like a dictatorship. By that I mean the players are too dependent on their coaches and that coaches do not encourage them to stand on their own feet, back their own judgment and make up their own minds. The player needs to be more self-reliant, learn all he can about his game, and take responsibility for improving and managing it. When you are batting in the middle the coach can't help you and if you can't stay calm, keep your concentration and think for yourself, you won't do well."

West Indies coaches must now search for new performance strategies. But when coaches are uprooted from their own comfort zones by new challenges, they often revert to the safety of their old ways. This entrapment reminds me of an old Muslim parable.

An old man was walking home one night when he saw a young friend searching for something under a street light. "What are you doing," he asked his friend. "I dropped the key to my house." "I'll help you look," said the old man. After a few minutes of frustrated searching the old man asked. "Where were you when you dropped the key?" The friend pointed toward the darkness, "Over there." Then why are you looking for it here?" "Because this is where the light is," replied the young man.

West Indies coaches might be searching for success in the illuminated area because that is where their knowledge and experience lie. But the key to West Indies revival might very well lie in the dark, not in the light of their thinking, knowledge and experience.

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