Task 12

Coaching in a Foreign Land

Coaching professional rugby is a fair challenge at the best of times. Doing it in a Country that is foreign in language, written word and culture takes the challenge to a whole new dimension. The purpose of this paper is to offer some helpful tips for those first time coaches heading overseas for a new experience.

I was fortunate enough to Coach in Japan for 4 years and if someone had given me some of this advice prior to my departure it would have been invaluable.

I was once told that coaches generally fit into three categories.

1. The Coach who has extremely good rugby knowledge but can’t convey his idea’s because he is a poor communicator, or his nature and personality inhibits his/her ability to do so.
2. The Coach who is a great communicator/people’s person but is limited in his ability to coach because of his lack of rugby knowledge.
3. Then there is the coach who possesses both. Excellent rugby knowledge with great communication and people skills. These coaches are rare.

Regardless of where you believe you fit into the above definitions as a coach, coaching in a foreign land with a foreign language will test your ability.

Having had time to reflect on my experience the best piece of advice I can give is:

- Learn their Language
- Understand their culture & their ways.

Embracing these two simple principles will go a long way in determining the success you may or may not have.

Learning the Language

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. If I had my time again I would have thrown myself fully into learning the language. The first two years of my time in Japan I squandered the perfect opportunity to learn the language because I relied on my interpreter supplied by the club.

I was fortunate in that I was contracted with a Top 14 club situated in Tokyo. Part of my contract included Japanese Lessons with the internationally recognised learning centre Berlitz. Berlitz was a very expensive learning institution. In my final year I studied hard. Had I studied as hard as I did in my final year I would have had a very good understanding of the language both written and spoken. I do regret this.

In any event I would advise that you insist on some form of Tutoring or education that helps you learn the language. Make sure it is included as part of your contract. Many of the companies would look fondly upon this request as it would show genuine desire to integrate into their society. Make sure you find a good tutor.

Glen Panoho
Something as simple as introducing yourself in their language and attempting to speak in their dialect goes a long way. Learning the language is important for a number of reasons, but none more so than the respect you will gain from the company and the players and management. I cannot stress this enough in terms of coaching in Japan.

Whilst Japanese maybe a difficult language for some to learn, it does eventually become easier once you understand the basics. Forcing yourself to coach in their language is difficult but the players do respond well to the effort, and eventually they help out. More out of pity I suspect.

Try to avoid the trap of using an interpreter all the time. If you have to use an interpreter make sure he or she is a good. Particularly make sure he or she has rugby knowledge. This is a very important point. You may have all the knowledge in the world but if the players are receiving a different message then you might as well have said nothing at all. I cannot stress this point enough.

**Ways of beating the communication barrier**

A lot of time can be eaten up using an interpreter. One hour sessions become two, two become four. There are certain methods that can be employed to aid you in getting the message across.

For those who know a thing or two about VARK, using a visual aid is always helpful. In my first year the Head Coach would use examples of the types of moves he wanted to employ by showing examples from Premier League, Super 14, Tri Nations etc.... This was great given he was excellent technician with the AV, but it always came unstuck when we hit the field. Once again we would have the problem of communicating face to face.

The white Board was another good tool to teach. It did become a little impractical once we hit inclement weather. Writing the moves in English and having them translated into Japanese was another method we tried but the pitfalls were making sure the interpreter was translating correctly and it was not a great method of learning for those who were visual or kinaesthetic.

In my final year we implemented what I found to be the most effective method of teaching. Many of the players were keen to learn English and within my own company many of the players had to learn and pass certain competency tests in English before they could progress within the company. Unfortunately, for various reasons we did not find out that many of the boys understood English well until after the first season had finished. In some instances players had been overseas and played in English speaking countries. Once we understood this, we gathered some of the old boys and players who had a good grasp of English & rugby. Together we would work with these players before sessions. We worked with the company to have these players and Old boys join the Coaches in planning the session’s prior to the commencement of each session. It required you to be well organised and well planned. We would explain to our group of players why and how we would do the drills. We would have them execute the drills and error correct. It was a dual learning process. We would teach the players and they would teach us the correct rugby terminology in Japanese.

When the team arrived for the session, the players and the old boys would explain and demonstrate the drills without the need for an interpreter. It allowed us as Coaches to error correct, and the drills would flow seamlessly. We would review the sessions with the players & old boys and they would talk to the players we could not speak with on the field during that particular session.

Glen Panoho
With this method we found the execution rate and understanding of what we taught increased phenomenally. In the absence of having a good grasp of the language and being able to speak it competently, this was the most effective method.

**Some other Language traps**

Understanding the language was important for other practical reasons. When using certain letters within the English language there were certain letters that the Japanese players had trouble pronouncing. This potentially could affect your calling system especially if you used English letters. For example R’s were particularly difficult for the Japanese players to pronounce. When called in lineout sequence the Letter “R” would sound like an “L”. The same would apply with words beginning with R. Because we used English letters in our calling system we eventually sat down with the players and went through every word in the alphabet so as to eliminate any potential confusion.

As you would appreciate the language barrier was the number one inhibitor when it came to translating and communicating philosophy and rugby principles to the players. Something we take for granted coaching in our native tongue, but something I could have rectified had I applied myself when I first arrived.

**Understanding the Culture**

In my opinion understanding the culture was just as important as learning the language. One thing I will treasure most about coaching in Japan is that there are many ways to achieve an outcome. It may mean that it is not necessarily the most logical to an Australian, and it may not be how we would do it in Australia, but the desired outcome is usually the same. Sometimes longer and more impractical, but none the less it would be important to the Japanese it was done that way. These rules are no doubt in place for a reason because there is no way 10 million Australians could live in such a confined space as Tokyo without there being a murder every 10 seconds.

Whilst there is usually a strong Foreign Support network at every club, I would encourage you to source some strong ties with the local Japanese people. We were fortunate enough to find great Japanese friends through our children’s schools. We found our Japanese friends were a great source of help in Japan. It gave a better understanding of the boundaries you can push with the company and the players. It gave us a better insight into understanding how and why things happen.

An example of this was when we tried to change the times for our training sessions. We tried to change the normal 2 to 2 ½ hour training session to an intense compact session that should last between 1 hour to 1 ½ hour. No matter how hard we tried he could not convince the players or the hierarchy. We were told. “It is the Japanese way.” No matter what science or how many proven formulas of success we showed them, we could not convince them to train shorter times. Sometimes, just sometimes, you had to accept that this was their way.

If there is one thing I will take from my Japanese experience it will be the planning and organisation that is required to run the team/squad. My team in particular loved you being well planned, well prepared and well organised.

Glen Panoho
My top 5 tips if you decide to Coach in foreign Country –

1. Learn the Language
2. Understand the Culture
3. Speak to someone who you trust who has coached or played at the place you are going to, and get a good grasp on what you are heading into.
4. Ask for all the assistance you can from your club in the first month, because after that you will be on your own.
5. Embrace and find some friends who are local.

Finally, enjoy and embrace the experience because ultimately it will make you a better coach.