Role of a Head Coach and My Thoughts

Introduction –

I wanted to explore the role of a Head Coach. I have had the opportunity to work with many different coaches over the past 15 years. I have seen a lot of different styles of coaching, a lot of different styles of set-ups and heard a lot of different opinions on what works best. I wanted to learn how a good coaching group comes together for the best outcome of the players, the club and also to get the best out of the coaches for their development and progression. There are so many different roles within a Club that the Head Coach may be responsible to oversee, they may have someone overseeing them as well. Here is just a couple of different roles within a coaching group that I could think of –

- Directors of Rugby
- Head Coach
- Assistant Coach/es
- Specialist Coach/es
- Strength and Conditioning Coach/es
- Physios
- Doctors
- Managers

I wanted to focus on the role of the Head Coach and what the requirements of this position are, I spoke with a few coaches in this role and asked them the following questions and put the responses together below.

1. Do you need to be the best coach over all aspects of the game? No, you need to definitely have a good knowledge of the game and on how to run a program at an elite level, but you can have others around that are stronger in certain parts of the game. You need a strong team around you.
2. Can you have weaknesses? Yes, that is part of the learning process. If you think you know it all, that is the first sign of a problem. It connects with the first question about having a strong team, this allows you to be over everything.
3. How do you cover those weaknesses? Having a great team around you that want the same outcome as yourself. This may take a few attempts to get the right people on board, but as long as you are in control of the situation, this is quite easy to achieve.
4. What style of leadership/management skills do you need to have? There were all different types of leadership styles, but the main response that came from this question was that management skills are key to success. If you are not well organised and do not have people around you to assist in ‘back of house’ management, you will fail. You can’t do everything yourself and still have time to coach.
5. How did you get put in the position of Head Coach? Most coaches had been coaching for over 10 years, had completed their Level 3 accreditation or were in the process of completing it. Some of the coaches had coached at numerous clubs in varying positions on
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Their path to their current role, they all had to do presentations to a board of directors to get the job.

6. Did you pick the remainder of your coaching staff for the season? 100% was the response, all coaches talked about having a team that they trusted and could work with being the number one outcome. At the end of the day, we have our heads on the chopping block if things don’t go to plan. They also need to know coaches abilities to cover all parts of the game. 1 Big point a few of the coaches made about selection of coaches was that they wanted people who had good knowledge, but also had great people skills and care for players pathways more than their own.

My personal thoughts on what makes a good Head Coach, from the talks I had with current Head Coaches and also my dealings in the past with Head Coaches that I have worked with.

1. A proven track record from where they have coached before. This helps in retainment, recruitment and overall excitement to a club from day one.
2. Always wants the players to go further in their careers, whether that be ‘on’ or ‘off’ the field. This is a massive one for me, players knowing that you genuinely have an interest in their lives, will go that extra step for you.
3. Always had time for the ‘CLUB’ as a whole, not just first grade and took the time to be part of the club and watch all grades. If this is not done day one, bridges are burnt immediately within the club. In the club environment, everyone matters. Yes, Head Coach is going to be judged by 1st Grade results, but any issues can be overcome by putting the right systems in place early for everyone to be able to excel.
4. Always willing to teach the coaches and players everything they know and not think that, knowledge is power. Comfortable to part with their knowledge and mentor both players and coaches.
5. Able to adapt to different players at any time. People skills are vital.
6. Have a great knowledge of the game, but not be afraid to let someone else take the lead when they know they have a weakness. Being able to manage a team under you still know that you can learn at the same time.
7. Be able to deliver feedback without destroying people. This relates to adapting to people, not all people take feedback the same way, recognise that.
8. Be talked about in high regard by other coaches within the network. It is unbelievable how much talk there is between other coaching groups throughout the whole world. Network and be happy to talk to others within the same field about rugby. One of my early coaches always told me to share knowledge and experience with others.

I have some key takeaways and thoughts from this process in learning about the Role of a Head Coach and below are just some of them.

1. You need a Head Coach that is experienced, but willing to let go and give some clear and concise indicators on expectation, wants and needs, then let the assistant coaches/specialist coaches run with it, reporting back to you as the Head Coach with feedback from the
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sessions. As the Head Coach you have too many other things to do in your role, so go and do them and trust the system you have put in place is being followed, with correct management of the process, you will still get the feedback from the coaches and the players without having to have a hands on control of everything.

2. The Head Coach has such a high pressure job throughout the year that does not stop from the final whistle of the previous season, “there is no off-season” relates directly to coaches. Recruitment, retainment start day one, some have to attend board meetings and player meetings. If you have a good set up in place, these can be made easier.

3. Using specialist coaches, you have highly skilled coaches in each individual component of the game, instead of coaches that have broad knowledge. This will lead to better sessions that are more specific and beneficial to players and create a huge buy in as they know they are learning.

4. When session are planned well, specialist coaches will work with all other grades and colts coaches and teams over the weekly sessions, while mentoring the coach of that particular team to upskill them to have a broader knowledge and understanding of the skill to benefit the playing group in the future.

5. Give the players the best opportunity to learn, coaching success comes from team success, if players are getting picked in representative teams or picking up full contracts from overseas, you need to manage this and see it as a positive on what you are doing, players get seen when the team is going well and that is a good thing. Players want to come to clubs that have a success path that they can use.

6. Allow coaches to be able to focus on a specific and be the best at that specific area of the game while still having broad knowledge of all facets of the game.

7. Different voices at training can be positive, as long as they are all on the same path as the Head Coach and are using the same language. They must be beneficial to the playing group, don’t just get someone to come in for the sake of it.

8. Let coaches, coach, put strong, and highly skilled coaches in high positions, it offers the playing group the best of all facets of the game and it also allows coaches to develop from other highly skilled coaches, but make sure they are available to mentor others. Coaches come to training to learn as well as coach, make sure there is an environment for this.

9. I will say that I have come across some specialist coaches that, on paper have good qualities, but don’t have the skills to get it through to the players. This can be a big issue, players see through these things and it could hurt the overall feel of the club. Make sure you have the right people in the right jobs.

I believe that being a Head Coach is about putting a strong team around you, with coaches that have skills to bring to the table and add to the players or coaches that want to learn. Yes, you have to have a strong skills set, but you can have weaknesses, that is what the learning process is all about. Surround yourself with coaches that fill those weaknesses and don’t try and bluff your way through. Players and other Coaches are smarter than that and see through this. Having weaknesses does not mean that you are not fit for the role, not being able to see these weaknesses and fill the voids is an issue.
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At the end of the day, I have learnt over the past 15 years, it is all about the players, players just want environments where they can learn, evolve and possibly take it to a professional level if they are not already there. They want a place where they feel people actually care about them and what they want and have not just been given a sales pitch to get them on board for the season. Obviously a good game plan and strong playing squad does not hurt, but the foundation of having these things is to have all of the others in place. Word spreads between players, between coaches about what programs are good and bad and players will not go to bad programs, unless money is their only drive, eventually that will run out and what are you left with.

Coaches want to learn from other coaches, they want to learn the do’s and don’ts in coaching, they want to learn the WHY’s and WHY NOT’s from the Head Coach, you need to be able to offer all of these answers or have someone in a role that can answer these questions.

“Attitude Reflects Leadership”, this is a saying that I like to use and believe it relates to the role of a Head Coach and his team.

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