It’s not ALL about winning: A modern sporting example to achieve program outcomes

Stephen O’Brien

Performance coach course: Final Task
It’s not ALL about winning: A modern sporting example to achieve program outcomes.

PURPOSE:

Every coach and player wants to win. This is the one common outcome that all programs have, whether playing at a community rugby level or at the elite performance level of the game.

So the question must be asked, if everyone shares winning as a common goal, why is it always at the top of the priorities?

Winning is the culmination of culture, core skill and execution. In my years in rugby development, most coaches have emphasised winning often neglecting the process it takes to become winners.

In this paper, I will endeavour to use a current sporting example of where placing the emphasis on something other than winning is so much more beneficial - not only to the culture of the environment but also the long term success of the program.

INTRODUCTION:

Where do we start?

The Chicken or Egg scenario... What comes first?

Do you design and implement a program to your coaching strengths / strategy and then develop players accordingly OR do you develop your players to be able to adapt to any strategy or style of play required?

If we look through a different lens we can potentially open up another world of opportunities for coaches and players. Referencing the Hawthorn Hawks and Alastair Clarkson example, I will demonstrate the possibilities of looking through a different lens in terms of HOW WE DRIVE OUR PROGRAM OUTCOMES.

Hawthorn Hawks – Head Coach Alastair Clarkson

Coaching history:

Clarkson took on the Head Coach role at Hawthorn Hawks in 2005 – a club that had been underperforming for many decades. The last time Hawthorn had won the AFL premiership was in 1991.

It is well documented that Clarkson employs a ‘system and process’ driven coaching style. This relies heavily on each assistant coach, and support personnel, at the club.
Clarkson was able to drive the program outcomes by fostering and developing his coaches' own aspirations. He measured his coaching success through only ONE OUTCOME:

- How many of his assistant coaches graduate into head coaches around the AFL.

The outcome of his program was not winning (that is implied).

Through setting a meaningful outcome for his assistant coaches i.e. to graduate into head coaches around the AFL, this had a knock on effect throughout the entire organisation – demonstrated in diagram 1.1).

NB: When looking at diagram 1.1, always relate it to the above OUTCOME.

Diagram 1.1

This outcome has had wonderful success with seven coaches “graduating” to become head coaches of other AFL franchises (appendix 2).

This also correlated with on field success. The Hawthorn Hawks have won four premierships (appendix 1) in just 11 years (five grand final appearances – losing in 2012) since Alastair Clarkson became Head Coach.
In a competition with a draft and salary cap, these are amazing results.

The Fox Footy channel documentary “AFL, the Graduates” (appendix 3) uncovers the common thread of Clarkson’s succession plan for the assistant coaches. Interviews with Bolton, Hardwick, Cameron, Simpson and Beveridge (all now Head Coaches and former assistant coaches of Hawthorn – appendix 2) show a common thread in that all were nurtured and developed to become AFL head coaches. It is clear to see that these coaches have continued to utilise the systems / process driven coaching style that Clarkson had employed.

What also became apparent, is that most people are unaware that this system is underpinned by understanding the person first. All assistant coaches noted above, describe the importance of the person within their respective organisations.

Bolton, Hardwick, Cameron, Simpson and Beveridge all reveal in their respective interviews that the people in their ecosystem are the biggest asset to any sporting organisation.

Another commonality across all the above interviewed can be drawn. The coaches are athlete centred not coach centred. Emphasis is placed on developing everyone who exists inside the ecosystem. The development of the assistant coaches, the support staff and the players are a priority of the head coach.

The interview with Luke Beveridge, Western Bulldogs coach (2016 AFL grand final winners), was very indicative of this athlete centred environment. In every segment of Beveridge’s interview, he highlighted or made reference to a player. This mindset must be embedded in his coaching philosophy.

The above interviews also highlighted the importance of staying true to your core beliefs, values and coaching philosophy.

The “Graduates” of Alastair Clarkson’s system are proof that emphasis and development of the people within the ecosystem are paramount to the overall success of the organisation.
A different MINDSET:

Let’s revisit the Chicken or Egg scenario…..

Do you design and implement a program to your coaching strengths / strategy then develop players accordingly OR develop your players to be able to adapt to any strategy or style of play required?

I know what you’re thinking. It’s a results driven industry. We don’t have time to develop the players!

If winning is the by-product of culture, core skill and game day execution and performance, then the emphasis must be placed off the field before we can guarantee collective buy in to a program. The PERSON!

At the end of the day, the PERSON is going to achieve a program’s results.

Using a Shute Shield premier club as an example, what if the only outcome for your program was:

- How many of his PLAYERS graduate to higher representative honours.

How would this outcome drive your program?

What if we applied the same principles as discussed in the introduction and focussed solely on the athlete / player?

---

**Head Coach**
Identification and selection of PLAYERS.
The development and continuous learning of the PLAYER.

**Progression**
Endorsement and recommendation from the club and Head Coach for higher representative honours.

**Club Philosophy**
PLAYER understands and adheres to drive the clubs vision, values, behaviours (CULTURE), as well as the program outcomes.

**Athlete Centred Learning**
PLAYER aspiration ensures quality of delivery in program OUTCOMES.
Skill development and game understanding is highest priority to drive results.
Using the above outcome, accountability is transparent across the coach and athlete/player. Coaches are driven to understand the athlete/players requirements and develop the athlete/player accordingly. The athlete/player has clear development criteria to meet and exceed, providing the coach has spent the appropriate time understanding the skill deficiencies and has put a plan in place to rectify and measure this.

Recent research into the Athlete centred versus Coach centred learning environments (appendix 4; Ahlberg, Mallett, Tinning) has discovered that the shift into this mindset has obvious benefits. This is directly correlated to the difference between Coercion Vs. Empowerment (appendix 4; Ahlberg, Mallett, Tinning) in the coaching environment. Empowering your clubs participants has long term benefits to your sporting ecosystem.

Athlete centred learning environments should include:

- **Choice**
  - Avoid controlling behaviour (coercion)

- **Promote Initiative and independence**

- **Rationale of Task**
  - (understanding)

- **Ask questions and listen**
Summary:

In conclusion, a clear vision set of values and behaviours underpin any sporting organisation or ecosystem.

The ability to set refreshing and meaningful outcomes for your program across the sporting ecosystem will promote and develop everyone existing within the ecosystem.

As discussed, Alastair Clarkson’s system of firstly identifying and selecting potential coaches to drive his outcomes is an unusual but very effective. This system is undoubtedly one of modern sport coaching marvels. The success through this outcome is undeniable.

It’s not ALL about winning, but if your outcomes are more meaningful than winning than that will be the end result.
APPENDIX:

APPENDIX 1: Source – Wikipedia; Alastair Clarkson Coaching statistics

*Statistics are correct to the end of the 2016 AFL Season

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Games</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>W%</th>
<th>LP</th>
<th>LT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>88.0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014^</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>73.1%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>281</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W</th>
<th>Wins</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>Losses</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Draws</th>
<th>W%</th>
<th>Winning percentage</th>
<th>LP</th>
<th>Ladder position</th>
<th>LT</th>
<th>League teams</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Runner Up
Due to illness, Clarkson was unavailable for senior coaching for five matches in 2014. Brendon Bolton coached Hawthorn in those five matches from round 11–15 (all of which Hawthorn won).

APPENDIX 2: Source – Wikipedia; Hawthorn FC

List of assistants have gone on to coach at senior level in the AFL;

- Damien Hardwick - Richmond - 2010 - present
- Luke Beveridge - Western Bulldogs - 2015 - present
- John Barker - Carlton - 2015 caretaker coach
- Brendon Bolton - Carlton - 2016 - present
- Adam Simpson - West Coast - 2014 - present
- Leon Cameron - Greater Western Sydney - 2014 - present
- Chris Fagan - Brisbane Lions - 2017 - present

APPENDIX 3: Source – Fox Footy documentary, AFL, The Graduates;

APPENDIX 4: Source; citing reference to Coercion vs Empowerment

http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2008_AhlbergMallettTinning_IJC_S.pdf