COMMUNICATION

(and its relationship to Rugby Performance)

Communication as a tool, can be used to “boost” performance and it is widespread throughout the world. There are many examples of simple communication methods, utilized across all walks of life that enhance human performance.

It is my belief that, Communication as a performance enhancer, is under-utilized by coaches and players in the game of rugby.

Elite teams that consist of outstanding athletes and rugby thinkers, usually have a ‘handle’ on communication as a performance enhancer, and it shows through their results on and off the field.

As a “core skill” at the junior and senior club levels, and in school sport, not enough emphasis is put on the usefulness of communication and its relationship to rugby performance.

Below I will attempt to explain my belief that

❖ We need to increase the awareness of communication as a rugby performance enhancer,
❖ The types of communication that can be used,
❖ Where and why it should be used,
❖ Its relationship to Rugby as an enhancer,
❖ Some examples to support my claim and also some strategies that I employ at training.
Communication is and has been used for centuries as a tool to enhance performance for human endeavour.

Many examples, new and old, exist of this realisation that a verbalisation can help consolidate the thought, it can enhance and support the successful conclusion of the task required.

A modern example would be of a martial arts expert, a brick breaker who is required to smash a stack of bricks 16 – 18 high and 20mm each in depth. Never has there been a successful break from a silent athlete. No he must channel his thoughts, use his “chi” and co-ordinate his mind and body to successfully complete his task. This is enhanced by a verbalisation, usually a guttural roar or noisy exhalation of air…..either way there has been a consolidation of thought through a communication technique (para language and self communication) and usually a successful outcome.

Other examples may include
- Young men/boys chanting through rites of passage, ceremonies etc.
- Samurais using banzai
- ANZACS roaring, yelling, charging as the whistle blows to go ‘over the top’
- Riggers and dogman loading cranes with whistles and signals
- ALL BLACKS – Haka, also SAMOA, TONGA, and FIJI
- ELITE Teams (national and S12’s) freakish attack and try scoring abilities. (Lions/NZ, Crusaders, Blues, Waratahs, Broncos etc)
The above are all examples that contain communication methods that enhance performance including;

- Body language
- Para language
- Direct communication
- On and off task talk
- Self communication
- Statements

All of which can have a positive effect on human endeavour when taught as a habit.

**Body language** such as the All Blacks Haka. They as a group are sending a message, through aggressive body motions and loud strong voices, that they are indeed aggressive and strong, they are united and physically and mentally at their peak. They wish the opposition to know that the above is true and that this will be a hard fought contest not for the faint-hearted. It must truly be an experience of mixed emotions for those opposite.

The men in black are more importantly sending that *same* message to their comrades and teammates. Yes I will be aggressive and strong at the contest, I will unite and stand shoulder to shoulder with you in this game, at each opportunity I shall support you.

This, I think, is one of the main points in communication as an enhancer, the athletes *state* through body language and direct communication their state of mind, commitment level and support. They as individuals have said it, they as a team have said it….they are confident in each other and the team!
The team opposite should also take the opportunity to do the same and use communication through body language etc. and send the message to each other and the opposition.

Strong and Untied in the face of the opposition, a battle of mental strength and wills.

This is after all how some of our more desirable traits are borne…. Through mental toughness and desire to achieve and a knowledge that a team of like minded athletes are there to play with the same desired outcomes and willingness to execute.

The emphasis is on communication of their desired outcomes, it sets the stage for the game, a great deal of effort is employed in its performance and much respect lauded upon the HAKA!

This is direct evidence of communication as a tool to enhance performance in a rugby match. Just ask an “All Black”.

Although above I do make some generalised points on communication. I would like to further dissect my comment by relating what type and when and why we use communication and its benefits.

Types of Communication

Direct Communication

- Verbalisation of tactics
- Nomination of tasks
- Codes / catch cries
- Decoy calling
The above can be either ‘on’ the ball. ie/ as the game is being played using codes and catch cries nominating, verbalising support etc. Or perhaps more importantly ‘off’ the ball. ie/ allowing team mates options through verbalisation, nominating codes, catch cries, communication methods by effecting that particular option, scanning opposition movement and improvising suitable alternative tactics prior to the ball and play arriving at that/those identified areas.

“Working off the Ball” Should be greatly emphasised by coaches, to ensure a common knowledge and understanding of prescribed actions, with the bonus of athletes having a confidence in their pursuit through consolidation of support via communication. Basically “pre-warned” is “pre-armed”.

Examples of direct communication:

“On the ball”
- Backs off set play nominate their men in defence
- Forwards timed scrum calls
- 1,2 and 3 pillar post defensive pattern
- Lineout lifters and jumpers up/down back/forward calls
- Nominating captains of certain pattern tasks
- Nominating roles as a supporter
- Telling a supporter when you are passing him the ball (especially in traffic)

“Off the ball”
- Backs pre-empting attack options through scanning and both sides individual field positions
- As above but in defence (who have you got!) tell them and your team mates

“If you say it, you do it!”
**Body Language**

As explained the HAKA etc, can set the mood / attitude of teams, athletes and even supporters. It is body language used at its best, but it stays off the field and must constantly be re-iterated by team members through action and communication.

This can be done from many areas, but firstly as a team warming up at opposite ends of an arena. I believe it is imperative to start and dominate a mental battle prior to any contest, in the hope of demoralising and draining some confidence from the opposition.

This can and will be done by ensuring a team atmosphere and environment that can clearly be seen and heard by the opposition 120m away.

The team does all warm ups, stretches and drills together as a team or relevant units, no exceptions, there must be a very strong message of team unity sent out, to the opposition and within.

It is a two bladed sword. It can make the opposition apprehensive re: their chances and also promotes team and individual confidence.

Once on the field, body language has many opportunities to enhance our performance and hopefully detract from theirs. Examples

- First set to all set play including lower body height formation.
- Forming relevant groups for debrief and fitness recovery at stoppages.
Always jogging back to 10m past ½ way as a group for fitness recovery after try / points scored. (opposition must ask themselves if this team can be any fitter?)

Hammer home the ruthlessness through body language.

- In defence point at man inside and opposition in front, ensure correct man covered, repeat on other man (outside) and in front / then nominate who is covering who. The pointing to and fro and certainness of the defensive call must play on opposition minds.
- Never break for injury breather whilst opposition on the attack.
- Front rowers, hands up ready (looks aggressive)
- Decoy runners facing differing angles and standing in places to draw opposition attention.
- Big physical tackles and feats off athleticism can always start a team going. (jealously of not having the biggest hit….must get one!)
- Heads up / positive at stoppages. No heads down, hands on knees, panting, laying or sitting down.
- Always retreat at penalties, breakouts facing opposition.

In conclusion I would like to offer a strategy of perhaps making verbalisation of prescribed tasks more natural to an athlete by; Utilising Key Factor Charts for skill development and ask learning athletes to verbalise each of the factors while they are performing it at training.

Eg: 1) Sight Target
   2) Body Position
   3) Arm Clasp
   4) Leg Drive
   5) Secure
‘Remember; ‘you say it, you do it!’

In fact all of the factors can be broken down for training to emphasize each factor whilst performing it.

‘If we consistently get the player “to say as they do it!”, more shall be retained.

After this ‘core skill’ level has been achieved, coaches and athletes can concur and formulate catch cries and codes for certain tasks and situations.

Certain calls and captains of those calls can be made. Fine tuning it down to a point where minimal direct communication is required and more emphasis can be put on body and para language to pass messages between teammates, but also to oppositions.

I believe, as the English language is so large, so are the possibilities available for the coach (to expand his teams potential) and so are the opportunities for a more confident and learned team environment.

Thank You
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