The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Coaching

When Ken Hodge (2014) of the University of Otago asked Graham Henry and Wayne Smith to reflect on the important factors that contributed to the All Blacks Success in 2011, and without knowledge at that time a successful 2015 World Cup campaign, they were able to articulate what allowed the All Blacks to finally perform to their potential on the highest stage – the World Cup. The data that was collected fell into eight main themes (Hodge, 2014);

- Critical turning point
- Ability to be flexible and evolving
- Dual-management model
- Better people make better All Blacks
- Responsibility
- Leadership
- Expectation of excellence
- Team cohesion

Hodge (2014) referencing Meyer & Fletcher (2007) relates the All Blacks now famous “Better people make better All Blacks” to emotional intelligence, with respect to the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies. Several aspects of the above eight themes relate to an emphasis on key personal characteristics in players and the team environment which are also important components of the Emotional Intelligence Model.

Furthermore, Smith et al (2013) argue that Emotional Intelligence has a positive impact on team cohesion and performance in sport, while Chan and Mallet (2011) discuss that Emotional Intelligence is an important aspect and skill of an efficient coach and is therefore a legitimate area of coach development.

Linden (2000) also suggests that there is a link in a non-sports context of emotional intelligence with the development and fostering of a transformational leadership environment. Transformational leadership is discussed by Hodge as a key feature of Henry and Smith’s leadership with the All Blacks.

So if emotional intelligence is a such an important aspect of coaching what is it? Emotional Intelligence addresses an individual’s knowledge and development of both interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies.

Dale Carnegie wrote “How to Win Friends and Influence People” in 1936 and has sold over 30 million copies, and in 2011 made the number 19 spot on Times Magazine’s list of 100 most influential books. This is emotional intelligence before it was called as much! With sections such as; Fundamental Techniques in Handling People, Six Ways to Make People Like You, Twelve Ways to Win People to Your Way of Thinking and Be a Leader: How to Change People Without Giving Offence or Arousing Resentment. This was an early discussion on the subject.

Daniel Goleman in 1995 wrote “Emotional Intelligence” and created a model to describe EQ with the four domains summarised by the model below.
Daniel Goleman describes emotional intelligence as “The capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, and for managing emotions effectively in others and us”.

**Self-awareness**

Self-Awareness is about being aware of the way you feel and the impact feelings can have on decisions, behaviour and performance. Self-awareness describes an individual’s ability to reflect on their own behaviour and feelings. Obviously accuracy is an important aspect of this.

Knowing as an individual what triggers you getting stressed and then how this makes you behave. Under pressure you may tend to get short with people. When you have a deadline approaching you may get very rude and not listen to other people’s advice. It may be that you tend to be quiet in a large crowd or at parties get over excited and talk too much and speak your mind. Knowing how you come across to your superiors and subordinates. This is all self-awareness.

This does not take into account the fact that some people may want to be perceived in a certain manner, such as a boss who enjoys and wants to be difficult to approach. It could be argued that this still takes self-awareness from the boss’ perspective to realise that they are coming across in a certain manner. What they lack is the self-management or desire to control their behaviour.

We can all think of a person in our lives who comes across rudely and abrupt, they may just not understand how they are interacting and being perceived by other people. This is poor self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

**Self-management**

Self-Management is about managing one’s own mood and emotions, time and behavior, and continuously improving oneself.
“If you are not in the process of becoming the person you want to be, you are automatically engaged in becoming the person you don't want to be.” Dale Carnegie

Once an individual becomes aware of how they are likely to behaviour in certain environments and situations it is possible for them to start to regulate their own behaviour. Once the realisation has been made of becoming stressed when a deadline approaches, an effort must be made to start to control the resulting behaviour. You may need to get in early to finish work before your colleagues arrive at work, or when someone talks to you in the middle of a job, you may need to calmly explain that you just need to finish this task and then you can talk to them about their problem. It may even help to explain to colleagues, co-coaches or a spouse that “I feel stressed and I just need to get this done in order to concentrate on what you need me to do”.

As indicated in the image below a strong self-awareness can lead to self-management and some social awareness. However, it is important to note that for effective self-management, an individual needs to have an accurate self-awareness and a desire to self-regulate.

“The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid one” Dale Carnegie

There is an interconnectedness between all the domains with some models demonstrating this, as indicated above;

**Social-awareness**

Awareness of others is about perceiving, understanding and acknowledging the way others feel.

When Paul Roos finished his playing career he had some very clear thoughts and observations about how the game of AFL had changed for the good and not so good. He had ideas about the way a club should be run and the players coached. Roos sat down and wrote 25 points, which given the opportunity later in life would become his key values which would underpin his approach to coaching. He did this soon after finishing his player career
so as to still have a player’s perspective. These 25 points are the framework for “Here it is, Coaching, leadership and life.”

Roos emphasises the need to develop relationships. He saw that the coaching paradigm needed to change from the authoritarian and coach centred style, from when he was first playing, to a more dual management style. This is supported by Hodge, from his observations of the All Blacks. The fundamental change that was needed was for better relationships between coaches and players. Roos also advocates the need for strong relationships amongst the coaching staff and for the head coach to delegate roles and responsibilities and promote his assistants, ultimately as a succession plan for the head coach role, from within the club. Roos’ emphasise is on relationships, which is social awareness.

As introduced above social awareness is about an individual’s desire to build relationships and in order to foster these relationships individuals, leaders and coaches, need to have a strong social awareness. They need to be able to understand people’s feelings, know why people get stressed, how this makes them behaviour and then almost anticipate the expected reaction. Leaders need to be aware how subordinates react when they are loaded up with meaningless and irrelevant tasks, how people react when they are confronted with accusations of poor behaviour or work performances below expectations and how others feel and behave when fatigued and/or out of their comfort zone. Which ultimately as coaches is exactly where we want to take our athletes.

On the converse leaders and coaches should be aware how people react when given roles of responsibility and autonomy, how people feel when we take a real interest in them, and most importantly find reasons to offer genuine praise for a good effort or performance. As Dale Carnegie points out, individuals are interested in themselves thus, take interest in them, ask them questions:

“You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.”

Social Skills/Management

The social skills domain, which is also referred to as social management and even others management, is in my opinion the most important. It is also the easiest and most rewarding when some mastery of the other three domains has been obtained. Dale Carnegie has come under criticism for what his critics see as a crude attempt to control other people’s behaviour. But I would argue this is exactly what we all do when interacting with each other. More importantly as a coach we want to direct them in a certain direction. We may want to make a player feel good about themselves, about the effort they have put into their defence, even though they missed a few tackles.

Educators do this every day. They try to manage the way students feel and thus interact with their subject’s content, and as coaches and leaders we want to encourage our chargers to be positive and constructive in their approach to our sport. We want our players to respect our feedback and we want them to make a positive contribution to the team environment and hopefully the team’s on-field performance.

A first hand reflection from my role as Combined States Head Coach in preparation for School Boy Nationals
**Self-Awareness**

Five days before our first game every year, the team goes into camp. We have five days to get to know each other, learn the plays and a game plan before we face QLD and NSW Schools teams. I have come to reflect on my behaviour over the last four years and have realised that I am very intense at the start of the camp. All I want to do is talk tactics, plays and game plans. I want to get the lads into training straight away.

My behaviour in this situation is very serious and intense and this is not a great start to a campaign.

**Self-management**

When we go into camp, I plan to start the program in a relaxed manner. We play touch for the first session. I play with the lads, as do some of the other coaching staff and I inevitably struggle and drop a few passes which allows for a few laughs and a chance for the players to see me in a fun environment. We also play a few other games and I explicitly make the point that the priority of the sessions is to have fun and get to know names and positions.

In this situation I am consciously being more relaxed and making an effort to have fun and engage with the players in a game environment. I also make a huge effort in the first 24 hours to know every players’ name and a little about each.

*“Names are the sweetest and most important sound in any language.”* Dale Carnegie

**Social Awareness**

As our preparation starts, I realise that as much as I want to get into the content and start talking rugby I am aware that the players are nervous, excited and over stimulated. They are not likely to take a great deal of new ideas in. Their focus initially is to work out the environment, the players and the staff, do they fit in, are they good enough to be here, they want to make an impression and only then can we start talking footy.

**Social skills/management**

My priority is to make the players feel comfortable. I want to create an environment in which they have fun, they feel they have buy in and one to which they want to work hard for each other.

The coaching group asks for player input; how do we want to be perceived, how do we want to play, what do they want out of the week and what are the groups strengths and weaknesses. We priorities group time, we have a team mascot, we emphasise our identity and most importantly we have fun.

As mentioned above the players are not likely to take in too much new information so we make a point of only introducing information in very small amounts. I make a point of letting them know what each meeting is about and having three key messages for each meeting.

So hopefully, we are creating an environment which addresses some of the points noted in social awareness.
Graham Henry’s EQ

Hodge was able to share an example of how he felt the All Blacks coaches had displayed strong emotional intelligent. Tana Umaga approached Henry in 2005 and questioned the effectiveness of Henry’s pre-game team talks: “Tana was dead right, it was their time. They needed to focus on what they needed to do. They didn’t need some other bugger yelling in their ear... I had been team-talking for 30 years, and I thought it was bloody important, and he thought it was a bloody waste of time... He was dead right, and thank God he told me. I could still be doing it!”

This demonstrates outstanding skills in all four domains from Henry to firstly take the feedback on board (self-awareness) and then just as importantly to change his behaviour (self-management). It is also a great example of how a coach has acknowledged a group’s problem (social awareness) and then gone about creating an environment (social management) which is more conducive to a better preparation.

This also shows the flexible aspect of a successful coach as supported by Chan and Mallett’s (2011) In Hodge (2014). Chan and Mallett go on to claim that high-performance coaches require qualities beyond technical and tactical skills, such as leadership and the ability to facilitate a functional leader-follower relationship; and that the key to a functional coach-athlete relationship was the coach’s emotional intelligence. Consequently, they champion emotional intelligence as a key coaching skill that elite coaches need to master.

“Personally I am very fond of strawberries and cream, but I have found that for some strange reason, fish prefer worms. So when I went fishing, I didn’t think about what I wanted. I thought about what they wanted. I didn't bait the hook with strawberries and cream. Rather, I dangled a worm or grasshopper in front of the fish and said: "Wouldn't you like to have that?
"Why not use the same common sense when fishing for people?” Dale Carnegie

Conclusion

The first step for coaches is to become more informed of the emotional intelligence model. Dale Carnegie and Daniel Goleman would be appropriate places to start in this regard. Coaches should then look to develop their skills in the four domains and look to seek feedback from their peers and players periodically throughout the year.