IMPROVING COACHING EFFICIENCY

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this presentation is to provide “E” and “D” level coaches with a self-study guide to improve teaching effectiveness by improving efficiency.

Fundamentally, the coaching process reduces to two basic skill sets - **Technical Knowledge** and **Teaching Skills** – with the journey from novice to expert requiring years of study and deliberate practice.

Expertise in coaching is reflected by superior understanding of the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological components of the sport; and by the ability to help athletes continually improve their performance.
INTRODUCTION

As the percentage of former and current players entering the coaching ranks continues to increase, so too does the average level of technical experience. Simply, today’s novice coaches know more about soccer, because more have played the game.

However...while playing experience often provides a more intuitive connection to the coaching process, playing experience does not automatically translate into teaching ability, nor guarantee success as a coach.

*Players have to study and practice to become effective coaches.*
INTRODUCTION

Effective teachers plan for learning. Effective teachers have evolved efficient routines for every aspect of the teaching process. Effective teachers spend less time organizing and more time instructing. Effective teachers provide clear demonstrations and explanations. Effective teachers say more in less time. Effective teachers engage students in their own learning. Effective teachers constantly check for understanding and react to verbal and non-verbal feedback. Effective teachers make a difference.

Effective teachers know “what” to say, “when” to say it, “how” to say it; and, most importantly, “why” they are saying it.
INTRODUCTION

The typical soccer training session can be broken down into a series of discrete teaching moments that collectively help define effectiveness. These include situating the practice, introducing the training activities, introducing large-sided games, coaching within large-sided games, and coaching at “half-time.” Thoughts on providing feedback and using the freeze method are also discussed in this presentation.

The information highlights these key elements and offers examples of how coaches can become more effective by becoming more efficient in their planning and delivery.
SITUATING YOUR PRACTICE
Many times in formal coaching education settings, candidates simply announce their given topic - “OK, my session is on midfield defending” - without ever providing the players with a context for their training session.

This problem can be even more pronounced in home environments where coaches may not appreciate the need to plan training sessions in advance; nor appreciate the motivational benefits of announcing a training theme.

Introducing the theme of the training session is an important first step in the teaching process, because it announces to the players - and clearly defines for the coach - what they are all going to be working on; and, more importantly, why!

Without a clear definition of purpose (What’s the problem with this player, or with this line, or these lines, that I need to improve?”) training sessions often deteriorate into general “coach everything and anything” events that lack focus and direction.
To expand on the midfield defending example, consider the following possibilities...

Why would midfield defending be important to individual or team development?
What are the benefits of improving defending in the midfield area?

More specifically...

Does the problem relate to the midfield line, or with the players in the midfield third? Is the problem with central players, or the wide players; or the flank players from two different lines? Does the problem show up on only one side, or both? Does the problem occur because of your system, or because the opponent uses a system that doesn’t match up well to yours? Does your midfield have issues when your team presses, or when they drop off to defend behind a deeper line of confrontation? Or is the problem related to defending in transition because the line lacks balance?
# A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

What is the soccer problem in usable terms?
- What specific issue was going on in the last game / last games that needs to be improved?
- Why is this training session going to help the team in the short-term? Long-term?

Which specific players / lines are involved?

Where on the field is the problem taking place?

When is the problem happening?

Why is the problem happening?

What are the key tactical cues?

What are the key technical solutions?
PLANNING PRACTICE ACTIVITIES
Coaches can save a significant amount of transition time during their practices by planning the physical logistics of the session in advance.

For example, when any smaller practice spaces are color-coded inside the largest playing area, and the goals and balls and scrimmage vests are positioned for easy access in advance, the session improves its efficiency. Even the number and spacing of cones has an impact on both preparation time and the transition between activities.

The following slide provides a checklist for pre-practice preparation.
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

- Do I have enough players available to conduct my training plan?
  - If no, adjustments?
- Do my field spaces correspond to my playing numbers?
- Are my field spaces oriented (N-S) for transfer, where possible?
- Are my field markings organized for ease of transition?
- How many yards between cones?
- Are my smaller fields organized inside the largest field?
- Are the goals in place?
- Are the balls in place?
- Are the scrimmage vests in place?
- Do I have my notes?
- Do I have the players assigned to teams and positions, based on my soccer problem?
- Do I have my watch and whistle?
- Where is my introduction to the players going to take place?
- Which direction do the players need to face to avoid direct sunlight?
INTRODUCING PRACTICE ACTIVITIES
The introduction of practice activities invariably ranks amongst the most inefficient parts of the training session because: a) players can only attend to limited chunks of verbal information; b) coaches often fail to demonstrate their training activities; and c) coaches often start to instruct before a ball has been kicked.

For new activities, in particular, the longer the explanation, the more likely the players will fail to grasp the directions.
Once the field logistics have been arranged, the next challenge is the physical introduction to the players. Again, planning saves time and simple details count. Who plays where? What colors do you want each team to wear? What do the players need to know to get an activity started? What can wait until there is a need to know?

Most important during the actual introduction, are the players paying attention to the coach? Experienced coaches develop common signals, such as a clap of the hands, to gain attention. Are the players making eye-contact with the coach? Are they talking to each other? Are they playing with their soccer balls? Are they close by, or scattered? Are they in front of the coach? Are they facing away from the sun?
Because it is easier to learn when we actively participate, practice time can be saved by simply positioning the players on the field and walking them through the activity. This process is often as simple as alternating possessions to demonstrate a) how goals are scored, b) how any scoring systems operate, and c) how any special rules apply.

**Demonstrating AND explaining focuses attention and saves time.**
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

- Do I have the players attention?
- What color do I want each player (team) to wear?
- What do the players need to know to get started?
  - What is the basic concept of the activity / game? (Possession? Targets? Two goals?)
  - What is the desired organization (drill) / shape or formation (game)?
  - How is the game won?
  - What are the scoring structures?
  - What are the special conditions?
  - How long does each round / game last?
  - How are the extra players rotated, if necessary?

- How am I going to demonstrate the start of the activity / game?
INTRODUCING LARGE-SIDED GAMES
Inexperienced coaches often stop instructing when the “big game” begins, perhaps viewing the end of training as time for free play, or the reward for completing practice drills, or whatever has gone before.

Large-sided games serve four main purposes. First, they help integrate soccer problems into team play; second, they help transfer learning from smaller environments to the spacing and distances of the competitive game form; third, they provide an opportunity to reinforce a style of play; and finally, they help develop realistic soccer fitness, specifically extensive endurance.

With these purposes in mind, the large-sided game becomes an essential element in practice planning.
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

The Organization

- What colors do you want each team to wear?
- What is the desired formation of your team?
- What are the specific roles assigned to specific players?
  - These roles and functions should reflect the training session.
- How do you want the opponent to be organized?
  - Specific players in a specific formation?

- How are you going to promote an organized transition to play?
  - Scrimmage vests pre-organized in formation on the field?
  - Scrimmage vests pre-organized in formation at the side of the field?
  - Key players organized in their assigned color and placed in formation?
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

The Player’s Reminders...

- What is the focus of the training session (the soccer problem)?
- Who are the key players involved?
- What are the relevant tactical cues?
- What area of the field is the relevant action taking place?
- What technical / tactical responses are being stressed?
- What happens next (integrating the phases of play)?
COACHING
LARGE-SIDED GAMES
FROM THE SIDELINES
Coaching from the sidelines – or from the middle of the field – is arguably both the most important and enlightening element of the training session, because there is direct transfer between the coach’s ideas about the team (vision) and the player’s performance (learning).

Good training sessions include experiences that help players understand where and when and how to move, and how to read tactical cues to solve problems. The large-sided game helps players transfer ideas from smaller, more repetitive organizations, into the context of the weekend game form - 6v6, 8v8, etc.,

While coaching the larger-sided formats is an essential tool for reinforcing training themes, the inexperienced coach can also struggle to maintain the direction of the session, because they must integrate the shape of the team with the application of the principles of play and the integration of the phases of play. In short, there are lots of potential distractions.
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

Checking for Understanding
Once the game starts, the first task is to check for understanding by observing the action.

- Are the players in their assigned positions?
- Do the players understand their roles and functions?
- Is the general flow of the game as you expected?
- Are the key moments of the soccer problem materializing?
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY

Coaching
When the game starts to flow as expected, the coach can start to look for moments to influence the decision-making relative to the soccer problem.

- Are you commentating on the game, in general, or on the specific soccer problem?
- Are you coaching the relevant side of the ball (attacking vs defending)?
- Are you coaching the relevant players?
- Are you coaching at relevant moments?
- Are you Cueing (pre), String-pulling (during) or Correcting (post) the action?
- Are you shaping the game by helping the players recognize the tactical cues?
- Are you Freezing the game to comment on the soccer problem?
THE FREEZE TECHNIQUE
ABOUT THE FREEZE TECHNIQUE

The freeze technique is one of the most over-used, abused and miss-applied methods in the coach’s Tool Kit. Like all methods, it has its place, and it can be highly effective, but it should not be the dominant method of instruction.

In freeze theory, the coach 1) stops (freezes) the players in place when they have failed to recognize how a soccer problem is situated in a practice activity. The coach then 2) provides the player(s) with the “correct” technical or tactical solution. Next, the coach requires the players to 3) “rehearse” the correct solution. And finally, the players 4) “restarts” the game with the coach’s corrected version of the solution.

There are some serious pitfalls with this sequence of events.
ABOUT THE FREEZE TECHNIQUE

1. The theory explicitly requires the coach to provide the solutions.
2. The stoppages kill the flow of the game and lower enjoyment.

   More stops = less flow.

3. The stoppages are often too long.
4. The players are often technically and tactically incapable of executing the coach’s solution.
5. The coach’s solutions often digress into soccer-by-numbers: “A passes to B passes to C passes to D and Goal!”
6. Unless the coach projects his/her voice, the coaching information is often lost on the group as a whole.
ABOUT THE FREEZE TECHNIQUE

The freeze technique is most effective when the players are organized into positions and the coach limits its application to ideas about imprinting a style of play.

Some examples...

1. Players don’t recognize the application of a new concept, such as how to open a passing lane, or how to move to combine, or how to react to a turn-over.
2. Players don’t recognize tactical cues, such as opportunities to play forward; or moments to keep the ball; or the position and movement of immediate opponent(s).
3. Players away from the ball don’t recognize their function (job) to provide width or depth during a specific phase of play.
When You Freeze...
- Is the Phase of Play consistent with your defined soccer problem?
- Is the Area of the Field consistent with your defined soccer problem?
- Is the Player / Player-Group consistent with your defined soccer problem?

About The Freeze...
- Are you helping the players recognize a tactical cue?
- Are you limiting your information to the tactical cue?
- Are you restarting with a player-choice (“Try again”), or with a coach-choice (“Do this”)?
- Are you “in and out” in under 30 seconds?

Self-Assessing...
- How many times have you stopped your activities during the session
COACHING “HALF-TIME” OF PRACTICE GAMES
COACHING AT “HALF-TIME.”

To develop soccer fitness and encourage good focus during practice matches, the flow and tempo of the games must be maintained and the time assigned to each playing period should be closely monitored. While the coach can certainly offer information and encouragement during live action, the main interventions should take place during the planned stoppages, AKA, the “half-time” breaks.

When soccer fitness is not a key aim of the session, during recovery training, for example, the coach is more likely to stop the action and provide more detailed information. In these case, the information from the “half-time” talk should be used to review the key points at the end of the training session.

Guided Discovery is a common technique used by teachers to make students active participants in their own learning. The level of questioning in soccer situations can range from asking simple facts, such as whether the team is creating goal chances, or not; to opportunities for deeper thinking, such as asking what the team might do differently to create more goal-scoring chances in the second half.
## Using Guided Discovery...
- What is the goal of the training session?
- What have we done well? Not so well?
- What tactical cues are we recognizing?
- Why are we still missing some opportunities?
- Think about what each of you can do a little better in the second half / next session to make your play a little more consistent. ____________ (name) What are your thoughts?
FEEDBACK
FEEDBACK

The purpose of feedback is to help **improve individual performance** within the context of team play. Expert coaches have developed the skills to provide correct information to the correct players at the correct moments and in the correct manner to impact learning.

When **specific players** are given **specific information** about how to react to the game’s **tactical cues**, the quality of the coaching “intervention” is improved and learning is more likely to occur.

In contrast, when coaching information is general (“get your shape”) and non-specific (“someone pick up”), or, worse, demeaning (“what are you doing?”) the coach is more likely to be a non-factor in improving the shape, rhythm and flow the game.

Similarly, coaching information that focuses on absolute solutions (“when you get the ball, pass to the winger”) will always be less effective in developing tactically insightful players.
The experienced coach’s vision of the game directly connects the lessons of practice with performance expectations, and game coaching is most effective when it reinforces playing themes (habits) evolved over time in training. **Good teachers replicate match situations in practice.**

Feedback is essential for helping players improve their tactical insight. From reading visual communication cues, to checking for pressure before coming into possession, to receiving the ball into undefended space, to taking up good supporting positions, to moving in support of the game, to understating positional responsibilities, to reading cues on when to press and when to drop, to appreciating the application of offside tactics, to recognizing when to penetrate and when to possess, etc., the coach’s role is to shape the identity of the team by providing feedback on how closely player-performance meets coach-expectations.

The coach also plays a critical role in the development and expansion of each player’s technical range. Agility, Balance and Coordination (A-B-C’s) can significantly impact technical efficiency, as does the coach’s ability to provide mechanical analysis. Experienced coaches target the root causes of deficiencies and learn to appreciate that “perfect” technique and “correct” technique are often mutually exclusive.
Command Style vs Guided Discovery

Soccer information can be delivered either directly from the coach to the player; or as an exchange of questions and answers, with the coach leading the players towards improved tactical awareness.

Command style is at the heart of the coach-centered approach because the adult is expected to provide all the technical and tactical solutions. It is an effective method inasmuch as it uses time efficiently and provides the players with immediate feedback when time is limited, but it has significant limitations.

Guided discovery, in contrast, engages players to attend to predictable and repetitive tactical cues and is at the heart of player-centered coaching. Guided discovery is a highly effective teaching tool, that encourages players to engage in their own learning, but the method takes time to learn and inefficient stoppages can often be disruptive to the flow of the training session.

Ultimately, good coaches are adept at using both techniques, but appreciate that engaging players in their own learning - guided discovery – is a better long-term strategy for promoting independent thinkers.
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY - 1

Who Are You Taking To?

☐ Are you talking to a specific individual?
☐ Are you talking to a specific on-field organizer, who has a pre-determined “coaching” role?
☐ Are you talking to a specific line?
☐ Are you talking to the team?
☐ Are you just talking out loud?

When Are You Talking...

☐ Are you selective in your coaching moments?
☐ Are you constant in your coaching moments?
☐ Are you cueing players before they come into possession?
☐ Are you string-pulling players as they come into possession?
☐ Are you correcting players after they have made a decision?
☐ Are you louder when your team is winning?
☐ Are you louder when your team is losing?
A CHECKLIST FOR EFFICIENCY - 2

What Are You Saying?

- Are you focused on a specific **soccer problem** (practice game)?
- Are you focused on **specific performance** areas (playing themes)?
- Are you focused on **one side of the ball** (attack vs defense)?
- Are you focused on the correct **phase of play**?
- Are you highlighting **absolute solutions**?
- Are you highlighting **tactical cues**?
- Are you correcting **blow-by-blow technical** decisions?
- Are you correcting **blow-by-blow tactical** decisions?
- Are you correcting **positional decisions**?
- Are you correcting **strategic decisions**?
- Are you **cheerleading**?
- Who do you **treat differently**?
- Are you **distracted** by the opponent or the officials?
Coaching Undertones

- Are you generally **seated or standing**?
- Is your voice **threatening**?
- Is your voice **encouraging**?
- Is your voice **understanding**?
- Is your voice **friendly**?
- Is your voice **sarcastic**?
- Is your voice **abusive**?
- Is your **body language positive**?
- Is your **body language negative**?
- Does your non-verbal communication **match** your verbal?
- Does your **tone change** when the players are not performing to your expectations?
- Does your verbal or non-verbal communication **change** with the match situation (time & score)?
Additional Questions?

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