

Assessing Coaching Behaviors

Sport Psychology HHPK 528

Assessment of Coaching Tone (ACT) Observational Coding System

The coaches have a significant impact on the motivation, confidence, and enjoyment of the athletes in the sport. For decades, scholars in the sport psychology literature had investigated how coaches used a variety of means to coach based on the frequency of coaches issuing instructions, praise, and punishment. That was useful in characterizing coaching styles, but it omitted a critical part of analysis, or a much needed amount of insight: the psychological meaning derived by athletes from their coach's language. Two coaches can say the same words with radically different emotions, as tone plays a role. To address this issue, Erickson and Côté created the Assessment of Coaching Tone (ACT), an observational coding system that measures how coaches talk, and not only what they say.

There has been systematic measurement of coaching behavior since early research on the famous basketball coach John Wooden. Early instruments, like the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) and the Arizona State University Observation Instrument, mainly looked at instructional and feedback behavior. These systems categorized coaching actions such as reinforcement, punishment, and instruction within a frame of the word, but while frequency was important, meaning was not. Subsequently, researchers recognized that the motivation of the athlete did not rely on a specific type of feedback but on the ways in which they interpreted the coach's intention.

Incorporating this psychology, the ACT was developed to fill this gap by conveying the intervention tone, the psychological message conveyed through coaching engagements. ACT

was designed through the following process: a multi-phase approach combining theory and observation. At first, researchers assessed major motivational and leadership theories, such as Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, transformational leadership, and growth mindset research. Across these theories there emerged a common idea that supportive communication enhances motivation and controlling communication diminishes it. The researchers then observed youth sport practices and refined categories until all coaching behaviours could be reliably classified. Then, coders were trained and were required to meet at least 75% agreement reliability before coding the data and reliability testing revealed good consistency between them. Finally, the system was validated by viewing coaching videos and proved the tool could differentiate between better and worse coaches.

The ACT assesses coaching behaviour in two components: content and tone. First, the observers know what type of communication such as instruction, encouragement, organization, mental skills communication, social behavior, and non-sport conversation are. These factors add detail but do not define the assessment. The ACT is primarily designed to assess three level domains of tone: autonomy support, evaluation climate, and rapport. Autonomy support refers to the extent or extent to which the coach supports independence or control. An autonomy supportive coach takes athletes as decision makers and asks questions in order to gain clarification. A coach who is controlling provides a directive without athletes involved. For instance, you might ask an athlete “What change do you think will help?” represents autonomy support and “Do it this way” represents control. The second dimension, evaluation climate, is measuring whether feedback emphasizes improvement or comparison. Mastery feedback evaluates effort and learning, e.g. an athlete’s technique enhanced by learning. Ego based feedback evaluates an athlete to see whether they have the same or similar performances as their closest peers or focuses on winning. The

third dimension, rapport, represents the personal connection between coach and athlete through non-sport conversation and building relationship communication.

The ACT is useful as it explains both athlete motivation and development. Research consistently demonstrates that athletes perform better with mastery oriented and autonomy supportive coaching. These athletes have generally more self confidence, enjoyment and time in sport. In contrast, controlling and ego based coaching is linked with anxiety, burnout, and dropout. As a result, the system may be used not only in research, but in coach education. Training programs can increase the capacity for communication rather than simply instructing how tone will affect athletes by demonstrating to coaches how it impacts them. The evaluation is versatile and applicable in youth sport, PE classroom, and high performance sports. As the ACT gauges general patterns of interpersonal communication based on motivational theory, it can be modified for use in other sport settings. Researchers also concluded that more successful teams largely included coaches who employed more mastery oriented communication, less controlling language, and more personal interaction with athletes.

A study adapted the ACT and explored two youth synchronized swimming teams that differed in overall success. Practices were documented and coded with ACT categories. The more successful coach indicated more commitment to autonomy, more feedback for mastery, and much more personal communication with the athletes. The less successful coach made more controlling statements and comparisons based on ego. On the other hand, the coach that did well spoke less generally but more effectively. This showed that the tone of communication had more effect on athlete's outcomes than did the amount of direct instruction given.

The ACT, therefore, represents a vital step forward in the field of coaching research, as it shifts our attention from frequency of behavior to the psychological meaning behind it. Rather than

gauging whether coaches provide praise or instruction, this measure is about whether athletes feel they have support, that those coaches are consistent and similar, or that they feel they are being controlled. This difference explains why athletes tend to respond differently when given similar feedback. The tool can also offer a pragmatic model for the enhancement of coaching effectiveness by facilitating the teaching of communication techniques that contribute to motivation and development.

Thus, the ACT observational coding system represents an important contribution to knowledge in the field of sport psychology to explore interpersonal understanding of coaching behaviour. Created based on theory and tested through observation, the ACT can credibly measure autonomy support, motivational climate, and rapport. Training data has clearly shown coaching tone that affects athlete's development, performance and enjoyment. Due to its research credibility and pragmatic applications in coaching, ACT is a useful approach for scientists and practitioners to enhance athlete experiences and performance in sport.

Reference

Erickson, K., & Côté, J. (2015). The intervention tone of coaches' behaviour: Development of the assessment of coaching tone (ACT) observational coding system. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, *10*(4), 699–716.
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