

Performance Appraisal of Sports Coaches: A New Zealand Analysis

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Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of research on performance appraisal of sports coaches in New Zealand. Many New Zealand sports have moved towards professional or semi-professional models of operation over the last five years. While sports may consider themselves professional, many of the practices they use are far from professional. Performance appraisal is one such practice, with a history of being a technique to fire coaches, rather than being used for the organisational and individual goal of coach development. This research examines factors considered important in the performance appraisal of sports coaches in the development of a performance appraisal template.

A variety of literature sources were used as this research combined general performance appraisal, sports appraisal and sports coaching literature. The sports appraisal literature in relation to New Zealand was almost non-existent, so a reliance was placed on American sports literature, even though much of this related specifically to appraisal systems in American athletic programmes. This paucity of literature on the topic provided further incentive to create new work in this growing area of concern in the sports industry. This research was warmly received by most coaches with a strong recognition of the importance of appraisal, and the problems with many appraisal systems currently being used in New Zealand.

Method

This research involved the identification of thirty-six performance dimensions applicable to sports coaches. They were presented to participating coaches in survey form. Eight performance constructs and corresponding questions were developed primarily from overseas research, and in particular Turkington's 1992 work. The research collected data in three key areas. Demographic data were collected for analysis and testing purposes. Information was collection on the key performance appraisal issues of who should appraise, frequency of appraisal and experience with appraisal. The 36 performance dimensions at the heart of this research were ranked on a five point Likert scale.

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The survey population for the research came from five team based sports, who provided either contact details for their top coaches, or undertook distribution of surveys. The sports involved were basketball, cricket, netball, rugby and softball. The research was primarily aimed at the top coaches in each sport, or those coaches who may be on a career path in the coaching of a particular sport. This population included a range of coaches from fully professional to purely voluntary coaches, with an even distribution of coaches at various levels. Information from some administrators was also obtained, but the number of administrators involved in the survey was lower than initially anticipated.

Results

A strong response rate (forty four percent) of coaches was obtained with only one mail out. Responses came from a variety of coaches from national to representative levels across the selected sports. Eighty two percent of coaches surveyed indicated that they had been subjected to some form of performance appraisal, with 71 percent indicating they had experienced formal performance appraisal. Ninety seven percent of respondents endorsed the practice of performance appraisal for coaches.

A major issue in any performance appraisal is who should be involved in the appraisal process. Modern performance appraisal trends, tend to advocate the use of a number of "stakeholders" in the appraisal process. This trend was mirrored in this research. As in general performance appraisal literature, self-appraisal was a well supported option. Captain and player appraisal ranked ahead of other groups traditionally used in sports appraisal, such as administrators or special committees. Respondents indicated that peer review should be undertaken only by coaches respected and accepted by the coach being appraised. Some respondents suggested the word "mentor" as they indicated they support for being appraised by peers. Administrators were ranked only fifth, showing the lack of faith respondents had in administrators conducting appraisals. Forty nine percent of respondents believed appraisal should be annually.

Who should appraise	Frequency
Coach him/herself	48
Captain of the team	43
Players	38
Coaching peers	33
Administrators	27
Assistant coaches	19
Special committee	19
Other	11

While the above was important information about the appraisal process, a major focus of the research was the rating of the thirty six performance dimensions. These dimensions

were categorised into eight performance constructs. Six of the eight constructs were rated by respondents as being in the "important" to "very important" range having mean scores above four on the five point scale. "Fundamental skills", "rules and regulations" and "characteristics of the coach" each had a very high mean score of 4.7. This showed the perceived importance attached to coaching knowledge and personal characteristics in being a successful coach. The high rating of rules and regulations was a surprise. Potentially, it shows the serious view many coaches take of their positions and associated responsibilities.

Construct	Mean
Fundamental Skills	4.7
Rules and Regulations	4.7
Characteristics of Coach	4.7
Coaching Ability	4.6
Role Model	4.6
Coaching Education	4.2
Results	3.7
Relationships	3.6

While the mean scores are all considered high on a five point scale, this was expected as much work was put into identifying relevant performance questions and constructs in the appraisal survey.

The top five ranking constructs could all be categorised as core skills in coaching. These interpersonal or knowledge based skills are areas covered in most coaching courses. This finding confirms the appraisal process has the ability to improve coaches through providing them with training and development in these key areas. Coaches can be taught about rules and regulations, the characteristics of a successful coach or how to be a good role model. In contrast it is difficult to have specific training and development in the lower ranked constructs of "results" and "relationships", as to a certain extent they are a result of the coach being proficient in the higher ranking constructs.

It was interesting, albeit not surprising, that "results" had a mean score below four. This confirmed that survey respondents did not believe win – loss results to be of the same importance as the other measures of a coach. This rating of "results" showed that any appraisal process with a focus on results is considered inappropriate, as this research indicates that other categories are seen by coaches as being more significant in success. While relationships are a major part of coaching, they rated a long way behind most constructs.

Some interesting patterns emerged from the rankings of performance items. The two highest ranking items that had means of 4.9, are potentially the most difficult of all thirty-six questions to measure. These items require personal judgements to be made about a coach on subjective factors such as their "willingness to improve" or if they are "giving 100

percent to the job". This can be compared with most other performance items that could be objectively measured through observation, testing or by looking at results. This finding has the implication that coaches themselves must be involved in the process as they are the only ones with the true answers about these leading performance items.

The next group of performance items with a mean of 4.8 consists of the knowledge of technical and tactical aspects of sport, verbal communication skills, honesty, the ability to adapt coaching methods and develop a coaching plan and the ability to aid athletes to meet their best level of competence. These items are more focused on practice or team meetings. Effective practices and planning meetings are central to being prepared for games, having effective game plans and achieving winning results. This means those involved in the appraisal process must be present at practices to see coaches communicate their knowledge, and witness their coaching sessions and plans as they attempt to develop athletes.

The seven lowest ranking items relate to the areas of results and relationships. Winning results will be a product of a coach undertaking the higher ranking performance items effectively. Relationships, while being a part of a coach's job, are the peripheral part of the job. The relationships in this category referred to relationships with groups including administrators, the media and athletes significant others. These groups can be seen as making up the "political environment". This construct of "relationships" does not include the coach's relationship with athletes' as this is covered in the coaching related constructs. These seven lowest ranking items have a place in the appraisal process but should be seen as areas to be considered as part of a coaches overall performance, and not specifically focused on in a way that would be appropriate for the higher ranking performance items.

Significant differences in performance item ratings

T-test's were run on a number of the rankings of performance items, according to demographic information. Significant statistical differences were found between different groups for the mean ratings of the following performance items:

Professional coach of a professional team and volunteer coaches

Professional coaches placed higher importance than did volunteer coaches on ten performance dimensions. These items were technical and tactical knowledge, a structured training schedule, verbal communication skills and the ability to analyse game situations, consistency with team rules, emotional control under stress, talent selection, the willingness to improve coaching methods and the development of a coaching plan. It should be noted that while significant differences were not found for a number of items, professional coaches placed higher mean ratings than did volunteers on thirty-one of the thirty-six items. This is most likely a reflection of the higher standards and importance they place on being

able to perform a core range of coaching areas effectively, the higher level of coaching skills expected from professional coaches, and perhaps a greater recognition of the importance of performance appraisal by those who make their living from coaching.

Coaches who receive payment and volunteer coaches

The "Coaches who receive payment" includes professional coaches of professional teams, professional coaches of semi-professional teams, and professional coaches and part-time paid coaches of amateur teams. These coaches who receive money placed significantly higher importance on the win/loss record, final competition placing and the enforcement of team rules than did volunteer coaches. For coaches in professional and semi-professional sports, winning becomes more important as issues such as crowd attendance, sponsorship deals and revenue generation become more important. It was anticipated that paid coaches would place a higher emphasis on winning and season placing, but the higher rating of enforcement of team rules was a surprise. One explanation may be that for some teams athletes are being paid and coaches feel they must become more professional in their handling of athletes who, like them, have sports as a career.. This finding may show further recognition by paid sports coaches of the new "professional sports" environment.

Coaches and administrators

Administrators rated five items significantly higher than did coaches. These items were enforcement of team rules, non-verbal communication skills, being an appropriate role model, willingness to improve coaching methods and ability to develop a coaching plan. These items appear arbitrary and may simply be the result of the small number of administrators involved in the survey. A surprise in this t-test was that coaches rated relationships with boards as more important than did administrators. It can only be speculated that coaches feel some obligation towards those in administrative positions, while the administrators are happy for coaches to get on with the job. Administrators' views on the performance appraisal process need further research.

Years of coaching experience

Interesting and unexpected differences were found for four items. Coaches with more than twenty years experience placed a greater importance on loyalty to athletes, discipline on the playing arena, and relationships with boards and public relations. The areas of loyalty and discipline could be described as "old school" values of coaching. Public relations and relationships with boards is not a traditionally "old school" value, but may reflect the more experienced coaches respect for those above them (boards) and for the media.

Male and female coaches

Female coaches placed a significantly higher importance on the ability to demonstrate a sense of fair play/sportsmanship than did male coaches. Female coaches also placed significantly higher rankings on relationships with athletes' significant others. One can only speculate as to the reasons for these differences. The higher rating on fair play/sportsmanship may reflect stereotypical views of females playing sports for participation, whilst males have a fixation with winning at all costs. The greater recognition of athletes' significant others could be representative of females greater general awareness of the important roles played by those closely involved in the lives of athletes.

The coaching environment

The special environments in which coaches operate, and in particular the media attention they receive was outlined earlier. One representative level coach commented, *"Media are also very results driven. If this project serves to educate these people I will be pleased"*. The media or other interest groups can put a lot of pressure on organisations to do something about poor results. The media, however, generally only have information about two of the thirty-six items identified as important (season placing and win/loss) and these items rated near the bottom of the thirty-six performance dimensions. Sporting organisations must be careful when considering media and public pressure in relation to coaching issues, for the simple yet important reason that these groups do not have the information necessary to effectively appraise a coaches performance.

Sporting organisations in New Zealand additionally need to show more patience when dealing with coaches whose teams may not be achieving desired results. Many coaches receive promotions to new coaching appointments but are given limited time to adjust to their new role. Scully's (1992) research on sports coaches (managers) found that managerial efficiency increased over time. Coaches need time to develop their skills, especially as they move to higher levels or different challenges. A survey comment reflecting this and New Zealand's general attitude is *"Generally New Zealand's attitude is if you lose, sack the coach and I feel we tend to flick coaches out too soon. They need time to develop as well as players. If we could change this "short term attitude" then performance appraisals become more relevant"*.

Conclusions

The review of the literature confirmed the wide range of roles involved in being a sports coach. With these roles come many factors considered important in being a successful coach. These roles and factors operate in a changing, competitive and unstable environment where a wide range of variables can impact upon a coach's performance. The best description of what to evaluate can be found in VanderZwaag's (1998: 86) description of assessing the Gestalt quality of the coach,

As used here, the "Gestalt" implies that the role of the coach is more than can be identified through an identification of specific responsibilities. It is the whole that transcends the particulars.

The focus on the whole means all factors involved in being a coach must be considered depending on their varying importance at different times, and factors outside a coach's control must also be considered as part of the "whole". Behaviours and not targets must be the focus of the appraisal (Spencer and Spencer, 1999). The appraisal instrument must focus on behaviours and factors important to coaches depending on their specific job and environment.

This behavioural focus was supported by the construct rankings found in this research. Coaching behaviours and skills, rather than results which are analogous to targets, were identified as important by the coaches themselves. The performance appraisal process for sports coaches should therefore focus on the coaching and interpersonal skills, as identified in this research. By focusing more on behaviours, environmental distortions can be minimised. External environment factors are unlikely to have much impact on areas such as a "coach's work ethic" or "verbal communication skills". Environmental factors are likely to effect the less important areas of peripheral "relationships" or "results". Where major environmental changes do occur, the appraisal process must have provisions to allow for the consideration of, or protect the appraisal from, factors outside a coach's control.

An important decision must be made on who will appraise the coach. Current trends in performance appraisal involve using a number of different people in the process. The literature, survey results and analysis show self-appraisal to be an extremely valuable component that should be an essential part of any appraisal process. Athletes have a place in the appraisal process, as do peers and administrators providing they have the appropriate knowledge, and the coach being appraised consents to the parties being involved. Appraisals should be conducted annually, with this appraisal occurring at the end of the playing season.

Win/loss factors can be used in the appraisal process depending on the level at which a coach operates. For professional coaches at elite levels, especially when large revenues exist, win/loss records must be recognised as a reality of the coaching job. It is in the consideration of win/loss factors that environmental factors such as rule changes, injuries to key players, and political issues can have a large impact. The reality is that these factors will be considered in conjunction with the appraisal process. For most other coaches who do not operate at elite, or revenue based levels, results should not be a major consideration. The development and improvement in results can be specified to come after coaches improve their fundamental coaching skills.

This research found a strong interest in performance appraisal among coaches. Similar concerns and problems were found in performance appraisal of sports coaches as were identified in the general performance appraisal literature. Sports must undergo the same steps as other professions in the development of effective performance appraisal processes. While strong support exists for performance appraisal, major concern exists as to who should undertake the appraisal process. A results based model of appraisal must be

abandoned with appraisal needing to focus on coaching behaviours, giving coaches time to develop their skills. When sports consider the above factors the performance appraisal process can be effective in its major goal of coach development, which in time will lead to results in the sports arena.

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