1.1. The Coach and Their Environment I
Unit 1

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Introduction

We know how important environment is to an athlete's performance and their psychological well-being, as well as the leading role that coaches play. In this unit, we are going to shift our focus to the coach's environment and the importance of learning about and understanding the contexts in which coaches interact on a daily basis.

Coaches develop in high-pressure environments, they manage problems, set objectives, make decisions and so on. Thus it becomes a recurring demand to know and understand what happens in the most immediate contexts, so as to train oneself according to the different situations that can be found throughout a sports season.

Thus, we will examine the sporting environment that coaches inhabit. It is there that we will find the contextual factors that will influence their performance.

Systemic-Ecological Model for the Coach's System

We live in a world of constant change and interaction, in which we modify our behavior, adapt, and make connections with others.

> The ecology of human development encompasses the scientific study of the gradual mutual adjustments made between an active, developing human being and the changeable attributes of the immediate environments in which the human being lives, to the extent that this process is affected by the relationships that are established in these environments and by the larger contexts that are incorporated into these environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1987, p. 40).

Sport is not immune to these processes and thus we must understand coaches as individuals who are in a continual state of development, with the ability to act within the environment as the environment also acts upon coaches.

The ecological theme focuses on studying and understanding the constant adaptation between a dynamic human being and the changeable attributes of the environments to which the human being adapts. This process is affected by the most confined environments and by the widest contexts in which subjects find themselves (Bronfenbrenner, 1987). One refers to an open system which lends itself to steady and permanent relationships with other contexts and the reciprocal exchange of information, which tends toward continual development. Both the coach and the environment mutually influence each other.

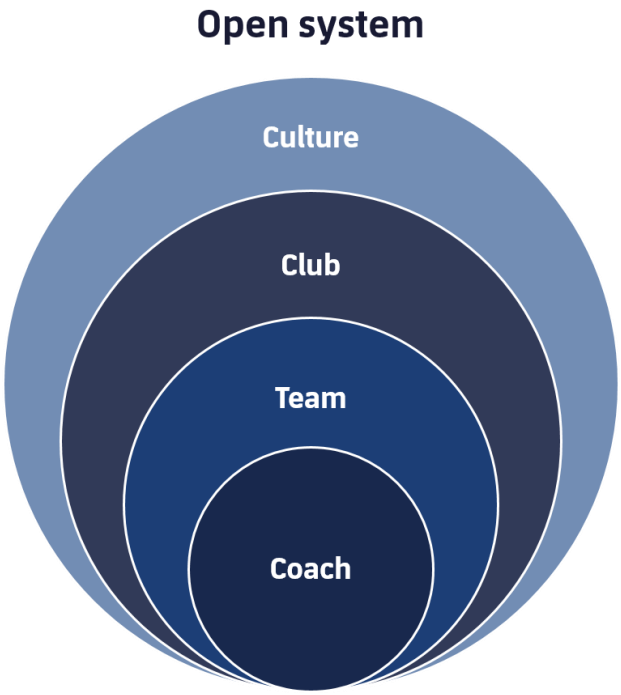
Coaches may switch clubs and/or divisions every season (or even halfway through a season). Circumstances that manifest themselves in their personal lives affect their training methods; likewise, results from their respective competitions may interfere with their family life. Furthermore, a move to a new team in another country will result in the coach being conditioned by a different culture and belief system.

When we refer to the environment, we refer not only to the environment that is most immediate to the individual but also to a macro-context that encompasses the most immediate environments. Each player, coach, and official interacts with and develops in a unique immediate environment (family, school, work, etc.) which, in turn, is part of a broader context (neighborhood, city), which is also a part of a larger context (city, community, etc.).

Each person's development and/or actions must be put in a **context**, since we cannot interpret human behavior without understanding that said behavior is part of an environment that is influenced by a specific and unique history. Consequently, when analyzing individuals, we must bear in mind the way that they relate to their context and the changes that this produces in them, and vice versa. The experience that a person accumulates throughout their life is what determines how they interpret their environment and generates specific actions within this environment. People may exist within a common reality, but what must be kept in mind is how each individual reality is perceived and interpreted. Consequently, there will be as many realities as there are people. A single sporting incident – for

example, a foul committed by an opponent – can be interpreted in multiple realities: by the player against whom the foul is committed, the game official, the audience watching at home, the linesman on the right hand side, etc.

Figure 1: Open system



Source: Prepared by the author.

So far, we have looked at an overview of the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model (1987). Next, we will delve deeper into the contexts that a coach must be familiar with, in order to understand the impact that these environments have on staff, the team, and on coaches themselves.

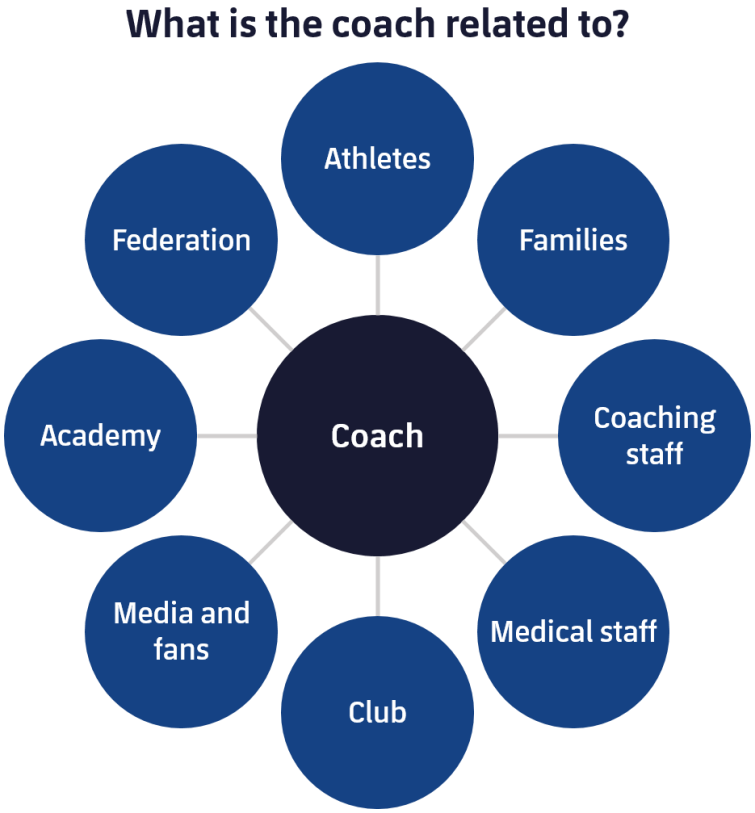
Microsystem

A coach's most immediate environment, the one in which they live and interact every day. A coach's values, beliefs, and personality traits, developed over a lifetime, are shaped in these environments. This context includes their family, the club where they coach, their workplace/academic institution, and their friends, among other domains (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As these relationships accumulate, the interactions between them become more complex and the coach's life will be exposed to more and more direct influences.

If a coach begins working on the club's basic training as an assistant coach, at first, their most immediate environment in the institution will be their team's head coach and its physical trainer. If, after a period of time, they become a lead coach, interaction with the general training coordinator and the head coach can be added in. As coaches take on higher positions at the club, the number of environments that they will need to manage will probably increase.

The following figure provides an example of the individuals/departments that a high-level coach will need to form relationships with, to a greater or lesser extent, in order to carry out their duties as a coach.

Figure 2: A Coach's Relationships



Source: Prepared by the author

As a coaches move up through the divisions of their sport, they will see that the number of environments in which they interact also increases. Consequently, the coach of a **U-18 A** football team will have more environments and stakeholders to deal with than the coach of an **U-10** team. This is because the latter will not have a significant relationship with the media or a fanbase. They will not have to directly deal with the Federation,

as this will be the coordinator's responsibility. Furthermore, there will be less coaching and medical staff.

Mesosystem

This system is distinguished by the coexistence of two or more environments in which the coach interacts actively (family, work, and social life). Consequently, more than one microsystem may exist in a mesosystem, and this number may increase if there are, in turn, additional microsystems.

In their off hours, coaches may take part in leisure and sports activities. For example, they may play a game once a week with the coaches from the other categories. Likewise, coaches may go out to for a monthly dinner following the first team's match, with the other coaches as well as their partners and children.

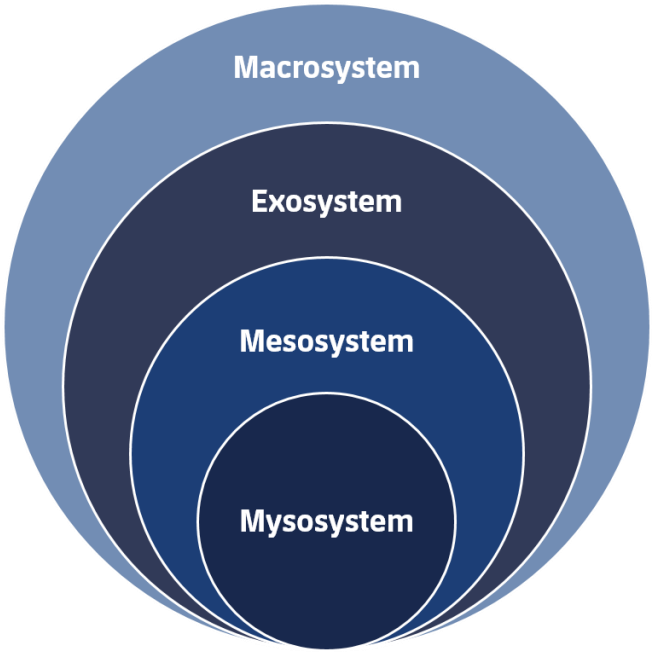
Exosystem

The individual is not an active participant in the exosystem, but this environment includes the coach, and everything that happens in this environment affects them, in the same way as the other systems. However, this does not require the coach's presence. The exosystem is associated with regulatory and/or cultural issues (norms, values, beliefs, and practices) pertaining to the most immediate environment. In this case, the exosystem is made up of the club's regulations, the philosophy of the entity that they represent, the neighborhood where the club is situated, changes to the regulations of the sport that they coach, etc. All of these examples affect a coach's behavior and, when a change takes place without the coach's direct involvement, it nonetheless changes their patterns of behavior.

Macrosystem

This is the system that corresponds, in form and content, to the lower-order systems: micro-, meso-, and exosystems, which it may accommodate as subcultures or as a part of its culture as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1987). For example, a high school, a given club's basketball team, a cafeteria, and a clothing store all have specific qualities and attributes within certain parameters in one country, which differentiate them from the same settings in different countries. Thus, the system of beliefs, the religion, or the social and economic policies specific to a region all affect human development and mold and define the different systems that make up the macrosystem.

Figure 3: The Ecological Model



Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model, 1976

Source: Bronfenbrenner, 1987.

The Coach and the Environment

In this section we will address how professional dedication varies substantially amongst coaches. A high percentage of sports coaches make sport compatible with their primary professional activities, which is known in the field as combined employment. A considerable number volunteer as coaches, and, finally, there are those who dedicate themselves as professional full-time coaches, which is the least common scenario.

Knowing a coach's level of dedication helps us to understand how many hours they will be able to dedicate to preparation, study, and sports practice.

The environment in which a coach carries out their athletic activities is very similar to the athlete's environment. Likewise, we can talk about how any one of these factors directly influences team performance (team in this case being the aggregate of the professional staff and the athletes). Some of these factors are:

- **Availability of infrastructure and equipment:** meeting the basic requirements for participating in the relevant sport. Here we are referring to having access to suitable training and competition spaces (in terms of quality and availability), functioning training equipment, qualified coaches, health professionals who provide support and prevent injuries, etc. Imagine a team that trains on a dirt field full of holes: this increases the likelihood of players becoming injured; teams that cannot train or do so early in the morning or late at night (which interfere with athlete rest and with study time) because they have to share spaces in which club members have first priority, etc. These are some examples of situations that are more common than we would hope.
- **Prioritized commitment to the sport:** coaches of non-professional division teams are not able to be completely committed because they are not offered full-time contracts. For this reason, they must combine sport with their primary employment (the same can also apply to athletes). The demands of high performance sport are growing every day, both in terms of coaches' education, effort, and commitment, which requires that they focus on sport as their only job.
- **Multidisciplinary coaching team:** having access to a team – and in coordination with the head coach – having access to a team of qualified professionals from various fields (physical training, medicine, physiology, psychology, nutrition, etc.). Imagine that a player, after feeling discomfort, is diagnosed by a doctor two or three weeks later, and who, in addition, does not have a physiotherapist available during his recovery who could give him advice about the exercises he should do to strengthen the damaged area, a physical trainer to prepare him to overcome increases in workload over the course of the season, a psychological assessment to work on his communicative abilities and to optimize the coach's leadership, etc.

  A multidisciplinary coaching team is a clear example of a player and coach's microsystem. The following should be taken into account when learning about and managing relationships in the most immediate environment.
- **Technological support:** having access to technology that objectively measures a variety of variables related to an athlete's performance can provide greater insight into training, as well as a context in which scientific evidence increases the effectiveness of training. The coach must define what she wants to measure in order to decide on which technology to acquire, in accordance with her budget.

If coaches were to increase their professional dedication (in cases where their workday is not already completely dedicated to sport), they might improve their professional expertise (studying their sport and how to teach it), interpersonal skills (the ability to relate to others) and intrapersonal skills (self-knowledge) in order to increase their effectiveness (Côté & Gilbert, 2006; Gilbert & Côté, 2007). If, in addition, the quantity and quality of the factors cited above were increased (quality facilities, a multidisciplinary team, high-quality latest-generation materials), we could propose the hypothesis that, under both sets of circumstances, the performance of the athletes and that of the team would improve.

In conclusion, it is vital for coaches to be aware of the fundamental role that they play in the life of an athlete, above all in their formative stages. They also need to understand the influences present in different environments and how these shape the way that we understand and relate to each other. Being aware of these issues should become a key goal for coaches in their pursuit for knowledge. Here, we are not only talking about self-knowledge. Rather, it is vital that we reflect upon what affects the athletes and professionals who are closest to us in our day-to-day lives, and upon how each of the individuals that make up this environment in turn influence the others in their environment.

Being aware of our team's contexts gives us information we can use to work on specific aspects that promote general well-being and optimized performance, not only in the field of sports, but attempting to encompass the greatest quantity of possible areas.

To finish up this unit, we will share a passage from the book "Short Stories for the Hidden Mind" by Leandro Taub (2016). Here, the author indicates that if we train ourselves to look at others from their perspectives, and not from our own perspective, we will achieve greater knowledge and understanding of how people see reality. This would avoid many of the sources of conflict in relationships and the ways in which we coexist.

> A man visited a foreign land, where he was given a special present: a wooden box that contained a mirror. This man had never seen a mirror before and did not know what it was. Upon opening the box, he discovered the living portrait of his father inside of it. He returned home and showed his wife the marvelous gift that he had received. Upon opening the box,

she discovered the image of a woman who looked on with suspicion.

So the woman accused her husband of betraying her with the woman who appeared in the portrait in the box. The man called her crazy, since whenever he opened the box, he saw his father's image, and not that of a woman. In order to resolve this situation, they decided to go to the village wise man. Upon opening the mysterious box, he said that both of them were wrong, and that the only face in the box was that of an old and already deceased wise man. (Taub, n.d., http://serenelmundo.com.ar/podcast/cuentos-la-mente-oculta/).

1.2 The Coach's Environment II Unit 2

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Introduction

A coach needs to understand his or her professional environment in order to perform well within an institution.

In this unit we will examine various ways to understand the coach's athletic environment. Here, we invite you to reflect upon any existing relationships between different members of a workgroup and the way that they should communicate and relate to each other so that the professional team can collaborate toward their objectives, everyone acting from his or her position in the team and taking care of the working culture as a group.

"There are many uncertainties in the process; the only thing that is worth it is the certainty of having a clear idea." (Guardiola, n.d., https://culturatactica.com/frases-de-entrenadores-pep-guardiola/)

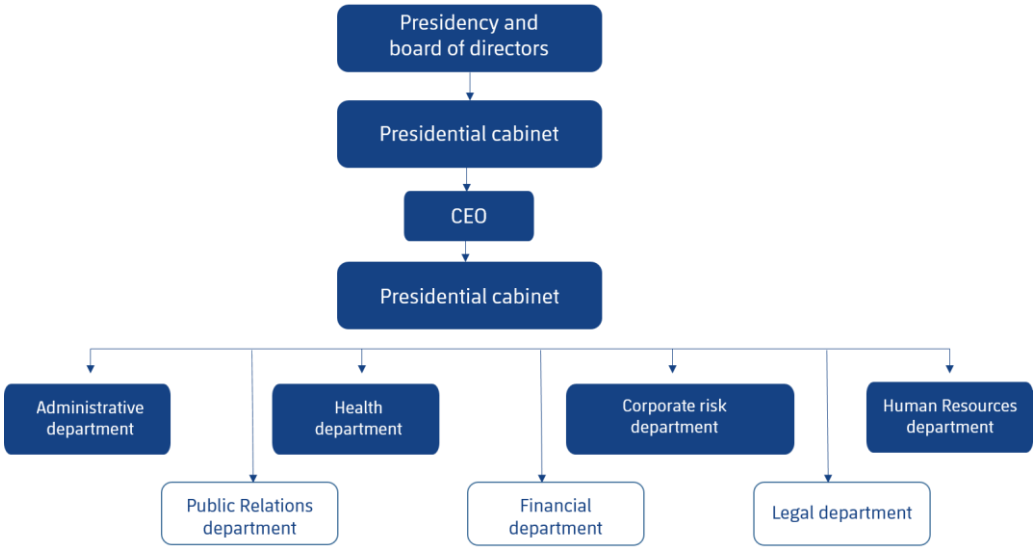
Relationships Between Team Members

Every sports coach needs a solid team of professional staff in order to achieve maximum effectiveness. In the world of sports, we find that – depending on the nature of the sport and depending on the way that each institution and specific club functions – a great deal of variability exists among professionals that may be members of a team. Let's consider a track and field team whose coach plays the role of coach, physical trainer, and is also the team's nutritionist. By contrast, if we talk about a professional football club, we can see that the coaching staff is made up of the head coach, the assistant coach, the physical trainer, the goalkeeping coach, the physician, the physiotherapist, the psychologist, and the match delegate. It must be kept in mind that not all teams will have all of these professionals available to them. This will depend on the team's level and, above all, on its budget. In lower divisions, the staff can typically consist of a head coach and an assistant.

It is important to know who works in our organization and, in turn, what departments they belong to and what duties they perform.

An organizational chart is one of the most popular tools for communicating the structure of an organization. This is a graphic representation of the structure of an institution/company, in which various coexisting departments and their relationships are represented.

Figure 4: Example of an Organizational Chart for a Professional Football Team



Source: Prepared by the author

Next, we will move on to a deeper level of analysis, in which each of the areas will be broken down and examined in detail. Figure 5 shows an example of an athletic department in a football club (professional team and youth academy).

Figure 5: Organizational Chart of the Athletic Department of a Football Club

Source: Prepared by the author.

Once all the individuals who make up the structure have been identified, along with hierarchical relationships, we must identify what the functions of each department are and what roles the individuals play within each department. We are more efficient when we know who to approach, depending on what we need to work on or what information we need.

With this in mind, let's look at the following example: a youth academy player injures himself and the team coach does not know who the head of the physiotherapy department is (to whom the case should be referred). He asks around until somebody directs him to the right person. This increases the amount of time that the coach takes to make the referral to the physiotherapist, making it an inefficient operation. Knowing the department within the club that is responsible for making hotel reservations and travel arrangements when the club plays away from home is important, but so is knowing the person who has to handle that particular task.

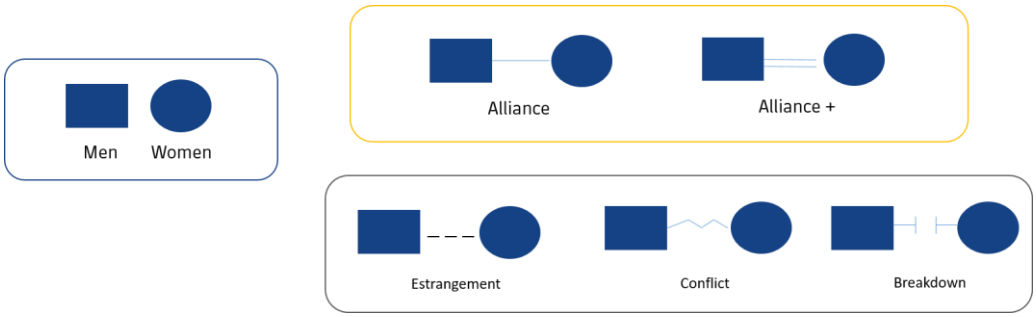
Just as it is important to understand each person's role, it is the responsibility of each worker to explain clearly and concisely what kind of requests they can assist with. This will prevent the wasting of time and the frustrations involved with finding solutions during your day-to-day operations.

For example, if there are various employees in the travel department, but each one is assigned to a specific area, knowing that Laura is the person in

charge of transportation and Miguel is in charge of hotels will prevent us having to call twice.

Once we have identified all the departments and the individuals therein, as well as the functions that each employee performs, we will take an extra step and reflect upon the kind of relationship that exists between each member of the team/department.

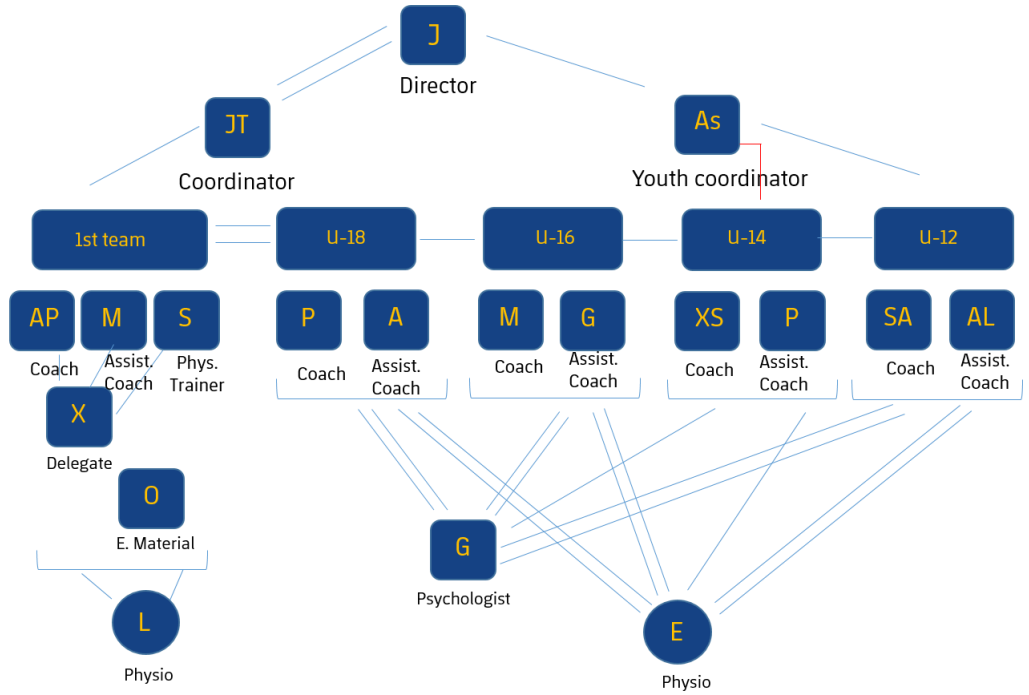
Figure 6: Elements for Constructing a Relationship Map



Source: Prepared by the author

In Figure 6, we present an example of how to describe different relationships, but this classification can be altered and expanded as desired, as long as it encompasses all the types of relationships that are present in an institution. However, we recommend simplifying it down to five or six at most, so that the map will be easy to interpret.

Figure 7: Example of Relationships Between Professionals in the Athletic Department



Source: Prepared by the author

Figure 7 provides an example of professional relationships between staff members belonging to the professional teams of different football clubs. If we look at the illustration, what stands out is that there are five relationships (in pink) that are subject to estrangement, breakdown, or conflict. For these relationships, we need to start asking what caused the relationship to become fractured or unsatisfactory, and what actions might be taken in order to improve the situation?

In addition, we see that the coaches in the junior football league team have a conflictive relationship and that they, in turn, have a conflictive relationship with the head coach, but, on the other hand, we see that their relationships with the non-athletic area is satisfactory. Consequently, strategies must be identified to optimize the relationship between individual coaches as well as the relationship between the coaches and the director.

In the case of the U-12 team, does the lack of a relationship between the head coach and the assistant coach affect the team? How might it affect things if, in the first division team, the physical trainer and the person in charge of the equipment are unable get along? If we consider these questions carefully, we will realize the importance of fluid, two-way relationships that promote cohesion within the workgroup, making it possible to combine everyone's

efforts toward shared goals. Thus, in cases where the team's professionals have unsatisfactory relationships, we will need to establish channels that help us optimize and improve these relationships. We are not saying that the goal is friendship, but rather optimal and efficient relationships between professionals. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of each employee as well as of coordinators and coaches to raise awareness of the importance of this issue and to provide all manner of tools and strategies to support positive relationships.

Below, in Table 1, we find a new tool that enables us to analyze a professional team's relationships and to clarify the objective of the interactions between members of the staff. At the same time, this analysis will make it possible to show the number of coordinating activities that are carried out between various professionals, and, as a next step, to evaluate whether these are necessary, satisfactory, or lacking, in accordance with each specific case.

Table 1:

Individual	Environments they coordinate	Objective
Coach		
Coordinator		
Director		

Source: Prepared by the author

The analysis put forward in Table 1 can be extended to everyone involved in the team: the match delegate, assistant trainer, equipment manager, physiotherapist, psychologist, etc. Consider the following example: imagine that a coordinator meets with the entire professional staff of a youth academy (head coach, assistant coach, and physical trainer) to discuss the same issues. The frequency of the meetings is once a week, and the meetings are held one-on-one. The coordinator spends many hours organizing and leading the team, but surely her time could be spent more optimally if each professional were to address issues that had been previously agreed upon, such as duties specific to each role. For example, these could be meetings with the head coach to talk about that week's

starting lineup (i.e. with respect to player performance and attitude), meetings with the physical trainer regarding microcycle workloads and the players' development, etc.

Next, a sample description of tasks that an assistant football coach might carry out at a small junior league team:

- Technical and tactical work with the team.
- Leading training session warm-ups and cool-downs.
- Helping the head coach assign the team's technical tasks.
- Individual work with the players: technique and tactics.
- Statistical monitoring during training sessions and matches.
- Serving as a liaison between the players and the head coach.
- Academic monitoring of the athletes.
- Specific work with goalkeepers.

From the beginning and at the start of the season, the coordinator needs to present the description of tasks to the assistant coach; at this point, any potential doubts or questions that may come up should be resolved. In future coordinating sessions, the attendees will discuss follow-up for the tasks related to their assigned duties. The same procedure is repeated with all of the staff members that a coordinator or coach meets with in order to resolve any issues.

With the aim of summarizing the themes we have covered thus far, and so that they might serve as **recommendations** for learning about and analyzing the sports environment, we propose that:

- A holistic view of the institution's human resources is achieved through the use of an organizational chart, which also serves to establish the hierarchy of chains of command between employees and departments. This lets us know who to contact, depending on the issue to be dealt with and the hierarchical relationships between departments.
- Reflect on the relationship style that exists between the team members most involved in the day-to-day execution of tasks.
- Ask yourself: is there a relationship that needs changing in order to improve it?
- Analyze the coordinating activities of each team member – or one's own – to identify a meeting's true objective.
- Propose that personal goals be established in order to improve communication between team members.

- Quarterly review of goal-setting.
- Get to know the team (not just from a work perspective): increase employee visibility through the use of personalized photos on the intranet, encourage mutual knowledge-sharing and team cohesion, offer activities outside of working hours.

Improving the Working Environment

Generating a positive atmosphere among sports professionals is fundamental for ensuring that the team is functioning well. For the professional members of the staff, a positive atmosphere is also key for feeling commitment to the organization and satisfaction with their positions.

The type of relationship between employees, work protocols, inter-team and inter-category communication style, and how autonomy and responsibility are managed are all factors that affect the coach's motivation and the working atmosphere that is experienced. Next, we will discuss strategies that contribute to a positive working environment:

- Self-knowledge: knowing oneself, practicing self-criticism, empathy and assertiveness will result in staff members developing healthy and balanced careers. For example, the coach of a national team that is competing for a place in a pre-Olympics event knows that this is a critical moment, but he is capable of letting the team know what they want to do and what they need to ask of each other in order to meet the objective. He knows how to recognize their mistakes and put new strategies into practice so that the team can qualify.
- Knowing the members of your team: devoting time to getting to know people and sharing points of view. If a colleague knows that the physiotherapist is going through a tough time in their personal life, when they notice that they are distracted, they may interpret this as an exception and not as indication of poor work performance.
- Fostering tolerance and respect among all team members. This is essential for good performance, and, furthermore, we must not forget that, as coaches, we serve as models for the players with whom we spend so many hours.

- Fostering autonomy, responsibility, and respect for each employee and in the relationships between them. Rewarding not just an employee's performance and effectiveness but also their attitude and autonomy.
- Asking the workgroup for feedback: it is important to include each person and to listen to their contributions, since this encourages an atmosphere in which each person feels heard and in which they feel that their opinions are taken into account. Feedback must be provided with care, on a periodic basis. We all have opinions and we appreciate it when we are asked about them. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that new ideas can come from any member of the group.
- The opportunity to work collectively and across disciplines on new projects and on problem solving.
- Promoting continuous learning and the development of professional skills. Leadership courses, foreign language courses, public speaking courses, specific subjects relevant to a team member's position.

To conclude this unit, we include the story of the tools from the book "Tales That My Boss Never Told Me" by Juan Mateo (**2011**), in which he uses metaphors to explain the importance of individual team members, since they are all essential to the execution of the task that is to be performed.

> In a small town, there was a tiny carpenter's workshop that was famous for the furniture that was built there. One day the tools decided to have a meeting to settle their differences. Once they were all present, the hammer, in his capacity as president, took the floor.
>
> "Dear colleagues, we are now assembled. What is the problem?"
>
> "You must step down!" many voices cried out.
>
> "For what reason?" asked the hammer.
>
> "You make too much noise!" was heard from the back of the room, while the rest gestured simultaneously in agreement.
>
> "Also," added another tool, "you spend all day banging on everything."
>
> The hammer felt sad and frustrated.

“All right. I’ll go if that’s what you want. Who nominates themselves for president?”

“I do,” proclaimed the screw.

“No way,” yelled various tools, “You’re only useful if you go in circles, and that slows everything down.”

“It’ll be me,” declared the file.

“Never!” the majority protested. “You’re very grating and always rub others the wrong way.”

“I’ll be the next president!” proclaimed the tape measure.

“No way, you spend your day measuring others as if your measurements were the only ones that counted,” said a small tool.

They were caught up in this argument when the carpenter came in and set to work. He used each and every tool at the right moment. After a few hours of work, the pieces of wood stacked up on the floor were transformed into a stunning piece of furniture that was ready for delivery to the customer. The carpenter rose, examined the piece of furniture, and smiled to see how well it had turned out. He took off his work apron and left the workshop.

The tools immediately met again, and the pliers held the floor: “Dear colleagues, it is obvious that we all have defects, but we have just seen that our attributes make it possible to make pieces of furniture as marvelous as this one. The tools looked at each other without saying anything, and the pliers went on: “it is our good qualities and not our defects that make us valuable.” The hammer is strong and that allows us to join many pieces together. The screw also fastens, and it lends strength where the hammer cannot. The file smooths down what is rough and polishes surfaces. The tape measure is precise and exact, it enables us to correctly achieve the measurements that we have been tasked with. And I could go on like this about any one of you.

After those words had been spoken, all the tools realized that it was only teamwork that made them really useful and that they should focus on each other’s virtues in order to achieve success. (Mateo, 2011)

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