4.1 Communication in sports

Introduction

In this module, we will learn some important aspects of the way people communicate with each other and the things coaches should keep in mind when communicating with their athletes.

Communication is the main vehicle through which coaches can influence their athletes and help them reach their full potential. Through communication, we can foster learning, support motivation, pass on values, generate concentration, optimize self-confidence, etc. Unfortunately, we can also achieve the opposite: discourage athletes, contribute towards lowering their self-esteem, distract them, etc.

Coaches are often not aware of the strong influence they have on their athletes, whether positive or negative, and that this influence can go far beyond the sports context. What coaches transmit and communicate can transcend the athletic environment and leave a deep mark on other aspects, such as an athlete's self-esteem. It is therefore very important to understand the power of communication, since coaches sometimes unconsciously influence their athletes' mood in a negative way by not understanding the importance and impact of communication.

Coaches' communication can also impact the relationships they build with their own staff, with the athletes' families, and even with the club's fans and followers. However, in this unit, we will focus primarily on the effect of their communication on the athletes.

Being aware of how coaches communicate and which areas they could improve will be key to helping optimize both the relationship between the coach and the athletes, and the players' athletic performance. We will also see that there are many elements that hinder effective communication between two or more people. Although these elements will be much more evident in certain sports, it is still important to take them into account in all cases.

During this unit we will therefore focus on the following points:

- Communication: definition and basic elements.
- Communication barriers.

Upon completion of this unit the student will be expected to know:
What we mean by communication, what the basic elements of communication are, and what barriers we may find in the sports context that hinder coach-athlete communication and vice versa.

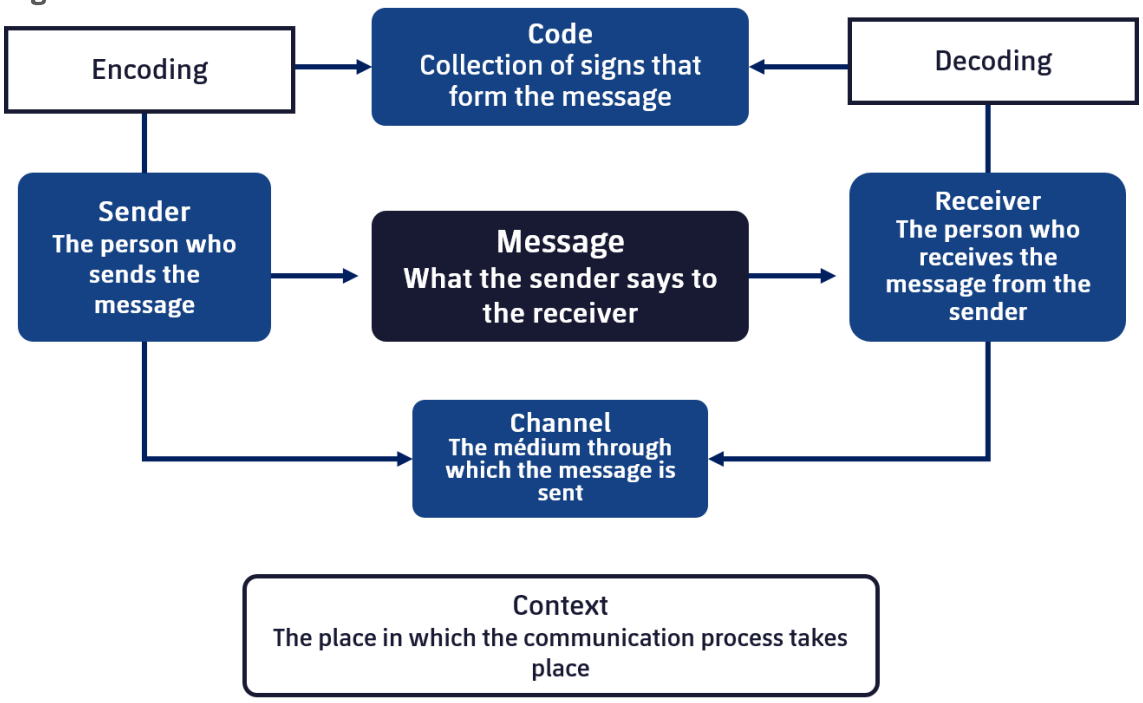
1. Communication: definition and basic elements

One of the definitions of **communication** in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication). To delve deeper into this definition, we can explore more of the aspects to be found in the word **communicate**. This word also has several possible definitions, for example:

> 1. To convey knowledge of or information about: make known.
> 2. To reveal by clear signs. (...)
> 4. To transmit information, thought, or feeling so that it is satisfactorily received or understood. (Merriam Webster, u.d., https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication).

Code, sender and receiver are some of the basic elements of communication. The context and channel are also factors, although they do not appear in this definition. Below is a brief description of each of these basic elements.

Figure 1: Elements of communication



Source: [Untitled image showing the elements of communication]. (n.d.). Adapted from http://www.benitezrafa.es/como-desarrollar-una-estrategia-de-comunicacion-en-8-pasos/

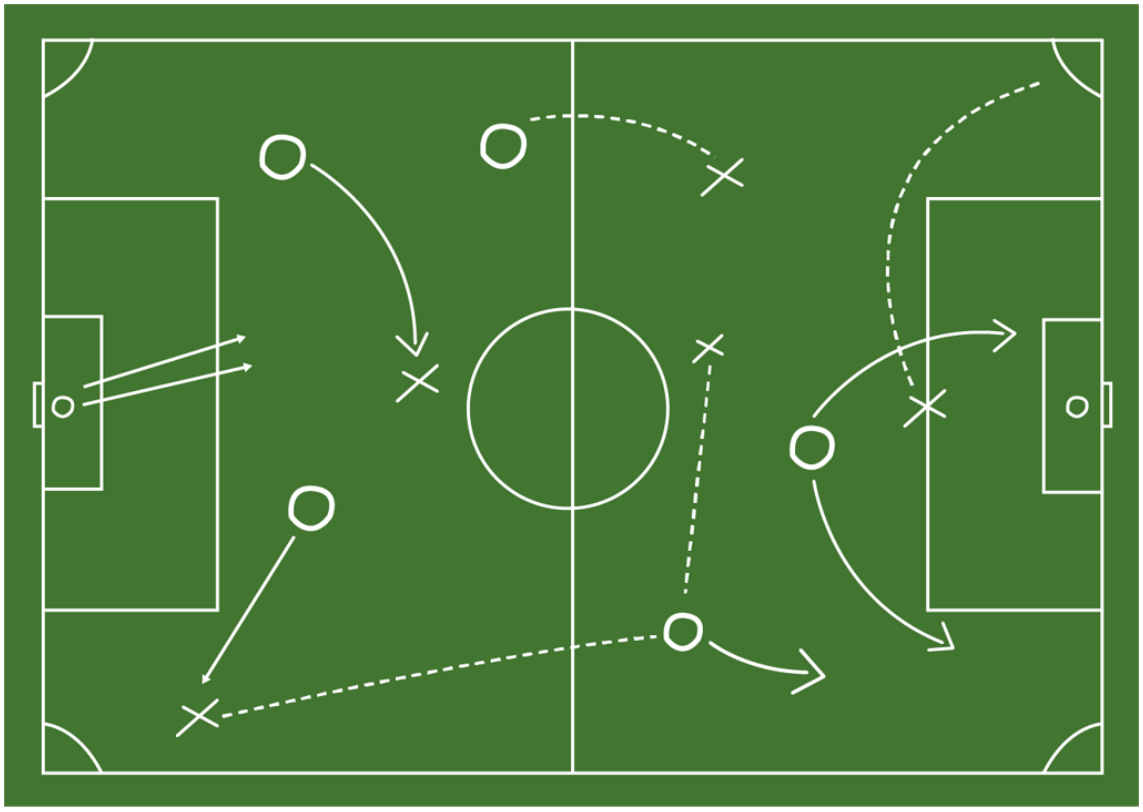
The act of communicating implies that there is a **sender** who conveys a message to someone, and a **receiver** who receives the information from the sender. When a

coach explains a specific play to his athletes or makes a technical correction, he is the sender and the athletes are the receivers. However, when a player asks the coach to explain the move again, or even looks at the coach with surprise after the coach has made a technical correction that he did not understand, the player becomes the sender and the coach becomes the receiver.

Another important aspect that we can take from the definition of "communicate" is the concept of the **code**. The code is the system of signals or signs that are used to convey a message. The sender and receiver must share a common code for the communication to be effective. In other words, if I do not know sign language, it will be difficult for me to communicate using this code. Or if I do not speak Spanish – when a person asks me how to get to the train station in Spanish, or where they can buy bread, I will not be able to understand them and as a result there will be a communication error. Because we have not been able to communicate in the same code. This situation could also occur in a sports context when an athlete from a non-Spanish-speaking country signs with Fútbol Club Barcelona, and on his first day of training, he does not understand anything the coach or physical trainers, representatives, etc. are saying. In this case, they could try to make up for it with gestures and visual examples. Even so, this will also cause difficulties if the signs have not been previously agreed upon.

In sports, coaches are familiar with using a lot of gestures to communicate with their athletes; however, many of these gestures have never been agreed upon, and no one can be sure that both the receiver and the sender share them and understand them the same way. It is also important to keep in mind that these codes can be linguistic (for example, a specific language) or non-linguistic (for example, traffic lights, play diagrams drawn on a chalk board).

Figure 2: Non-linguistic codes



Source: [Untitled image showing the importance of a common code in communication]. (2015). Adapted from https://www.infobierzo.com/los-favoritos-en-las-apuestas-de-la-liga-adelante-demuestran-que-la-2a-es-imprevisible/199059/

Another element of communication that we must take into consideration is the **context**. This refers to the situation in which the communication occurs, since this context will serve to facilitate the understanding of the message.

For example, a coach has prepared a play with his athletes. During the match, he raises his right fist to communicate to the players that they should execute that move. This context – the match situation – helps them understand what the coach wants them to do. However, the same coach and the same team of athletes are doing an outdoor activity, and the coach raises his right fist during the meal. In this context, the players stare at the coach without understanding what is happening, and it never occurs to them that they should perform the move they had been practicing.

In the act of communication, we must also consider the **channel,** which is the physical means by which the message is sent. For example, when a coach speaks during a training session, the message is transmitted through the air. When a coach sends information to the athletes via instant messaging and communicates a change in the training schedule, the channel is the cell phone. Similarly, if the coach sends a video by email of different plays practiced during training, the channel is the email manager. It is important to ensure that all the athletes have access to the channel through which the message is being transmitted. For example, players may

not have a cell phone for several reasons (it is broken, they do not want one, they are not old enough, they are not allowed), or they may not know how to use email. So it is also very important to take this aspect into consideration, rather than assuming that the act of sending information implies that the receiver has received it. For example, in verbal communication, the message is transmitted through the air, and the distance between the sender and receiver on athletic fields often means the sound does not arrive, whether due to the direction the coach faces when speaking or the distance between them. This happens when coaches organize the athletes on the field before trying to explain the exercise and how to execute it.

We have looked at some examples in which coaches send messages that do not reach the athletes for one reason or another. In the first example, it was because the sender and receiver did not share the same code (the coach makes a gesture that the athletes do not understand), and because the message was out of context (he raises his fist during the meal instead of on the field). In the second case (changing the schedule using a cell phone), it was due to the information being sent via a channel that not everyone used.

We can therefore see the importance of considering what the receiver has understood during the communication process, and asking for ***feedback***. Otherwise, we only know that the sender has sent a message, but we do not know whether the athletes have received it as the coach intended. The sender wants the message to reach the receiver and be understood in the same way as it was sent. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the **final responsibility in the act of communication falls on the sender**. So if coaches want to transmit their knowledge to their players – a model of playing, a certain idea, their values, etc. – it is their responsibility if the message does not reach the players correctly. Even if the athletes are not paying attention, the coach is responsible for creating a climate that promotes attention, for choosing the appropriate time to start the communication, and for encouraging the athletes to be involved in the act of communicating by creating a participatory climate.

It is very important that senders be constantly aware of the receivers' reactions, and be able tell by their faces or by what they say whether the receivers have actually received the message or not. However, this very often does not happen, and coaches constantly send messages to athletes without ensuring that the message has been received correctly. In this case, we are not talking about communicating but informing, since the communication has not had the desired effect. So it will not have been **productive communication** (Vives, 2011).

The following table provides an exercise that can be used by coaches to reflect on the basic elements of their communication.

Table 1: Reflection exercise for coaches

Self-assessment on the use of the basic elements of communication during an act of communication:		YES/NO
Code	Have I ensured that the sender (coach) and the receiver (athletes) share the same code?	
	Have I ensured that the coach and athletes use the same words to refer to the same thing?	
	Have I ensured that the gestures used by the coach are understood by all the athletes?	
	Are the athletes fluent in the code used during communication, or are they learning it?	
Channel	Have I thought about what channel is used to send messages to the athletes?	
	Have I ensured that all the athletes have access to the chosen channel?	
	If the channel is the air, have I ensured that all the athletes receive the message regardless of their position on the field?	
Context	Have I asked myself if the context in which communication occurs is the most appropriate?	
Feedback	Has the coach ensured that the receiver has understood the message well?	
	Has the coach asked the athletes to explain the information they received?	
	Has the sender paid attention to the athletes' facial expressions to see whether they understood the message?	
Productive communication	Has the communication sent by the coach had the desired effect?	

Source: Prepared by the author.

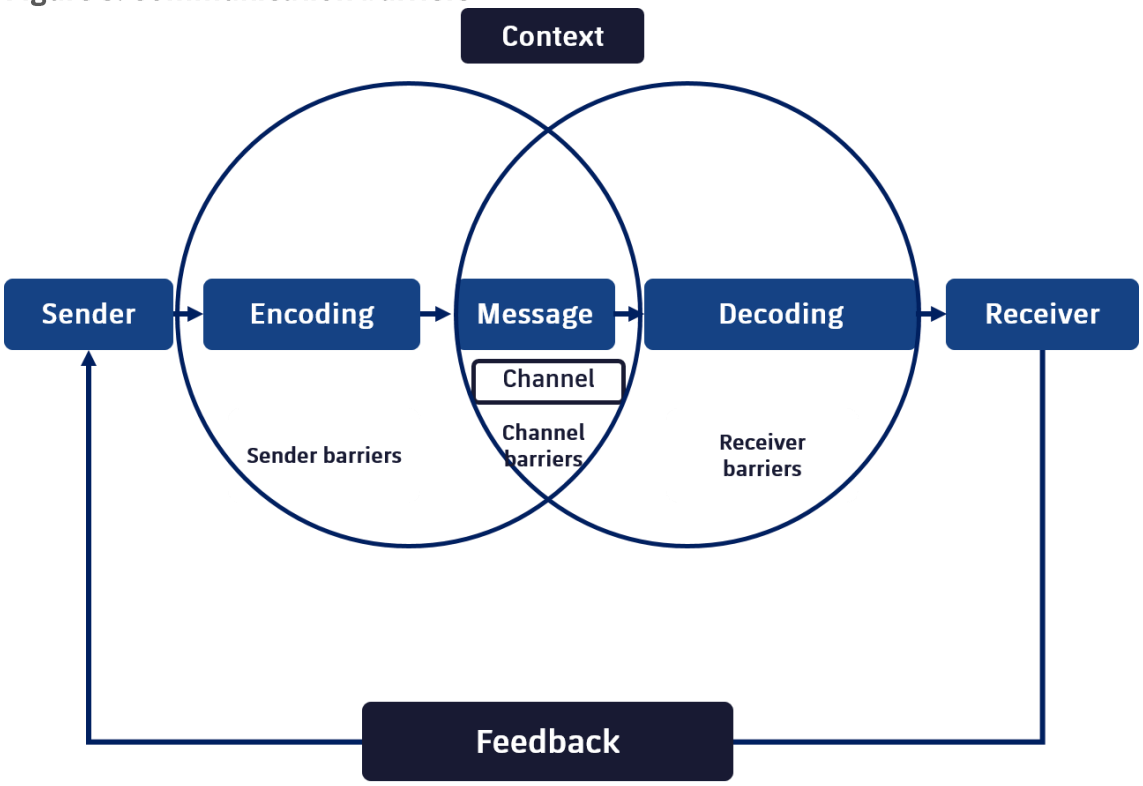
Once these questions have been answered, coaches can identify what aspects they need in order to establish productive communication – in cases where the communication was not productive – and reflect on which aspect they want to modify next time.

2. Communication barriers

In communication, we know there is a sender who wants to transmit a message to a receiver through a specific channel and context. We also know that in order for this to occur, they must share a common code. Even if they share the same code (for example, they speak the same language), there may be other barriers or interferences within the communication. This can occur when the sender is

encoding the message, in the form of barriers in the channel, or when the receiver decodes the message.

Figure 3: Communication barriers



Source: [Untitled image showing communication barriers]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.aiteco.com/barreras-de-la-comunicacion/

Martens (1987), cited in Dosil (2008), identifies some of the causes of ineffective communication between coaches and athletes.

- What they want to convey does not relate exclusively to the athletic situation, so confusion can arise.
- They lack the verbal or non-verbal ability to transmit the message correctly.
- The athletes do not receive the message because they are not paying attention.
- The athletes misinterpret the message or do not understand it.
- The athletes misinterpret the intention of the message.

Weinberg & Gould (2010) mention other barriers to effective communication:

- The receiver tends to evaluate and judge the communication.
- There is a lack of trust between the people who are trying to communicate.
- The sender allows the receivers to filter the message for better efficiency.

In all of these cases, coaches must examine not just their communication skills, but also the athletes' interpretation in order to evaluate whether the objective of the communication has been achieved.

To prevent the previous situations from occurring, the coach can focus on the following aspects:

- ✓ **Ensure that the messages are clear and direct.** It is important that coaches avoid messages with indirect, ironic or double meanings**.** These create confusion for athletes, as well as a certain amount of indignation when they feel like the coach is not being clear with them. Here is an example: a coach knows that an athlete has been out partying that week, and during the training session, the athlete in question makes a mistake. At that moment, the coach makes a reference to the player's lack of professionalism. In this case, it would be better for the coach to correct the athlete's mistake during the training as usual. Once it is over, the coach could speak to the athlete about what he thinks of his lifestyle, decreased performance, and his commitment to playing the sport.

- ✓ **Ensure that messages contain exact and essential information**. Sometimes, errors in communication occur because of either an excess of information or a lack of information. When excess information is given, it is usually because the coach talks a great deal and gives a run-on series of instructions. This makes it difficult for the athletes to absorb the information. On the other hand, sometimes the communication barriers arise from a lack of information. Although the sender has a clear idea in their mind, they may omit information when transmitting the message – information that could be important to the receiver's understanding. Furthermore, when there is a lack of information, athletes arrive at their own interpretations that sometimes do not coincide with the actual intentions of the coach. If the athlete is in a match situation, it is important that the messages be selected and geared towards helping the athlete: they must be positively-phrased and focused on what the athlete should do in the future, rather than focusing on criticizing a mistake made in the past.

- ✓ **Ensure that messages are transmitted when the athletes are prepared to listen.** Sometimes coaches explain things when the players have not yet reached the center of the field. Other times, coaches make corrections or give explanations about past plays or actions at times when the athletes are focused on other demands. Thus, the athletes are forced to pay attention to two things at the same time: the action taking place and the coach's explanations. This creates difficulties and can mean that the player does both tasks incorrectly. On other occasions, the athletes are simply not paying attention. This could be for a variety of reasons. For example, they are thinking about something else, they are remembering a previous action, they are paying attention to a teammate or to what is happening at the other end of the sports complex, etc. In these cases, the first thing for the coach to do is to capture their attention. Then they can give the explanation.

✓ **Ensure that the coach is paying attention to the facial expressions of the athletes after emitting the message, and asking them to repeat or say in their own words what they have to do or what questions they still have.** Coaches often explain the exercises that their athletes have to do. Once the task has started, they may realize that it is not going the way they expected or had in mind. They then have to repeat their explanation of what the exercise consists of and how to do it. This situation can be frustrating for coaches, and they may even blame the athletes for not paying attention to their explanations. However, this could be avoided if coaches ended their explanations by asking the athletes what they are supposed to do next, what the purpose of the activity is, and how they will know if they have done it correctly. These types of questions can help coaches realize which part of the message reached their athletes, what they have understood, and what information has been processed. This way, they will repeat or clarify the necessary information before carrying out the exercise. Sometimes the coaches do ask, but instead of actively listening, they interrupt when the players give their answer. Active listening involves paying attention not only to the content of the information, but also to the overall communication – in other words, the purpose of the message and the feelings of the sender. Coaches must make eye contact, and they can nod their head when the athlete tries to explain the message again.

✓ **Ensure that the relationship between the coach and the athlete is as rich and trusting as possible so that the athlete does not misinterpret the intentions of the coach.** The better and smoother the relationship between coach and athletes, the less likely it is that the athletes will misinterpret the coach's intentions. If a misunderstanding occurs, it will also be easier for the athlete and coach to talk in order to clarify it. In addition, to create a good, smooth relationship, it is important for the coach to consider the following aspects mentioned in Weinberg & Gould (2010):

- Regularly organize and hold meetings to establish and reinforce the bond.
- Be rational and explain why the athletes are expected to exhibit or not exhibit certain behaviors.
- Show empathy. This means being sensitive to the athletes' feelings and connecting emotionally in order to respond in an understanding way. For this, the coach may show interest in the athletes as people and involve them in seeking solutions.
- Use a positive communication style including praise, encouragement, support, understanding and positive reinforcement.
- Keep the channels of communication open and flexible. In other words, create spaces so that the athletes can approach the coach to ask questions or speak to them (establish that the coach will be on the field for 15 minutes after a training session in case anyone wants to speak with him), accept constructive criticism, etc.

- Show consistency when administering discipline. We should apply it equally with all the athletes, regardless of their performance or the match or competition that is in play.
- Send messages using "I" and "me" instead of "us" or "the team." For example, instead of saying, "the team doesn't think you're committed," say, "**I** don't think you're committed."
- Separate facts from opinions. Coaches can first comment on the athletes' behavior or situations they have been involved in, and later say what they think about it. It is important for coaches to avoid assuming that they know the athlete's feelings and emotions. For example, if a coach says to an athlete, "The team doesn't matter to you. You only think about yourself." The coach would be inappropriately assuming something, since only the athlete knows whether the team matters to him or not. Instead, the coach could say, "The team lost the match, and you posted a photo on social media of one of your moves where you made a slam dunk (evidence). When I see this, I think (opinion) that, on this occasion, you were not thinking about the team, only about yourself."

Other barriers that may come into play during the act of communication have nothing to do with the sender or receiver, but with natural barriers, due to the noises in the environment where the athletic activity takes place. Let's look at some examples to illustrate these types of barriers:

- A swimming coach asks the club's sports psychologist to talk with an athlete who never pays attention to the instructions he yells from one end of the pool to the other. As soon as the sports psychologist approaches the last lane of the pool where the athlete in question is swimming, she realizes that the information simply does not reach the athlete. The athlete does not hear because the coach is too far away and the other swimmers in the group are noisy when moving through the water.

- Another example comes from the sport of sailing, in which athletes often cannot hear what the coach is saying over the noise of the waves and the motors of the coaches' boats.

- It is also very common in sports complexes, where more than one team trains at the same time, resulting in a lot of noise from balls, voices, the sound of shoes on the floor, etc.

Although the barriers are more evident in some sports than in others, it is important for coaches to analyze the natural barriers found in their every-day environment and to think of an action plan to overcome them. Without this, important messages could be missed and the athletes will not benefit from the comments that their coaches make to help them in their continual learning and improvement. The following table gives an example that can help coaches to analyze the barriers in their environment in general, and to assess specific situations as well.

Table 2: Guide for analyzing barriers

Situation	Description		
	The swimmer in the last lane does not listen to me when I make corrections.		
Barriers	Physical (sounds)	Sender	Receiver
	Water. Distance. Splashing of the other swimmers.	Too much information.	?
Action plan	Get closer to the swimmer (if I can). Agree to look at me when reaching the end of the pool and agree on gestures for indicating corrections from a distance.	Focus on one correction at a time.	Not specified.

Source: Prepared by the author.

To conclude this section, a self-assessment questionnaire on communication skills is presented (Weinberg & Gould, 2010).

Figure 4: Self-assessment on communication skills

Think about how you communicate with other people. How often are you engaged in the following behaviors? Indicate whether you identify with this behavior.

1 = almost always 2 = usually 3 = sometimes 4 = rarely 5 = almost never

a. I pay attention mainly to what the person is saying,

and I pay little attention to what they are doing.

b. I allow a person's lack of organization to interfere with

my listening.

c. I interrupt if there is something I want to say.

d. I stop listening when I think I understood the idea, whether

the reporter has finished or not.

e. I cannot repeat what has been said before reacting.

f. I return little verbal or non-verbal information to the people to

whom I am listening.

g. I only pay attention to the words instead of the words, the tone,

and the way they are used.

h. I allow emotional words to make me angry.

i. If I think the subject is boring, I stop paying attention.

j. I feel incapable of limiting my ability to criticize
a teammate's actions.

k. I believe that directly facing the communicator helps me
ensure my point of view is heard.

l. I allow distractions to interfere with my concentration.

m. I do not recognize when I am too angry or tired to

speak or listen.

n. I raise my voice when I want someone to pay attention to what

I am saying.

o. I try to give advice when someone tells me their problems.

Score your responses to the 15 items. The higher your score (maximum of 75), the better your communication skills. Your total score is less important than your responses to specific items. Scores between 1 and 2 mean that you have room for improvement in those aspects of your communication. Compare the comments of other people with whom you tend to communicate in order to verify the information in this questionnaire.

Source: adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 2010, p. 231.

This questionnaire can be self-administered by coaches in order to detect areas that need improvement within their communication skills. It can also be given to athletes in order to find out more about their communication skills and to improve communication between the two. Whether focusing on improving the communication skills of the coach or the athletes, it is important to note that refining any skill requires a lot of effort from the person who wants to improve. It is therefore important to focus only on certain aspects, adding new goals once the first have been achieved.

4.2 The coach's communication

Introduction

As we saw in the previous unit, communication is a constant part of our lives. However, that does not mean that we always communicate what we intend to. In this unit, we will see that communication is much more than the simple act of speaking. There are many other aspects that come into play and are easy to overlook if we do not pay attention to them (for example, non-verbal communication), and we may be unaware of the huge influence they have on the people with whom we communicate. Coaches should not just be "training machines," only using their communication to optimize athlete performance; instead, they must also be able to create a climate of trust in which their athletes can initiate communication with their coach and express themselves comfortably. At the end of this unit we will provide a tool for coaches to evaluate their own communication style through a self-observation technique.

The main objectives of the unit are to show readers why it is impossible not to communicate, how digital and analog communication differ, and how symmetrical and complementary relationships influence the act of communication.

To achieve this, we will cover the following points:

- The theory of human communication: important axioms.
- CBAS: an assessment tool.

1. The theory of human communication: axioms

Paul Watzlawick was a psychologist and theorist who developed the **theory of human communication** (1971) together with Janet H. Beavin and Don D. Jackson. Although this theory is often used in the field of family systems therapy, there are many aspects that can help us analyze communication in the world of sports. Let's look at the five axioms of communication proposed by this author. These are important because they influence the relationship, behavior and emotional state of people who communicate with each other. First of all, let's define "axiom."

Axiom

A proposition that is clear enough to be accepted as true without evidence.

Each of the unprovable founding principles upon which a theory is built.

a. Axiom 1: It is impossible not to communicate

This refers to the fact that people can never stop communicating, no matter how hard they try. Whether they are talking or not, they are always transmitting a message. This means that they always communicate in some way and influence others through this communication. At the same time, other people are also communicating non-stop as they interpret the messages. It is therefore important to understand that communication does take place, even in the absence of words or attention between two people. Let's look at an example to better illustrate this point.

Joe is a futsal coach. Rich is one of the athletes on his team, and Joe feels that Rich's level as a player is below the level he should have to be part of the team. When Rich is on the court, the coach has trouble identifying any well-played or accurate moves, so in order to avoid correcting him constantly, Joe has simply stopped paying attention to him and giving him instructions. The coach's behavior communicates many things to the athlete, even though they do not exchange a single word. The player quickly begins to feel that his coach does not see him as part of the team, since the coach never corrects him. He also perceives that the coach does not trust him, that he is not important as a player or as a person, and that his coach does not believe he is capable of improving at all. After interpreting the message this way, Rich stops trying, seems sad when he arrives at training sessions, and rarely smiles. Rich also sends a very clear message to his coach.

b. Axiom 2: the content level and the relational level of communication

This axiom says that in all communication there are two different levels, both when we send and when we receive a message:

- **Content level:** this has to do with the message itself, with the objective information that is spoken, the literal significance of the words that have been emitted.

- **Relational level:** the second level, however, has to do with how the person who sent the message wants it to be understood, that is, what type of message should be understood. It also indicates the relationship between the communicators.

To better illustrate this point, we will continue with the example of Joe and Rich. As we know, Joe is Rich's coach, and they have recently had poor communication and a generally poor relationship. In the last few days, Rich has complained of physical pain. One day it was his right thigh, another day his head, another day his stomach. As a consequence, he has not trained with the rest of his teammates. However, for today's training, Rich is changed and ready to train. Joe looks at him and says, "Well! There's nothing wrong with you today then?"

Let's read this message with the two previously mentioned levels in mind: content and relationship. The content of the coach's question is to find out whether Rich is in any pain today. At the same time, however, it gives information about his relationship with Rich. The way in which Joe asks the question, the tone he uses, the inflection in his voice, his facial expression, and the context in which he asks the question indicate the relationship between them. As a result, this connection can be interpreted as tense, disapproving, close, professional, etc., depending on the case and on how it is perceived by the people who are establishing the communication.

c. Axiom 3: the nature of a relationship is dependent on the punctuation of the participants' communication procedures

This axiom means that when messages are exchanged they can be interpreted a certain way, and this interpretation will also influence the communication relationship that has been established. This means that a particular response is often seen as a direct consequence or direct effect of the previous information. However, this is not the case; instead, the communication process forms part of a deeper feedback system.

Let's continue with our example: Joe reprimands Rich for something he does in the training session. Consequently, Rich withdraws for the rest of the training. Because of Rich's reaction, Joe continues to reprimand him because he thinks Rich has a poor attitude towards improving. As you can see, this situation is reciprocal and repetitive. However, if we ask Joe, he will surely believe that he communicated this way as a consequence of Rich's attitude; meanwhile, if we ask Rich, he will think that he communicated this way due to the way Joe coaches. In this case, it is our view that the coach should break this cycle and start communicating in a different manner. He should put other strategies into practice in order to increase the player's performance and foster his well-being.

d. Axiom 4: human communication involves digital and analog communication

We understand digital communication to mean all verbal communication, whether written or spoken. However, analog communication is all non-verbal communication. We often think that non-verbal communication only involves our body movements (smiling, covering our mouth with our index finger to indicate discretion, giving a thumbs-up as a sign of approval). However, we must also consider other very important aspects including posture, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, the rhythm and cadence of our words, etc. – the paraverbal aspects.

Sometimes, the digital message (what is said) and the analog message (how it is said) work together perfectly, and one accompanies the other, making communication more effective. At other times, there is what is called a **double bind**, in which the digital communication (the "what") says one thing,

but the analog communication (the "how") says another. This process is harmful to the people who receive the mixed message, and can create confusion and emotional instability.

Continuing from the previous example, when Joe makes Rich play, he tells him to play well, that he trusts him, and that he is giving him the chance to prove himself. This is his digital, or verbal, message. Nevertheless, while Rich is on the court, Joe demonstrates non-verbal communication that is completely different from the verbal. He bites his nails, covers his mouth with his hands every time Rich touches the ball, snorts... and when Rich makes two mistakes, Joe substitutes him and leaves him on the bench. In addition, Joe never lets him play in a close match or with a higher-level opponent. As we can see, the player receives two contradictory messages, so that the relationship of trust between them is damaged. Rich also feels uncomfortable while he is on the court and notices the non-verbal behavior of his coach. In this case, a double bind occurs.

In sports, it is very important for coaches to take into consideration a whole range of different aspects that are related to how they say things. They should consider certain aspects of non-verbal communication (related to physical aspects) and those related to paraverbal communication (elements involving the voice).

The following table gives some non-verbal aspects of communication that coaches can choose to explore and improve on.

Table 3: The coach and non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication
Distance
Posture
Gestures
Facial expressions

Source: Prepared by the author.

- **Distance***:* distance impacts communication. The same message may be interpreted differently, and it may affect the athlete differently, depending on whether the distance is short or long. There are different types of interpersonal distances, and our choice of which to use will depend on what we are trying to achieve. We must also take into account that individual preferences will depend very much on each person, and respecting this distance will make people feel more comfortable. So remember to observe and respect this personal preference.

- Intimate distance: this occurs when the distance between the speakers is less than 45 centimeters. We use this with people when we want to have intimate and close contact. For example, when the coach wants to convey closeness, trust, regard, support, etc. It can often be accompanied by physical touch, including squeezing a person's shoulders, touching his head, or giving a pat on the back. This distance should never be used to scold or criticize.

Figure 5: Intimate distance between coach and athlete

Source: [Untitled image showing what distance communicates]. (2016). Retrieved from https://www.marca.com/juegos-olimpicos/album/2016/08/21/57b8def546163fbd278b45ef_6.html

- Personal distance: this occurs when the distance between the sender and receiver is between 45 and 120 centimeters. We can use this distance to make individual corrections, in one-on-one situations, or for a meeting in the form of a personal interview. This allows for continued visual contact in a comfortable way, as opposed to intimate distance. It is a good distance for transmitting a correction or criticism to a player that you do not want to share with the rest of the group or with the other people close by, thus protecting the athlete's trust in the coach.

Figure 6: Personal distance between coach and athlete

Source: [Untitled image showing what distance communicates 2]. (2016). Retrieved fromhttp://psicologiadeldeporte.space/el-entrenador-y-el-deportista-interdependencia/

- Social distance: this occurs when the distance is between 120 centimeters and approximately 4 meters. It is an appropriate distance for sharing a message with several people at a time. Different spatial arrangements can be considered depending on what we want to achieve; for example, the athletes could sit in a circle so they can all participate and their faces can be seen when they speak. This distance is typical in pre- and post-game locker room huddles.

Figure 7: Social distance

Source: [Untitled image showing what distance communicates 3]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.synkrolovers.com/como-ser-nadadora-de-sincronizada-profesional-campus-synkrolovers/

- Public distance: This distance ranges from 4 to 5 meters. With public distance, the message may not reach some of the players because they are too far away. It will also be important to choose the message carefully, because it will typically have to be given in a raised tone of voice. An example of public

distance is when a football coach gives instructions to all eleven players on the field from the coaching area; it is unlikely to reach everyone if no specific action is taken to manage the distance. It will also be heard by everyone present, even the people it is not directed towards. Coaches very often encourage and congratulate their athletes without the athletes noticing. The players miss this encouragement, even though the coach did give it.

Figure 8: Example of public distance

Source: [Untitled image showing what distance communicates 4]. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://yodeportivo.com/debuta-con-triunfo-la-primer-mujer-entrenadora-profesional/

- Posture and gestures: the posture a coach or athlete adopts is easily seen, even from a distance. It plays a very important role in communication, and is controllable and trainable. Posture is associated with the motivation, attitude and mood of the sender. For example, if a coach has his arms crossed while looking at an athlete, this may indicate anger, and if he is sitting down during a match, it can convey calmness. Gestures are also seen from a distance and are generally more closely associated with the meaning of the message. Gestures are often agreed upon by the coach and athletes to indicate a specific move. However, others are not agreed upon, and this can lead to confusion as the athletes try to guess what their coach wants to convey instead of focusing their attention on the task at hand. It is therefore very important to agree upon and train gestures.

Figure 9: Postures

Source: [Untitled image showing what posture and gestures communicate]. (2018). Retrieved from http://www.ginnastica-ritmica.eu/index.php/2018/09/14/irina-viner-pronta-ad-escludere-soldatova-rgwch2018sofia/

Figure 10: Gestures

Source: [Untitled image showing what posture and gestures communicate 2]. (2018). Retrieved from https://trome.pe/deportes/rusia-2018-mira-gestos-aliou-cisse-sorprendente-entrenador-senegal-video-fotos-86554

- Facial expression: facial expressions are very difficult to control, and many coaches are not trained to do so. It is important for coaches to at least be aware of the expressions they use in complicated situations. They should be able to look at themselves and see what their players see; they should be able to reflect on the message they convey when a player makes a mistake, for example.

Figure 11: Example of facial expressions

Source: [Untitled image showing what posture and gestures communicate 3]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/Amantesdelfut_/status/384175792315310080

As we have already mentioned, it is also useful for coaches to take into consideration their paraverbal communication, in other words the aspects related to their voice. Becoming aware of and training some of the following aspects is an important area for coaches to work on (Vives, 2011).

Table 4: Paraverbal communication

Paraverbal communication
Volume
Tone of voice
Speed and articulation
Breathing
Silences or pauses

Source: Prepared by the author.

- Volume: this has to do with how much or how little we raise our voice. It is a factor that we can regulate. Generally the volume is increased so coaches can convey messages that they consider more important. However, using a raised voice should not be overused since it could lose the desired effect. Using a high volume is recommended only if it is deemed appropriate.

- Tone of voice: this is one of the most important parts of paraverbal communication, since it helps both to transmit and to interpret the message. Tone of voice can make up for volume if it is used appropriately, as it helps influence the idea of the message to be transmitted. It is important to choose a tone. For example, if we want to correct a mistake, it is important not to do so with an aggressive tone because the athlete may focus more on what has been conveyed

by the tone of voice (the coach's anger after a poor execution) than on the message itself.

- Speed and articulation: speed involves how quickly or slowly the sender emits a message. For example, coaches often give many consecutive instructions very quickly, which makes it difficult for athletes to process all the information. If coaches want their message to reach the athletes correctly, it is important to use a slow speed so the message can be processed. Articulating words also helps to emphasize the relevant aspects and capture the attention of those receiving the message (for example, "what I am going to explain to you now is very IM-POR-TANT"). When we articulate words, we also speak more slowly. Coaches can use this resource any time they think it is appropriate. However, it should not be abused either.

- Breathing: just as it does with athletes, rapid breathing indicates arousal and nervousness. By controlling their breathing, coaches can convey a calmer and more confident image. It can also help their analytical skills and be more favorable for the athletes during matches. To control breathing, perform diaphragm breathing and deep breathing exercises.
- Silences and pauses*:* pauses make speeches clearer and easier to follow for the athletes, especially when they are physically and mentally exhausted, as they may be during a time-out in a match. It is also very important for coaches to respect silences and leave space for athletes to ask questions or contribute. Sometimes, coaches ask their athletes questions, but they do not leave enough silence for them to process the information and respond.

e. **Axiom 5: symmetrical and complementary interaction in communication**

This communication axiom refers to the two types of communication exchanges: symmetrical and complementary.

- We understand **symmetrical interaction** as those cases where the relationship between the people communicating tends to be equal. Generally, this refers to relationships between siblings, friends or teammates.

- **Complementary interaction** occurs when there is a reciprocal connection between the communicators, so if one is dominant, the other will be submissive, or if one is better, the other will be worse, and so on. Normally, a complementary relationship is established by the social and cultural context. For example, the case of a mother and child, physician and patient, professor and student, or coach and athlete.

A problem may occur within a team when two teammates who have a symmetrical relationship try to dominate one another. This causes conflict between them, and is called symmetrical escalation. It is important to detect and manage this type of conflict instead of ignoring it, since it can escalate to the point where both athletes are emotionally exhausted and the other teammates become involved, which breaks down the team's cohesion.

In other cases, the more the coach wants to develop authority, the more he may impose himself as the complementary dominant party, often due to a lack of self-esteem. For example, he might say that a training session is voluntary, but when a player does not attend the session the he may later find himself excluded from the match squad; other reprisals can also occur. We want to highlight this point, since it is important to keep in mind that whether a relationship is complementary or symmetrical will itself have an effect on the act of communication.

2. Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS): an assessment instrument

To conclude this unit, we propose an exercise that we encourage all coaches to do in order to learn about their communication style. It is a tool called *Coaching Behavior Assessment System* (Smith, Smoll and Hunt, 1977), which helps coaches become aware of what their communication is like – whether verbal or non-verbal – and when it occurs.

A coach's communication style helps to motivate athletes and can create a favorable climate for learning, so they remain committed to their athletic activity. This section describes one of the ways of doing this because it is related to the coach's communication style. The communication style is the way in which coaches regularly manage their athletes and what they focus on when making corrections.

For some time, sports psychologists have used a tool that is easy to implement and is very informative for coaches, making them aware of what they do and say to their players during matches or training sessions, and how this affects their confidence and performance.

It involves an observation system through which the behavior of coaches can be recorded with respect to their communication style and how they act. Twelve different actions can be recorded according to whether they are reactive (8) or spontaneous (4). A reactive action is one that occurs if the coach does or says something as a consequence of a player's action. On the other hand, behaviors or comments are considered spontaneous when the coach makes them without anything happening beforehand. They occur, as their name indicates, spontaneously.

The two tables below show different behaviors that can be observed in coaches, along with an explanation of how to code them.

Table 5: Observable reactive behaviors

Observable reactive behaviors	
Responses to desirable behaviors	**Explanation for coding them**
Reinforcement (R)	Positive reaction (verbal or non-verbal), reward for a good effort or a well-played move
No Reinforcement (NR)	No reaction to a well-played move
Responses to UNdesirable behaviors	**Explanation for coding them**
Mistake-contingent encouragement (MCE)	Encouragement after a mistake
Mistake-contingent technical instruction (MCTI)	Instruction or demonstration on how to correct the mistake made by the athlete
Punishment (P)	Negative reaction (verbal or non-verbal) after a mistake
Punitive Technical Instruction (PTI+P)	Technical instruction after a mistake given in a punitive/hostile way, in the form of a punishment
Ignoring mistakes (IM)	No reaction to a mistake
Response to a disruptive behavior	**Explanation for coding them**
Keeping control (KC)	Reaction to establish or maintain order (e.g. distraction, behaviors outside the norm)

Source: Prepared by the author based on Souza, Cruz, Torregrosa, Vilches & Viladrich, 2006, p. 266.

Table 6: Spontaneous behaviors

Spontaneous behaviors	
Match/training related	**Explanation for coding them**
General Technical Instruction (GTI)	Instruction transmitted spontaneously regarding technique or playing strategy
General Encouragement (GE)	Encouragement delivered spontaneously
Organization (O)	Administrative behaviors to assign roles, positions, responsibilities, or to announce substitutions
Match/training irrelevant	**Explanation for coding them**
General Communication (GC)	Interactions with athletes that are not related to match situations or team activities

Source: Prepared by the author based on Souza, Cruz, Torregrosa, Vilches, & Viladrich, 2006, p. 266.

This is a useful tool both for sports psychologists and coaches themselves. The following is an explanation of how to use it.

Material needed:

- Video camera.
- Microphone to capture the coach's comments (If there is no microphone available, a tape recorder or cell phone may be used to ensure that there are other audio recordings besides the video camera.)

When:

- Most scientific articles that have published aspects of the CBAS have recorded coaches in match situations, since this is typically where coaches have a harder time controlling themselves, and also because it is when players tend to feel more pressure. It can also be carried out during training sessions in order to discover whether there are different styles depending on the context in which the communication occurs.

How:

- Strategically place the video camera so that it records the coach and the space where the sporting activity takes place, in order to see whether communication is reactive or spontaneous. If it is reactive, it will record whether the communication is produced after mistakes or successes.

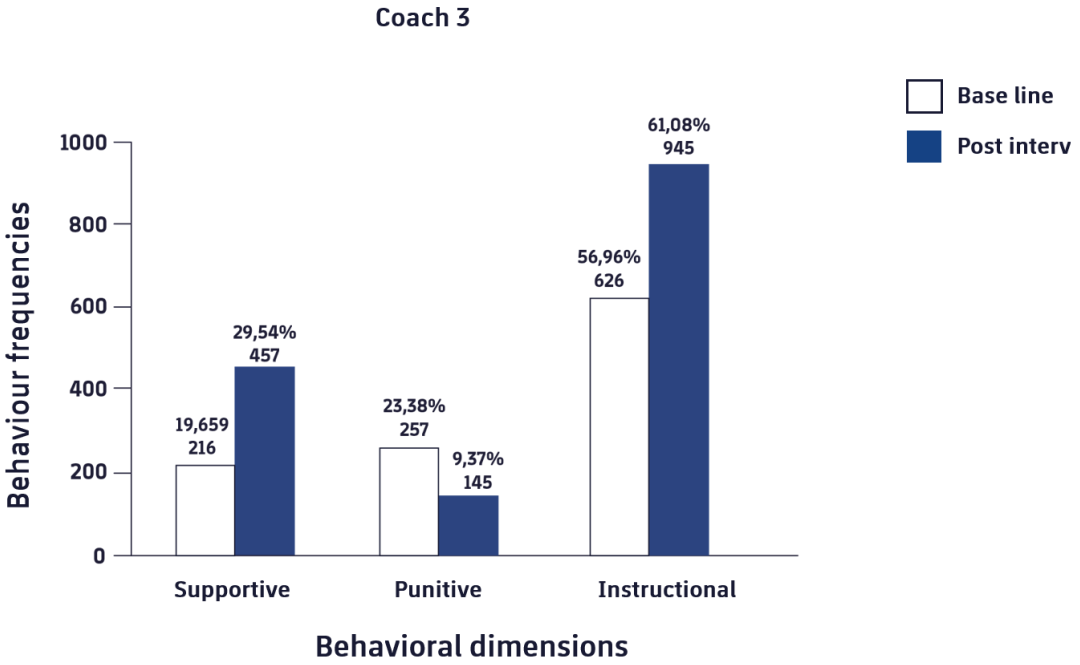
Procedure:

- Make a first recording without having received any information, to capture the base line (for example, the coach's reactions before becoming aware).
- Analyze the video and code it based on the categories identified in the tables above.
- Create an Excel chart to visually and easily observe the times the coach performed a behavior and to see what their communication style is.
    - The categories of mistake-contingent encouragement and reinforcement can be added and counted as **supportive** behaviors.
    - The categories of punishment and punitive technical instruction can be added and counted as **punishing** behaviors.
    - The categories of general instruction and mistake-contingent technical instruction can be added and counted as **instructive** behaviors.
- Indicate a concrete objective. For example, "I want to reduce the number of times I punish, and increase the amount of reinforcement and mistake-contingent encouragement."
- Work on this during trainings, and pay attention to what you want to achieve.
- After a period of time, make another recording to see if the indicated objective has been achieved, and decide whether you want to continue working to improve new aspects.

Studies that have used this tool together with training given by a sports psychologist, have achieved an improvement in coaches' communication style (Soriano, Ramis, Cruz, & Sousa, 2014; Sousa, Cruz, Torregrosa, Vilches, & Viladrich, 2006).

The following is an example of a football coach who was able to improve his communication style. Now, after the communication intervention, he demonstrates more supportive behaviors and fewer punitive behaviors.

Figure 12: Results from observing a coach



Source: Adapted from Soriano, Ramis, Cruz, & Sousa, 2014, p. 104.

Based on this analysis of the coach's communication during matches, the athletes may also be given the *"What do you need from your coach?"* test. (Roffe, 2009, p. 272).

This is a brief test in which the coach asks the athletes to specify what they need from their coach:

- Before the match.
- During the match.
- After the match.

Below is an example from a handball player.

Athlete: AJL

What would you like from your coach before the match?
I'd like him not to tell me anything, not to interfere with my pre-competition routine, and to be calm.

What would you like from your coach during the match?
I'd like him to encourage me if I make a mistake, to give me brief instructions. I don't want him to correct a past action when I am focused on a new action.

What would you like from your coach after the match?
I'd like him to help me correct my mistakes and to recognize my successes.

This is a very brief test that athletes can complete quickly. It is an interesting tool for coaches who like to be in control of a lot of things, who are detail-oriented, and who are interested in their athletes individually.
By asking athletes these questions, the coach is showing that he is interested in knowing how to help them and in understanding them and knowing what they need. At the same time, it is important to respect the findings, because if the test is given to athletes and then the coach does nothing with it, this may upset the players.

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