

Inspiring participation and maximising performance of coaches and players

# HITTING THE SEAM

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# It's Good to Talk

## **Sports linguistics expert Dr Kieran File's research into empowering players through language is changing how the coach-player relationship is viewed. He spoke to us about strategies for coaches who are looking to evolve their dressing room dynamic.**

I've played sport all my life and have had plenty of coaches. In some of those teams I have felt empowered and in others I have felt restricted, apprehensive and even fearful.

These experiences have led me to ask questions about how these different atmospheres are created. What exactly are coaches doing differently that contributes to the creation of these different atmospheres? Coaches are largely working from similar strategy books - the rules of the sport they're coaching are the same - so why do players feel different from changing room to changing room?

In my research, for which I had access to various sports teams during training and matches, I take questions like these and look at them from a linguistic perspective. Coaching is largely a linguistic activity and there is a lot to learn about team culture and relationship management from exploring the way coaches actually use language.

A particular theme of this research is how coaches use language to create atmospheres that empower players to express themselves, make decisions, be brave and develop leadership characteristics. I explore this by looking closely at the way coaches use language when they are actually coaching and the relationship they construct with their players as a result of their language choices.

But this doesn't have to be an academic-only area of learning and study. My research has been used by national sides, professional club teams, coaches of Olympic athletes and others to consider how language can be used in teams to empower their members. And, you, as a cricket coach, can put your own language under the microscope and explore the extent to which you are empowering your players.

Firstly, don't just trust what you think you do. Record your interactions, listen back and reflect on the role language has played. That's really simple and you don't need to be a linguistics expert to learn from what's been said, and how that impacted on the person you were speaking to.

Most of the time coaches dominate the interactional space, doing all the important tasks for the team. And in lots of situations, coaches do this because they are restricted by their contexts.

Many of you will only have a few hours a week with players outside of a match, within which time you've probably got a bunch of things you want to cover. This inevitably involves a lot of talking from the coach, so that contextual constraint impacts on what kind of relationship you build with your players.

However, if you want to empower players, that model will need to change. This may be more of a goal in elite-level playing contexts. At the top level of the game, coaches not only have more time with players but also a need for players to make their own decisions, to develop into leaders. That requires some specific language skills, but also an understanding of where your involvement (verbal or otherwise) is needed and where responsibility should be handed over to the players.

Coaches wanting to try and empower players more can try out two general strategies.

One is to change a player's expectations about their role as an expert in the team, to tell them that you need their help as an expert out there on the pitch.

You want them to feel more like contributors to the team and encourage them to share their own insights. Changing expectations is crucial as no matter what you do linguistically, if the expectation among players is that the coach is the sole figure of power, the players won't feel comfortable taking the lead.

The second strategy is to shut up. And wait. As uncomfortable as it may be at times, leaders will emerge to fill these gaps. A coach being in the room changes the dynamic of the situation, so consider whether you need to be there at certain moments.

Most player-coach relationships work on the basis of the coach having more power and authority. It's typically the coach's analysis and evaluations that matter the most.

However, for many coaches this idea is rather outdated. Currently, at the top level, is so much about creating players who make their own decisions and who are confident enough in those decisions to take risks. You won't get players like that if they have an overarching authority who they worry about offending by disagreeing with them.

# Time your evolution



**“Use a watershed moment to introduce changes to the team dynamic. That may be a new structure to team talks, where the players feed back first, and the coach last.”**

01

Stage 1

02

Stage 2

03

Stage 3

04

Complete

Another key, if you want to effectively increase player empowerment in your team, is to think about when (as well as how) you begin to change the dynamic.

Find a watershed moment - often that's the beginning of the season, but it could be a series of bad results, or a change in personnel. Once you have identified a suitable watershed moment, press reset. Lay out your expectations, invite players to talk about what they would like to do, what they think is working well or not.

Use the watershed moment as a way of introducing changes to the team dynamic. That may be a new structure to team talks, where the players feed back first, and the coach last. Or break the teams into groups for analysis: a bowling group and a batting group for example.

A smaller audience may help some players to feel more comfortable about speaking openly.

If you don't wait for an appropriate watershed moment, or if you just pick a random day and start trying to change the team dynamic, you'll disorientate everyone.

# Language in cricket

Cricket's an interesting sport to think about when it comes to the use of language and empowering players. More than most team sports, the onus for the state of play falls to one or two people at a time. That leads to different language-use dynamics and opportunities than in other sports like rugby or football.

For example, there are so many more breaks in play in cricket – between each delivery in effect – that there's greater opportunity for the batsmen in the middle to use language to build confidence in each other.

Batting pairs in particular can be a breeding ground for leadership development – an opportunity to see the empowerment of players having an effect. Those two players, for a period of time, are the team. The fact there's only two means fewer inhibitions, meaning people will feel more comfortable talking.

If the coach was out there in the middle all the time, listening to the two talking, imagine how different the players would be.

Talk with players about what the purpose of conversing out in the middle is. You want them to be keeping confidence high and to pass on any bits of technical or tactical insight they've gathered while out there.

Being that point of support for your batting partner can prove vital, and it's something you can work on. Language use and communication is a skill and people do become more effective with training.

Try running a 'talking in the middle' workshop, letting the players discuss what they like to hear out there. Senior players might feel they're being helpful by picking apart their partner's technique halfway through an over, but it could in fact be destroying that partner's self-confidence.

Another area of focus could be communication in the field. How does your team deal with a dropped catch? The bowler and other fielders will be disappointed, but how do they get that across?

If a bowler glares at the fielder in question all the way back to their mark, the bowler could be wanting to get across the message, "I'm disappointed, get yourself ready to catch the next one". But the fielder could read the glare more forcefully as meaning, "I absolutely hate you now, that's unforgivable".

By throwing these situations open in a workshop or team meeting, the bowler can better get across what a glare from them actually means, and the relationships within the team improve as a result. In short, teammates need to learn how to interpret each other better so everyone is on the same page.

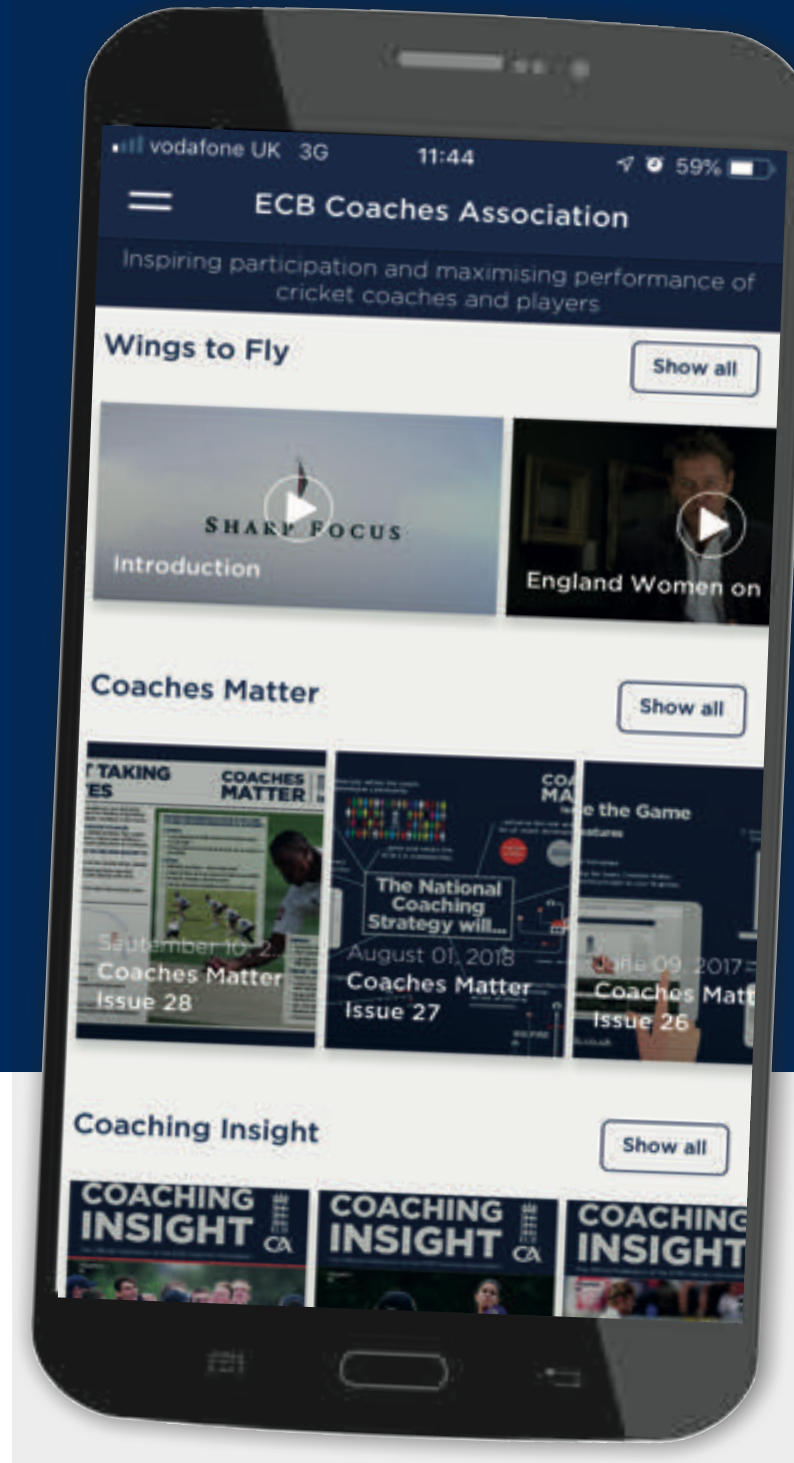
Sports teams have workshops about all manner of things nowadays, from mental strength to gambling awareness. A workshop focusing on communicative dynamics and language-use patterns in your team is an innovative way you can invest in your team culture.





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