Connecting and Keeping Connected

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Good relationships provide a powerful foundation for coaching. Connecting is something you do and can practice getting better at, particularly the art of listening well.

5 Barriers to Connecting

- *Think of connecting as a soft skill:* A sideshow to the main task of preparing to win.
- *Just be friendly:* "Banter" is sufficient. A good relationship means you are always relaxed and smiling together.
- *Talk only about sport:* Ignore their lives, relationships, dreams and world outside of sport.
- *Solve a problem, offer reassurance or give advice instead of listening:* Imagine that if they only listened to you, all will be well. If things go wrong, that will probably be their fault.
- *Ignore your feelings:* It about them, not me.

5 Top Tips for Connecting

Connecting, in itself, turns lives around, because empathy is like a fuel that helps people to feel safe and brave enough to change. Every conversation can make a difference, whether formal or informal, short or long, whether about sport or other things.

- *Be yourself:* Authentic. Honest. Open about yourself and the mistakes you make. Notice how you feel and trust your instincts.
- *Speak to a person:* Not just an athlete. Not someone who lacks things that need fixing, but someone with strengths, who appreciates choice, kindness and who has dreams, challenges and good qualities there to be noticed, connected with and acknowledged.
- *With curiosity:* Have conversations driven by compassion and curiosity. Ask about how they are feeling and behaving, whether about sport or other things. How are they feeling when you talk to them? Notice how this makes you feel.
- *Ask open questions you don't know the answer to:* This takes courage. They, not you, are in control of what is said. You follow. It's like knocking on a door. Once inside, there are other skills besides questions you can use.
- *Use listening statements, affirmations and summaries:* These are things you can say besides using questions. They keep to conversation going and ensure that you are empathising and not interfering! See Deeper Dive 1 for examples.

Top Questions for Connecting
What are your top questions for connecting with athletes?

Here are some examples:

How are you feeling today?
What happened?
Where did things go wrong for you?
What going to really help to get you into your A-game?
How can I best help you?
What sort of coaching helps you the most?
What kind of practice will help you the most today?

Notice how the last four questions all point the conversation in the direction of change and improvement - as they talk through the answers, their confidence will lift, if you let them say what they think and feel. New insights emerge, new paths to improvement.

Mindset & Skills
Connecting involves both mindset and skills, and both can be worked on. Start with your mindset. Like putting on a different set of lenses to see through. You are not the "deficit detective" solving problems, but someone who chooses to connect for a period of time.

Let go of: **C**leverness, **C**lutter and **C**omplexity in your mind
Hold on to: Being **C**alm, **C**urious and **C**ompassionate

Motivational Interviewing
In motivational interviewing this mindset and skills are used in a conversation about change or improvement. Here, after asking an open question about change you use listening statements and affirmations, especially when you hear change talk:

Coach: How are you today
Athlete: Not 100% to be honest
Coach: What's going to help you find you're a-game today? (open question about change)
Athlete: Not sure really
Coach: Its not quite clear for you yet its something you want to reach for (listening statement)
Athlete: Oh for sure I want to get on top of my game today (change talk)
Coach: You seem determined to make this work for you (affirmation)
Athlete: Yes, I'm going to prepare as best I can (change talk)
Coach: Its like a zone you get into that helps you to just do your thing, free of distraction ((listening statement)
Athlete: Oh yes I know what that zone is but finding it is not so easy
Coach: What usually works for you? (open question about change)

DEEPER DIVE 1: SKILLS DIGEST

These skills are like notes in a melody, best mixed together without allowing one (e.g. asking) to dominate (see example in DEEPER DIVE 2 below). Remember the value of a clear mind: curious, compassionate and calm. Try to imagine the likely response before you say something. Use their reaction as feedback for you.

1. **Asking**

Closed questions useful for getting information; you receive a simple answer, often "yes" or "no".

"Have you seen the physio yet?"

Open questions can focus on the past, the present or the future. Those that focus on the future have the best potential for exploring improvement.

"How do *you* see your game getting better over the next couple of weeks?"

They can be completely open or point the conversation in a particular direction.

"How are you doing today? (completely open).
"How do you see your game going today?" (narrower focus)
"What did you notice about that last movement?" (even narrower focus – you might be looking for a particular answer)

2. **Listening**

If a question is like knocking on a door, listening is what happens when you are invited inside. You make statements rather than only rely on questions. You offer up statements as guesses, hypotheses or little summaries of what you imagine the person is saying or could be saying or feeling (see Deeper Dive 2).

"Hi Mike, you're looking really up for it today"
"The injury is getting better but that does not mean you are free of frustration"
"You seem a bit confused about your position today"
"That must feel good"

The intonation of your voice goes down at the end not up. It does not matter if you are a bit wrong with a listening statement. If you are genuine, the person will correct you.

Why use them listening statements? If all you do is ask questions the person could investigated and obliged to reply. Listening statements are like handing the baton over to them to say just what they like, in their own words – the most rapid way to establish empathy between you. They allow you to empathise and connect more rapidly with how the person is feeling or what their experience is. Like learning to ride a bike, their use can feel clumsy to begin with. Then over time you will appreciate more and more the power of this skill. A good radio or TV interviewer will use lots of these statements.

3. Affirming

This is a statement you make in admiration or appreciation of their strengths, values or behaviour. Less of a judgement, more like shining a torch on what you notice, so you point it out, there for them to take ownership of. Different to praise which is more like a judgement you make. Affirmations lift people, especially if they have not noticed what you have.

That must have taken some effort
You might have lost but you sure kept your nerve there
Being a good teammate is really important to you

Notice that the word “I” is not involved. It’s about them, not you!

4. Summarising

If a conversation takes more than a few minutes, it can help the person to hear a summary of what you have heard. They feel understood and empathised with. A summary is like a collection of things about them and what they said that you have logged as the conversation went along, like a gathering of observations. What you include in a summary is where the magic lies. Avoid using the word “I”. Rather use “you”.

DEEPER DIVE 2: SKILLS ILLUSTRATION

An athlete says they feel “out of sorts today”.

Coach: How are you feeling today? (open question)
Athlete: I’m out of sorts to be honest
Coach: You can feel you are not 100% (listening statement)
Athlete: Yes, I knew it the moment I got up this morning
Coach: That must be making it difficult for you to come in today all ready for action (listening statement)
Athlete: Exactly right Coach.
Coach: You are someone who works hard on your preparation (affirmation)
Athlete: I do I guess, which is why this is not easy
Coach: I wonder what’s up? (Open question)
Athlete: I slept fine, but then last night I got all wound up at home, so maybe that’s preying on my mind
Coach: You prepare well for game day (affirmation), and yet last night your preparation got sort of undermined (listening statement)
Athlete: Yes, I like to be in control of this, and last night I could see trouble coming. There was nothing I could do about it.
Coach: Do you want to talk about what happened?
Athlete: Not now but thanks for asking
Coach: you want to focus on the day ahead (listening statement)
Athlete: And I will that’s for 100% sure. (open question)
(A summary was not needed in this brief conversation)

Only Questions
Coach: How are you feeling today?
Athlete: I’m out of sorts to be honest
Coach: Is that because you are still feeling that injury?
Athlete: No, that’s OK I think, I just don’t feel I’ve got much energy
Coach: Are you sleeping OK?
Athlete: Yes fine.
Coach: So what’s up?
Athlete: I’m just all lethargic
Coach: Should we give you some time out for an hour or two?
Athlete: No, I had better just get on with it