

Coaching and Adult Learners: Do It with Style

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Training coaches involves working with adult learners one-on-one and in groups. Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Adult learners have particular requirements, special needs and distinctive styles; thus, we need to rethink how we organize learning experiences for them. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. When those who train coaches know the important differences and similarities about adult learners, they can be more effective at enhancing performance and providing a crucial element in developing the competitive edge.

A clear understanding of adult learning theory leads to a new “paradigm” for the role of the coach. The role of the coach becomes that of a facilitator or guide, rather than director or boss. This requires new skills, new attitudes and new approaches. Thus, instructors of coaches should keep the following in mind:

- Adult learners need to be personally involved in the learning, which should be based on prior experience for maximum results.
- Adults learn best when they are able to see the practical and immediate consequences of what they are learning.
- Since adult learners are concerned about their self-concept, coaches must deal with affective as well as cognitive learning.
- Since we learn in different ways, understanding individual learning styles is crucial for coaching effectiveness.
- The role of the trainer of coaches should be a facilitator of learning rather than simply a conveyor of information or directions.
- There are some simple and effective ways to accommodate adult learning needs and respond to different learning styles.

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Basic Principles of Adult Learning

- Adults have a rich set of experiences and a wealth of information, which should be used to help them. Be sure to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base.
- People learn in different ways. Individual differences among people increase with age. Present single concepts and focus on application of concepts to relevant practical situations. Summarize frequently to increase retention and recall.
- Adults must participate actively in their learning. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing. Adults have a problem-centered orientation to learning.
- The learning must have practical and immediate consequences to be most meaningful. Adults appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show candidates how this course will help them attain their goals.
- Adults are concerned about their self-concept. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. Allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. Treat all questions and comments with respect. Remember, the only foolish question is the unasked question.
- Adults are people whose style and pace of learning has probably changed. Use a variety of teaching strategies such as small group problem solving and discussion. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods.
- Adults have established values, beliefs and opinions. Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, religions, value systems and lifestyles. Let the candidates know that they are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, but that everyone in the course may not share their beliefs. Allow debate and challenge of ideas.
- Adults are autonomous and self-directed. You should actively involve the candidates in the learning process and serve as a facilitator for them. Allow the candidates to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership.

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Guidelines for Coaching, Training and Education

- ✓ Make sure your programs – and your coaches – take style differences into account.
- ✓ Focus on the process of learning as well as the content. Adults who are motivated to seek out a coaching course do so primarily because they have a use for the knowledge and skills being taught. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
- ✓ Help coaches redefine their role of a coach as that of a facilitator, developer, guide and resource.
- ✓ Practice what you preach!
- ✓ The candidates tend to compensate for being slower in some psychomotor learning tasks by being more accurate and making fewer trial-and-error ventures. Adults often take errors personally and are more likely to let them affect self-esteem. Therefore, they tend to apply tried-and-true solutions and take fewer risks.
- ✓ Plan frequent breaks, even if they are 2-minute “stretch” breaks. During a lecture, a short break every 45- to 60-minutes is sufficient. In more interactive teaching situations, breaks can be spaced 60- to 90-minutes apart. The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable.
- ✓ Make sure your coaching; training and education programs are consistent with adult learning principles.
 - In what ways are the learning experiences experiential?
 - In what ways are different learning styles accommodated?
 - In what ways are the learners truly involved personally in their learning?
 - In what ways do the learning experiences take into account the need for immediate, practical consequences?
 - In what ways have you attended to the learners’ concern for their self-concept?ⁱ

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Comparison of Experimental and Traditional Learning

TRADITIONAL	EXPERIMENTAL
<p>Focus is on content and information.</p> <p>Another person is responsible for motivating the learner.</p> <p>Emphasis on recall, the “right” answer or approach.</p> <p>Climate of competition, mistrust.</p> <p>One-way, top-down communication; “the sage on the stage.”</p> <p>Participants listen, memorize, and are passive learners.</p>	<p>Focus is on the process of learning. Learning how to learn!</p> <p>Learners themselves are responsible for learning.</p> <p>Emphasis is on problem-solving.</p> <p>Climate of openness, trust, concern.</p> <p>Communication as co-learners; “the guide on the side.”</p> <p>Participants are involved, participate, explore, problem-solve, and are active learners.</p>

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Studying the Adult Learner

Educator Malcolm Knowles believes that the adult learner brings life experiences to learning, incorporating and complementing the cognitive abilities of Piaget's adolescent. As the individual matures:

- 1) His/her self-concept moves from dependency to self-direction
- 2) He/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experiences that becomes a resource for learning
- 3) His/her learning readiness becomes increasingly oriented to the tasks of various social roles
- 4) His/her time perspective changes from one of postponed knowledge application to immediate application
- 5) His/her orientation to learning shifts from subject-centered to problem-centered

If you examine personal and cognitive development and compare teaching approaches, you see that children tend to be dependent learners, whereas adults need to be independent and exercise control.

The key to the instructor is control. The instructor must balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of relevant student experiences and the clock. Ironically, it seems that instructors are best able to establish control when they risk giving it up. When they shelve egos and stifle the tendency to be threatened by challenge to plans and methods, they gain the kind of facilitative control needed to affect adult learning.

The instructor has to protect minority opinion, keep disagreements civil and unheated, make connections between various opinions and ideas and keep reminding the group of the variety of potential solutions to the problem. The instructor is less advocate than orchestrator.

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Unlike children and teenagers, adults have many responsibilities that they must balance against the demands of learning. Because of these responsibilities, adults have barriers against participating in learning. Some of these barriers include lack of time, money, confidence or interest, lack of information about opportunities to learn, scheduling problems, “red tape,” and problems with childcare and transportation. Consequently adults must be motivated to participate in a soccer-coaching clinic. The best motivators for adult learners are interest and selfish benefit. If they can be shown that the course benefits them pragmatically, they will perform better, and the benefits will be longer lasting.

At least six factors serve as sources of motivation for adult learning:

Motivating the Adult Learner

1. **Social relationships:** to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.
2. **External expectations:** to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
3. **Social welfare:** to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for services to the community and improve ability to participate in community work.
4. **Personal advancement:** to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement and stay abreast of competitors.
5. **Escape/Stimulation:** to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.
6. **Cognitive interest:** to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake and to satisfy an inquiring mind. ⁱⁱ

Educators must remember that learning occurs within each individual as a continual process throughout life. Positive reinforcement by the instructor can enhance learning, as can proper timing of the instruction. There are four critical elements of learning that must be addressed to ensure that participants learn. These elements are:

- A. Motivation
- B. Reinforcement
- C. Retention
- D. Transference

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Motivation – set a feeling or tone for the course, set an appropriate level of concern, set an appropriate level of difficulty. Feedback must be specific, not general.

Reinforcement – instructors who are teaching new skills normally use *positive reinforcement*. The objective here is to reinforce positive behavior by the candidate. Instructors teaching new information normally use *negative reinforcement*. It is useful in trying to change modes of behavior. The result of negative reinforcement is *extinction* – that is, the instructor uses negative reinforcement until the “bad” behavior disappears. An example in a Youth Module course would be extinguishing the word drill to be replaced with activity.

Retention – The instructor’s job is not finished until you have assisted the candidates in retaining the information. The amount of retention will be directly affected by the degree of original learning. Simply stated, if the candidates did not learn the material well initially, they will not retain it well either. Retention by the participants is directly affected by their amount of practice during the learning.

Transference – Transfer of learning is the result of training. As with reinforcement, there are two types of transfer: *positive* and *negative*.

- ⦿ Positive transference, like positive reinforcement, occurs when the participants use the behavior taught in the course.
- ⦿ Negative transference, again like negative reinforcement, occurs when the participants do not do what they are told to do. This results in a desired outcome.

Transference is most likely to occur in the following situations:

- ⦿ *Association* – participants can associate the new information with something that they already know.
- ⦿ *Similarity* – the information is similar to material that coaches already know.
- ⦿ *Degree of original learning* – Participants’ degree of original learning was high.
- ⦿ *Critical attribute element* – the information learned contains elements that are extremely beneficial in coaching.

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Characteristics of a Good Coach/Instructor

- HONEST
- IMAGINATIVE
- COMMUNICATIVE
- SENSITIVE
- NON-BIAS
- MOTIVATIONAL
- ETHICAL
- LOYAL
- DOWN-TO-EARTH
- ENERGETIC
- FUN
- PERCEPTUALLY ACCURATE
- SPONTANEOUS
- CREATIVE
- OBSERVANT

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- ENCOURAGES CANDIDATE PARTICIPATION
- KNOWS HOW TO LISTEN TO A CANDIDATE QUESTION
- USES HIS/HER VOICE WELL
- MAKES EYE CONTACT WITH CANDIDATES
- GOOD POSTURE AND MOVEMENT
- USES GESTURES APPROPRIATELY ⁱⁱⁱ

HOW I LEARN

While you are getting settled, take a few minutes to complete the four sentences below. We will use these at the very beginning of the session to look at some of the important aspects of how adults learn best and the implications these have for your coaching programs.

When I am learning something new, I...

I learn best when...

I work harder when...

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I respond positively to a coach who...

ⁱ Ron and Susan Zemke

Innovations Abstracts Vol VI, No 8, March 9, 1984

ⁱⁱ Stephen Lieb

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ⁱⁱⁱ Steve Mandel

Effective Presentation Skills, Crisp Publications, Inc. 1993



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