

Leveraging Behavioral Styles to Enhance Team Performance: Beyond the X's and O's

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Every coach has been there...the season is fast approaching and you're running through in your mind all the returning players one by one. You're thinking about the leaders you had out on the floor who have since graduated and asking yourself which players, if any, will be able to fill the void. You're thinking about all the new players coming on board and wondering how they're going to fit into the overall dynamics of the existing team. In some cases, if you're being totally honest with yourself, you're also probably giving some thought to the one or two returning players whom you never seem to 'click' with, right? Or you are thinking about the one or two key players who do not get along with each other. You're wondering what impact their behavior is going to have on the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the rest of the team. In fact, in a worst case scenario, you may even be dreading returning for another season because of a handful of players with whom you have had difficulties and whom you believe damage team cohesiveness. You may be asking yourself how you will approach the new season with these carryover issues.

And how about your assistant coach? As you think about the upcoming season are you thinking about how well your styles do or don't complement each other in practice, during competition and during casual interactions with your athletes? How do players interact with your assistant coach? What is the impact of the various relationships on team performance?

These thoughts and concerns about interpersonal and behavioral dynamics seep into the minds of most coaches as they prepare for another athletic season. Yet the ultimate irony is that, in our experience, what coaches spend most of their pre-season time on are the "Xs" and "Os" of the game -- the so-called "hard skills" rather than on the relationship-based issues -- the "soft skills."

We believe that there are several reasons for this paradox. First is the fact that soft skills are often the hardest skills to coach for, even though they can have the biggest payoff in terms of team performance over the course of a season. Second is that many coaches think in terms of tangibles -- the play you diagram on a clipboard or the drill you run in practice. Coaching, however, is as much about relationships as it is about the playbook.

Switch gears for a moment and think about the business environment. In the business world, managers think about many of the same issues -- enhancing team performance, getting the most out of cross-functional work groups, fostering leadership qualities among staff, peer-to-peer performance coaching, managing difficult relationships, etc. Their drivers are, like yours, achieving desired performance levels.

Having recruited the technical talent they need, managers often make the same miscalculation that many coaches do. They fail to fully appreciate the impact of behavioral and interpersonal style on team performance.

In various discussions about coaching and guiding talent in our respective venues, it became clear to us that there were some transferable lessons to be learned about the importance of behavioral and interpersonal styles on team performance. The business environment, in fact, is increasingly recognizing the importance of identifying and adapting to style differences as a catalyst for enhanced team performance. You would be hard-pressed to find a business journal that does not make some mention of the value of relationship building, appreciating and leveraging diverse styles, and building emotional intelligence as a cornerstone to achieving business results. The business world has gained much insight from the world of coaching that can be transferred to the workplace. We believe that the world of business may be able to provide some teachable moments for coaches that can be transferred to their work with athletes.

It is the purpose of this article to transfer some of the lessons learned in the business environment to the athletic arena. Specifically, we will discuss:

- The importance of gaining insight into one's own behavior style as a coach.
- The impact of one's style as a coach on his/her athletes.
- The interrelationship of the coaching staff's behavioral style on the athletes and within the team dynamics.
- Techniques to leverage the preferred behavior style of your athletes in various situations.
- Strategies for adapting your style to meet the style needs of your athletes to be most effective as a coach -- on and off the field of play.

Underpinning our discussion is our belief, that self-awareness is a key first step in building understanding. With a better understanding of one's own style, as well as the strengths and limitations of that style in different situations, coaches are better able to foster the types of relationships with their athletes and fellow coaches that produce maximum results.

The Coaching Relationship

The coaching relationship involves a complex and ongoing psychological interaction between coach and athlete that extends beyond the demands of the basketball court. Before, during, and after an athletic contest, there are interactions that impact the overall relationship between a coach and his/her athletes. The quality of these relationships can have an impact on performance.

One of the areas that we have been exploring is the impact of individual behavioral styles on team cohesion. The preferred behavioral style of both coach and athlete, while often overlooked in favor of the "Xs" and "Os," can create both positive and negative patterns of interaction that contribute to the psychological environment for the team as a whole and to the outcome of the athletic contest, in particular.

Coaches are keenly aware of the fact that they impact their teams in many ways. Many recognize that their behavior and communication styles as leaders are major contributors to the successful integration of individuals into a cohesive team. It is for that reason, therefore, that much time and attention in coaching education courses is spent on the leadership and communication skills of the coach from a *theoretical* perspective. Much less time, however, is devoted to helping the coach more literally explore his or her behavior style tendencies, the style tendencies of their athletes and the impact of both from an *applied* perspective.

One needs look no further than an athletic contest to see behavior styles in action -- with all their accompanying strengths and weaknesses. For example, we have all seen (or experienced!) a coach who yells and screams on the sideline while his/her team is engaged in the basketball game. While frustration with the turn of events may have been appropriate, the coach's behavioral outburst probably did not create positive long-term results for the team. What impact does this behavior have on a team from a coach's perspective? From an athlete's perspective?

There is also the basketball coach who recruits a star performer -- someone who is comfortable with directing the action on the floor during a game. Now imagine that there are several other performers who also like to direct the behavior of others during a contest or, rather, do not respond well to the directive style of a teammate. There are many well-publicized examples from the world of professional sports involving a player who so disrupts team chemistry that they -- or players around them -- have to be traded. Finally, what happens when the coach also likes to direct all aspects of the game? Can any of these behavioral tendencies impact the outcome of a contest, for better or worse? We believe they can. Raising awareness of ones' own style and the style of those with whom one interacts, and then leveraging that understanding in targeted settings can foster greater personal effectiveness and relationship building, greater team cohesion, and enhanced levels of team performance.

Behavioral Style Assessment

There are many instruments on the market with which to determine behavior style. In our work, we use a well-researched and reliable self-assessment instrument developed by Inscape Publishing -- the "DiSC® Dimensions of Behavior." This tool has been used in the corporate environment for many years -- often as a way to help work groups build cohesive teams that support high performance and productivity. It is designed to help people explore behavior across four dimensions:

- Dominance
- Influencing
- Steadiness
- Conscientious

The goal of the instrument is not to change who we are as individuals. Rather, it is to help people increase their understanding of their behavioral preferences, their motivators, their preferred environment, and strategies they can employ for increasing their effectiveness when dealing with others whose style may or may not match their own. Responses are based on one's perception of the environment as either favorable or unfavorable relative to achieving their goals and their own power or influence over that environment.

Unlike a personality assessment such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the DiSC® does not measure personality. It does, however, identify preferred behavior styles in different environments (e.g., at home, in the classroom, on the basketball court, etc.). A second distinction is that our personality is considered to be "hard-wired" at an early age and, as a result, it is not likely to change much over time. Behavior style, on the other hand, *is* something we can change, and often do change in different situations. In the context of a basketball contest, for example, a coach on the sidelines may behave in a certain way when the team is down by ten points with less than two minutes on the clock. He or she may behave quite differently, however, when the team is up by thirty points with the same amount of time on the clock. High stress situations that carry huge consequences often bring out "shadow" behaviors -- behaviors that may be evident in normal circumstances, but get amplified in more trying times, and do not necessarily have a positive impact on performance.

When completing the instrument, respondents are asked to consider a specific environment as the basis for their responses. For example, we instruct coaches to "consider their role as a coach" when responding to the instrument. With regard to athletes, we ask them to "consider their role as a basketball player," for example. Once completed, the tool identifies the respondent's primary and secondary behavior style in the specific environment they identified when completing the instrument.

The insight gained from this tool is threefold:

1. First, by examining their behavioral tendencies in different coaching situations, coaches are able to more fully explore the inherent strengths and limitations associated with each style, as well as the potential impact of different behavior styles on team performance.
2. Second, by exploring the characteristics associated with each style, the coach is able to recognize the behavioral styles of athletes and others in the athletic environment. This awareness of style differences forms the basis for building relationships that support optimum performance.
3. Finally, the coach is encouraged to convert this new insight into effectiveness strategies that he or she can leverage when working with athletes. Adapting our approaches to the individual style needs of the athletes and others with whom we interact is at the heart of fostering greater interpersonal effectiveness.

The application of a behavior styles inventory with athletes is natural because a coach recognizes the importance of team cohesion in the context of increased productivity or wins. This self-assessment tool provides coaches and players, alike, with an opportunity to understand their style preferences and how those styles manifest themselves in different situations.

Our Approach

When conducting workshops or individual coaching sessions on behavior styles and team building, we invite participants to explore the consequences and dynamics involved when these style differences converge in an intact group (athletic team, work group, class, etc.). To illustrate this point, we show each of the styles in action through live enactment or video clips. The reactions that people have to each of the styles being demonstrated conveys just how visceral our reactions to styles other than our own are and, subsequently, the challenges inherent in working most effectively with styles that do not match our own.

There are strengths and limitations associated with each style, as well. For example, strength associated with a person whose preferred behavioral style is the Dominance Style (the "D" style) is that he or she is able to make decisions when no one else wants to, is not afraid to confront tough issues, and embraces change as a personal challenge. This sounds like some desirable qualities, doesn't it? However, when the style is taken to extremes, a person with the "D" style may also be seen as overly opinionated, combative, arrogant, impatient, and someone who likes change for change's sake. Let's look at the other style characteristics.

A person with the Influencing Style --the "I" style -- is often viewed as having great enthusiasm for working with others, adept at inspiring and motivating others, always available to others, and as someone who easily gives positive feedback to others. Potential limitations of this style, however, are that an "I" person can be perceived as being disorganized and superficial in their approach to tasks and people.

A person with the Steadiness pattern or "S" style is often viewed as a good team player, empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others, and one who likes harmony among team members. Limitations associated with this pattern include indecisiveness, unwillingness to confront directly, and resistance to change. Because of their concern for

maintaining team harmony, their own needs may be suppressed. Over time, this can cause resentment and a degree of passive-aggressiveness.

A person possessing the fourth behavior style, the "Conscientious Style" -- the "C" style -- is typically perceived as thorough, analytical and accurate, above all else. They focus on getting things right. Their emphasis is on "task" rather than "people." Potential limitations associated with this pattern include a perception of aloofness and an excessive concern with perfection that can stifle creativity in the group.

Behind each of the four styles are drivers -- goals and fears -- that precipitate behavioral responses. It's been said that one's fears are actually the flip side of one's goals. For example, a dominant behavior pattern may have a goal of "being in control." As such, the behavior a person with a "D" style is consistent with trying to maintain control of a situation. The greater the fear one has over losing control, the more pronounced the characteristics associated with maintaining control become - up to and including angry outbursts, giving orders, chastising, etc. When taken to extremes, these fears can foster a range of ineffective behaviors. While the "D" fears losing control, the "I" often fears being blamed or disliked; an "S" often fears confusion, chaos, change; and the "C" tends to fear unwarranted personal criticism.

Practical Application

We collaborated with coaches and players on the women's basketball team at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh to assess behavioral styles of both athletes and coaches and their respective impact on team cohesion and performance on and off the court. The ultimate goal of the project was to help both athletes and coaching staff become more aware of the various factors -- besides the "X's" and the "O's" -- that impact performance results.

The first phase of the two-phased process we used was to administer the DiSC® instrument to players and coaches at the end of the season. There are both short and long versions of the instrument. For the athletes and assistant coach we selected the short version, which takes about ten minutes to complete. We selected the long version for Head Coach Pam Ruder, who now coaches at Southwestern University, which takes the same amount of time to complete, but provides a more in-depth interpretation of results. With the exception of Coach Ruder, all profile results were kept anonymous.

Upon completing the self-assessment, we provided Coach Ruder with a detailed written profile of her behavioral tendencies, drivers, and effectiveness strategies. In addition, she received an aggregate behavioral profile for her team.

In phase two of the process, Ms. Mungai met with the Coach to interpret her individual report from several perspectives. First, they examined Coach Ruder's preferred style under normal, non-stressful circumstances (in practice, for example). The focus was on exploring and building on the strengths of that style. Equally important was a discussion of how that style was likely to manifest itself in stressful situations such as in the middle of an athletic contest with the score tied and little time left on the clock. While each of us has certain style strengths; when we experience stress in our environment, our primary behavioral style can become more pronounced -- to the point where the effectiveness diminishes.

Phase two of this process involved working with Coach Ruder to explore the style make-up of her team, including her assistant coach. The results, while anonymous, were useful for understanding team dynamics. For example, the team behavior styles profile indicated that the primary style of the team was the Steadiness style. The team's secondary style was Conscientious. A team profile of this type would suggest behavioral tendencies that are very team oriented, passive, and conflict avoiding, as well as those that value detail, predictability and/or precedence, and getting it right. When we shared these results with Coach Ruder, she could readily identify the team behaviors we described. Let's look at these four style characteristics in more detail...

Because of their strong desire to be challenged and to challenge, the "D" may overextend him or herself to the point where the challenges become too great and, as a result, overall effectiveness is diminished because of competing priorities. A person with an "I" behavioral dimension has a tendency to overdo emotional expression. This may not be an issue if he or she is dealing with another "I" (and, therefore, another people-person), but it may cause discomfort for a "C" type, who is much less prone to outward displays of emotion. An individual with

a primary "S" style is not inclined to celebrate their accomplishments, yet they can become frustrated and maybe even resentful if their contributions to the team go unnoticed for too long. A person with a primary "C" style tends to overanalyze things -- even if the things they are overanalyzing do not warrant the amount of attention being given to them. This over-emphasis on analysis can lead to what has been referred to as "analysis paralysis" -- that is, the concern for getting it right can actually slow or freeze the team's progress.

Once the team profile was explored, we discussed effectiveness strategies that Coach Ruder could employ that would likely enhance the coach-athlete and team interactions. For example, because many of her athletes had a Steadiness style preference, Coach Ruder could enhance her effectiveness by providing them with a big picture perspective of her game plan and clear instruction on specific plays, rules, guidelines, etc. emphasizing the value of teamwork and individual contributions for team success. At the same time, however, she must coach for the type of style she needs more of in athletic contests -- that is, the dominant style that is not afraid to take charge and direct the action on the floor. Team results indicated that the "D" style was the least preferred style indicated by her team! As such, as a coaching intervention, one of her effectiveness strategies would be to help athletes develop more of a take charge, confident and assertiveness behavior style in situations that most warrant it. This could be accomplished best by using goal setting in practices.

As a result of our in-depth debrief of results with Coach Ruder, she indicated, "some of the problems between players and staff became evident once I understood the styles and needs that were involved. I became better able to navigate situations because I was more aware of the strengths, weakness and needs of my individual athletes. This helped me adapt my approach in a variety of settings -- practice, the actual contest, and in casual conversations so that the athlete and I were conversing in the same language. It made a big difference on and off the court."

When using the "DiSC®" in the athletic setting the coach must first recognize his or her style tendencies and situations in which the style is most effective in goal achievement. The second step is to develop effectiveness strategies. Examples of effectiveness strategies vary, but an effectiveness strategy for a person with a primary "D" style is often to develop greater patience and to work toward being a better listener. People with a primary "I" style can often increase their effectiveness by demonstrating greater objectivity and focus on the task at hand. For the "S" style, becoming more change-agile can enhance overall effectiveness. Finally, the "C" style can often improve overall effectiveness by becoming more aware of feelings -- both his/her own and those of others.

The primary style of many managers we work with is the Dominance style. While we would need to conduct more research, we hypothesize that a preponderance of coaches shares a similar profile. Their role often calls for dominance-style characteristics. Athletics, just like business, is focused on driving people to achieve desired results. One thing we have discovered, however, is that other styles are just as important to exhibit in the coaching and managing domains. Dominance style people tend to focus on results and action-oriented. When you are trying to foster a team orientation, especially when you have a great deal of new team membership, the more people-oriented styles is useful in building relationships that will serve the team well for the longer-term. This means that the coach with a "D" style would be wise to invest time in building interpersonal relationships with players.

Conclusion

As Lao Tse said "He who knows others is learned. He who knows himself is wise". However, knowing yourself is only part of the secret to enhancing team performance. Coaches need to go beyond understanding their own style to include building an understanding of their athletes' preferred styles. In order to adapt to the athlete the coach has to know how to communicate with the four styles to be most effective. For example, when communicating with a "D," get to the point in the conversation quickly and respect their need for autonomy. When approaching the "I" do so informally and use humor. While with the "S" the coach needs to let them move through change slowly, while the "C" needs clear expectations and deadlines. Because teams are comprised of people with all four styles, coaches can enhance their effectiveness by not only knowing the style tendencies of each style, but also how to interact with people with the various styles. For example, because the "D" style is very goal and task focused, they often appreciate a direct approach in conversation. Because the "I" style likes to work with and through people and enjoys the limelight, a little public recognition and building in appropriate time for 'small talk' can go a long way toward forging a strong coach-athlete relationship. The main driver for the "S" is constancy and harmony -- two things that cannot be guaranteed in the midst of an athletic contest!

However, helping the athlete see the big picture, remaining calm, and acknowledging their contributions can foster loyalty and trust. Because the "C" is most concerned with 'getting it right' and has little need to affiliate with others, a coach can help them become most effective by encouraging interaction and being sensitive when providing corrective feedback since they already have a strong need to be perfect in execution.

Knowing how to communicate most effectively with each of the four styles saves time, enhances understanding and, ultimately, leads to better overall team functioning. We have found that the DiSC® instrument can be a powerful catalyst for harnessing team strengths. Teams are, after all, about relationships and about leveraging and valuing the strengths that each member possesses. Even with the best game strategy, teams can fail if they neglect the interpersonal and behavioral aspect of membership. We believe all coaches can enhance their overall effectiveness by going beyond the traditional X's and O's. Coach Pam Ruder agrees. "Having my team take the DiSC® really opened my eyes to the impact of style on personal interaction and the positive change that it can have on performance. I continue to be amazed by how adapting the language I use can enhance my relationship with my team. It continues to be a personal initiative for me and one that I need to constantly focus on for the development of my team, athletes and myself." Assessing behavioral styles and their respective impact on team functioning provides coaches and athletes, alike, with an effectiveness strategy that complements the "X's" and the "O's."

REFERENCES

Personal Profile System® system "DiSC" instrument, Inscape Publishing.

For information on the DiSC® feel free to contact the authors.

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