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## **The Performance Director's Secret Soft Syllabus**

**The Foundation of all Good Performance-  
Communication**

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**T**he greatest mistake we make in performance today is not realizing that the effectiveness of our hard skills (sport science, strength and conditioning, speed technique etc.) is completely and utterly reliant on the quality of our soft skills.

Over the course of 15 years working with professionals across elite sport, business and military, I learned through much failure that to be successful I had to develop a certain set of secret and vague 'soft' skills in order to be truly effective and to lead and manage people in high performance. This secret skillset was a completely different set of abilities or exam subjects to the performance skillsets I had developed as a professional. As one of the first performance directors, I realized there was a whole new set of leadership skills I was never taught through formal education.

Now as I mentor and advise the next generation of professionals in sport, military, and the corporate world, it's apparent these skillsets are the ones that either ensure you will succeed or struggle and perhaps fail in your role as the head of a department, high performance manager, athletic director, performance director, or whatever leadership role to which you aspire.

These experiences led me to write a syllabus and course for Performance Directors and in this chapter, I will focus on only one - Communication

### **Communication – an Introduction**

All good performance directors have good basic communication skills. It's a given. Some are excellent at addressing crowds, others have great personalities and build great relationships, and a few have both, but I've not seen one performance director succeed for any period of time without the ability to communicate well in some form.

Most continue to develop these skills as their careers progress. It's virtually impossible to be a good leader, or even practitioner, with poor communication ability, whether that's to players, staff, or front office.

Communication as an overall skill is not complex, but the more you understand and consider communication the greater the adaptability, effectiveness and sustainability of your messages. We interact casually with staff on a daily basis, we present ourselves

nonverbally through body language, we send emails, use handouts, and text possibly hundreds of times a day in total. All of these are instances of communication – it's far more powerful than you might first imagine.

### **Why we communicate**

It's important just to touch briefly on the purpose of our communication for a moment. As a performance director our goal is to lead, deliver messages, provide information, and help educate players, staff, and front office.

#### *Staff*

With our staff the key function is to listen to and understand the challenges they face. We need to concisely explain the goals and objectives for each one of them and the department as a whole. They generally are the easiest with whom to communicate even though they may have different skills but still speak our language since they underwent similar education stages.

#### *Senior Management*

With the front office the clear needs are to unmistakably understand their requirements of you and your role, and the deliverables they want presented. In many cases their backgrounds may be different than ours. They come from a varied background of education, business, and even playing careers.

#### *Players*

Players on the other hand require support, direction, and understanding of actions that will support their performance goals and allow them to perform optimally on and off the field or court. In this case we often need to gain trust and build habits that allow them to continue to improve.

#### *Backroom Bandwidth*

Each group has different back grounds, objectives, and goals. I refer to this as 'backroom bandwidth'. There is a different need for each. However, with careful consideration it's very possible to create a communication approach which can address all groups in a very cohesive way. Nonetheless it requires a careful understanding.

## **Learning from Others**

### *Bill Clinton*

Bill Clinton had a special ability to get his point across to both large groups and individuals. He used two distinct styles, but both based on the same philosophy. In groups he made a special point to demonstrate to the audience he understood their concerns and fears by verbalizing them. With individuals he connected on a personal level by listening, giving them full attention and taking time to ensure they felt heard. These approaches allowed him to establish an emotional connection with his audiences. One unique aspect of Clinton's approach you should learn from was his communication never seemed trite or gimmicky because of his attention to and connection with his audience. We can use these approaches, especially his ability to gain trust and connect by listening and demonstrating our genuine interest in the audience.

### *Winston Churchill*

Winston Churchill has been long regarded as a great communicator. He is especially well-known for his one-liners or catch phrases. He used short impactful statements such as 'Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference', and 'Never, Never, Never.' This often overlooks the importance of his ability to create an image for the audience. Unlike Clinton he had little visual opportunities to influence his audience and relied on his voice across the radio to connect. As a performance director we can learn from Churchill's ability to portray authority in a strong voice and establish our own presence.

### *Donald Trump*

Donald Trump is a very effective communicator for two particular reasons. He exploits emotional concerns and targets fears to elicit a response from his audience. He also uses mediums like twitter to deliver short phrases that are clear in message and attention grabbing. While I don't recommend this approach, we can learn from it. We can target emotional fears in athletes (injury fears, aging concerns) and use short clear

unambiguous phrases to connect with them. We should also learn from the negative effect of Trump's approach by avoiding divisive or confusing messages.

## **Intrapersonal Communication**

Before we start on what is regarded generally by everyone as 'communication,' I want to mention one often overlooked aspect. I've spoken about authenticity before and nowhere is it more important and evident than in communication. Authenticity and transparency in communication will ultimately determine your ability to build a sustainable program and maintain the trust of your audience.

### *Self-Talk*

However, the most often ignored communication is what we say and hear from ourselves. Intrapersonal communication is communication with oneself. It can be audible, written, internal vocalization, and even reflective thinking. Your own voice is the most powerful voice you have, and the most convincing. Be alone with your own thoughts for a short period and you realize how powerful they are.

Authenticity in communication means having a clear and honest vision, objectives and aims. Verbalizing them to everyone, yourself included. A message that you neither believe in nor communicate will both undermine your own confidence and will easily become apparent to the people, players, staff and management with whom you interact.

## **The Communication Process**

We rarely think of communication as a process, but it is actually an ongoing continuous process. Good performance directors are constantly aware of this and so continually recalibrate the impact of every message, verbal and non-verbal, and consider it a process. This is why I often refer to it as a 'campaign.'

As you become aware of how impactful communication is, it's equally important not to become self-conscious. Nonetheless, it's important to be self-aware of the full impact we have on others and the messages we send. In the performance context our human communication is generally an interpersonal process in which a message is relayed with a goal or intention to elicit or inspire a positive action.

While I don't suggest you plan all interactions in a very detailed manner, I want you to be aware that communication is a process and series of considerations.

### *Source*

As the performance director you must ensure that, while not all messages need to come directly from you, you need to be aware of the messages of your staff and those that pertain to performance matters. You ultimately are responsible for the messages of the department and staff or at least will have to deal with misinformation. This is where the overall vision and ethos of the department is key.

You can't insist every message is approved or ran past you, but proper organization, meetings, and leadership will ensure you avoid this issue.

### *Medium*

Usually when we consider communication, the first thing we think of is the medium. The medium is the immediate form which a message takes. We might use a presentation, posters, images, emails, or a quiet word one-on-one. We choose the medium largely on two factors: the audience receiving the message and the most suitable vehicle.

### *Vehicle*

As the source of a message we must consider first of all if we are the best source to deliver a message. As the performance director, you don't have to be the voice constantly. If a staff member has a better relationship in relating to strength & conditioning, nutrition, or rehab, they may be the better vehicle for this message. The vehicle could be in-person, but it can be not only image-based, audio, or text, but a combination of these.

### *Audience*

In other communication situations the audience is deemed responsible for interpreting and understanding the message, but in this industry the responsibility is on us to ensure the message is interpreted and understood. To achieve this, we must consider the audience perspective, mindset, medium, and vehicle most suited to them.

## **Audience Perspective**

One of the biggest mistakes we make as performance directors is that we believe others want and interpret information in the same way as we do. However, we are very different from the audiences with whom we spend most of our time communicating. We've had a desire to understand things, we usually want detail, we need to be convinced in a way that supports a scientific understanding.

Players are generally used to a certain medium and vehicle of communication whereas coaches and other staff are familiar with a slightly different medium and vehicle. I disagree completely with the position that we must explain the 'how it works' so people will do something. Yes, for some populations this is needed, the playing audience does not require this. They want to know the 'what.'

The best place to be convinced of this is to look at what motivates the audience to whom you are speaking to and what motivates them to arrive with an inherent buy-in. Many athletes have had different educational backgrounds and experiences.

### *Multiple Audiences*

In our profession we need to remember our messages rarely are delivered to one person, whether we plan it or not. The most effective communication strategy considers cohesiveness and uses themes to ensure a consistent message.

### *Context*

A message delivered at the wrong time or incorrect location loses its power or even its point. Trying to deliver a message in a crowded room or busy street is largely a waste of time. Unless you consider the timing and location, your messages will fall to the same issues.

Context is critical not only to the delivery but also the interpretation. Communication is either reinforced or weakened by the environment in which it exists. The place, time, event, all impact the attitude of the audience regardless of the message itself. It's best to wait until the right moment and place to make a point you need remembered and taken on board.

### *Setting a New Context*

While the actual context in which your audience finds itself is always important, you still have the power to manipulate and create the optimal context to present your message. This involves careful thought and creativity but delivered appropriately it can be very effective in terms of the overall winning strategy. For example, after a blow-out win where overconfidence is starting to creep in, a message of calm, caution, and humility can be reinforced if appropriately presented.

Strategies to do this can involve:

1. Giving the example of a team who lost focus, let standards in treatment, training, and practice slip and lost to a much lesser opponent the following week.
2. Relating a story of a team in a similar situation previously who then went on a losing streak.
3. Role-playing the possibility of everyone taking their eye off the ball and the consequences that might follow.

Strategies such as these can set a new context to deliver a message that might be in contrast to the mood or context of a situation in which an important message must be delivered without the benefit of time or when time constraints are an issue.

## **Feedback**

Many performance directors have a 'fire and forget' attitude to communication. However, good communicators see this as the beginning of the end. They see it not just as an end but an ongoing process.

Always look for feedback but remember it doesn't have to be interpersonal. Asking for feedback can give an impression of a lack of confidence depending on who you ask, how you ask and also on the message being delivered. For a performance director authority is important.

Feedback can come from body language, posture, attention, questions, facial expression or reactions of the audience. I use a simple rule that any comments from a person mean that 'seven' others feel the same way or had a similar impression.

Feedback doesn't have to be immediate. If you are running a 'campaign' it's best to wait until the campaign has been established before reacting to it.

### *Requesting Feedback*

By all means, be aware of the influencers in the group. They can be those who are in positions of authority, but also be aware of those who are not directly in roles but are still influential, such as veterans or those who are not in senior positions but are vocal.

It's worth bearing in mind that all of your audience are not only different by role and position, but also by their interests, so not everything will appeal to each person. Expect and accept that some will respond positively, and some will not; do not be disheartened by some people who don't respond favorably.

### **Message**

If everything has been considered the message should be short, concise, and delivered with clarity. This does not mean the interaction needs to be very short, but the actual message should be.

### *Set the scene*

As you deliver the message bear in mind the mindset and perspective of the audience. Start from where they are: don't simply fire your message at them. Acknowledge their position or frame of mind and 'take them on a journey' from there.

For example, if you're addressing a group of players and you want them to come for treatment or check in the next morning after a late return flight, explain you know that they will be tired. It's important to acknowledge their concerns and placate to remove the excuse or put them at ease.

### *Explain the Benefit*

Once you have identified their position, present the benefits to them - they get treatment done early and get more time off with the family. Note, I don't mention the benefit to you. I don't suggest you outline that, as a team or organization it's most important to find out the status of the players – speak to their concerns professionally. The reason is important, but it is not necessarily what they are concerned with.

Keep in mind that, these are all adults with free will and there has to 'be something in it for them', some benefit. However, more importantly, by getting them to decide and choose to do something there is a far greater chance of compliance and of establishing a routine or habit.

## **Delivery**

Don't start your message without explaining the context or putting fears at ease first. Think of it as comparable to asking someone to take medicine. Before you explain 'what' you want someone to do, allay any fears, explain the benefits and present a solution.

Know very clearly what the key sentence is in your presentation, image or talk. Don't be afraid to repeat it. Mention it at the start, reinforce the benefit, and repeat again.

Consider it a 6-point loop:

1. Address the concerns of the audience
2. Explain what your message is
3. Explain the benefit to them
4. Explain what your message is
5. Address the concerns of the audience
6. Explain what your message is

You're presenting a solution, a benefit, to help them, and it must be framed as such.

## **Reinforcement**

I never consider a message a singular event or action. A message should be always part of a larger program or campaign. There should always be a follow-up or a secondary supporting message or action to reinforce and remind. This may simply be in the form of a text, an image, or a comment in passing individually.

## *Noise*

Noise is any factor that inhibits the delivery of your message, anything that gets in the way of the message being accurately received, interpreted, and acknowledged. These

are distractions and noise that can affect the concentration, focus, and attention of the audience.

Noise can present an internal or external distraction. An athlete concerned about a contract extension may not be attentive or fully focused on the message you are trying to deliver because they are distracted by internal noise. Disturbances outside the room, external noise, may prevent the clear delivery of a message to an audience or individual.

### **Barriers to Effective Communication**

There are six key things we should avoid as performance directors when communicating:

- Prejudging or not considering the audience
- Not having a good understanding of who you are targeting
- Not being aware of the audience's attention
- Using your terminology, not the audience's language
- Not delivering a message that the audience needs or giving unwanted advice
- Not concerned with or addressing the audience's needs or fears

Notice that all are concerned with the audience, not the messenger.

### **Keys to Effective Communication**

There are key elements performance directors should remember when we communicate:

- Follow-up to reinforce with additional messages and/or actions
- Get feedback either verbally at that moment or soon after
- Demonstrate you know the audience and can allay their fears
- Be clear and concise; do not leave room for ambiguity.
- Present the benefit to the audience

### **Additional Thoughts**

*The Power of Tempo*

One of the biggest mistakes people make when speaking is rushing. Rather consider that pausing and taking your time can be highly effective. Simple techniques such as pausing before you speak draws all attention to you. It creates a slight sense of expectation. Using pauses in the middle of an interaction will have the same effect when timed between points.

If you are addressing a group following another presenter, the natural reaction is that we adopt the tempo and theme of the previous speaker. There is a greater impact when we approach it differently, if we want to deliver a slightly different message or address a different topic which needs a distinctive focus.

### *Imagery & Emotion*

Creating an image in the audience's mind is a very powerful emotional connection. We can do this literally by using a visual aid such as a single image on a presentation or we can do it indirectly by describing an image or situation. Both are effective.

In today's visually stimulated society imagery is highly effective. However, if you can describe and create a visual image in someone's mind the main advantage is that they are fully focused on you as the messenger. You can enrich the mental image through the words you use, your emphasis, tempo, depth, and sound. You can increase or reduce the emotional charge. You can calm, excite, or elicit whatever response you want from the audience.

## **Communication Skills**

### *Listening*

Being a good listener is the foundation in order to be a good communicator. No one enjoys communicating with someone who only cares about putting in their two cents and does not take the time to listen to the other person. If you're not a good listener, it's going to be hard to comprehend what you're being asked to do.

Take the time to practice active listening. Active listening involves paying close attention to what the other person is saying, asking clarifying questions, and rephrasing what the person says to ensure understanding ("So, what you're saying is..."). Through active

listening, you can better understand what the other person is trying to say and can respond appropriately.

### *Nonverbal Communication*

Your body language, eye contact, hand gestures, and tone of voice all color the message you are trying to convey. A relaxed, open stance (arms open, legs relaxed), and a friendly tone will make you appear approachable and will encourage others to speak openly with you.

Eye contact is also important; you want to look the person in the eye to demonstrate that you are focused on the person and the conversation (however, be sure not to stare at the person, which can make him or her uncomfortable).

Also, pay attention to other people's nonverbal signals while you are talking. Often, nonverbal signals convey how a person is really feeling. For example, if the person is not looking you in the eye, he or she might be uncomfortable or hiding the truth.

### *Clarity*

Good verbal communication means saying just enough – don't talk too much or too little. Try to convey your message in as few words as possible. Say what you want clearly and directly, whether you're speaking to someone in person, on the phone, or via email. If you ramble on, your listener will either tune you out or will be unsure of exactly what you want.

Think about what you want to say before you say it; this will help you to avoid talking excessively and/or confusing your audience.

### *Demeanor*

Through a friendly tone, a personal question, or simply a smile, you will encourage your coworkers to engage in open and honest communication with you. It's important to be nice and polite in all your workplace communications. This is important in both face-to-face and written communication. When you can, personalize your emails to coworkers and/or employees – a quick "I hope you all had a good weekend" at the start of an email can personalize a message and make the recipient feel more appreciated.

### *Confidence*

It is important to be confident in your interactions with others. Confidence shows your coworkers that you believe in what you're saying and will follow through. Exuding confidence can be as simple as making eye contact or using a firm but friendly tone. Avoid making statements that sound like questions. Of course, be careful not to sound arrogant or aggressive. Be sure you are always listening to and empathizing with the other person.

### *Empathy*

Using phrases as simple as "I understand where you are coming from" demonstrate that you have been listening to the other person and respect his or her opinions. Even when you disagree with an employer, coworker, or employee, it is important for you to understand and respect their point of view.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past two years many newly appointed performance directors, as well as up and coming strength coaches have reached out for guidance and advice. The requests have varied from auditing help, technical or personal/career advice, to professional insight. In the majority of cases coaches recognize that the greatest limiting factor is not technical ability or knowledge, rather the soft skills such as leadership, management, conflict resolution, and communication. There's no doubt that with exceptional technical knowledge you can have a good career in this industry. However, your ability to have a long and sustained career will depend on your integrity and ability to master the people skills we need, the ability to help, serve and relate to each other.

### ***Who is Dr. Fergus Connolly?***



Dr. Fergus Connolly is one of the world's leading experts in team sports and human performance. He is the only coach to have worked full-time in every major league around the world. Fergus partners with teams at the highest levels integrating best practices in all areas of performance.

His highly acclaimed book 'Game Changer - The Art of Sports Science' is the first blueprint for coaches to present a holistic philosophy for winning in all team sports.

His second best seller '59 Lessons: Working with the World's Greatest Coaches, Athletes, & Special Forces' reveals the secrets learned first-hand from working with the world's greatest winners.

Fergus has served as director of elite performance for the San Francisco 49ers, sports science director with the Welsh Rugby Union, and performance director and director of football operations for University of Michigan Football. He has mentored and advised coaches, support staff, and players in the NBA, MLB, NHL, Australian Rules Football, and international cricket. Fergus has also trained world boxing champions and advises elite military units and companies across the globe.

He is a keynote speaker and consultant to high performing organizations around the world.

Learn more at [fergusconnolly.com](http://fergusconnolly.com)