



# Strategies

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# Effective Promotion of Athlete Responsiveness

By Craig P. DeAngelis

### The Question

Coaches are forced to address a wide range of issues related to their sport on a frequent basis. In addition to contractual obligations, contextual factors including the performance environment will have a heavy impact on the coach Figgins et al., (2019). While most matters are handled throughout the course of a single season, there are pressing questions that seem to linger over the duration of a coach's career. The importance of these questions might vary from coach to coach or even school to school. But all high-quality coaches, regardless of their placement, are confronted with seemingly open-ended questions that lack a sufficient response.

One such question could be summarized as follows: "What do I have to do to get my athletes to listen to what I'm saying?"

Coaches across the globe are confronted with this conundrum. Unfortunately, in trying to determine a suitable answer with appropriate action steps, coaches will end up traveling down an ominous theoretical road speckled with "what if" statements, misplaced emotions, blame for the "ills" of modern sport culture, or even identifying the shortcomings

of local administrators. In truth, there could be validity in each of those suppositions. However, an accurate diagnosis of the root cause(s) may or may not actually aid in attaining a suitable answer to the question at hand. What supersedes the validity of the “reasons why” should be the welcomed reality that the coach is behind the wheel of the car.

Modern sport coaches have a full plate of responsibilities, including but not limited to:

- mandatory trainings,
- professional development,
- communication with parents,
- communication with the community,
- media responsibilities,
- off-season planning,
- practice planning, and
- coordination with medical and training staff.

The list could go on! In some ways, it would be unfair to add another item onto a growing list of coaching demands. However, just like driving an upgraded vehicle, the addition of new items is often a guarantee for a more effective and reliable journey.

So, in order to answer the query, the list of responsibilities must continue to grow. This reality brings an interesting perspective to the idea of “getting athletes to listen.” Perhaps it would be healthier to reframe the question altogether. After all, the efficacy of coach–athlete relationships is linked to both positive and negative outcomes (Davis et al., 2019). In truth, coaches are not nearly as concerned with getting athletes to listen as they are with getting athletes to respond. Therefore, the question is more accurately communicated when it reads: “What do I have to do to get my athletes to RESPOND to me?”

The importance of this adjustment cannot be overstated. In changing a few words, the coach can now target the responsiveness of athletes in relation to them as individuals, not solely in terms of what they are saying at a given moment in time. By giving credence to the “softer skills” of the role, coaches can ultimately play an influential role in shaping the mentality of the team (Radcliffe et al., 2018). This is vital, since coaches are charged with steering their athletes toward a successful destination. While it may seem counterintuitive for coaches to take responsibility for athlete responsiveness, it is in this acceptance that high-quality coaches will see continual improvement from their athletes. Also, by taking ownership of their athlete’s responsiveness, coaches will see a budding answer to the lingering question.

## Acronym

Thankfully, in order to promote athlete responsiveness, a helpful acronym is available:

- C – Consideration
- A – Action
- R – Reflection

The organization of these words should be seen as incredibly intentional. As stated earlier, coaches are behind the wheel. Thus, the C-A-R! But also, effective coaches should already be active in consideration, action and reflection. These positive practices are present in many areas of coaching. Therefore, the acronym provides a best practice model for coaches to employ. In the moments when coaches feel like they are “not getting enough” out of their athletes, they can simply use this saying to remind themselves of the active role they play in the process.

For coaches to put the C-A-R in motion, they must drive according to the following standards:

**Consideration.** It is vitally important for the coach to think before they speak. While that truth may be lost in simplicity, this is an important practice for high-quality coaches. Off-the-cuff communication has some value, but not when a coach is actively seeking to improve the responsiveness of their athletes. Therefore, an individual coach should take time to tactfully plan the structure, content, tone and delivery of their words. To be clear, this does not mean that a coach must script a prompt of things they are going to say! Rather, a coach should develop a general plan, prior to engagement, in order to avoid emotional interference and to deliver a coordinated message.

**Action.** The sport setting is dynamic, full of constantly changing demands and expectations. Therefore, a coach must have the confidence to employ the things they contemplate. As such, there must always be enough flexibility afforded for on-the-fly adjustments. In coaching, to suggest the elimination of “from the heart”– or “from the gut”–type content would be foolish! Equally, when unpredictable and reaction-driven content is overshared, it can be a detriment to long-term athlete responsiveness. When coaches enact a carefully considered plan, leveraged together with in-the-moment open honesty, they provide the fertile soil for both individual and team growth.

**Reflection.** One of the most important aspects in promoting athlete responsiveness is being sensitive to feedback. Typically, athletes will demonstrate the most useful feedback in their actions or in what they verbally tell a coach in the wake of communication. Things will go better than planned, as planned, or worse than planned. Sometimes, all will be present in varying degrees. None of these outcomes should be surprising. Instead, they should be addressed with care after an event, practice or competition is complete. If a coach can effectively reflect and adjust, they will see progressive growth in athlete responsiveness.

## Honesty

The implementation of the C-A-R model, over the course of time, will prove to be beneficial for coaches seeking to promote better athlete responsiveness. In fact, research suggests that coaches can develop positive social situations for their athletes through coordinated communication (Davis et al., 2019). However, C-A-R is not a “cure all.” In the real-world

sport setting, athletes are dealing with a number of factors that could be hindering their responsiveness. Schools do their best to mitigate challenges and ease constraints, but challenges still remain (Huml et al., 2019). For example, here are some possible things athletes deal with outside of sports:

- Dates
- Dances
- Driving school
- Grades
- Parents
- Friends
- Social media
- College/future
- Family drama

The list could go on! The collective sum of an athlete's life, including unique situations, cognitive makeup, volitional inventiveness, and personality, will dictate efficiency (Niculescu & Sabău, 2018). Coaches must remember that, despite the use of C-A-R, along with their best professional efforts, and personal intentions—the life circumstances of athletes will always be a hindrance to athlete responsiveness in sport.

Thankfully, coaches have a unique opportunity to combat the personal challenges facing athletes with the “fuel” of the vehicle they are driving. The fuel used by high-quality coaches is empathetic concern. As coaches carefully consider what they will say, they have the honor of balancing it not only against the demands of their sport but also with the genuine needs of their athletes. As they act on what they planned, coaches can use the “from the heart” moments to address what they are seeing in their athletes' eyes or facial expressions. Most poignantly, when reflecting, coaches can process feedback through multiple lens, such as:

*how what was said caused the athlete(s) to respond.*

*AND*

*how what was said caused the athlete(s) to feel.*

Perhaps the question “what do I have to do to get my athletes to respond to me?” is not one that needs to take a career to answer. Instead, through the use of careful Consideration, Action and Reflection, coach–athlete communication can be

immediately elevated. And by employing appropriate empathetic concern, coaches will find that they hold the key to the effective promotion of athlete responsiveness.

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### Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send “Coach’s Corner” submissions to *Strategies* Editor at [tlawson@shapeamerica.org](mailto:tlawson@shapeamerica.org).

The purpose of the Coach’s Corner column is to feature short articles about one specific coaching lesson that readers can immediately implement with their team. Articles should contain a brief introduction, followed by quick-hitting information such as bullet points or lists. Submissions should not exceed 1,000–1,500 words (or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages).