

Communication Skills Training for Interactive Sports

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The development of interpersonal communication skills is an important aspect of psychological skill development in interactive sport athletes. This article presents a communication skills training program for interactive sport teams. Collegiate coaches of interactive sports implemented a series of seven interpersonal communication exercises with their teams to gain a preliminary perspective on the effectiveness of communication skills training. Overall, athletes' responses in evaluating the program indicated that the communication exercises raised awareness levels of communication skills and competencies and also provided valuable opportunities to practice improving communication skills. Suggestions are provided for the continuation of communication skills training with athletes.

Research on the competitive sport process has consistently attempted to uncover reasons for team success and has determined that effectiveness and success are dependent on several variables. Ability and aptitude are certainly two of those variables. There are also several important psychological skills that contribute to team development and success (Alexander, 1985; Vealey, 1988; Yukelson, 1984). Of interest to this particular program evaluation were the factors concerned with effective interpersonal communication, trust, and conflict resolution.

Effective communication is apparent when team members listen to one another and attempt to build on each other's contributions. In team situations, where disagreement is likely to occur, the ability to recognize and resolve conflict is important to the team's success. The creation of feelings of trust, respect, and understanding are key elements in team development. Yukelson (1984) has indicated that the development of trust and mutual respect between coaches and athletes will serve as the foundation for effective communication.

Several studies have examined the relationship between interpersonal communication skills or team cohesion and athletic team success (Bird, 1977; DiBerardinis, Barwind, Flaningam, & Jenkins, 1983; Martens & Peterson, 1971; Nixon,

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1976). In interactive (team) sports the evidence indicates that effective communication skills are important components of a team's performance and success. In fact, effective communication is often cited as a critical element in the success of athletic teams. The quality of individual experiences within a team often improves when individuals respond to individual differences within a group (Connelly & Rotella, 1991). Carron and Bennett (1977) showed the importance of coach-athlete compatibility to team success. Athletes who are in incompatible dyads with the coaches are simply unable to communicate with each other; quality interaction is important to the development of a compatible coach-athlete dyad.

According to Pfeiffer (1973), an individual's interpersonal life is dependent on his or her facility for making thoughts, feelings, and needs known to others and on his or her receptiveness to the attempts of others to share similar information. Communication is essential for this purpose. In a study on enhanced interpersonal relations as predictors of athletic performance (DiBerardinis et al., 1983) in which team sport athletes participated in 12-week sessions for the development of interpersonal communication skills, interpersonal communication skills were enhanced and were predictors of athletic performance. Williams and Widmeyer (1991) found that cohesion significantly predicted performance outcome and that one way that cohesion might enhance productivity in interactive sports is by improving communication. Slepicka (1975) determined that sympathy and the expression of friendly behavior have positively influenced individual performances by creating a better atmosphere for those performances.

This information supports interpersonal communication training as a viable method for creating a positive environment and for increasing the probability for higher levels of performance. In fact, Connelly and Rotella (1991) have indicated that being direct, assertive, and respectful of others' opinions are all skills or techniques that can be taught. Teaching these skills is a "season-long process of shaping, refining, and reinforcing attitudes and behaviors" (Connelly & Rotella, 1991, p. 79). Vealey (1988) has indicated that interpersonal skills are important facilitative skills for interactive sport athletes and that many coaches and other educators understand the positive impact of psychological skills training; however, the lack of specific program implementation procedures hinders skill development. To examine the impact of a program specifically designed to enhance interpersonal communication skills more closely, several intercollegiate teams were observed during their involvement in that program.

Description of Communication Skills Training Program

Seven intercollegiate coaches were given the same series of seven interpersonal communication skill activities which they were asked to complete with their teams at least once during the academic year before their competitive seasons were over. It was explained to the coaches that the activities could be done at any time: before practice, after practice, during practice, outside of practice, or during a team meeting. The objective of the program was to give athletes the opportunity to participate in activities specifically designed to raise awareness levels of their own communication skills and competencies and to provide practice to improve those specific skills.

The first exercise was designed to allow participants an opportunity to establish a foundation and to set the tone for subsequent group activities and discussions. In addition this exercise introduced the principles of effective listening. The remaining activities were designed to give team members the opportunity to explore their awareness and competency with various communication skills. Each activity was either a modification of an activity found in *The 1973 Handbook for Group Facilitators* (Jones & Pfeiffer, 1973) or was from Griffin and Placek's (1983) *Fair Play in the Gym*. The seven activities follow.

Activity 1—Guidelines

Goals. The goals for this activity are the following: (a) to establish a foundation for setting the tone in subsequent activities and discussions, and (b) to introduce the principles of effective listening.

Materials. The following materials are needed for this activity: (a) blackboard and chalk, or (b) three large pieces of newsprint on the wall and a magic marker.

Process.

1. The coach asks the team members to think about things that annoy them about how people listen. A question that might help is, "Think of times when you've been talking to someone and felt like they weren't really listening to you. What did the person do, or not do, that made you feel they weren't listening to you?"

2. The coach has team members call out some of the poor listening habits they remember. As the team calls them out, the coach writes them on one sheet of newsprint titled "Poor Listening Behaviors." Usually people have little trouble identifying poor listening behaviors. Limit the listing to about 2 minutes.

3. Next the coach asks the group to think about behaviors that would indicate that a person is really listening to them. A good cue statement might be, "Think of a time when you really felt like someone listened to you well and understood what you said *even though they may not have agreed with you*. What did this person do to make you feel this way?" The group calls out these "Effective Listening Skills" while the coach writes them on the second sheet. Limit the listing to about 2 minutes. Examples of "Effective Listening Skills" could include the following:

- Good eye contact;
- Asking clarifying questions, not judgmental questions;
- Trying to understand, not argue;
- Checking to make sure everyone has a chance to speak;
- Nodding head or in some way indicating interest;
- Restating what the speaker said in your own words to be sure that you understand what they said;
- Trying to see the speaker's point of view;
- Keeping an open and relaxed body posture;
- Before giving advice, ask if the speaker wants it;
- Respecting the speaker, even if you disagree with what he or she says.

4. Finally, the team members use these lists to make up a third list called “Guidelines for Group Discussion.” These should be guidelines that the group thinks are important and agrees to abide by for all activities to follow. The “Guidelines for Group Discussion” could include the following:

- Respect the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others;
- Try to understand what others are saying;
- Speak for yourself. Say “I” instead of “people” or “men” or “women” or “blacks;”
- Try not to judge what others say;
- Feel free to pass if you do not want to share a thought or feeling;
- No discounting other peoples’ statements by saying “That’s stupid,” or “I don’t believe that;”
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak;
- Don’t talk more than your share;
- Don’t try to argue someone out of their beliefs;
- Respect silence — sometimes people need to think a little.

5. When the list of guidelines is complete, team members should read it over silently. They should identify the ones they will have to work on, based on what they know about their own listening habits. Team members should then get into small groups (3 or 4 people) and share their answers with each other. The coach should remind them to use the guidelines while listening.

Activity 2—Personal Evaluation and Feedback

Goal. The purpose of this activity is to provide an opportunity for team members to compare their self-assessment with those of others.

Materials. The following materials are needed for this activity: (a) an Introspection Worksheet (Figure 1) and pencil for each person and (b) blackboard and chalk.

Process.

1. The coach introduces the activity as a way to help the participants look at their attitudes and feelings about themselves in relation to the way other people describe them. The coach should encourage participants to be honest.

2. Each person selects a place in the room to complete the Introspection Worksheet in relative privacy. Each person should code the worksheet on the back so it can be identified later on.

3. When all players have completed their worksheets, the coach collects them and randomly redistributes a worksheet to each player. No player should have her or his own worksheet.

4. Players should look over the worksheets and make written comments based on observations, reactions, or patterns identified. For instance, if a player rates herself or himself as being very cautious, disagreeable, and lazy, the reviewer may observe that she or he does not notice anyone of that description on the team.

5. The coach collects the worksheets again and individuals retrieve their own worksheets (identified by the code on the back of the page). Players read the comments from other members of the team. At the end of the activity, the coach *may* choose to allow reviewers to identify themselves.

The following words were selected to enable you to record your perceptions of yourself. You are to indicate these by placing an “X” on one of the spaces between each pair of words. The distance from the “X” to a word indicates the degree to which it represents your view of yourself.

I AM	
Impulsive	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Cautious
Relaxed	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Tense
Interesting	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Boring
Self-Confident	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Timid
Insecure	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Secure
Modest	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Arrogant
Pleasant	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Unpleasant
Mature	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Immature
Agreeable	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Disagreeable
Friendly	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Unfriendly
Attentive	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Inattentive
Compassionate	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Malicious
Competent	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Incompetent
Compulsive	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Flexible
Industrious	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Lazy
Happy	___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : ___ : Sad

Figure 1 — Introspection worksheet.

6. The coach then assembles a Team Profile by asking members of the team to indicate their responses to each item. The team may, for example, see itself as being primarily mature, disagreeable, and friendly.

Activity 3—A Team-Building Starter

Goals. The goals of this activity are the following: (a) to create an agenda for a team-building session, (b) to generate commitment to commonly perceived problems facing the group, and (c) to develop effective listening skills.

Materials. The materials needed for this activity are the following: (a) blackboard and chalk and (b) paper and pencil for each player.

Process.

1. The coach discusses the goals of the activity and gives a brief overview of the design.

2. Team members pair off by selecting someone with whom they have not talked recently.

3. Pairs get together in separate places in the room and take turns interviewing each other. The topic for the interview is “What problem situations should we work on in this team-building session?” Each participant has five minutes to interview her or his partner. Interviewers are not to take notes, but they are to be prepared to report what their interviewee said.

4. After the interviewing phase is over, the team reassembles in a circle. The coach stays outside the circle. Each team member takes a turn reporting to the team—not the coach—what her or his partner said. The coach lists all the suggestions, exactly as they are expressed, on the board. Each interviewee then “corrects the record” by adding anything that the interviewer left out. During this phase, other team members may respond only by asking for something to be clarified. Again, it is very important that all information be recorded accurately on the board.

5. At the end of the activity a list of problems should be on the board. Each person then rank-orders each problem so that the team can decide which ones deserve the most immediate attention. A rank ordered list of “problems” should be on the blackboard when the activity is finished.

Activity 4—Sharing and Supporting Goals

Goals. The goals of this activity include the following: (a) to enhance the team-building process through self-disclosure, feedback, and interpersonal commitment; (b) to offer the team members an opportunity to give and receive feedback about team-related, personal growth goals; and (c) to develop the team members’ commitment to support each others goals.

Materials. The materials needed for this activity are the following: (a) blank paper and a pencil for each person and (b) blackboard and chalk.

Process.

1. The coach briefly presents the goals of the activity, stating that a positive team climate includes the norm that each team member is able to disclose team-related personal growth goals and then receive feedback about and support for those goals.

2. The coach writes the following words on the blackboard and tells each player to complete the sentence on paper:

On the team, I need to improve my ability to . . .

Sample sentence completions might be “confront other team members about difficult issues” or “acknowledge effort of teammates.” The coach mentions that if several goals seem appropriate, the player should choose the one that she or he feels is most significant and complete the sentence accordingly.

3. As the team finishes completing the sentence, the coach writes the following questions on the board:

In your opinion, how does the sentence completion represent what this team member needs to do for her or his growth?

How challenging do you think this undertaking would be for this person?

How can the team support this person in her or his efforts to meet this goal?

4. The players take turns reading their sentence completions and then take turns receiving feedback from the remaining team members in the form of answers to the posted questions. After receiving feedback, each player decides to keep, modify, or completely change the goal and announces these intentions to the group by restating the final goal.

Activity 5—*Risky Business*

Goals. The goals of this activity include the following: (a) to identify concerns, fears, hopes, reservations, and expectations about what the current competitive season will be like; (b) to allow individuals to express their own fears as well as to listen to those of others; and (c) to acknowledge that risk-taking behavior is often difficult but that it becomes more comfortable as it is repeated.

Materials. The materials needed for this activity are the following: (a) enough 3×5 cards for each person on the team; (b) a pencil for each person on the team; and (c) a hat or box or other container in which to put the completed 3×5 cards.

Process.

1. The coach asks players to each take a 3×5 card and tells them that they will be asked to write down a *hope* that they have for the season on one side of the card. On the other side they will be asked to express a *fear* that they have about the season. Players should not write their names on the cards. The coach collects all the cards in the hat and redistributes them so that each person has someone else's card. The group sits in a circle and the players read aloud the hopes and fears on the card they now have. All hopes and fears will be expressed, yet each individual's hope and fear will remain anonymous.

2. The coach asks team members to describe patterns or themes they notice in the hopes and the fears. After everyone has had a chance to speak, this is a good time for the coach to address the hopes and fears mentioned by the team.

3. This activity should be concluded with a discussion of the nature of risk-taking behavior. The coach should explain that sharing one's thoughts is risky—someone might not understand. It is also a tremendous risk to practice as hard as possible each day—failure is possible. But in both instances the outcome might be very different. When players share their thoughts, someone might understand *very well* how others feel, often making it easier for them to feel that way. In practicing as hard as possible each day players might *succeed* at getting better!

4. The coach should remind team members that risk-taking behavior is an important key to progress!

Activity 6—*Facilitating Openness*

Goals. The goals for this activity include the following: (a) to assist team members in building a group norm of openness; (b) to promote self-disclosure and to develop each person's ability to interact openly during group work; and (c) to enhance each person's understanding of "mistakes" as opportunities for learning.

Materials. A small trophy (or certificate or other award) is all that is needed for this activity.

Process.

1. The coach introduces the goals and then explains the basis for the activity. One way to facilitate openness on a team is to have members of the team to take turns sharing stories about classic mistakes that they made while on the team

and that taught them valuable lessons. They will probably need a couple of minutes to recall such an event.

2. Team members break into two groups and take turns sharing their stories and what they learned from these experiences.

3. The coach states that each group is to decide which member's story was the "best," one that represents the greatest learning or turnaround.

4. The whole team reassembles, and representatives from each group share their group's "winning" story. The whole team then votes on the best story within the team, and that individual receives the award.

5. Ask team members to share their thoughts on the following:

How did you feel when you first shared your story in your group?

How did you feel about the reaction to your story by others in the group?

How did sharing your story affect the lesson you learned from your mistake?

Activity 7—Group Self-Evaluation

Goals. The goals of this activity include the following: (a) to help a group evaluate its own functioning, (b) to provide a way to examine objectively the participation of group members, and (c) to explore the norms that have developed in a team that has been working together for some time.

Materials. The materials needed for this activity are the following: (a) copies of the evaluation form for each player, (b) pencils, and (c) blackboard and chalk.

Process.

1. The coach distributes the Group Climate Inventory (Figure 2) to each person on the team. It is best to do this at the end of a practice session. Players are instructed to fill out the form individually.

2. As soon as everyone has completed the form, each person should calculate her or his score. All of the data are listed on the board.

3. The coach leads a discussion on the data presented, noting particular team behavioral trends, for instance, "Most members of the team think that their teammates are very accepting individuals."

4. Team members are asked to plan new behaviors for the next practice based on the findings presented.

Scoring. The maximum score for any of the aspects of group climate is 20. For example, if a person has a total score of 18 for Numbers 1, 5, 9, and 13, then the member's *perception* is that the team responds to her or him in a genuine manner. A high score for Numbers 2, 6, 10, and 14 indicate the perception that the team responds to that individual in an understanding manner. A high score for Numbers 3, 7, 11, and 15 indicate the perception that the team values that individual. A high score for Numbers 4, 8, 12, and 16 indicate a perception that the team accepts that individual.

If there are 10 people on the team the maximum score for any of the aspects of group climate is 200. If a team projects a total score of 180 for acceptance then the group as a whole perceives each other as being accepting. In discussion the coach should refer to *group* totals or averages.

For each activity the coach was asked to serve as group "facilitator" and to not attempt to necessarily dominate discussion. They could, however, participate in discussion as it seemed appropriate.

Directions: Think about how your fellow team members as a whole normally behave toward you. Within the spaces in front of the items below, place the letter that best corresponds to your perceptions of their behavior.

- A — They can always be counted on to behave this way.
 T — Typically I would expect them to behave this way.
 U — I would usually expect them to behave this way.
 S — They would seldom behave this way.
 R — They would rarely behave this way.
 N — I would never expect them to behave this way.

I would expect my fellow team members to . . .

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1. _____ | -level with me. |
| 2. _____ | -get the drift of what I am trying to say. |
| 3. _____ | -interrupt or ignore my comments |
| 4. _____ | -accept me for what I am. |
| 5. _____ | -feel free to let me know when I "bug" them. |
| 6. _____ | -misconstrue things I say or do. |
| 7. _____ | -be interested in me. |
| 8. _____ | -provide an atmosphere in which I can be myself. |
| 9. _____ | -keep things to themselves to spare my feelings. |
| 10. _____ | -perceive what kind of person I really am. |
| 11. _____ | -include me in what's going on. |
| 12. _____ | -act "judgmental" with me. |
| 13. _____ | -be completely frank with me. |
| 14. _____ | -recognize when something is bothering me. |
| 15. _____ | -respect me, apart from my skills. |
| 16. _____ | -ridicule or disapprove of my peculiarities. |

Scoring Instructions: Group Climate Inventory

Items 3, 6, 9, 12, and 16 are negative behaviors; they should be scored first: A = 0, T = 1, U = 2, S = 3, R = 4, N = 5. All other items are scored the reverse: A = 5, T = 4, U = 3, S = 2, R = 1, N = 0. The ratings in each of the four columns may then be added to obtain scores for each of the following aspects of group climate:

- Column 1 = Genuineness (1, 5, 9, 13)
 Column 2 = Understanding (2, 6, 10, 14)
 Column 3 = Valuing (3, 7, 11, 15)
 Column 4 = Acceptance (4, 8, 12, 16)

Figure 2 — Group Climate Inventory.

Evaluation of Communication Skills Training Program

Seven intercollegiate coaches of interactive teams and 80 female and male athletes on their teams participated in this training program to gain a preliminary perspective

on its effectiveness. Included in the group were four female and three male coaches; three of the females and two of the males coached female teams, and one female and one male coached male teams. A total of 60 female and 20 male athletes participated in the program including an approximately equal number of freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior level athletes. Five NCAA Division I teams (men's basketball, women's basketball, men's water polo, and women's volleyball) and two NCAA Division III teams (women's basketball and women's volleyball) were selected to participate. It is important to note that this was not a tightly controlled research evaluation, but rather a preliminary test of the acceptance and usefulness of the training program by athletes and coaches.

As a part of the training program, each athlete was asked (a) to evaluate each activity in terms of its relationship to communication skills and (b) to describe a specific skill, related to the activity, that they could practice in order to improve their communication skills. They were also encouraged to indicate how the particular activity might impact their own practice or competitive performance. The coaches were also asked to identify one specific skill that their teams could practice in order to improve their interpersonal communication skills.

The impact of interpersonal communication skill training must be examined from several perspectives. The first indication that the training may be of value came from statements made by the majority of the participating athletes who expressed interest in continuing to take part in similar activities to improve their interpersonal communication skills. Similarly, the coaches involved in the program spoke of having a greater appreciation of the value of taking the time to incorporate these activities into their busy seasons.

The second indicator of value, indicating interpersonal communication awareness, is reflected in the responses made by athletes to the statement "Describe your reaction to this activity as it relates to your interpersonal communication skills." Examples of responses to this statement follow:

I should listen more before I react to what has been said.

I see myself differently than others see me.

I have a heightened sense of awareness of my personal goals and communication skills.

It is scary to open up, but this made it easier.

Perhaps another activity could be created specifically related to respecting teammates cultural, racial, etc. differences.

This exercise brought out some basic tenets of communication that I have always taken for granted.

Our team unity is improving.

We have an increased awareness of our *team* communication issues.

Laughing and sharing critical emotions eases tensions.

It helps to understand what others expect of me.

It helps to know the goals of my teammates.

The nature of the responses indicates that interpersonal skills training activities gave team members an opportunity to demonstrate their awareness of interpersonal communication skills/issues and to begin identifying areas in which they might need improvement.

The third indicator of value, levels of interpersonal communication competency, is reflected in the responses made by athletes to the statement “Relative to this activity, identify one skill you could practice to improve your interpersonal communication skills.” Examples of responses to this statement follow:

- I can have more eye contact with the person speaking.
- I will not interrupt when others are speaking.
- I can confront issues right away—they only get worse.
- I will give my opinion more to people with whom I feel intimidated.
- I will support the risks my teammates take in practice.
- I will try to not make assumptions about what others are thinking.
- I should ask for help from my teammates.
- I can use new and improved listening skills even when I’m not really interested.
- I can let my teammates know that it’s OK to not be perfect and to make mistakes.
- I will stop and think about the positive things I did in practice so that I can do them again the next day. I am constantly reminding myself of the negative things.

The nature of these responses indicates that it is possible to increase awareness of interpersonal communication skill competency. In this case, team members and coaches indicated skills that they can practice on their own as well as with help from teammates and/or coaches.

The last indicator of value, the relationship between enhanced interpersonal communication skills and higher levels of performance, is reflected in statements from both coaches and athletes regarding their perceptions of this process. Examples of these statements follow:

In basketball, as in life, you rarely get two chances at something. We’re now better at making the most out of the first time around.

We are following through on the court with what we’re discussing in these activities.

We are performing better this year. Is that because of improved communication skills or because the seniors are gone?

I would like to compare my results on these drills from year to year just as I compare my results on the physical drills.

The activity regarding hopes and fears related directly to our confidence level last weekend. I really felt like we were more confident as a group.

Describing the relationship between enhanced interpersonal communication skills and higher levels of performance is difficult to do in terms of wins and losses. A comment made by one athlete was that their team would change every year; therefore, the problems and strengths they would encounter would always be different. Because the individuals in the group change, their individual skills will also change. These changes will impact the group’s ability to communicate effectively. However, individuals within the group can continue to strengthen

their communication skills to facilitate learning new ways to function as a group. The nature of the athletes' responses regarding team success are associated with goals beyond mere wins and losses, including learning how to be better risk-takers or learning how to increase confidence levels—both goals that affect wins and losses. Their statements specifically indicate that there is a positive correlation between enhanced interpersonal communication skills and higher levels of team performance.

Discussion

The results of the athletes' participation in this interpersonal communication skill training program show that systematic interpersonal communication development can enhance team members' awareness of their own communication skills and/or competency. The athletes and coaches participating in this study indicated that it was a positive experience for their teams.

A controlled research study examining the effectiveness of a communication skills program is needed. It is also suggested that activities that might be specifically incorporated into the practice session might relate more directly to the athletic endeavor. Additionally, to further support the connection between enhanced interpersonal skills and performance levels, it is recommended that coaches (a) evaluate a team over a period of years to determine progress with communication skill development and the relationship of that development to team success, and (b) continue to identify methods of practicing and reinforcing both interpersonal communication skills and the positive behaviors of team members.

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