

## **The Coaching Process as Sensemaking**

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### Introduction

The last decade has seen the concept of ‘player’ or ‘athlete centered coaching’ firmly established in the coaches’ lexicon amongst both practitioners (Sport New Zealand; International Rugby Board) and academics (de Souza and Oslin, 2008; Kidman, 2005; Kidman and Lombardo, 2010). Therefore, as an academic, I was delighted that in the first edition of the *Journal for Athlete Centered Coaching*, Lynn Kidman and Dawn Penney recognized the need to ignite some scholarly discussion surrounding athlete centered coaching, and in doing so explore the meanings, values and practices of this coaching approach. I certainly concur with Kidman and Penney (2014) that in attempts to operationalize what athlete-centered coaching may look like for the practicing coach, “there are dangers that the significance of underpinning values may become lost amidst somewhat functional ways of thinking about Athlete Centered Coaching” (Kidman and Penney, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, in response to the call to arms to “re-think and extend the meanings of athlete centered coaching” (Kidman and Penney, 2014, p.2), I present my commentary to extend our understanding of athlete centered coaching through the application of sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

### The Coaching Process as Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a process of social construction whereby as people negotiate their lives and confront events and endeavor to interpret and explain salient cues based on their experience (Weick, 1995). As people make sense of their experiences, they give meaning to them and this guides future behaviour (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). Consequently, Weick (2009) postulates that there are a number of intermingling ‘sensitizing concepts’ underpinning the process of ‘making sense’. In applying sensemaking to the coaching process, one will see the stakeholders, that is, the

athletes (and coaches) come together and collectively experience events, when they act based on their pre-defined socially constructed beliefs [identity] and generate tangible outcomes [cues]. Athletes use these cues to review and discover what is occurring, construct credible explanations of their experience (e.g., rationales for coach behavior and decisions), whilst further constructing and re-constructing their own identity through the process.

A sensemaking understanding of the coaching process celebrates the agency of athletes in constructing the meaning of their experience (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Human agency is the capacity for people to make choices, and in particular refers to both the creativity and the motivation that drives individuals to break away from scripted patterns of behaviour (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As Weick (1995, p. 8) argues “sensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery”. The applicability of sensemaking to athlete centered coaching lies in the central agency given to those within the social network to be the author of their future. This central agency can both be a concern for the athlete centered coach and an outcome for those practicing it’s philosophies (Kidman, 2005). These processes are depicted in the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy whereby “believing is seeing” (Weick, 2009, p. 14). For the athlete, an awareness (conscious or subconscious) of their agency and role as author (or personal authority) is likely to capitalize on their self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and lead to self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). This process further supports the empowerment drive and humanistic beliefs associated with athlete centered coaching.

Despite sensemaking’s central role in constructing experience and behaviour, it is apparent that as sensemaking can be a subtle, socially located process and easily taken for granted, “the transient nature of sensemaking belies its central role in cultivating meaning and determining human behaviour (Weick et al., 2005). However, if coaches identify themselves as athlete centered, and consider athletes’ needs as paramount, sensemaking (despite its subtlety) offers not only a framework for coaches to breakdown the complexities of the athlete experience from a point of praxis, but also a framework to enact Kidman and Penney’s (2014) understanding of athlete centered coaching.

### The Athlete Centered Coach and ‘Sensible Environments’

‘Sensible environments’ are shaped by identifying and understanding sense-giving triggers, enabling the act of sense giving by leaders and members (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) and the socially discursive and educative practices

in negotiating and cultivating meaning (Lesser and Storck, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007; Wood and Bandura, 1989). All of these constructions become important when we consider the position of the coach, who Goosby-Smith (2009) cites as a sense maker and sense giver. For athlete centered coaching, there are two relevant applications for sensemaking I would like to raise in this short commentary; sensemaking as a form of self-awareness and 'leading by compass not map'.

### Sensemaking and Self Awareness

It is important to note that for the athlete centered coach there are two layers of sensemaking that one needs to be cognizant of; sensemaking of the athletes and their response to coaching, as well as that of the coach as a consequence of his or her experience. As Kidman and Penney (2014) stipulate, "The essence of athlete centered is awareness, it is about athletes becoming aware of themselves, and coaches becoming aware of themselves so they can help athletes" (p. 3). A product of 'sensible experiences' for both athlete and coach is a heightened sense of cognition in order to interpret experience, from which facilitate a state of self-awareness. For the coach, it could be argued that the very acknowledgment and awareness of the presence of sensemaking in the coaching process will enable the coach to enact the underpinning values of athlete centered coaching. For example, coaches need an awareness of athletes and the coaches' socially constructed histories (Kidman & Penney, 2014), the agency of athletes and a need for decentralizing of power (Kidman, 2005) and the role of environmental cues and therefore the significance of coaching behaviors (good and bad) in athletes making sense and constructing meaning (Jones and Wallace, 2005). If athlete centered coaching is to offer a "change in coaching focus that empowers athletes towards discovery based learning" and ultimately ownership of their sporting experience (Kidman and Penney, 2014), then a coach needs be able to offer what Weick (1995) terms as 'sensible environments' (with sensemaking emphasis at the fore).

### 'Leading by compass not map'

One particular salient leadership approach relevant to athlete centered coaching that has a powerful 'sensitizing effect' on the social landscape is that of relinquishing power and authority by acknowledging "I don't know" (Weick, 2009, p. 263). This notion shares considerable similarity with the underpinning of athlete centered coaching, namely an emphasis on promoting athlete awareness, independence and responsibility for learning and performance (Kidman, 2005; Kidman and Lombardo, 2010; Kidman and Penney, 2014). Weick

(2009, p. 265) argues, “People who act this way help others make sense of what they are facing.” Sensemaking is not about rules, and options and decisions. Sensemaking does not presume that there are generic right answers about things like taking risk or following rules. Instead, sensemaking is about how to stay in touch with context...The effective leader is someone who searches for the better questions, accepts inexperience, stays in motion, channels decisions to those with the best knowledge of the matter at hand, crafts good stories, is obsessed with updating, encourages improvisation, and is deeply aware of personal ignorance.

Weick (2009, p. 264) uses the metaphor of “navigating by means of a compass rather than a map” to describe these leadership practices that create sensible environments. He argues that whilst maps may be the basis of performance but in an equivocal, unknowable world, the compass is the basis of learning and renewal. He states:

“It is less crucial that people have a specific destination, and more crucial for purposes of sensemaking that they have the capability to act their way into an understanding of where they are, who they are, and what they are doing.”

In a partially charted world, if coaches admit that they don’t know, then athlete and coach are more likely to mobilize resources for meaningful mutual direction (Weick, 2009), namely learning. The coach who can lead with a compass invariably will be able to cater to individuality when working with athletes (Kidman and Penney, 2014), the variance of their needs and rates of development.

## Conclusion

I aimed to present a case that if we are to stay true to the underpinnings discussed by Kidman and Penney (2014), applying the notion of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to our understanding of the athlete and coach experience, may shed new light in our journey towards a clearer understanding of athlete centered coaching approaches so that we can effectively understand the athlete and their individual needs.

The concept of sensemaking offers a medium to re-connect philosophically and practically with the underpinning values of athlete-centered coaching, and in doing so commits to both the notion of ‘athletes’ voice’ (Kidman and Penney, 2014, p. 2) and gives agency to the athlete as author of both their experience and

future. The acknowledgement of the world as unknowable and unpredictable, and the place of sensemaking amongst the milieu re-acknowledges athlete centered coaching as not “an approach with a magic formula” (Kidman and Penney, 2014, p. 3) but rooted in complexity. A sensemaking perspective further grounds athlete centered coaching as a non-linear pedagogy, and helps to ensure that practice does not become reduced to a set of functions or tools.

I hope this short commentary offers a fresh and alternative response to Kidman and Penney’s (2014) call for discourse to reflect upon present understandings of athlete centered coaching practice and in turn may generate some discourse of its own. To the practitioners I hope this paper presents some thought provoking concepts to help understand athlete centered coaching. To academics I hope sensemaking may offer new perspective through which to investigate phenomena connected to athlete centered coaching, to further explore ways athlete centered coaching is interpreted and enacted (Kidman and Penney, 2014).

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