



WHY GOOD COACHES QUIT; HOW TO DEAL WITH THE OTHER STUFF

By Rick Aberman and John Anderson © 2005 USOC

"The effective management of others is the result of effective management of oneself".

In professional sports, teams spend millions on player development but virtually nothing on the development of people. Talent and technical expertise are important, however it is clear to us that one's moral, emotional, and creative intelligence are the critical differentiators when it comes to performing at high levels.

The same can be said when it comes to being an effective coach. For most coaches, professional development means attending clinics and conventions to learn the latest innovations in training. Very little attention is given to dealing with the emotional world of leading a team of competitors. Time spent learning how to deal with "the other stuff" or how to maintain your own sanity as a leader is sorely lacking.

Rick: Many coaches ask my advice to help them become better leaders. Upon some discussion I soon discover that what they are really asking for is; "How can I get my team to do what I want them to do"? Of course my advice is to begin with you.

John: I now have a greater understanding of how my actions contribute to the behavior of the team. I have consciously tried to raise my self-awareness and become a greater observer of self. That said, it is much easier said than done.

A couple of years ago during the course of a tense game a player approached me in the dugout. He told me that my behavior was having a negative effect on the team. I was critical of our team, I was blaming the umpires, and everything was happening with a raised voice. He basically told me that I was scaring the hell out of the other players. Here I was asking them to stay focused and in control, but I was not helping. I was holding the team back from practicing the very thing I was trying to teach.

Today our players expect that we spend dedicated time talking about important emotional competencies. We take the time to educate and review those things that we believe are the critical differentiators of performance. Our players see it as a competitive advantage. They now ask for it.

The Performance Sweet Spot

To sustain an optimal level of performance requires conscious effort and continued self-awareness. Taking into account talent and technology, the difference between effectiveness and superior performance is often quite small. We have chosen to focus our discussion on the critical competencies necessary to perform under pressure and at very high levels.

These competencies include moral competencies, emotional competencies, and creative competencies. Together acting in harmony, we call it the "Performance Sweet Spot".

Moral intelligence has to do with acting consistently within your principles, values and beliefs. The Institute for Global Ethics in Bangor, ME has conducted research from a variety of cultures worldwide to identify some universal principles. They identified: respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and compassion as standards for ethical and responsible behavior. If one of these principles is violated, the credibility of the leader will be questioned and a relationship bond is weakened.

What do these principles look like in action?

- Being respectful of others and of one's self.
- Being responsible for individual actions and behaviors as a member of a community.
- Being honest in the things we do, including honesty in our relationships.
- Being fair when we deal with others.
- Being compassionate when it comes to the limitations and the misfortunes of others.

With moral intelligence, think of it as having the courage to make the right decision even though it may not serve you personally.

The second component of the performance sweet spot involves **emotional intelligence**. We define emotional intelligence as; "The ability to stay focused on a goal in the face of competing emotions". It is the capacity to create alignment between your goals, actions/behaviors, and values.

As human beings, we have the ability to experience a variety of emotions often at the same time. When you think of sports or performance, it is possible that we may feel both excited and fearful simultaneously. We can be happy with our success, yet sad our career may be over. We can experience both excitement and fear when we attempt to hit a game winning shot. Emotional intelligence is about staying focused on the goal, executing, even though we are feeling a variety of often-competing emotions.

Almost everything we do in sports is about emotional intelligence. Skill and technical expertise are important however; most of the research (see Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence www.eiconsortium.org) demonstrates that emotional intelligence is most important when it comes to sustained optimal performance. There are plenty of people who are smart and talented but do not do well or reach their potential. If you imagine two individuals with equal talent, why does one achieve their potential and the other does not?

Take for example the emotional competency that looks at impulse control. October headlines on FoxSports.com read: **"Tavares pulls a 'Kevin Brown', breaks hand."** The reference is to Julian Tavares, a pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals who punched a phone and broke his hand after a disappointing outing during the NLCS Playoff Game. Kevin Brown is a highly paid pitcher of the New York Yankees. Brown, whom after a similarly disappointing performance, punched the concrete wall of the Yankee dugout resulting in a broken hand.

Both of these high performers became overwhelmed by their strong emotional reactions. Everyone can understand the emotions of frustration and disappointment. The decisions one makes concerning the expression of those emotions is important and in this case problematic. It is possible to become more conscious of your decisions when facing conflicting emotions or ethical decisions. The emotional competence of impulse control becomes a critical differentiator when confronting the pressure and demands of performing at a high level. Unfortunately for Kevin Brown, he is now known as much for his lack of impulse control as he is for being a talented athlete.

Continuing to list other well-known athletes or performers, leaders or coaches who lack important components of emotional intelligence would take up too much space. But it is interesting to think of this when you are evaluating individual talent and individual and/or team performance.

Emotional intelligence is also about making the right decision when presented with ethical challenges. Competing in the world of sport where the stakes seem to be getting higher and higher has created a significant gap between managing our emotions, and making the right decision. Again, with more pressure to perform, and to reach our goals quickly, sustained optimal performance requires developing your emotional intelligence and making the right decisions. It is never too late. Unlike our IQ it is possible to improve your EI. We can always learn to manage our emotions or become more empathic.

Creative Intelligence is the final piece of the performance sweet spot. Creative intelligence is the ability to see things from a different perspective. We all have the tendency to perceive data in the same way over and over again. Because of this we are often limited in our ability to solve problems creatively. How we go about solving problems is often more problematic than the problem itself.

When confronted with repeating problems, expanding beyond our normal set is critical. This first requires self-awareness, the ability to notice that we are stuck. The next step is to challenge yourself to take a different view of your situation. Again, working smarter not harder. The eventual relief of not pounding your head against the wall will create other possibilities. This "letting go" is what artists often refer to as a "surrendering to the creative experience".

Often this process happens naturally as people describe "hitting rock bottom". Another view suggests, "If it hurts bad enough change will occur". While sometimes this happens on it's own, often the cost is too great, i.e. physical health, personal relationships, and career, etc. Practicing creative competence is something you can be more conscious of. You can improve your creative intelligence through self-awareness, and surrendering to the creative experience.

Why Bother?

For a variety of reasons, the things we may have learned from our families 25 years ago are no longer being taught. Our society has now become dependent on our institutions to teach the basic skills of motivation and how to play nice with others; both emotional competencies. Today we look to our leaders outside the home, our teachers, coaches, leaders, and corporations to be our guides. As a coach, you may not have signed up for that in the beginning, however once having been at it for a while I'm sure you will experience the added responsibilities.

Our advice is not to ignore it-- but embrace it. See it as an opportunity to move beyond where you are now. We strongly suggest that you invest more energy teaching the critical EI skills than the teaching of technical skills.

In today's world emotional intelligence has become a critical differentiator when it comes to sustained optimal performance. We are committed to teaching these skills just like you may teach a proper follow through. We continue to see the benefits of our work whether it is in sports and or performance in business. With practice and commitment you can improve your ability to consistently reach the performance sweet spot.

Soft Skills and the Bottom Line: A current look at the University of Minnesota Baseball Program

We understand the competitive spirit. We also understand that in order to compete at a high level for a long period of time requires using all the resources available. We cannot afford to rely only on hard work. We also know that we cannot just rely on physical talent alone. The ability to utilize and maximize the talent we have has been the key to our success.

We have tried hard to change the culture of the University of Minnesota baseball program by implementing some of these "soft skills". Over the past five years of using these "soft skills", we have been able to maintain a fairly high level of performance.

As John enters his 24th season as a head coach, players on the University of Minnesota baseball team have earned a championship ring in six of the past seven seasons. Perhaps we are nearing the point where we can say that we are able to sustain an optimal level of performance, or at least until next year.

Excerpted from the new book "Why Good Coaches Quit; How to Deal With the Other Stuff" 2nd Ed. By: **Rick Aberman**, Ph.D. aberm001@umn.edu Sports Psychotherapist, The Lennick Aberman Group, and **John Anderson**, ander014@umn.edu Head Baseball Coach, University of Minnesota. To purchase the book visit: <http://www.coacheschoice.com>