

I see you

In Western Africa, Zulus greet each other by saying: Skihona - I see you. The other person returns the greeting: Sawubona - you've been seen.

Everyone can count how many apples are growing in one apple tree; many of us think they can count in advance how many apple trees will grow out of one apple.

A young athlete has many needs, and one of the most important of these needs is to be seen. When we, as coaches, are observing the performances of our athletes, what do we actually see and how far ahead can we look? Do we see our prejudices in the athlete rather than what s/he might become? Do we see an apple, a seed, a sprout, a tree or a nuisance? Being heard and understood is as important as being seen. According to one view, we are born and remain alive in the discussions with each other. It is through these discussions that a person receives a spirit, becomes visible, and begins to exist. Our communication takes us in a positive direction, if the participants not only feel that they are heard and understood but also experience that the exchange of ideas gives rise to hope. How often are we able to achieve this in coaching?

A lonely coach may be caught in the trap of linear thinking

While many coaches are competent in what they do, they usually work alone. Lonely working may expose us to linear thinking. The team becomes a project that we try to manage and control from start to finish. We draft visions and strategies in order to reach the desired targets. When the goals have been set and communicated to everyone, it is time to move on and carry out the fine ideas. It seems that all coaches and athletes in all clubs want to become Finnish and World Champions. If problems are faced, attempts are made to solve them, of course. And when a

problem has been solved, everything continues as before. In the best case people may realize that problems result from failed solutions, which could be used as learning experiences. A coach struggling in the trap of linearity is often more interested in problems than in solutions and fails to understand that solutions do not necessarily involve problems. The coach may become a detective searching for mistakes.

If we continue doing what we have done before, we are unable to create anything new. We will run out of creativity, if we start avoiding mistakes; a new source of creativity is found only after we become disobedient. A linear seasonal plan will look great on a whiteboard. Fortunately, life is so merciful that it will remind us of the difference between theory and practice. In theory, there is no difference between the two, but in practice we can often find a difference. This blind spot can often be found in coaching, irrespective of whether the coach has a university degree or whether s/he has learnt the job through many years of experience.

Non-linear activities involve reflection; one's own ways of doing are questioned and new coaching methods are sought and examined. An athlete and a team can become better only when everyone involved is developing. If the coach fails to reflect on his/her own actions, it is difficult to crusade outside one's own thinking. The twenty-year-long experience of a coach may actually amount to an experience of one year, which has been repeated for twenty years.

The main thing is to raise good people

When an athlete succeeds, those around become more interested in her/him. The coaches and support teams tend to focus on winners in order to share their success. This is typical of all human beings. When do people need most support and encouragement: when they make progress and succeed or when they remain on a plateau or lag behind? Stig-Ole Gustavsson; who has coached

Ingemar Stenmark, Stig Strand and Thomas Rigbrandt of IK Fjällvinden, once said: "The main thing is to raise good people, the results will follow." The same three athletes used to be the successful Swedish national team in alpine skiing.

Sport sociologists have calculated that in the industrialized countries, there will be one elite athlete of international level per 250 000 inhabitants. This means that Finland will have a total 21 such individuals in all disciplines. It is fairly clear that there is little room in this group for many representatives of one discipline. When Hanno Möttölä found his way to the NBA after having played in three Finnish basketball clubs, many boys began to think that what had seemed impossible now might be possible. A few years ago, Möttölä's home club made calculations based on the then budget and on number of club members. These calculations showed that their next "own man" would leave for the NBA after 200 years. We must have dreams, otherwise they cannot come true. It hardly hurts anyone if 20 young downhill skiers imagine that they are Kalle Palander, but difficulties may arise, if the fathers of these young skiers think that they are Jouni Palander. On the other hand, in the world conference of coaching held in Turkey last summer, Marks Williams pointed out that behind every elite athlete there is a more or less "crazy parent".

The coach does not make the athlete

The coach does not make an athlete, nor does a parent. It is the athlete who makes him/herself an athlete, if possible - sometimes even despite coaching. We have to have the will to see the athletes when they need it most. We have to be able to perceive what they might achieve, and the span must be longer than that between now and the next competition or season. For us, the greatest achievements mean that we manage to turn young people into athletes who want to continue their career till adulthood and then see what they really can achieve.

Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" has a line : "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." These cracks can serve as sources of light in our work. Coaching and individual development do not proceed like a train; the process is more like that in a hatchery. Eggs can be lit and kept warm in optimal conditions. However, it is important to remember at all times that we cannot crack eggshells, open them from outside and then reclose those that still need more hatching.

Skihona – I see you.

Sawubona – you've been seen.

Matti Henttinen