

September 2026. Issue 2: Communicating Effectively, Rhys Deighan and Dylan Waller.

Sports Coaching & Development



A Practitioner's Guide

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About The Authors

Rhys Deighan, Founder, Writer and Researcher.

Over the previous 2 years I have gained a HND in Sports Coaching & Development, and now study at Stirling University. In addition to this, I have 5 years of experience coaching multiple age groups and teams within North Lanarkshire, including experience at an elite academy and leading a U18's women's team. In future, I plan to continue progressing through UEFA Licences while obtaining the highest degree of education possible.

Dylan Waller, Writer and Researcher.

For the past 1/2 decade I have amassed coaching experience at youth-grassroots level, led a U-18's women's team, alongside serving as an assistant to various senior women's teams competing at regional and championship levels. I also achieved a HND in Sports Coaching & Development and currently hold the UEFA C Licence. Future progression includes completing the Football Coaching Degree at Edinburgh Napier and eventually breaking into the senior men's game as a coach.

About A Practitioner's Guide

As the SFA report “Coaches and volunteers are the lifeblood of the community game in Scotland”. Often unpaid, they give up significant amounts of time and resource to helping their clubs and the wider community” (1). Further to this, a 2015 study indicated that 77% of coaches in Scotland engage in voluntary work (2).

As coaches, we often dedicate ourselves and our time for no monetary benefit. However, limited training times amongst other commitments such as family and work life makes it difficult for us to become the best coach we can be (3). Finally, it is important to note that coaches in particular are responsible for the early stages of a child's sporting development; ensuring they build a positive relationship with sport is central to the Active Scotland Delivery Plan (4).

The aim for this project is to bridge the gap between academic research and practical coaching by presenting evidence-based knowledge in a digestible and applicable format. This project will also include interviews with influential members of the sports industry, professional practitioners, and volunteers.

Issue 2: Writer's Note

This issue will focus on the intricacies of communication, discussing: Why it is essential, guidelines for different methods, maximising clarity and overcoming barriers.

These are some of the questions which we answer in this issue, to give you greater knowledge on the topic, allowing for your sessions to flow better and help players learn quicker.

In the future, we will investigate the components of communication in more detail, however this issue is designed to provide an overview.

1. Why Communication Matters

Effective communication from a coach can help develop a player's morale, self-confidence and reduce anxiety (5).

A study conducted to gauge thoughts regarding coach communication showed that 80% of interviewed participants confirmed they use short, clear instruction – finding it helps players process information easier (6).

An excerpt from this study can be read below:

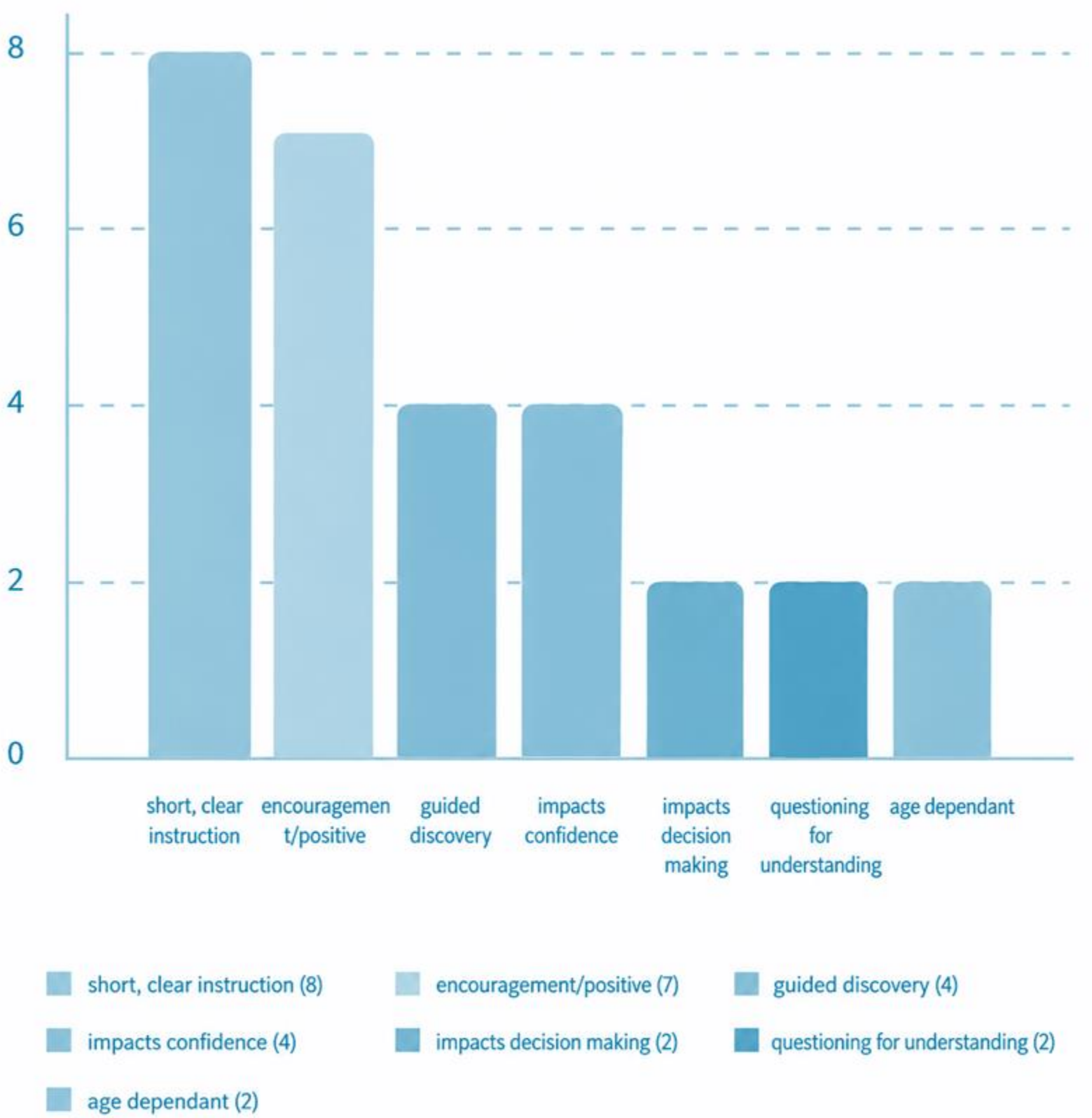
Coach F - “Keep it clear and concise, once they have nailed that part then start to gradually build upon that by adding finer details”

Coach A - “You need to be very clear in your communication as that helps get your message across. Sometimes the coach shouts too much, should maybe let it go for an extra minute as you don't always need to say something”

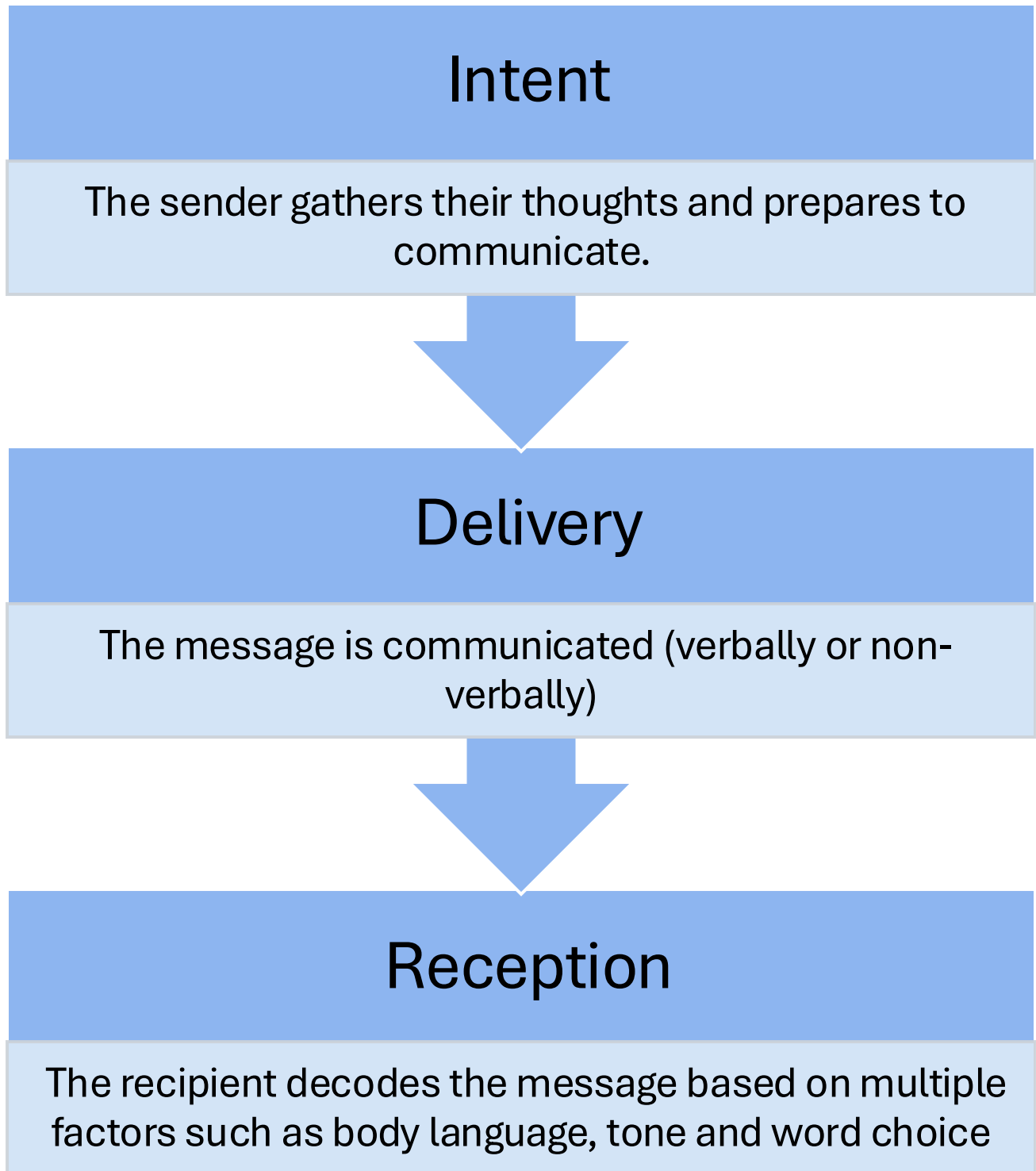
It is apparent that clarity and simplicity forefronts understanding according to these responses, which coincide with Ashford et al., (2022) articulating shorter communication equals faster interpretation, therefore faster action. The faster a player thinks, the quicker they learn.

***A bar graph showing what was discussed and by how many of the ten coaches can be seen on the following slide.**

Coach Communication Styles Results (6)



2. What is Communication? (7).



Communication is “One of the most effective ways to amplify the sporting experience” (6). How well a coach can portray their information and ideas to the minds of their athletes can determine how efficiently development occurs. Communication is broken into three essential parts (8):

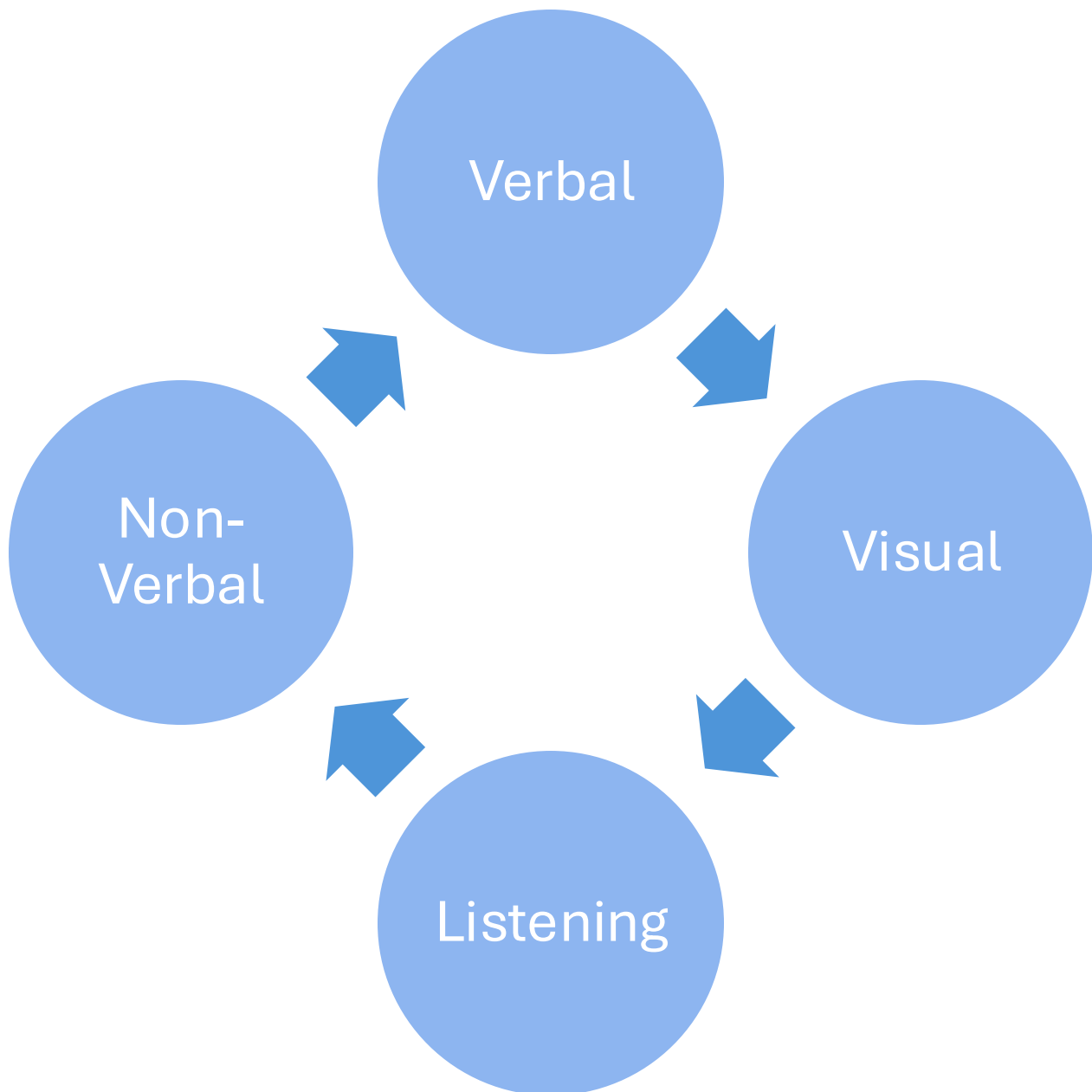
A. Information (what is communicated)

B. Utterance (how it is communicated)

C. Understanding (how information is received)

Clear and concise messages as key to understanding, with 1–2-word instructions allowing people to interpret what is said faster! (8).

3. Guidelines for Effective Communication

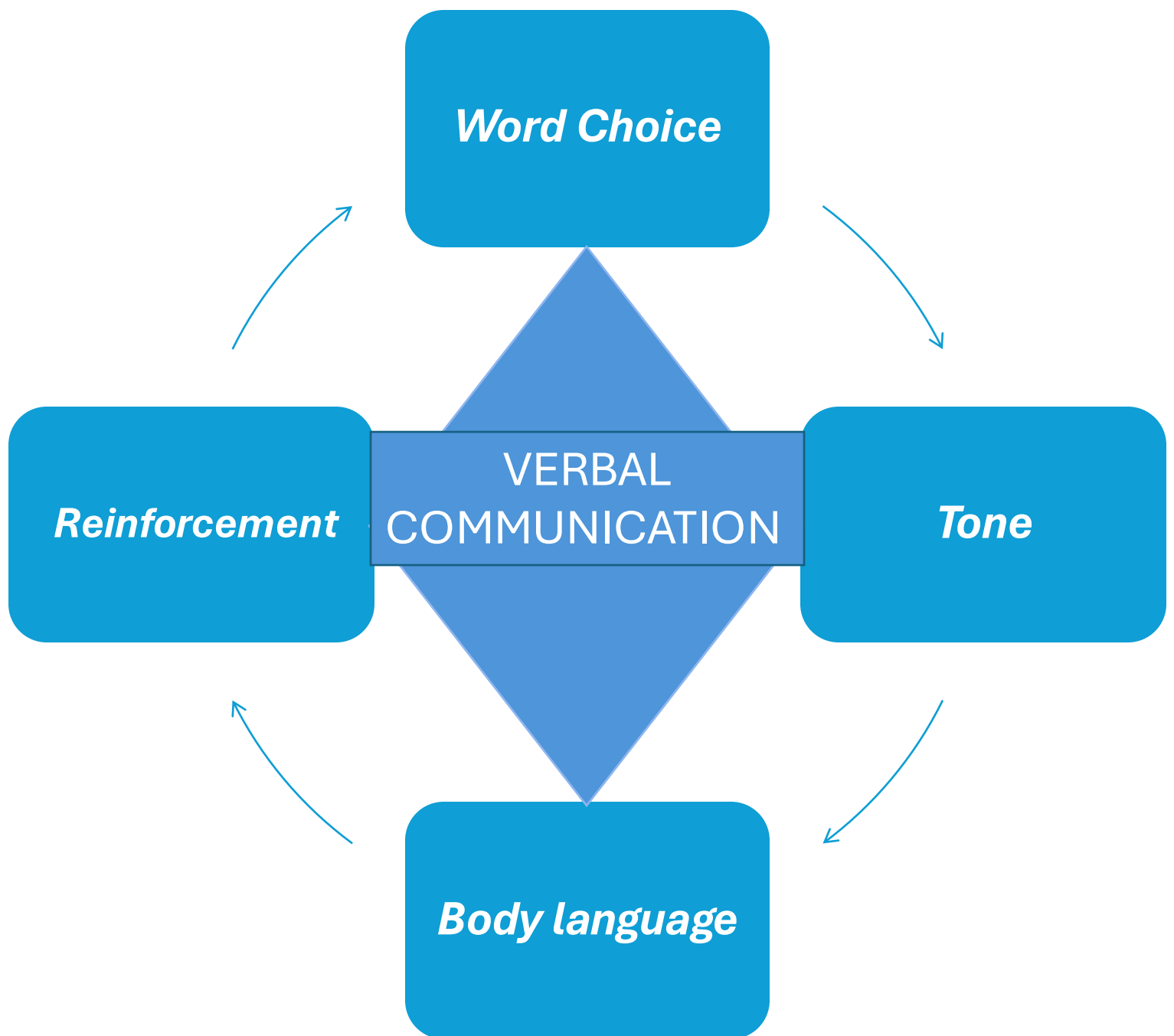


(7) Verbal: Verbal communication is either written or spoken words, and consists of three steps: firstly, is the thought or point that the sender wishes to communicate. Secondly, is the language, tone, volume and non-verbal aspects with which you communicate. Finally, the receiver interprets the message. Critically, we must adapt our communication in a way that the receiver will be able to understand.

Key areas in the verbal communication process (9):

1. Word choice – avoid words with negative connotations, be positive, constructive and encouraging as often as possible, and use language that is understandable to the player.
2. Reinforcement – Imagine you are talking to an animal – they do not understand the words you say, but they can understand body language and tone of voice. For example, if you shout something like “I LOVE YOU!” to a dog, they will receive the well-meaning message as a threat. Similarly, within coaching, the spoken word only accounts for 7% of effective communication, so ensure you reinforce your messages correctly!

(10) Non-verbal communication is critical in sports coaching, influencing athlete’s psychological safety, decision making, relationship building and risk taking. Key features of positive body language: Relaxed posture and breathing, positive and appropriate eye contact, face the child or young person to ensure they can see you, kneeling to reduce the distance between yourself and the child or young person (literally “ getting on their level”), warm gestures such as talking with your hands, and nodding and smiling.



Key Point: Notice how verbal communication includes visual communication too – the components are not isolated; they all work together to give our players a clear message.

Visual and Non-Verbal Communication

• **Body Language**

Body language can be used to exaggerate points, add emotion and positively influence concepts when speaking to players.

• **Demonstrations**

Demonstrations thrive when combined with exaggerating body language, and concise verbal instruction. Remember a picture is worth 1000 words!

As seen on the previous page, the infographic explaining visual communication is easy to read, and slightly more engaging than only words on a screen.

For your players, demonstrations mean less words, more action and faster communication, increasing game-time, understanding and engagement!

A 2017 study by Hallewell and Lackovic aimed to explore how universities used pictures within their psychology lectures. It was found that only 33% referred to the pictures explicitly. Carpenter, Witherby and Tauber expanded on this in 2020 arguing that students over endorse pictures leading them to believe they understand more than they realistically do. (11)

❖ **A picture without context means nothing. Allow your participants to understand the "why" not just telling and showing "how".**

❖ **Transferrable knowledge sticks best!**

"Information presented to students, including visual representations, needs to be accompanied with suitable teacher critique and guidance for students to develop their visual literacy" (11).

What does this mean?



Communication styles should not be seen as "separate" but as parts of a whole, which when all used in conjunction create effective communication.

In Possession Phase 3



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Key points:

- Angled midfield
- Line-breaking
- Forward runs
- Creativity



Here is an example of visual communication we prepared for a friendly game in college. The team shape is clear, supported by minimal instructions on the side, and a video. This allowed players to conceptualise what was being asked of them.

It can also be helpful to send images, videos and clips into WhatsApp groups for players to view in their own time, reducing the information required at training – only requiring a quick reference!

Active Listening: “Even if you’re in charge of a team, the only way to truly understand your players is with a listening ear. Creating opportunities for people to voice their thoughts builds trust and invites respect.” (12). Effective listening techniques: Give your full attention without distractions or interruptions, use subtle gestures to demonstrate that you are listening, for example regular eye contact, and nods, ask questions and take a genuine interest, summarise what has been said to you (9).



4. Barriers to Communication (9)

As we all know, communication is not always a straight-forward task, so developing an understanding of the barriers involved in the process may help streamline your messaging.

1. **Environment:** Factors such as temperature, noise, distractions, and relationships (with coaches, players, or home-life) can also cause communication breakdowns. If a player does not seem to be responding as they usually would, consider these factors.
2. **Emotions:** If one of your players are experiencing negative emotional states such as apprehension, anger, stress or displaying signs of tiredness/sickness, communication becomes more difficult. It is often a good idea to bring them to the side for a 1-1 discussion to better understand how they are feeling.
3. **Language:** Use language relative to the recipient's age and stage of development. Communicate with the individual; consider their personality and any additional support needs (ASN) you are aware of – a future issue will touch more on ASN in sports! Generally, be concise and positive.
4. **Fear:** Performers require psychological safety. As a coach every player in your care deserves an environment where they feel safe and comfortable. Build relationships and trust between the players and coaches.

5. Our Tips: How to Encourage Communication

- *Build trust and connection between the coach and player.*

- *Reinforce words with changes in volume, tone, speed, body language and movement.*

- *Discuss preferred communication styles with your peers and players.*

- *Practice active listening – be attentive and don't interrupt!*

- *Ask genuine questions and take an interest in their day.*

UK Coaching Excerpts (12)

Effective Communication

7% Spoken word
38% Tone of voice
55% Body language

Practical top tips

What can you do to develop your own communication skills? Remember, these tips are relevant when coaching everyone, not just people with hearing impairment.

Ask: Always ask! – Don't just guess or make an assumption about how a person would like you to communicate with them, as everybody is different. As a result of you asking, the deaf person is likely to feel more comfortable and will appreciate that you are keen to support them. They might even give you some handy tips!

Demonstrate, demonstrate, demonstrate – All good coaches should demonstrate. Demonstrating is especially useful for deaf people as it supports visual learning.

Talking while demonstrating – Talk clearly while demonstrating an activity, and try and face the group when doing so. Don't forget to check for understanding and clarify if necessary. Don't single people out when checking, but ensure anyone with additional support requirements has heard and understood you.

Positioning – When you are giving instructions or speaking to your players, ensure you are in a position where everyone can clearly see you. Good communication also relies heavily on facial gestures, lip reading and body language.

Stand still – As much as you may want to move about constantly to convey energy and enthusiasm, where possible stand in one place when delivering instructions.

Equipment – Use it! Tactics boards are a fantastic way of getting your ideas and instructions across, not just to deaf players, but to all of your players. Use flags, bibs and cones to convey visual instructions and to start and stop activity.

Encouragement and praise – Praising participants for good effort or success is an important element to any coached session. Think about visual ways of delivering feedback; for example, the traffic lights system or a good old fashioned thumbs up/thumbs down approach.

Interventions – Making interventions to develop players while allowing the activity to flow is vital. Consider how you will make these coaching interventions when working with a deaf person or group.

Involving everyone in conversations – Questions and answers are important in developing your players. It can, however, be difficult for a deaf person to understand a group conversation fully. Ensure people talk one at a time and that you, as the coach, clarify everyone's understanding.

One at a time! – Ensure people do not talk at the same time; lip-reading or trying to follow more than one person at a time is impossible for everyone!

Learn some basic British Sign Language (BSL)

– BSL is a language in its own right. It is a visual language using handshapes, facial expressions, gesture and body language to communicate. It is great if you are able to learn some basic BSL to aid communication. There are lots of resources available to help you.

Use your voice – Speak clearly and naturally, as this will benefit the whole group. A deaf person's preferred communication method may be lip-reading and listening. Even if a deaf person is predominantly using BSL, lip patterns are an important part of this.



Principles To Apply This Month



Communicate With The Individual



Be Concise, Encouraging and Positive



Connect Before You Correct



Reinforce Your Messaging With Multiple Methods



Coaches' Voice

An Interview with David Mitchell, PhD student and Sports Coaching & Development Lecturer.

Why is Communication Important ?

Communication is central to everything we do. It is important to recognise that communication can take many different forms and operate across a wide range of contexts. Different approaches and pedagogies may therefore need to be utilised to ensure that communication is effective. Our role is to identify the most appropriate two-way process, not only to share and explain information, but also to listen, receive feedback and develop understanding. Without effective communication, our ability to build relationships, support others and achieve shared outcomes would be significantly limited.

How Do You Manage to Communicate Effectively?

This is a broad question, as communication and language are socially constructed and can be interpreted differently depending on the individual, context and environment. Language can also be influential and, at times, may be used to shape meaning, power and understanding. Effective communication therefore involves identifying the most appropriate way to convey a message so that it can be clearly understood. This requires flexibility, active listening and the ability to adapt communication strategies to meet the needs of different individuals and situations.



Coaches' Voice

What are some barriers you have faced in the past and how did you overcome them?

More recently, I have become increasingly aware of the diversity of students and participants I work with, and how easily messages can be misunderstood, lost or interpreted differently if information is presented in only one way.

As groups become increasingly diverse, I have found it important to adapt my communication by speaking clearly and at an appropriate pace, checking understanding, and following up sessions or seminars with additional information in different formats. Providing written information, feedback and opportunities for clarification can help reinforce key messages.

One of the greatest challenges is recognising that there is no single method of communication that works for everyone. The ongoing challenge is therefore to develop and refine a range of approaches that allow communication to be as accessible, inclusive and effective as possible.



Coaches' Voice

As a youth coach, communication is central to everything that I do. Communication engages the players into the session that you have planned, allowing the session to flow and makes it fun for all involved. It also breaks down barriers between coaches and players allowing them to discuss issues either related to training or in their home life with you without judgment.

Barriers in this include if a child has their parent/carer close by and feels unable to chat freely, a good coach will notice this and find a way to help resolve the situation. Other barriers include if a child is embarrassed about his situation or is feeling excluded or bullied within the group, a good coach will pick up these signals.

Communication is fundamental in a child's progression, whether its praising their development, pointing out areas to improve or just becoming a trusted adult, nothing is more important in a child's life.

Steven - Grassroots Youth Coach



Coaches' Voice

As a coach, I see communication as the foundation of any good coach-player relationship. It allows me to clearly explain expectations, tactics and roles, while also giving players the opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts. Good communication helps create trust and ensures that everyone understands what we are trying to achieve. It is also important that communication is a two-way process — coaching is not just about giving instructions, but listening and understanding the players as well.

There are many barriers that can affect communication within a team. Players have different personalities, confidence levels and ways of responding to information, so the same message may not work for everyone. Players may also be reluctant to speak up because they are afraid of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing. As coaches, we can also create barriers without realising it through our tone, body language or the way we deliver criticism. It is therefore important to adapt our communication and create an environment where players feel comfortable being honest and asking questions

Communication can directly influence how a team functions and performs. When players know what is expected of them and feel that they are listened to, they are more likely to take responsibility, respond to feedback and work effectively with others. Good communication can also help prevent misunderstandings and resolve problems before they become bigger issues. For me, effective communication is about creating an environment where players feel valued, understood and confident enough to contribute.

Davie - Grassroots Youth Coach

THANK YOU!

We have come to the end of this issue of Sports Coaching & Development: A Practitioner's Guide.

While these past two issues have been quite generalised, we feel this is the best way to get started – providing a holistic approach to topics before delving deeper into them.

As this is a new project, we would love your feedback, whether it is constructive criticism, or how this may have aided your coaching journey.

Finally, thank you for completing this issue – we hope you have enjoyed reading and have learned some new tips!

Sign up to our newsletter to be notified when next month's issue is released,

Thank you once again, Rhys and Dylan.

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