What Coaches Can Learn from Athlete Perceptions

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Competitive athletes attribute their successes and failures to factors such as ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Research shows that the type of attribution athletes use to define outcomes affects both motivation and performance. It is therefore important for coaches to fully understand the attribution process.

Heider (1944) categorized behavioral outcomes into effective personal force (ability and effort) and effective environmental force (task difficulty and luck). Based on his theory the four attributions of ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck influence future success and failure. In 1972, Weiner restructured Heider's four attributions into a two-dimensional framework he called locus of causality. Locus of causality has two components: stability and locus of control.

The stability component consists of stable and unstable factors that influence performance as shown in Figure 1. A stable factor is an unchanging characteristic of an individual or a situation (ability and task difficulty). An unstable factor, on the other hand, is a characteristic that fluctuates from individual to individual and from situation to situation (effort and luck).

A second component of locus of causality consists of internal and external loci of control, that is, a psychological construct of individual belief about the location of the control in one's life (Cox, 1998). For example, an athlete who exhibits internal locus of control believes his/her ability or effort influences outcomes whereas an athlete who exhibits external locus of control believes luck, fate or the power of others controls the outcome.

In 1979, Weiner added the dimension of control to the locus of causality model. With a controllable attribution, for example, an athlete believes the outcome is a result of his/her personal control, whereas with an uncontrollable attribution, it is not. The addition of the controllable dimension made a distinction between internal attributions such as effort, which is subject to more personal control than ability.

The causes that athletes give for success or failure affect motivation and future outcome. Before proceeding to the attributions athletes use and their ramifications on future outcomes, let me relate how a coach applied attribution theory to motivate his youth soccer team when they suffered a humiliating defeat in a district play-off game:

One summer I was at a dinner with a U-12 traveling soccer team that had just suffered a humiliating 10-0 defeat. During the meal the coach asked the players their perceptions on why they lost. One player said they lost because of poor officiating. Some thought they had lost because of the poor condition of the playing field. The goalkeeper, who was co-captain of the team, tearfully

Figure 1. Weiner's Classification Scheme		
	Locus of Control	
	Internal	External
Stable	Ability	Task Difficulty
Unstable	Effort	Luck

Stability

reported that they lost because they were not good. As the players gave causes for their defeat, it was apparent that each of them had a little different perception of the cause. However, when the coach used attribution theory to analyze the reasons the players gave for the loss, he found important information about the way each player perceived the game. For example, those who attributed the loss to poor officiating and poor condition of the field blamed external and unstable factors. These players are therefore more likely to win with better officiating and a better playing field. In order to reinforce their perceptions, the coach encouraged them to practice harder in order to maximize a more positive outcome. The goalkeeper felt the team lost because they did not have the ability to play well rather than to the fact that they played a strong opponent. To motivate his team the coach encouraged them to view the opponents as tougher than they, but with practice, hard work and effort they could become better. In effect, the coach used attribution theory to analyze the players' causes for the defeat.

Research shows that athletes are generally self-centered in their insights about causes of outcome (Leith, 1989). Because of this, they are likely to attribute success and failure to internal and external factors respectively. If, for example, an athlete attributes success to ability (internal factor), the expectation is that victory will occur again in the future. Athletes who attribute success to internal factors experience the pride and satisfaction (Leith, 1989) required to increase motivation and confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 1995). They are more likely to think, "We were better skilled than our opponents," and "Our hard work at practice paid off." On the other hand, if athletes attribute success to luck, fate, and the power of others (external factor) they do not perceive success as certain. They also experience less pride and satisfaction (Leith, 1989), with no increase in motivation and self-confidence (Weinebrg & Gould, 1995). These athletes view external success as "We were lucky today," "It was our turn to win," or "The officials were just on our side."

However, when athletes experience failure and attribute it to bad luck or poor officiating, they believe things will change given another chance. Attributing failure to luck, fate, and the power of others will help athletes maintain motivation and confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 1995), i.e., "It was not our day," or "Our coach started the wrong players." Additionally, if athletes attribute failure to low ability, they believe defeat is likely to occur again. Because ability is stable and internal, athletes who attribute failure to a stable cause experience shame and dissatisfaction (Leith, 1989), as well as decreased motivation and confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 1995). They might say, "I am not as fast as my opponent," or "I don't have much jumping ability."

Although it is expected that athletes' will attribute victory to internal and stable factors, and defeat to external and unstable factors, caution should be exercised in the interpretation of their attributions. Individuals tend to make attributions in a manner that favors their self-perception and esteem (Miller & Ross, 1975). If athletes attribute a victory to ability and effort but in reality it was due to a lack of skill and/or hardwork on the part of the opponents, the coach should encourage them to practice harder and not relax because of the win. Similarly, if athletes attribute successive defeat to bad luck or poor officiating, the coach should help them focus on internal factors such as effort.

To conclude, coaches should pay attention to athletes' justifications for success and failure because attributions affect athletes' motivations and expectations of future outcomes. Furthermore, coaches should encourage athletes to attribute failure to internal and unstable factors that are controllable. This will help them see that favorable outcomes are possible with effort and hard work. By encouraging athletes to train harder and do their best, coaches will be laying the ground work for future motivation and success.

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