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Characteristics of a person-centred coaching approach

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Abstract

Within this paper we propose a need to better understand what is meant by a person-centred approach to coaching and in particular, to consider the intention that drives coach behaviours. Much of the extant coaching literature focuses on pedagogical models and theories of learning; without detracting from this important body of work, we suggest that a holistic approach requires a greater focus on coaches' inter- and intra- personal knowledge. In this paper, video stimulated recall was used to guide interviews with Alpine ski coaches, to explore their thought processes and intentions behind person-centred delivery. The findings suggest these coaches adopted other-centred intentions that are facilitated by an accurate self-assessment, a big picture perspective and a willingness to learn. Consequently, the concept of humility is proposed as a guiding principle for person-centred coaching, and a conceptual model (POWA) is presented as a solution to the challenges we identify throughout the paper.

Keywords

Alpine skiing, coach development, humility, humour, leadership, trust

The idea of athlete-centred coaching appears to have become something of a zeitgeist over the past 20 years,¹⁻³ with a number of related terms, often borrowed from other contexts, featuring in coaching research. Examples include a learner centred approach,⁴ client-centred therapy,⁵ holistic coaching,⁶ and humanistic coaching,⁷ all of which are concerned with reducing the focus on the pedagogue (coach, teacher, leader etc.) to enable the people they work with to flourish. Despite this substantial line of work, there remains widely reported inconsistencies in the definition, understanding and application of these concepts in practice.^{5,7,8} Perhaps more worryingly, evidence suggests that these athlete centred approaches to coaching often represent rhetoric as opposed to practical reality.⁹ Furthermore, colleagues have recently identified the need to more clearly articulate a move towards person-centred coaching, to further diminish the notion of athletes as purely athletic performers, placing people at the heart of our exchanges.¹⁰ The purpose of this paper is to address these issues by sharing emerging empirical work that explores the antecedents to coach behaviour and seeks to offer a conceptual model to underpin person centred delivery.

Alongside mixed definitional understandings that continue to frustrate academics and practitioners alike,^{8,11} there is also a paucity of practical resources to help guide coaches in their approach towards person-centred coaching.¹² This issue is partially addressed by a number of pedagogical models that are rooted in Kidman's² original conception of athlete-centredness as one of empowering athletes to be autonomous decision makers. Often referred to collectively as non-linear or constructivist pedagogies, which include work related to teaching games for understanding (TGfU),¹³ game sense,¹⁴ non-linear pedagogy,¹⁵ constraints-led coaching,¹⁶ and positive pedagogy.⁰⁴ This work is of great value and has contributed to a transformation of understanding around how athletes learn in context, and how coaches influence practice design to generate more independent thinkers, problem solvers and engaged learners.¹⁶ Building upon Kidman's¹⁷ work, our understanding of person-centredness has also been closely aligned with the philosophy of humanism that promotes a more holistic approach to developing the whole person, as opposed to just the athlete.¹² The idea that coaches should consider the needs of their athletes as their primary concern is inherently appealing, however whether this happens in

reality is something questioned in the literature.^{5,18} Denison et al.¹⁸ suggest real world coaching is so infused with power dynamics that practice rarely allows athletes' needs to be genuinely placed at the centre of affairs, and that the disciplinary frameworks that characterize modern sport, frequently stand in the way of athlete-centred intent.

In addition to the politics of power that often prevent coaches from adopting the level of altruism to which they might aspire, the use of the word athlete itself may also have an interesting effect.¹⁹ By choosing to be athlete-centred we tend towards prioritizing the athlete over the person, which focuses the coach on athletic performance, on the development of technical proficiency in sport and often on results. Whilst these remain important aspects of a coach's

role, a person-centred approach has the potential to encourage us to see beyond sport and to embrace a more holistic perspective, one that was intended in Kidman's² early work. In the spirit of adopting appropriate discourse, we embrace the purposeful use of the term 'person-centred coaching' throughout this paper in an attempt to foster greater focus and concern for the human and relational aspects of coaching.

Whilst pedagogical models and theories of learning do much to facilitate the acquisition of skill and development of sporting acumen, coaches' inter- and intra- personal knowledge also require our attention, if we are to further clarify what it means to coach effectively in a person-centred way.²⁰ For some time, scholars have grappled with how to address the interpersonal aspect of coaching and the messy reality this represents; Armour²¹ states that complexity in coaching must be faced not ignored, and ways of grasping it must be found. Acknowledging complexity, whilst at the same time offering ways to grasp it, is something of an oxymoron given that any model to guide behaviour, is inevitably subject to the unending variables associated with the coaching environment. Despite this uncomfortable reality, there exists a progressive body of work that explores the interpersonal realm, and therefore has the potential to inform our understanding of a person-centred approach. This research draws largely from psycho-socio perspectives that, not exclusively, consider the role of power,²² the characteristics of the relationship itself²³ and the importance of leadership models to guide coach behaviour.²⁴

Leadership and coaching behaviours: A case for 'other-centredness'

Building upon the research of Chelladurai,²⁵ recent work pertinent to leadership models in sport coaching focuses significantly on transformational leadership (TFL), which has made a notable contribution to coach education. Turnnidge and Côté²⁴ have expanded the original work of Bass and Riggio,²⁶ adapting the four behavioural dimensions of TFL to offer guidance for coach behaviour. Conducted primarily in youth sport settings, this research has been well received by coaching practitioners²⁷ and makes a sound contribution to Armour's²¹ call to find ways of grasping complexity.

TFL recognizes the importance of context in guiding more or less effective approaches. In fact, a prescriptive set of behaviours would clearly fail to account for the socially constructed, complex endeavour that is coaching.^{28,29} However, whilst acknowledging the dynamic nature of coaching practice, we should nevertheless avoid wallowing in ambiguity by defaulting to an 'it depends' position. Instead, to continue driving our understanding of successful interpersonal interactions, we must embrace this complexity and explore the impact of context at every opportunity, to do otherwise is to promote bookended thinking and capitulation to circumstance, in place of deeper investigation.

Philosophical perspective and the importance of intention

Further commentary on coaching behaviours comes from Cushion et al.³⁰ who suggest that the nature and structure of coach education should be less concerned with generic guidelines and mimicking the practice of

observed others, with more attention paid to developing a model of critical thinking. This supports the notion that coach behaviour should be governed by choices, made consciously during the coaching process, that are intentional rather than based on 'tradition and uncritical inertia'.^{31 p128} In order to embrace a deeper investigative strategy, recent studies have suggested critical realism as a useful perspective,^{32,33} where research attempts to occupy the middle ground, or as Grix³⁴ explains, the epistemic border where hard interpretivism meets soft post-positivism. Here, the aim is to provide what Pawson³⁵ deems to be a best fit, as opposed to an absolute truth.

Whilst important that academic language and concepts such as ontology and epistemological perspectives underpin research, to provide direction that is founded on clear rationales; it is equally important to minimize the academic practitioner gap³⁶ by distilling intellectual writing and converting it to a more accessible format. Therefore, we might ask (and answer) what is meant by the epistemic border? In our view, coach development requires resources that sit between a paint by numbers, prescriptive approach and an eternally open, idealistic 'it depends on the situation therefore let's not have any models' approach. That middle ground is the epistemic border; it is a balanced, open-minded approach to knowledge - not claiming a silver bullet solution, but equally not leaving things infinitely debatable. Such middle ground, paves the way for coach development to pragmatically suggest useful ideas and ways of working, underpinned by empirical research, that represent the current best attempt at saying 'this is a good way to do coaching'.

In embracing the epistemic border, it would appear that a more consistent approach to person-centred coaching requires research that goes beyond the pedagogical behaviours of coaches. To further support this position let us consider two recent studies^{37,38} that have used the Coach Leadership Assessment System (CLAS)²⁴ to collect observational data that focus on the interpersonal behaviours of coaches. Both reported idealized influence to be the dimension of TFL that is least evident in coach behaviour. This is not altogether surprising; according to the CLAS, idealized influence involves demonstrating humility, a trait that is not always overtly observable. To fully understand whether someone is behaving humbly, it is often necessary to understand their thought processes and motivations. Therefore, compared with other dimensions of TFL, such as intellectual stimulation where behaviours such as questioning, or problem setting are more explicit, we should expect idealized influence to be less observed. Given the inherent other-centredness within the concept of humility, we argue that humility as an integral component of idealized influence, provides a fitting framework for person-centred coaching. Moreover, we hypothesise that person-centred intentions are governed by humility.

Humility

According to Nielsen et al.^{39 p23} a precise and usable definition for humility is surprisingly hard to come by. The popular cultural, dictionary definition emphasizing a need for meekness and modesty, represents the 'old way' of conceptualizing humility, whilst the 'new way', presented by scholars and researchers, aligns more closely with Aristotle's version of a virtue, and is primarily concerned with an accurate awareness and understanding of self. Here, the distinction between new and old is the need for accuracy and a more expansive understanding of the concept, as opposed to the somewhat myopic position of self-deprecation. Nielsen et al.³⁹ outline the core concepts of humility as understanding self, relating to others and perspective. Additionally, Owens et al.⁴⁰ introduce teachability as a component, which is further elucidated by Tangney⁴¹

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who refers to a willingness to seek advice and a desire to learn, or an ability to 'acknowledge limitations'. These components recur throughout a body of literature that draws upon philosophical, psychological and religious perspectives. We hypothesize that humility governs a person-centred approach to coaching and pose the following research questions:

- What causal mechanisms facilitate the manifestation of person-centred intent in coach behaviour?
- To what extent does humility underpin a person-centred approach to coaching?

Method

A critical realist perspective

Consistent with a recent call to action within the sport coaching literature,^{32,33} this study adopted a critical realist perspective. As the forefather of critical realism, Bhaskar⁴² introduced the concept of three ontological domains that encourage a laminated view of the world. At the deepest level Bhaskar introduces the domain of the real, where we consider structures that have the potential to make things happen. Arguably, this is the location of dispositions that have the power to make person-centred intention a reality. It is when these structures or mechanisms are activated that we reach the domain of the actual, where events take place. The domain of the actual is consistent with research into coach behaviours which represent events that happen. Finally, the domain of the empirical, constitutes knowledge emanating from what we experience. In coaching research this may come from athlete perceptions, and whilst valuable, this level of knowledge is often partial and fallible.

What we experience (empirical) and what was intended (real and actual) are not always aligned. For example, a coach who has genuine person-centred intent (real) might display concern by putting their arm around an athlete (actual), however there is no guarantee the athlete interprets the embrace as person-centred and, in some circumstances, they may reject the gesture (empirical). As Nichol et al.³²

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point out, coaching research needs to move beyond exploring the outcomes or outputs of coaching, instead we must delve 'deeper into causal explanatory accounts, identifying emergent entities, powers and mechanisms'. It is with this in mind that within a critical realist perspective, this research foregrounds the domain of the real.

Participants

Consistent with intensive qualitative research, a purposive sampling strategy was applied.⁴³ Inclusion criteria required participants to be recognized by themselves and others as person-centred in their approach to coaching. More specifically, all coaches followed the same coach education pathway that is explicitly learner centred, and conversations with employers and professional colleagues reinforced the appropriateness of participant sampling. Additionally, having known all the participants for over 10 years, the lead researcher had engaged in numerous conversations that explored the participants' coaching philosophies, further supporting the person-centred nature of their practice. Finally, participants operated as both coaches and coach educators (CEs) within Snowsports; this dual role ensured high levels of expertise and insight around a person-centred approach and provided a novel sample. Although participants refer throughout this study to experiences in both contexts,

for the purposes of this paper they will be referred to as coaches, and their interactions viewed through the lens of a person-centred approach, irrespective of whether they are coaching learners to ski, or coaching the coaches. 4 male and 1 female coach, aged between 33–50 years (mean=44), took part in the study. They all held an international qualification, recognized globally as the highest level of assessed expertise and had coached skiing for between 16 and 30 years (mean= 25.4). Four coaches had worked as CEs for between 18 and 25 years (mean=20.75), were considered expert by candidates and peers, had worked as CE mentors, and had delivered at national and international CE conferences. One coach, considered expert by peers and employer, had delivered coach education within the work environment for 8 years. Once ethical permission was granted, all participants were consulted and informed consent for their involvement in the project attained.

Data collection

To address the embedded, relational and emergent nature of sport coaching, a multi-method approach to data collection was employed.^{33,44} Data was gathered in the French Alps, using stimulated recall with participants in post-event interviews. Stimulated recall interview is an introspective research procedure that uses audio and video footage to assist the recall and interpretation of experience⁴⁵ and is suggested as an effective way to facilitate immersion and specificity of recall.⁴⁶ As suggested by the work of McLennan et al.⁴⁶ video footage captured from an external perspective can lead to self-consciousness and biased selectivity in what is recalled, however given the importance of capturing coach behaviours, it was decided to use chest mounted GoPro cameras attached to the learners within sessions. Positioned as they were, the cameras were unobtrusive and blended into the skiwear apparel, helping maintain the familiarity of the coaching environment. This allowed video and audio footage to be captured across one entire coaching session (sessions lasted between 3 and 6hrs) for each coach, in a non-intrusive manner. To further address the limitations associated with videoing participants,⁴⁷ the researcher was absent from the filming period to maintain a natural environment.

Following recording, the lead researcher identified all interpersonal interactions (verbal and non-verbal), between the participant (coach) and the learner(s). The video was edited accordingly, producing a mean of 32.6 vignettes per coach (SD=7.81) that were used to guide the semi structured interviews. Consistent with guidelines advocated in previous research, and in order to minimize recall bias and situate the participants closely with the research context,⁴⁸ stimulated recall interviews of between 60 and 90 min with each coach, took place within 48 h of filming. The below questions were used as a starting point for the interview schedule, allowing the researcher to explore the intention behind coach behaviour.

- Was there a reason for that particular behaviour/ exchange/gesture etc.?
- Why did you behave in that way, was it a conscious decision or just something you do?
- Can you tell me what was going through your mind at that moment?

Data analysis

Thematic analysis⁴⁹ was conducted on the interview data. This process started with the lead researcher transcribing the data verbatim and (re)reading the transcripts to become fully immersed. Once the raw data responses had been coded, sub-themes and overarching themes were established via a process consistent with Bhaskar's⁴² DREI model, which promotes retroductive analysis, to abstract the main causal contributions within the research context. Importantly, critical realists seek findings and beliefs that appear to be truthful as opposed to claiming an absolute truth,^{32,33} consulting multiple perspectives during analysis, including that of the researcher and drawing upon pre-existing theoretical frameworks such as that outlined for humility.

Results and discussion

Analysis revealed four major themes that identify causal mechanisms contributing to person-centred coaching, each will be discussed in turn, along with sub-themes where applicable. Table 1 presents an audit trail of how the themes and sub-themes were generated from the data.

Theme 1 – other-centredness

The first major theme is that of other-centredness, with sub themes of learning through structured autonomy, accurate social assessment, building trust and humour. Given that all participants identified as adopting a person-centred approach, it is unsurprising that other-centredness was a prominent theme in the data. Other-centredness requires an outward looking focus with altruistic intent.⁵⁰ There is a symbiotic relationship between other-centredness and the sub-themes, however the discussion seeks to explain how other-centred intention facilitated learning, accurate social assessment, trust and the use of humour.

Table 1. Generating themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Raw data extract
1. Other-centredness	Learning through structured autonomy	Their task was to come up with different ways of standing on your skis that were accurate. So, it's getting them to think across the spectrum, across different terrains, how you might vary how you stand on your skis." (Glen)
	Accurate social assessment	was trying to work out what's going on emotionally... first I was trying to get other things out of her, about her skiing, then I very quickly realized it was too early, she needed more time to find her feet and get in a better mood." (Lyndsey)
	Building trust	It's important to build that relationship where he trusts the accuracy of what I am saying, he trusts my motivation for why I am saying it, it sounds obvious, but I am trying to help him." (Franz)
	Humour	don't know if I always put it the best way but I'm trying to make her laugh... I want her to feel more at ease..." (Jonny)
. Accurate self-assessment	Accurate awareness of role	We're not a set of peers going out training each other in our free time, I'm working professionally they're not working. Even though they are professional ski coaches, so there is that distinction. I want to be seen to be providing that service." (Franz – when running coach training)
	Accurate awareness of abilities	I'm not the best skier on the mountain but I am constantly adjusting and it's about helping clients to make that same conscious shift..." (Lyndsey)
3. Willingness to learn		When asked why the CE invited his group to critique his own skiing performance] "So if they [the trainee coaches] do see it [a technical weakness in the CE's skiing] tell me, because I'd be pretty happy to know!" (Bode)
4. Perspective		Yeah, this is the first day of a level 1, it's their first encounter with it [teaching skiing], they're trying stuff and getting it wrong it's all part of it, you can't hammer them for having no knowledge, because how do you have it on the first day of a level 1? (Jonny)

Learning through structured autonomy. All participants were clear that they sought a degree of autonomy for their learners, recognizing the limitations they had as agents of change. As Bode says, “they’ve [the learners] got to change their performance, I can’t change it for them, I can try and help them, but I can’t physically do it for them.” This approach aligns with autonomy supportive coaching,⁵¹ placing the person at the centre of the learning process. Scholars have highlighted the importance of structure in facilitating autonomy support,^{52–54} emphasising the fine line between a laissez-faire approach and a more transformational learning environment that fosters intellectual stimulation. Curran et al.⁵⁴ identified the importance of providing guidance, feedback and expectations in a way that respects athlete’s volitions. This was reflected in the data,

“If he can start to feel what I am talking about you start to build another feedback channel, which is intrinsic... it doesn’t take me out of the loop, but he can then get stuff done without me.” (Franz)

In order to help the learner take ownership, Franz provides structure around what success might feel like. Glen offers a similar thought when he explains how he uses drills in his coaching, a pedagogic tool often associated with more traditional methods.

“I’m only getting them to do the drill so they can understand the feeling of separation between legs and upper body” (Glen)

The other-centred intent in this quote is palpable. In practice, Glen shared with his learners the reasoning articulated in the above quote; he offers his learners a way to self-regulate and wants them to understand his motives and the rationale behind the drill.

There are two important messages for coaches to take from this interaction. 1) To be person-centred and foster autonomy, we sometimes need to guide learners using direct instruction, with the coach initially taking the lead (structure). 2) Direct instruction can be person-centred if the coach shares a rationale for this approach. It is then more likely to be accepted for what it is – scaffolding to help the learner achieve a more autonomous state.

For learners to become autonomous they require varying degrees of structure. The important distinction that comes from the data is that the level of structure should be governed by other-centred intention, not by a self-serving agenda or indeed by an unthinking, parrot-like approach to delivery.⁵⁵ As Glen puts it, “I’m in with them, trying to help them in that supportive role, rather than, I’m in charge and this is what we’re doing.”

Accurate social assessment. Whilst the skilful use of pedagogic techniques such as structured autonomy are central to how we operate in a learner centred way, it is equally important to look beyond the learner to the person. Making an accurate social assessment aligns with emotional intelligence⁵⁶ and our ability to adopt empathic accuracy, it contributes towards what Jowett and Poczwardowski⁵⁷ termed a shared understanding. It could be argued that this sub-theme is actually a mechanism that enables other centredness, that only when the coach reads the person they aim to help, can they truly behave in the most effective way. However, we argue that other-centred intent is required for a coach to invest the time to understand the people around them. This quote demonstrates conscious effort by the coach to investigate how the learner is feeling, before deciding which route to ski.

“I say these things [questions], then I see her react...So, I’m trying to collect information to decide whether I’m happy to take her down the hard one [slope] or the not so hard one.” (Lyndsey)

She follows this up with, “I am very tuned in to her there. I hear every thought in that phrase.” Interestingly, Jowett and Clark-Carter⁵⁸ found that empathic accuracy, the ability of one person to read the emotion of another

in the moment, is diminished in longer standing relationships. The suggestion is that familiarity reduces the conscious decision to observe, interpret and understand. Ski coaches often work with people over short, sporadic periods of time, therefore there is arguably a greater perceived need to 'work people out', which can be particularly challenging when goggles and buffs obscure people's facial expressions.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been conceptualized in a number of ways^{56,59} but Mayer and Salovey⁶⁰ present a cognitive ability model that requires emotionally intelligent people to accurately perceive emotion, use it to facilitate thought, understand emotion and finally to manage emotion. The following quote shows how Glen demonstrates some of these abilities, as a conscious thought process.

"No, it's not a throw away comment... he's [learner] quite intense [perception] and quite tentative. Sometimes he thinks too hard [emotion facilitates thought], so I want to give him the information [management] but I want to create the right climate for Peter [management]" (Glen)

Here we see Glen grapple with his interpretation of who Peter is and how he behaves, in order for him to be person centred. Glen does not appear to fully explore why (understanding emotion) Peter is so intense, but he does engage with the three other abilities in Mayer and Salovey's⁶⁰ model, demonstrating an emotionally intelligent approach and therefore an enhanced ability to make an accurate social assessment.

Building trust In addition to supporting learning, coaches in this study were also motivated to understand their learners in order to build trust Whilst learning and trust are arguably inter-dependent, it is interesting to see the lengths to which Franz goes, to specifically build trust

"There are lots of times when you are coaching skiing when you're not skiing, and a lot of that is chairlift time... there'll be times when it is a deliberate action not to talk about skiing... showing your human side is a pretty facile way of saying it, but to try and bond outside of the ski chat... I make an effort to do that, and I think it builds trust"

(Franz)

Skiing lends itself to non-activity related conversation, with enforced time spent riding lifts. Whilst Franz talks about how he uses this time to develop relationships, we might well wonder how coaches in other sports find or create that 'chairlift time' to develop the interpersonal understanding that is so crucial for a person-centred approach.

The intention to develop trust, extends beyond the dyad of coach and learner to include intra-group trust, "it's about getting them to work together, not just to trust me, but to trust each other, and being comfortable with each other" (Bode). In many ways trust is synonymous with person-centredness, requiring leaders to demonstrate attributes such as dependability and benevolence.⁶¹ Trust is our belief in the reliability of another,⁶² it is not so much a trait as an outcome, and so it is necessary to ask, how do we create it? The data suggests the coaches engage in specific behaviours that have explicit, other-centred intent to achieve this. A number of scholars have suggested that humility and the other-centredness that underpins humility, is a fundamental component of trust^{40,63}

Humour. The data shows humour to be an important means by which other-centred intention can be enacted. It is widely accepted that sport coaching is a negotiated and problematic social practice,⁶⁴ and with humour embedded in social interactions, it is surprising that so little research explores this concept.^{65,66} The below quote talks about how humour can help cement the learning process.

“It’s just a way of keeping it light-hearted, but still hopefully getting the point across. And sometimes when you make a joke like that... it might stick in his mind a bit more.” (Bode)

The intent here is to help the learner remember advice through the use of humour. Jones et al.⁶⁷ when discussing Bob Dwyer’s coaching techniques, identified a similar approach, where humour is clearly adopted with other centred intention.

Another use of humour reported in the literature is to reduce perceived power imbalances.⁶⁶ This was evident in how Bode uses humour to put others at ease, to create an environment that encourages dialogue, flattening any interpretation of hierarchy.

“I’m trying not to take myself too seriously, so that I’m approachable. You can have a bit of a laugh about it [ski technique] and again not be on the pedestal where you think you’re great... get on the same level as everybody else.” (Bode)

Finally, humour is used by the coaches as a way to manage tension. This is recognized by Ronglan and Aggerholm⁶⁶ as an important consideration and again in this quote we can see how intentional this was.

“I don’t do anything off the cuff [he was asked if his actions on the video were intentional], I was aware that I was standing there for a while, giving lots of technical input and I could sense that, ‘oh this is a bit heavy’, and I just wanted to throw that [humorous comment] in to lighten it up.” (Glen)

What we see here requires an accurate social assessment and aligns with Mayer and Salovey’s⁶⁰ notion of managing emotion. Having perceived the mood of the group and understood why this was the case, Glen used humour to change the emotional energy. Throughout the data, the use of humour remains other-centred, with no examples of sarcastic, demeaning or what Terrion and Ashworth⁶⁸ term putdown humour, where amusement is derived at the expense of the other. This is an important consideration for coaches in how they use humour in a person-centred way.

Theme 2 – accurate self-assessment

Whilst we have discussed the notion of an accurate social assessment, the data also revealed the importance of self-assessment as a mechanism that contributes to our ability to be person-centred. In writing about intellectual humility, Church and Barrett⁶⁹ outline the importance during introspection, of neither under valuing nor over valuing one’s beliefs and intellectual abilities, but instead viewing them as one ought – accurately. Of course, this is not necessarily an easy endeavour, and a lack of self-awareness is not uncommon amongst modern leaders,³⁹ yet this quality is often fundamental in our efforts to relate effectively to others. If we are to be accurate in our self-assessment, we should avoid inflated opinions of ourselves and moments of self-denigration, as both can compromise our ability to effectively influence what is right for the other. An accurate self-assessment in this study was evident in two ways.

Accurate awareness of role. Whilst in some instances it can be helpful to reduce hierarchy, it is also important to recognize hierarchies inevitably exist, and to understand one’s position therein. Franz clearly articulates this and demonstrates an awareness of how he is perceived, as well as the expectations associated with his role.

“I think you start off with a whole load of credibility from the position that you’re in, and I have that position as you know... so that helps.” (Franz)

Similarly, Jonny outlines how he shares the parameters of his role when running a national governing body assessment course.

“One of the things I say at the beginning [of the course] is that we have these criteria to get through, this isn’t just a performance week, I’ve got to deliver a course and there will be bits that they find more interesting and bits that they might not.” (Jonny)

Having clarity over one’s role allows the coach, in this instance, to adopt other-centred behaviours that are relevant to their professional context. If the primary goal of the group is to pass the exam (and this should be checked), then arguably a person-centred approach would be to ensure the criteria by which they are assessed are addressed during delivery, whether they enjoy that or not.

This final example involves Franz explaining that in order to watch his learners ski, he needed to assume a position on the slope where he was vulnerable to collision from other skiers. Despite him taking this risk, he instructed his group to position themselves in a safer position. “They’re all instructors so they’re used to watching people perform and they’d be comfortable with it [standing in the middle of the slope to observe], but I’m not treating them as instructors, I’m treating them as clients, performers, athletes, whatever... so they haven’t got that role. The role that I’m playing involves there being a distinction between us.” (Franz)

This provides an exemplar of an accurate social and self-assessment coming together to enable behaviour that is intended to be person-centred around safety.

Accurate awareness of abilities. In addition to understanding one’s role, the data also provided strong evidence that understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses allowed coaches to be person-centred. Franz is uncomplicated in his self-appraisal, not only does he recognize the weight afforded him by his position as a senior member of the coaching team, but he is aware that his skiing performance is strong. He also recognizes the clarity of his communication and the other-centredness of his motivation.

“I think I build credibility through the experience and position that I’ve got but hopefully through the way that I ski, and hopefully the interactions we have make sense so... I’m not just making stuff up, I’m deliberately accurate and helpful.” (Franz)

If his opinion of these characteristics was inaccurate then he would err towards the arrogant, however it was widely appreciated that Franz was indeed in receipt of these qualities.

Glen shares an equally positive overview of his strengths when discussing how he manages groups in the backcountry (off piste), where his decision as to whether terrain is safe to ski can have grave consequences. “So with off piste stuff... I think I’m pretty good now at saying ‘no’ [it is too dangerous to ski], you know, I’ve got better at walking up something and looking at it, and actually... we’re not doing it. I wanted to prepare them

[the group] for that” (Glen)

Here, Glen recognizes his ability to read the terrain in order to assess the safety of a slope and shares his decision-making process with the group. It is important to note that an accurate self-assessment is not necessarily enough, and the humble leader has a responsibility to think deeply about how others will be affected, by bringing these thoughts into the public domain. Had Glen shared his ability to make accurate safety decisions about off piste conditions with a group of beginners, for whom that context felt irrelevant, then we might rightly suggest

Glen was doing so to assuage his ego. However, because the decision to share his self-assessment was contextually relevant and motivated by other-centred intent, we can suggest his actions were humble. In this sense Austin^{70 p204} refers to a “proper self-assessment” requiring not only accuracy but also an appropriate level of concern for how that accuracy is managed. Furthermore, Peterson and Seligman’s^{71 p463} assertion that humility constitutes “a private stance toward the evaluation of the self”, could also be instructive.

Theme 3 – willingness to learn

Continuing with an introspective focus, this theme showed how the coaches demonstrated a willingness to learn, in order to support the other.⁴¹ Here Bode explains why he invites his group of trainee coaches to critique his own skiing performance.

“It’s about trying to put them [the learners] on the same level, we’re all working on our skiing. Secondly, it’s the truth, that’s [technical focus] what I’m working on. So, if they do see it [the error in his technique] tell me, because I’d be pretty happy to know!” (Bode)

Bode is expected to be the template in terms of skiing performance, so to invite criticism places him in a vulnerable position. However, his desire to learn can influence his group in a number of ways. First, they can develop their analysis skills on another skier, second, as Bode points out, this flattens the hierarchy, which is likely to promote dialogue, questioning and trust. Third, and perhaps most importantly, he models humility and sets an example; everyone can continue to learn no matter their skill level, which supports a long-term development approach for his learners.

Interestingly, Bode acknowledges “it is the truth”; it is important to avoid covert attempts to self-promote or as Oc et al.^{72 p11} suggest, the notion of “humble bragging”, where false modesty can be as detrimental as an open lack of humility. Oc et al.⁷² also point out that authentic humility is easily undermined by a desire to avoid vulnerability and meet the expectations of others. Certainly, when considering sport coaching there are undoubtedly, deep seated societal expectations that the coach has the answers, and should portray a position of strength as opposed to a vulnerability.⁷³

Further evidence of a willingness to learn revolves around managing difficult questions.

“You’ve got to go with it, haven’t you, I’ve asked them to ask me questions, but if I don’t know the answer, I’ll say so... I might go away and think about it for the next day, but you’ve got to be honest” (Jonny)

Recent work that explores the epistemology of high-level adventure sport coaches,⁷⁴ found the characteristic of humility to be a strong theme, and in particular that high-level adventure sport coaches recognize they do not know everything. They issue a call for more research to understand the processes that foster intellectual humility. Certainly, in this extract we see an openness to learning, but also other-centred intent.

Theme 4 – perspective

When referring to humility, one might argue that perspective and other-centredness are the same, however the humble leader is not only concerned with doing what is right for their followers, but also recognizes the wider

context within which they operate. This theme returns to an outward looking focus, but one that extends beyond the immediate coaching context and takes in the bigger picture.

Here Franz refers to his broad concerns of how learners relate to him as a CE on assessed courses.

“Well, there’s a worry that he [the learner] is subservient and therefore trying to please me rather than get better at skiing, I think that’s a general worry that they [the learners] just agree with you, whatever you say, or they try to say something that pleases you” (Franz)

This is synonymous with an accurate social assessment; however, it requires a stepping back, a conscious removal of self from the minutia of the day-to-day elements of the job, in order to adopt this wide angled perspective.

Considering things at a more organizational level, Bode explains how he relates the importance of time to his group, encouraging them to adopt patience and frame their development in the context of the entire course.

“You’re with us for 10 weeks, at the beginning all the information is coming from us, a little bit from your peers. But at the end of the course, you will be aware of your own performance and modifying it as you ski down.” (Bode)

In emphasizing the learning process,²⁴ Bode legitimizes a more transactional approach by providing a person-centred rationale. Perspective of this kind allows the coach to help the learner rationalize their progress, negotiate realistic goals, manage expectations and maintain motivation; all behaviours that align with a person-centred approach. The ability to expand one’s perspective and adopt a vantage point that provides oversight and balance, allows the humble coach to achieve a number of outcomes; it helps avoid self-enhancing bias⁷⁵ and importantly provides clarity around the enormity of what it is possible to know.

Finally, Lyndsey advises her learner not to rely on lessons to develop her performance, “Mm, I was trying to let her know that it’s about practice... we’re limited by how much we can do in 3hrs, she needs to ski and try things...she needs mileage... she doesn’t need more lessons as such.” (Lyndsey)

Adopting this wide-angled perspective, with concern only for her learner’s longer-term development, Lynsey compromises her future work opportunities with this client. Interestingly, without that perspective, Lyndsey could continue delivering lessons and remain arguably other-centred in her delivery, however the lack of perspective would ultimately detract from her ability to be genuinely person-centred, if what the learner really needed was space and time to practice.

A final insight drawn from the data is less connected to person centred intent per se, and more concerned with the explicit nature of intention in the data, and the implication this has on how we address person centeredness during the professional development of coaches. When questioned, all participants were able to articulate an overt thought process that had occurred in the moment, as the following data extracts demonstrate.

“...there was a definite thought process that went through my head.” (Jonny)

“There is a conscious decision, I am trying to empathise with her as I know the feeling” (Lyndsey)

“I don’t do anything off the cuff if I’m being honest” (Glen)

“I am quite conscious of that (the use of humour)” (Jonny)

This explicit decision-making process aligns with suggestions in the literature that coaches should ask themselves why they behave in certain ways,⁵⁵ rather than relying purely on tacit thought processes. Expertise is better developed by understanding the procedural knowledge that underpins practice and this is a recurring theme across the participants.

‘POWA’ a conceptual model of humility

The purpose of this paper was to better understand the intention behind coach behaviour, when adopting a person-centred approach to practice. Furthermore, and consistent with a critical realist methodology, definitions of humility^{39,40,70} were considered during retroductive data analysis, as it was hypothesized that aligning notions of humility with person-centred coaching could help provide guidance and consistency in practice. The data showed how participants in this study, adopted intentions and characteristics that align with the interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities associated with humility.^{39,40,70} The results (see Table 1) suggested that other-centred intent is facilitated by the causal mechanisms of accurate self-assessment, a willingness to learn and adopting a big picture perspective. The remainder of this paper will use these themes to support an emerging conceptual model for person-centred coaching.

We argue that the four themes in this study offer a potential roadmap for person-centred approaches to sport coaching. These themes are reordered to form the acronym POWA and hence the POWA model (see Figure 1). This work needs to be extended and refined, however as a starting point it offers a useful way to conceptualize humble intent.

It is important to appreciate that expecting coaches to hit each of the concepts within POWA, all the time, is unrealistic, and perhaps lacking in humility to assume it is ever the case! So, to increase the functionality and acceptability of the POWA model, we draw upon Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean that suggests for a trait to be virtuous it needs to sit at the average position (mean) between excess and deficiency.

Perspective – stepping back to see the bigger picture, seeing things objectively

Other-centered focus – making decisions intended to benefit others, as opposed to purely the self

Willingness to learn – an openness to vulnerability, to receiving and seeking feedback, to acknowledging mistakes

Accurate self-assessment – an honest and correct appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses

Figure 1. The POWA model of humility.

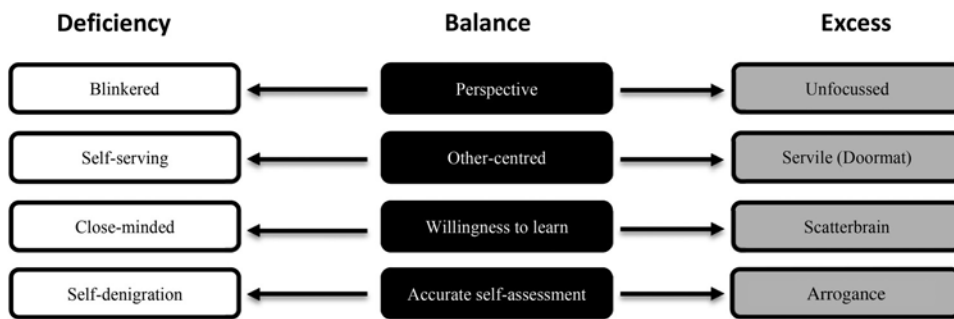


Figure 2. POWA model of humility and person-centred intention.

As an example, if we approach accurate self-assessment as a virtue, then it represents the middle ground between arrogance (excess) and self-denigration (deficiency). We apply this logic to each of the components of POWA as presented in Figure 2. In some ways, the concept of excellence or virtue equating to an average position seems antithetical, however what is really suggested is balance, not doing too much or too little of something, so that we arrive at the right amount, the best amount and hence excellence.

Using a balanced approach to guide person-centred intent, has the potential to offer coaches a reflective tool to appraise their delivery, to guide decision making and to structure the teaching of how to be person-centred.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to provide a preliminary understanding of the characteristics that constitute a person-centred coaching approach. Adopting a critical realist perspective allowed us to shed light on the mechanisms that are activated by coaches who have been recognized to value a focus on the person as well as the athlete. Consequently, the findings support a conceptual model (POWA) to guide person-centred approaches. Despite the potential of such a model there are limitations to this research. As noted by Mills and Boardley,^{76 p567} "all theories and models are suboptimal to some degree" and as a conceptual piece of work, the ideas presented in this paper require further investigation. Data analysis failed to identify examples of negative behaviours, yet as proposed when presenting the POWA model, we acknowledge such a finding is a rare reflection on reality. Therefore, given the importance of humility as an underpinning virtue for person-centred coaching, there is an urgent need for empirical research to better understand the conceptual components of humility in applied coaching settings, if we are to make a tangible contribution to coach development.

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