

# WHAT COACHES CAN LEARN FROM GREAT MANAGERS: BREAKING ALL THE RULES

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This article from the USOC Olympic Coach E-Magazine, Spring 2004, explores how coaches can motivate their athletes. In short, coaches can ensure that youth want to continue their sport involvement—that is, participate for intrinsic reasons—rather than participate for primarily external reasons such as feeling obligated to others to continue. How can coaches maximize their positive impact on youths’ motivation in sport?

## WHAT COACHES CAN LEARN FROM GREAT MANAGERS: "BREAKING ALL THE RULES" IN SELECTING AND COACHING YOUR ATHLETES

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Coaches occupy multiple roles in children’s lives as sport participants. Coaches must be excellent instructors so that youth learn and improve skills, increase knowledge of strategies and tactics, and achieve their goals. Coaches can also inspire children to maintain motivation for participating in sport and, in so doing, allow them opportunities to accrue such benefits as positive self-esteem, enjoyable experiences, long-lasting friendships, and a positive attitude toward the value of lifetime physical activity. In short, coaches can ensure that youth want to continue their sport involvement—that is, participate for intrinsic reasons—rather than participate for primarily external reasons such as feeling obligated to others to continue. How can coaches maximize their positive impact on youths’ motivation in sport?

[Athletes] don’t change all that much.  
 Don’t waste time trying to put in what was left out.  
 Try to draw out what was left in.  
 That is hard enough.

This paraphrase is at the heart of a 1999 best-selling management book entitled *First, Break All the Rules*. Through numerous in-depth interviews of the best versus average managers, the authors of this book question the conventional wisdom about how to select for and develop productive employees. The main findings of this book have some interesting implications for coaches interested in maximizing the performance of their athletes.

### Understanding Skills, Knowledge, and Talent

Central to this book’s message is that skills, knowledge and talents are distinct and different concepts. The authors argue that understanding these distinctions are critical for coaches eager to tap their athletes’ potential in its entirety. One such distinction that great coaches already know but that managers are just beginning to realize, is that while skills and knowledge can be taught, talent cannot. What is interesting for coaches is what falls under the heading of “talent”; and is therefore considered unchangeable. For the sake of clarity, here is how each of these terms is defined.

Skills are the “how-to’s” of a role—capabilities that can be transferred from one person to another. Knowledge, on the other hand, comprises what you’re aware of factually as well as what you have learned from experience. Experiential knowledge is what you pick up over time as you reflect back on your experiences and draw connections and patterns and includes, among other things, your unique perspective, your biases, and your values. The athlete who is able to analyze her competitive experiences to determine what works best for her during competition is developing her experiential knowledge.

Talent, the authors contend, is distinct from knowledge and skill and is the product of how your brain’s pathways developed in response to your unique upbringing and which kinds of thinking and behaving were rewarded or punished along the way. In short, your talents are your recurring thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. The authors have identified three types of talents:

1. **Striving.** This talent explains the “why” of an athlete. What motivates her? Is she competitive, achievement oriented, afraid to fail?
2. **Thinking.** This talent explicates the “how” of an athlete. How he thinks. Is he disciplined? Organized? Spontaneous?
3. **Relating.** This talent explains the “who” of an athlete—who he is drawn to or repelled by, is he introverted or extroverted?

Great coaches, therefore, should find their players roles that play to those players's talents and can do so in two ways. They create the environment that allows each athlete's talent to flourish. Second, they define the right outcomes and allow each athlete to find his own route to those outcomes.

Some coaches might question the idea that qualities like "drive" and "motivation" are unchangeable. There is little that is as frustrating as the highly skilled athlete who is not motivated to train or compete her perceived potential. Few sport psychologists escape the question from coaches wanting to know how to better motivate those one or two gifted, but seemingly uncoachable athletes. Great coaches, like great managers, have learned something from this kind of frustration, and have learned to redefine the issue. Accepting that an athlete's source of motivation is unchangeable does not necessarily mean that you cannot succeed with him. It may just mean that you have not yet individualized your approach enough to help his particular striving talent emerge.

Lesson #1: Individualize Your Approach to Cultivate and Maximize the Talents of Your Athletes.

Great managers will tell you to focus on each person's strengths and manage around his weaknesses. Don't try to fix the weaknesses. The lesson for coaches? Don't try to perfect each of your athletes. Instead do everything you can to help each athlete to cultivate his talents. Help each athlete to become more of who he already is. Keep in mind that this does not mean that athletes cannot learn to do things differently. Skills and knowledge are malleable. Talent, however, is not.

Great managers can describe in detail the unique talents of each of their people: what drives each one, how each thinks, and how each builds relationships. Great coaches do the same. Ask your athletes about their goals, about where they see their career heading, and how they want to interact with you. Other great questions for your athletes: Do you want public recognition or private? Written or verbal? Tell me about the most meaningful recognition you ever received. Why was it memorable? How do you learn best? Who was the best coach you had? How did he or she help you?

Great managers consistently reject the Golden Rule: Don't treat your people as you would like to be treated&hellip;treat them how each of them would like to be treated.

The hardest thing about being a manager is realizing that your people will not do things the way you would. But get used to it. Because if you try to force them to, two things happen. They become resentful&mdash;they don't want to do it. They become dependent&mdash;they can't do it. And neither is productive over the long haul. (First, Break All the Rules, page 151.)

Lesson #2: Spend Most of Your Time With Your Best Athletes The harder he works, the better he performs, and the more leeway he gets from me.--Jimmy Johnson, NFL Coach

Great coaches such as Jimmy Johnson break conventional wisdom management rules by refusing to apply one-size-fits-all approach to the athletes in their charge. They reject the traditional approach that suggests the best use of time is to bring up the lowest performers, and to assume that their best athletes are doing fine without them. Great managers agree, for the following reasons:

1. It's fair. The only way to treat someone fairly is to treat them as they deserve to be treated (not treating everyone the same) bearing in mind what they have accomplished.
2. It's the best way to learn. You as a coach can't learn about excellence by only spending time with those athletes who need more work. Ask questions and spend time with your best athletes. Listen to what they do, watch how they do it. Replay it, dissect it, and understand what happened and why it worked.
3. It's the only way to reach excellence. The best managers don't use "average" but "excellent" as the standard to judge performance. Those who are already performing above average are the ones most likely to reach excellence.

Lesson #3: Be a Catalyst

Great managers refuse to limit their role to controller or instructor. Instead, they spend their time trying to figure out better ways to unleash their best performers's distinct talents. Certainly all coaches would consider teaching to be central to their role, since sport skill acquisition is obviously critical to athletic success. Taken on its own, however, skill is often not enough. Consider Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, who languished as play-off non-contenders for several seasons before Michael was persuaded to redirect his considerable skills to put the interest of the team's success over his own. Here are some ways that you become more of a catalyst with your athletes: Strive to cut out a unique set of

expectations for your athletes that stretch and focus them. Highlight each athlete's unique style. Draw his attention to it; help him understand how it works for him and how to perfect it. No news is not good news for athletes-- it kills behavior. Great coaches don't forget to continue to reinforce the talents of their best performers. If you see your stars acting up, it is a sure sign that you have been paying attention to the wrong behaviors and the wrong people. As the authors of "First, Break all the Rules" rightly point out in their introduction, there are more differences than similarities between the world's best, be it coaches or managers. Beyond these differences in style, however, there do appear to be some universal truths in how best to help your athletes achieve their best. Don't be afraid to break some rules along the way.

Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). First, Break all the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers do Differently. Simon & Schuster, NY.