Effective Communication

Enhance your communication skills AND meet the needs of deaf participants
Communication: a coach’s most important tool

Communication is one of the most important skills a coach can have. It is not just about being able to demonstrate skills and knowing your sport’s tactics. It is about creating a relationship with the person in front of you. Knowing what makes them turn up to your session each week and understanding what motivates them to keep turning up.

Effective communication to reach everyone

Being an effective communicator means that you can get your message across to everyone you coach. This doesn’t have to include people who are deaf or hard of hearing, but if you can communicate effectively with someone whose hearing is impaired, you will find that your communication skills build better relationships and, therefore, more successful coaching sessions.

Verbal vs non-verbal communication

Words are very important in communication, but it is not the only thing you need to focus on. Albert Mehrabian, an American professor, talks about effective communication making up 7% spoken word, 38% tone of voice and 55% body language. This doesn’t mean that words are not important. It means that to be an effective communicator, all three elements have to be saying the same thing at the same time. As humans we rank those three elements in that specific order.

**Effective Communication**

- 7% Spoken word
- 38% Tone of voice
- 55% Body language
Using effective communication to create a positive welcome

As humans, our natural instinct is to be indifferent to another person who doesn’t look like us, as long as they are not displaying any behaviours that we find aggressive. As a coach, when you meet someone for the first time (for example, a new person comes along to your session), you must create a welcoming and authentic greeting in the first few seconds. You can display this physically by smiling – with your mouth and eyes, and show an open body stance (palms out and away from your body).

It is essential that you continue this behaviour (keeping your words, tone of voice and body language open and friendly) to ensure that you maintain good communication and start to build a relationship with that new person. Most coaching is not about showing how much you know about a sport and creating winners. It is about building rapport and getting the best out of a person and allowing them to achieve what they are able to achieve. Effective communication will allow this to happen.
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.
But I don’t coach any deaf people...

According to Action on Hearing loss (formerly RNID) around 3.5 million people of working age are deaf or hard of hearing. A further 4 million people experience significant hearing difficulties in everyday life.

We know that more deaf people want to play sport and be more active. They are held back by the lack of confidence either they or their parents/carers have in a coach not only welcoming them into their session or supporting them effectively to develop. It seems ridiculous that people are not involved in sport just because they feel their coach and the club around can’t support them. A good coach and access to sport along with everyone else can make deaf people feel less isolated socially, get fitter and develop greater self-confidence.

The Use of Hearing Aids or Cochlear Implants in Sport

- Most hearing aids work by making the sounds going into the ear louder. Hearing aids come in various shapes and sizes, and all are programmed to closely match the individual’s hearing loss. Most hearing aids are worn behind the ear (a hard plastic ‘elbow’ which hangs on the top of the ear – the most common form) or in the ear (a ‘shell’ which is custom made to fit in the user’s ear).

- Cochlear implants work differently to hearing aids. Instead of amplifying sound they use electrodes, which are implanted in the cochlea in the inner ear to provide electrical stimulation of nerves that the brain then interprets as sound.

- The following points should be noted about the use of hearing aids and cochlea implants:
  - It is a deaf person’s choice whether they wear their hearing aid. They may not wish to wear it because it may break. Or they may prefer to wear it, especially if playing in a mainstream environment.
  - Deaf people may want to wear extra head protection to protect the implant from potential injury.
  - Deaf sports competition does not allow the use of hearing aids to ensure a level playing field for all players. This is because the level of hearing deaf people have differs from person to person.
  - It is worth advising the referee/umpire that a person is wearing a hearing aid if playing in mainstream sport. It should not be up to the referee to dictate whether a person wears it or not.
Where can you go for further information?

The ‘Effective Communication: Coaching Deaf People in Sport’ workshop is delivered by tutors with a high degree of knowledge and expertise in this area, many of whom are deaf themselves. These tutors will, therefore, provide an incredible level of insight and experience to enrich your learning. Coaches who have attended this workshop to date have remarked on what a valuable experience attending it was for their development as a coach, even if they do not coach deaf people themselves.

It is recommended you attend the workshop to gain a real depth of knowledge with regard to developing your communication skills. This learning will equip you to work more effectively with deaf people, and it will also develop your generic communication skills, which will enable you to run more successful and engaging coaching sessions.

To find a workshop near you, visit sportscoachuk.org/workshopfinder

This workshop was a fantastic experience and has increased my confidence to coach deaf people. Understanding the techniques around non-verbal communication has been invaluable and has helped my everyday coaching sessions. Whatever sport you coach, I’d recommend you attend this workshop.

Brian Ward, Level 3 Squash Coach, Fair Oak Squash Club

Go to 1st4sport.com and buy Effective Communication: Coaching Deaf People in Sport
Further reading

Google and YouTube are also very helpful tools to learn more about effective communication and positive body language. Try searching for the following:

- **Albert Mehrabian** – academic expert in communication
- **Mark Bowden** – body language expert. Great TEDx talk (Toronto) on being inauthentic in your communication. Check out his website (truthplane.com/home/people/mark-bowden)
- **UK Deaf Sport (UKDS)** – www.ukdeafsport.org.uk
- **National Deaf Children’s Society** – www.ndcs.org.uk
- **Action on Hearing Loss** (formerly the Royal National Institute for the Deaf [RNID]) – www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Follow sports coach UK on  

@SCUKCoachEd - The official account of the sports coach UK Coach Education Team  
@scUKCoachFund - Funding information for coaches  
@researchub - The latest news, blogs and reports from the Research Team at sports coach UK
92% of delegates scored sports coach UK workshops
8 out of 10 or more*

Find out why coaches rate them so highly

Visit sportscoachuk.org/improvemycoaching today!

*Statistic taken from evaluations of April 2014 – March 2015 workshops.