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Coaching as a Skill: Verbal Cueing

Coaching can improve through progressions and practice. James Hobart offers cueing tips and drills to help you communicate with your athletes better.

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“A trainer trains.” —Greg Glassman

Our coaching job might be simply stated as follows: help people move better. But that isn't always simply done. Our efforts to get droopy shoulders more active and wavy midlines stabilized don't always succeed.

While we frequently rely on tactile and demonstrative cues, verbal cues often present the easiest and quickest choice for fixing issues, especially in larger groups. Sometimes they can also be the most misleading. We will bark “more vertical!” “explode!” and “elbows up!” but elbows will drop, torsos will dip forward and poor hip extension will still linger. Even the most sincere desire to coach Billy Badass to his next PR falls flat every once in a while.

As coaches, we want to improve alongside our athletes, and the general prescription for becoming a more effective coach requires experience and practice—and lots of both. A lot can be gained from considering cueing like a high-skill movement. Skills, drills and progressions can be used to refine one of our most foundational coaching practices.

The Myth of the Golden Cue

Verbal cues can be dispensed quickly to one or multiple athletes, and they provide us with a vast reservoir of good fixes for bad movement. Some are laden with technical jargon, but others—like “jump!”—are simple and brief.

Fight the urge to use the same cue over and over and over again because it sounds fancy or because nothing else will come to mind.

Cleaning up our own verbal cues first requires an evaluation of how they work. What do we say to our clients? Are our cues good?

Great coaches know the best cues are the cues that work. They should make an athlete take one or more steps closer to better movement—the desired result. The golden cue is just a myth, and you will have as many effective—and ineffective—cues as you will clients.

An effective cue leads to the desired result. Instructing an athlete to pull his or her chest up in order to correct poor lumbar position is most useful when we see the lumbar position improve. Repetition is often necessary. But we need to consider the extreme scenario of unending repetition. Fight the urge to use the same cue over and over and over again because it sounds fancy or because nothing else will come to mind. We have to do better in order to find new ways to communicate useful instruction to our athletes.

The first step is taking a more critical look at the cues we use. Doing so might be difficult in the middle of everything else that happens when we coach, but your athletes bring you video of their movements, so why not try the same thing for your coaching?



A verbal cue combined with a tactile cue is powerful, especially with a new client or beginning athlete.

Drill 1: Record Your Stuff

Set up a camera and record a few classes you coach. It might be best to focus on classes when you are teaching a skill or new movement to a small group during a warm-up, but any session will do as long as you can hear your voice. The first step during review can be to pick out the cues you use to fix faults. Make a list. Then watch to see how many times you use the same cue. Count the cues. Finally, focus on whether or not the cue you gave made the athlete better, had no effect or made things worse. Did the fix last for a single rep or multiple reps? Be critical and pay close attention. If you kept giving the same fixes and nothing changed, we know we need to start trying something different.

Watching yourself on video can be brutal and discomfoting. Deal with it. Unless you have a supporting coach who can give you similar constructive feedback, this drill can be very useful.



Your athletes use videos to fix their lifts—why not use the same method to improve your coaching?

I have tried this drill a few times. Once, it became glaringly obvious I used one and maybe two cues to have an athlete push the hips back first when descending into a deadlift. All I would say to the group was, “Stick your butt back.” To me this seemed brilliant—coaching ninjutsu at its plain and simple best. The majority of the time it worked. But because of this one-trick approach, I missed some chances to connect with all the athletes. Every time I watch or listen to that video, it makes me cringe because I looked like a crazy person repetitively barking one cue to an athlete with no change in movement. Einstein knew what he was talking about when he said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.”

Experience and practice can pay large dividends when it comes to coaching. Even after identifying our ineffective cues, we need to find ones that consistently work well. Our best resource is each other.

Growing your cueing repertoire shouldn't be a problem. Get access to other coaches. Exposure to other coaches will provide you with a wealth of information. You will see that many cues can be used to fix the same fault, and some will help improve others. The athletes you coach are unique and will respond that way.

Luckily, this was a point that hit me early in my coaching development. During an Olympic-lifting clinic, I was having trouble helping an athlete improve in pulling his barbell off the floor. He finally told me, “I've been a gymnast my whole life, moving my body around objects and not the other way around. I need you to coach my body into the position, not the bar.” This one example can help us realize the vast number of cues available even if we have not learned them yet.

Even if someone hasn't been coaching as long as you, he or she will say and do things you have not heard or seen. “Good artists borrow; great artists steal.” That's advice we commonly recite at CrossFit Level 1 Seminars, and it didn't start with us either. Nonetheless, it is potent advice for improving our coaching.

Drill 2: Steal and Borrow

Take your list of cues that you saved from Drill 1. Make two columns: one for cues you use to fix a certain fault, and the second column for different cues that can be used to fix that same fault. Begin by writing down a few alternative cues that you think might work or have heard in the past. Then go watch some other people coach, and add their cues to the list.

It's important to be constructively critical. Whenever you try a new cue, make sure you evaluate its effectiveness. Does it work on many or just a handful of your athletes? Did it make an improvement, have no effect or make everything worse? From time to time, ask yourself these questions and even repeat Drill 1 to measure your own improvement.

Be conscious of your own repetition and try different cues. Steal them from other coaches.

Keep in mind there is no hard science here. I am sure you have seen many different coaching styles, cues and personalities that are beautifully effective and enjoyable. If the drills listed above appear more limiting than useful, scrap them (that is more advice I can't claim as my own). Simply start by increasing your awareness of how your words and cues reach your athletes.

Just like learning better balance in a handstand, coaching, requires focused practice. Perhaps begin by asking yourself some of these questions before and after you coach:

- Did the cue you used lead to the desired result?
- How many different cues did you use?
- Do you always use the same cue for the same problem?
- How many times do you use the same cue without a change in your athlete?

Be conscious of your own repetition and try different cues (steal them from other coaches). Don't be afraid to ask your athletes if they understand what you mean. Recycle cues that lead to better movement and observe whether or not your own coaching becomes effective.

Saying More by Saying Less

Our bodies do amazing things. From gross motor recruitment to refined metabolic processes, the human body is primed to work extremely well even without us telling it what to do. It's fun to know about our body—it's ours. Knowing about it and watching it do everything

it does best is one of the reasons we love our coaching jobs. Once we begin instructing other athletes, however, our enthusiasm can get the best of us. Are the anatomy and physiology factoids always necessary to assist others in moving safely, effectively and efficiently? Simple cues—commonly used words, things and actions—are an excellent starting point.

Likely your clients don't have an exercise-physiology degree, nor should they need one to understand you. Cues such as "squeeze your butt," "jump," "lower," "no," "shrug your shoulders up," "stand faster," or "bring your hands and chest up" will likely be more effective than "externally rotate" or "elevate your scapulae." It's surprising how often we fall into the trap of using unfamiliar terms or simply reciting the points of performance that make up the movement. Even terms like "full extension" can be misleading for new clients and athletes.

Drill 3: In Their Own Words

List the points of performance that you have a difficult time coaching. Next to each point of performance, try to come up with a common word or action that would get the athlete to that position. For example, in the push jerk we need to reach full extension (the point of performance). We recognize full extension when the athlete's body is straight. What cues other than "full extension" might help the athlete understand this? How about "jump," "stand as tall as possible as fast as possible," and "squeeze your butt as you jump"?



To expand your cueing repertoire, watch expert coaches interact with their athletes and instruct proper movement.

Numerous compassionate coaches with limited knowledge of anatomy and physiology coach their clients beyond sickness back into fitness. That's not an excuse to skip out on Anatomy 101. Know your stuff. Nevertheless, keep in mind that at first your clients likely won't know and don't need to know everything you do. They don't want a Ph.D.; they want to live a better life. Cueing effectively occurs with simple cues. Here's more great advice I heard from another Level 1 Staff member, Joe DeGain: "Have the knowledge of an exercise physiologist but be able to present it like a gym teacher."

Location, Location, Location

Experience doesn't play fair; she is a cruel teacher in giving the test before the lesson. Our simple cues won't always work, even when we try new ones by seeking out what's effective and what isn't. One useful drill (discussed below) I wish I could take credit for was learned at a CrossFit Coaches Prep Course last year. Remember: good artists borrow and great artists steal.

When we instruct clients to get their weight in their heels, we are delivering a simple cue. However, cues like that one, which only tell the clients the desired result, don't specifically tell them how to achieve that result.



Consider using direction cues in your coaching:
"Move your torso toward my hand."

We can refer to these types of cues as "result cues." They are similar to repeatedly telling your friend to come over to your gym without giving him directions. When he doesn't show up, you call him back and tell him to come over to your gym and then hang up the phone. Your friend, just like a new client, needs to know both the destination and the directions.

During the Coaches Prep Course, we learned to tie a body part to a direction, location or object. "Push your heels down" and "push your butt back" are cues that include directions for getting weight back into the heels.

This isn't an exact science, and these direction cues might not be more effective than the result cues. But they might provide your client with more specific instructions to move better. Watch someone else coach to begin identifying the difference between the cues. Listen for a body part tied to a physical direction.

Drill 4: Point and Click

Consider the following cues listed below and identify which ones direct a specific body part to a location. Which ones don't do that?

- "Pull your arms above your head."
- "Push your knee to my hand."
- "Keep your arms straight until you stand."
- "Tighten your lumbar."
- "Push your knees forward."
- "Get off your toes."
- "Keep a straighter bar path."

All the above cues sound simple and useful, but which cues include both a body part and a direction? Are the cues that instruct a specific body part to move to a specific direction more effective for you and your clients? You might discover that newer athletes lacking body awareness have more difficulty knowing which muscles and body parts are required to get off their toes, tighten their lumbar or straighten out the bar path. It's our job to help them out.

This method won't work every time, and at first it can be difficult to tell the difference between cues that identify the correct position and those that tell us how to get to the correct position.

Through practice and hard work, the time will come when you can coach 20 athletes as effectively as you can coach one.

In February, we ran a handful of Level 1 CrossFit Seminars at Ft. Stewart, Georgia. Many of the athletes who came through were familiar with functional movements but unfamiliar with our jargon and points of performance. This communication gap in my own coaching became

very clear when, after three or four unsuccessful cues during a deadlift—"Get your weight in your heels!"—the young woman I was coaching told me, "I don't know what you mean. And I don't know what that feels like." Asking an athlete to shift weight to their heels seems relatively simple. And the concept behind shifting weight to our heels is fundamental for many of our movements. What cues could we use in this case? Why?

Drill 5: Ask Yourself Questions

Here are some questions to consider:

- What is the fault that I want to correct?
- What do I need to see the athlete do in order to see that the fault has been fixed?
- What body parts have to move in order to stop the fault?
- Where do those body parts have to move?
- Was the fault fixed?



***If the bar is not in the ideal overhead position in a press, which body parts need to move in order to correct the problem?
Which body parts need to be active to maintain the correct position?***

Begin writing out a single fault outside class, and then answer the questions. We can learn some new cues simply by practicing the method. What we also learn from this drill is that different body-part/direction cues can fix the same fault. For example, “push your hips straight back,” “curl your toes up,” “straighten your legs” or the simple “press your heel to the floor” can assist in returning weight to the heels.

This is awfully formulaic at first, but it becomes easier with practice. More importantly, you will likely find your own methods to cue effectively, and eventually you’ll learn to find those methods quickly. Returning to our earlier example, we can walk through Drill 5 with more complicated faults as well. Useful drills and tips will present themselves in unexpected ways throughout your professional coaching career.

When possible, apply these drills on your own before implementing them in the gym. Take small steps: begin working with a single athlete before a few and a few before a whole class. Perhaps the most wonderful side effect of becoming a more effective coach is creating a self-sufficient group of athletes. Yes, your athletes will learn how to cue, help and coach each other. The benefits of such an environment are invaluable. Keep focus on the methods that can improve our approach to make learning a better experience for all athletes.

“Have Fun Screwing Up” —Coach Greg Glassman

In *On Being a Trainer*, Coach Greg Glassman tells an early Level 1 Seminar, “When I am in your face it’s only 30 percent of the time to tell you how wonderful you are, and the rest of the time I will ask why can’t you stay on your heels, why did you lose your arch? where are your shoulders? don’t look down—look up.”

Forget that your clients must be perfect today; our goal is to become better for tomorrow. Start small and be patient. Through practice and hard work, the time will come when you can coach 20 athletes as effectively as you can coach one. Along this journey, have fun screwing up.

We are convinced that better technique will help bring our athletes closer to fitness, and cueing effectively remains only one small piece of becoming a great coach. Our passion and enthusiasm for better human movement can be tempered with time and practice, and we must balance our own coaching technique and intensity to become more effective.



About the Author

James Hobart is a CrossFitter. He has been coaching CrossFit for nearly five years and works as a head trainer for CrossFit Level 1 Seminars. He received his J.D. from Suffolk University Law School in 2011 and will be sitting for the Massachusetts Bar in 2013. He would like to thank all the coaches who have been generous enough to share their knowledge and teach him along the way, especially the entire CrossFit Level 1 Seminar Staff.