

Coaches and Athletes: The Psychology of CrossFit

The author, a British psychologist and CrossFit trainer, offers coaches advice on how to get better results by building better rapport with athletes.

Steven Shrago



Coaching is not just about stopwatches, whiteboards and learning progressions. It's about relating in a meaningful way to a diverse group of people.

At the core of the CrossFit model is the relationship between athlete and coach. This relationship may be on a one-to-one basis or as part of a group.

Coaching knowledge and virtuosity are strong determining factors in the results achieved by individual athletes. But sometimes coaching relationships do not work as well as hoped. That doesn't have to happen. So how to improve the athlete-coach relationship?

Let's start with a truism: everyone is different. From physical size, ability, capacity and potential through to more subtle and ethereal concepts like beliefs, personality and values, it's clear we are all unique. Your mum was right about that. Coaches need to bridge differences to relate to everyone in productive and effective ways.

Neurolinguistic Programming—NLP

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is the study of personal and interpersonal effectiveness. The researchers and practitioners of NLP have developed a number of theoretical models to help people understand and develop the skills to improve their effectiveness.

One of the cornerstones of interpersonal effectiveness in NLP is described as "rapport." Rapport can be described as "being on the same wavelength," "speaking the same language" or "feeling in sync" with the other person. It feels comfortable and easy to get along with someone with whom you have a rapport. It happens naturally with people we get along with, and often with people we would like to get along with, as you can see in the examples of "chatting up" pictured below.

In my experience, a coach's rapport-building skill is the single biggest factor in building solid relationships with athletes. Dare I say it's even more valuable than coaching ability itself? Think about some good or great coaches you have worked with in the past. Most of them were able to get on your wavelength and used that connection to get you to work harder.

Matching/Mirroring

People tend to mirror each other physically, verbally and psychologically when they are in rapport.

Look again at the pictures below. Notice how in each picture the body language of each person almost exactly mirrors that of the other. This is even more remarkable in the group picture. Notice how each friend leans forward, resting an elbow on a knee. The picture doesn't look staged; this is just how the group felt comfortable at the time.

"If the brain were simple enough for us to understand it, we'd be too simple to understand it."

—Ken Hill



Malias/Creative Commons

Physical manifestations of a good rapport between people include mirroring of gestures and body positions. Good coaches can use this to develop a link to their athletes.

The degree of matching and mirroring can be quite subtle, too. Notice the couple in the picture at the bottom right of Page 2: the woman almost exactly copies the posture and gestures of her partner, even though she isn't on the phone.

Rapport tends to happen naturally when we are with people we like. However, it sometimes happens unconsciously where we are trying to impress another person and inadvertently take on some of his or her mannerisms.

The athletes want to impress Burgener, of course, and to avoid burpees, I suppose. So to impress the coach, they tried, unconsciously, to look like him.

For example, Mike Burgener tends to cross his arms quite frequently. That doesn't mean anything in and of itself. It's just a mannerism. However, have a look at the effect his mannerisms have on an entire group at an Olympic Lifting Cert. In the second picture, a number of students have their arms crossed "Burgener-style" in front of them.

Why? The athletes want to impress Burgener, of course, and to avoid burpees, I suppose. So to impress the coach, they tried, unconsciously, to look like him. I'll wager that none of them was aware of it at the time, either.

If that's what rapport looks like when it's going well, then what does it look like when it isn't going well? In short, it looks opposite: mismatched postures, gestures and language. A typical giveaway of poor rapport is the tilt of the head. When people are in rapport, their heads tend to tilt to the same side.

Have a look again at the pictures of people in rapport (Page 2). Notice how the head of each person tilts to match those of the others? When you pay attention to small things like body language, you can learn about the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

You can try an experiment with a friend. Note which way he tilts his head and tilt yours to the opposite. If he is a good friend, he'll probably tilt to meet yours after a few seconds. Notice how awkward it is to hold a conversation with heads tilted the "wrong" way.

Now apologize to your friend.



Keith Witenstein/CrossFit Virtuosity

Coach Mike Burgener often crosses his arms—but anyone who's been to an Olympic Lifting Cert knows it isn't a sign of disinterest.



Keith Witenstein/CrossFit Virtuosity

Body language is contagious when a group is in sync. Here, students unconsciously mirror one of their coach's favorite poses.

Coaching Progressions

Typically, when individuals or groups are in rapport, you tend to see the same patterns of body language across the group; e.g., tilt of the head, position of the arms and legs. You can also look for people physically leaning towards the coach and laughing and smiling together.

When groups are not in rapport, and thus not engaged, you will tend to see all sorts of positions. Examples include people not paying attention or doing their own thing. You might even see little sub-groups forming. When that happens, you risk not getting your message across and even losing people entirely.

So what can you do about that as a coach?

I'll outline three progressions you can work through to develop your awareness and skills around building rapport with your clients. They increase in complexity and build on one another. I would recommend you give each one a good go before progressing to the next. It goes without saying that although these skills have great utility in CrossFit context, they're also pretty useful in life outside the box.

I'd also say that you should feel free to experiment. There is no magic bullet that will work for all people at all times. Try something, watch the result and decide whether the outcome was what you wanted. If it was, keep on truckin'. Otherwise, try something else.

The three progressions are:

1. Active listening
2. Building rapport
3. Rich communication



A cohesive group is often characterized by very similar physical responses from each individual.

Active Listening

Active listening is a psychologist's way of saying: "Pay attention." But it's paying attention with more than just your ears. It involves "listening" with your eyes, ears and emotions to get as full an appreciation of others as you can manage. Ultimately, unless you are genuinely and consciously aware of how people are different from each other and even you, it will be difficult to tailor your approach to meet their needs.

By listening with your eyes and ears, I mean:

How does the individual hold herself physically?

What mannerisms does she have?

What sort of words does she use?

How quickly or slowly does she speak?

How does she act when unsure of something?

How does she act when excited?

How does she act when worried?

What sorts of questions does she have?

To which side does she naturally tend to tilt her head?

Does she tend to move toward things or away from them?

Does she tend to make eye contact or avoid it?

Does she ask questions?

Does she do things just to please you as a coach?

But be careful: despite conventional wisdom, the meaning of body language is far from universal. Crossed arms can infer a multitude of different thoughts and emotions depending on the context and the person.

Active listening is also mentally tiring. It's not something most people are required to do on daily basis. As we get older, we tend to rely on experience or instincts, which are effectively mental shortcuts. Active listening opens your senses to the noise of human interaction without filtering. This information will be an invaluable asset in helping you build rapport with a wider variety of people.

Building Rapport

I prefer the term “building” to “manufacturing” because it sounds less Machiavellian. At least that’s what I tell myself.

This progression builds on the previous one by using the information you’ve gathered to inform decisions on what you can do to build rapport. The simplest approach toward building rapport, especially with people you don’t know well, is matching or mirroring. This is the subtle activity of physically or verbally reflecting the other person’s style in your own. And I really mean subtle. Really. No one likes a copycat.

So if someone tended to tilt his head to the left side when talking to you, you would subtly tilt yours to your right to match. The picture of the two women mirroring each other (Page 2) is a very good example of this.

Go gently, however. If the other person has a pronounced tilt of the head, you don’t need to match it for intensity. Also, if your partner constantly changes sides, don’t feel you have to move your head through a full range of motion to keep up.

Other things to watch for are body position. Is an athlete directly facing you or standing at an angle? Is he leaning toward or away from you? What leg is he carrying his weight on? How is he holding his arms? All of these observations can be subtly mirrored to build the mutual feeling of rapport. Watch and listen carefully to see if the rapport is

building. When you smile, does he smile with you? When you get a little more animated, does he follow? When you lean forward, does he?

This is where it is very useful to understand more about your own style. Grab a video camera and record one of your coaching sessions. What did you notice? What were your habits? What do you need to be aware of when building rapport with others?

Another area to focus on is language. Does an athlete tend to use certain words? Does he speak in a specific tone, pace, pitch or volume? These are also good options for matching. A common example is speech volume. Some people or groups are naturally quiet. Standing in front of them and booming out instructions in your best motivational style might not always be the best route to building rapport and understanding. Try standing a little closer and speaking more quietly at the start. See if that engages the group or individual more effectively. When dealing with a noisy, talkative group or athlete, feel free to ramp up the volume.

Observe what other coaches and trainers do. See if you can learn anything from their style. Determine what works best for you.



So how can you make your communication with others more effective while building on the active listening and rapport building? You can use the mode of communication that connects best with the individual’s representation of the world.

How is Lisa Lugo responding to Mark Rippetoe’s instruction? How is Rip getting his point across? What physical clues show that she’s getting the message?

Rich Communication

For the final progression, I'll start with a statement about the word "communication": it's heavily overused and widely misunderstood.

Communication is not:

- What you say.
- How you say it.
- Listening to other people say things to you.
- E-mail.
- A phone call.
- Having a meeting.

Communication is the message you get back. Think about that for a moment.

Now think about how many steps it takes to get from "the message I want to send" to "the message I get back."

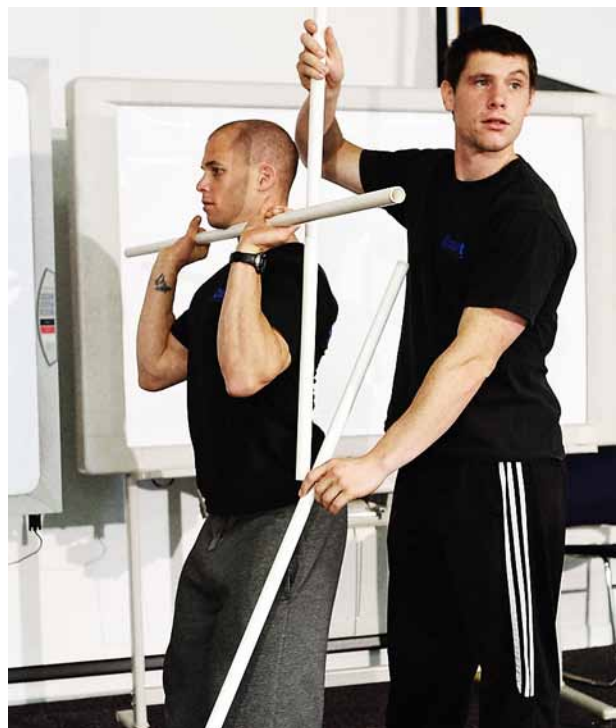
1. The message the coach wants to send (in her head).
2. The method the coach uses to send the message (what she says and how she says it).
3. The amount of the message received by the client (none, some, all).
4. The client's interpretation of the message received (good, bad).
5. The client's thoughts and feelings about her interpretation.
6. The message the client wants to send back.
7. The method the client uses to send the message back.

Effective communication has only really taken place once the client has sent her message back to the coach and the coach is satisfied with the answer. If the coach is not satisfied with the answer—and the answer may be words or actions—then she needs to change steps one and two. After all, the very definition of madness—or indeed poor communication—is doing the same things and expecting a different outcome. If this is true, then why, when faced with misunderstandings, do some people just loudly and slowly repeat what they already said?

So how can you make your communication with others more effective while building on the active listening and rapport building? You can use the mode of communication that connects best with the individual's representation of the world.



Each coach has his or her own style of communication, which includes visual, auditory and kinesthetic components that get the message to the athlete. Tanya Wagner used Coach Burgener's advice to snatch 135 lb. at the 2009 CrossFit Games.



Many athletes respond well to visual cues such as those given by Adrian (Boz) Bozman (right) and Chris Spealler—but some do not. How do you coach that athlete to a new PR?

NLP describes three basic representations of the world, which are generally reflected in their language usage:

Visual: tends to see, understand and describe the world in visual terms and mental images; e.g., "I see what you mean," "Look at this," and "Watch carefully."

Auditory: tends to relate to the world in terms of sound, voices and noises. Tends to listen in order to understand and err toward the logical and methodical; e.g., "Sounds good to me," "I hear what you are saying," and "Listen to me."

Kinesthetic: tends to relate to the world in terms of physical senses, feelings and emotions. Often needs to touch or feel things to understand them; e.g., "I can't get to grips with it," "Hold on," and "Feel the pressure."

The most common style in Western cultures is visual (approximately 65 percent of the population), followed by auditory (30 percent), and then kinesthetic (five percent). In reality, everyone tends to use all styles to some extent with a clear preference for one or two of them.

To get a quick sense of your preferred style, visit [this Web site](#) and complete the questionnaire.

To understand how these styles might work in a coaching context, consider the cues related to the most basic movement in CrossFit: the air squat.



The best coaches carefully listen and observe their athletes and are prepared to offer a wide variety of cues to success. Here, Coach Greg Glassman uses Lani Lau to demonstrate the air squat.

Visual

Physical demonstration of the movement ("Watch this.")

Pointing to key aspects of the movement as they happen.

Cue: arms straight out in front of your body.

Cue: hips back and down.

Cue: feet shoulder width apart.

Cue: toes pointed at 30 degrees.

Cue: knees out.

Cue: maintain lumbar curve.

Cue: crease of the hips below the knee.

Auditory

Detailed, logical and sequential description of the movement as it takes place

Cue: the elongated pronunciation of the word "pull" as the coach describes the effort of "pulling your body into the bottom position."

Cue: the elongated pronunciation of the word "drive" as the coach describes the effort of "driving off your heels and up."

Cue: sharp, militaristic pronunciation of the word "straight," when describing the "stand straight upright" portion of the movement.

Cue: directive, elongated pronunciation of the word "hold" when telling clients to hold their position at the bottom of the squat.

Kinesthetic

The physical feeling of completing each stage of the movement; e.g., the sensation of maintaining the lumbar curve.

The physical sensation of any hands-on adjustment the coach makes.

Cue: feel the weight on the heels.

Cue: stretch your arms up higher.

Cue: tighten up your core.

Cue: breathe in and hold.

Cue: pull yourself down into the bottom.

Cue: push your knees out.

Cue: press off your heels.

Look at the cues. Which seem more like your style? Do you use cues from all three sections or just two? Only one?

In order to create rich communication—what you say and how you say it to get your message through to others—you should be aiming to cover all three of these representation systems simultaneously.

If you have the time, listen to [President Barack Obama's inauguration speech](#). His words are laced with imagery (visual) and emotional context (kinesthetic). Furthermore, much has been made of the tone, volume and pace of his delivery (auditory).

The beauty of this approach is that you have complete freedom to create memorable, rich cues for all the movements you coach or are learning. There are no such things as the “best cues” to use; there are only cues that work for some people and those that don't.

Cues for Coaches

The most important tips for coaches are as follows:

- Work on your active listening. Use this to inform your rapport building, especially with people or clients you don't know well.
- Keenly observe the results and make changes where necessary.
- Finally, build up a varied toolkit of cues for each movement. If one doesn't work, try something different. After all, no two people are the same.

As a final note of inspiration, I'll share a couple of cues used by Andrew Stemlar, CrossFit Level 2 trainer and owner of CrossFit London:

On “hips back and down” for squatting movements: “Imagine that a rich and sexy person is standing behind you. Press your rear end out and try and impress them.”

On active shoulders in the overhead squat: “Imagine that you have a pair of angry squirrels in your hands. They are trying very hard to attack each other. Keep them high above your head and pull them apart as hard as you can.”

On “elbows high” as you drive out of the front squat: “Imagine that you have strings attached to your elbows. As you come out of the squat, feel yourself being pulled up by your elbows.”

Andrew is a genius.



Courtesy of Steven Shrago

About the Author

Steven Shrago is a paleo-eating, CrossFitting organizational psychologist from London, England. He has worked with a wide range of organizations, including the BBC and law-enforcement agencies. He cautions that neurolinguistic programming is just one map of underlying human complexity and is no more right or wrong than other models of personality and behavior.

Further reading

The NLP Knowledge Centre

West One Neuro-Linguistic Programming