

Performance support at the Sport Ireland Institute

Phil Moore shares his insights into what he believes is effective practice in high performance sport settings.

In this article my aim is to provide a brief overview of the approach to support work at the Sport Ireland Institute. We support around 300 athletes from around 20 Olympic and Paralympic sports. As a relatively small Institute of Sport, our team members will have several roles and no-one works exclusively with a single sport. Our current organisational structure reflects a recognition that whilst it has been administratively convenient to group staff by discipline (and therefore common interest and expertise), we work with our athletes, coaches and Performance Directors as flexible, adaptable multidisciplinary teams.

Why multi-professional/multi-disciplinary teams? The answer is that human performance is complex, which means that supporting that performance requires an integrated and holistic approach. No one individual on the support team will have the full picture and there is no single "reality." Every perspective has a value and each of these can (and will) impact on the understanding and action of other members of the team. We take a post-positivistic approach to our work, which embraces complexity and places emphasis on multiple viewpoints and the meaning that we (and in particular, the athlete) make of events and interactions.

Multidisciplinary sport science support

Doing multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary sport science support work is challenging. It's a quarter-century since we outlined some of the challenges (Burwitz *et al.*, 1994) and the reality is that in many ways little progress has been achieved in the intervening years. Recently, Wayne Goldsmith (2018) published a highly critical admonition to sport science that pretty much summed up the same key failings identified in our own work.

However, I would readily acknowledge that doing multi or interdisciplinary science and support is not easy. I think there are three key pillars of effective practice:

- Focus on the person (athlete or coach) and their performance rather than your science
- Invest in building effective professional relationships so that you can work as part of an integrated support team
- Yes, disciplinary expertise - but with humility, openness and curiosity about other perspectives and disciplines that may modify your understanding.

Focus on the person

To work effectively in applied sport science support it is essential that you invest in understanding the story of the person in front of you and how they see it being written. How did they get here? What happened along the way? What have they learned? Where do they see themselves now and where are they going next? And finally, what support do they need and can you help? Sometimes, that might require your specialist expertise, honed over many years. Often it needs you to do fairly basic tasks well and reliably without getting in the way. Occasionally, you will deliver a critical intervention.

So, engaging with the athletes and coaches around their needs is obviously critical. Good coaches tend to be open and inquisitive and are often pretty good at working out who can help them and who will be too much trouble. Time is short and at the high end of performance you'll be quickly appraised for your *usefulness* (not your expertise necessarily) and discarded pretty quickly if you don't

meet the mark. However, our own team have sometimes found it difficult to get a coach or Performance Director to articulate their performance questions. Often, the coach will direct the conversation back to a need for service (i.e. physiology lab testing) rather than engage in a conversation around the performance. Possibly, we haven't asked often enough for this to be normal. Possibly, it feels like an encroachment on their territory. However, by starting with a focus on building a trust-based relationship we are more frequently getting much closer to the performance questions.

Effective professional relationships

Support work takes place in a social context. There is a network of relationships, behavioural norms, history, power dynamics, territory, motivations and influences that pre-date your involvement. Consequently, it's a good idea to try to build a picture of what's going on, why it's done that way and who are the key influencers before you launch off on a raft of interventions. Listen, observe and build relationships through authentic enquiry - good questions will gain you entry far quicker than displays of your expertise. As our head of psychology Dr Kate Kirby commented, "Athletes don't care what you know until they know that you care." Physically and metaphorically you need to get on their territory - poolside, trackside, pitchside. It's a given that you've done your research into the sport or event, but it's imperative to learn their perspective on what works and why.

Back when I was working as a sport psych I worked in a team where the head coach was a fan of psychology, had used it as an athlete and valued it as a coach - great! The assistant coach (military background, active service under fire) was dismissive and disengaged. In fact, he used to sit at the back of workshop sessions, sighing and checking his watch. Opening a conversation was difficult as he would avoid me. Eventually, I engineered an opportunity where he and I were the last to leave the training ground and he had to give me a lift. Cue awkward silence.

Me: "So what do you think about this sport psych stuff?"

Him: "Load of crap, you can't tell me anything about dealing with pressure."

Me: "You're absolutely right, but tell me, what it's like to be under fire - how do you cope?"

And we're off - he was happy to give me his perspective and educate me, and I was happy to learn and make a connection. The next day we went to the gym and he lifted much, much heavier weights than me. Gradually, we built an effective working relationship - I used his coaching language in my work with athletes, he started to use my suggestions in his coaching practice.

Professional relationships with other support providers are equally important and whilst time-consuming, this interaction is essential to every support team. At the heart of these relationships is a need for open and candid communication.

Disciplinary expertise

Arguably, the best multidisciplinary support is led and delivered by a good coach who can understand and integrate lots of different "ologies" but with a very focused application to the specific performance needs of their athletes. The scientist-practitioner requires depth of specialist expertise in their own discipline to be

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able to bring something of value to the table. The application of that knowledge might well be of use to a broad range of athletes. Both need the other and the ability to talk to each other. Too often, the science is pitched for the scientist and is not useable by the coach.

The other challenge is negotiating boundaries both with coaches and with colleagues. So, I know that as a professional I must practice within the boundaries of my competence - to “swim in my lane.” But in reality there are always areas of overlap between disciplines. Actually, on all sides there are overlaps so instead of comfortably swimming in my lane I’ve got others crowding in all around. In fact, the lane analogy is not a good fit - it’s much more akin to the contact sport of open water swimming! So, the skill here is to embrace the contact and work to collaborate in the shared space rather than contest it. Being prepared to lead and draft, if we stretch the open water swim analogy. What helps is to have clear and shared objectives, together with structures and processes to facilitate the collaboration (clearly stated purpose, planning and review cycles, feedback loops, debriefs, weekly check-ins).

Developing skills and managing the environment

We try to balance any tensions through the application of the three pillars outlined above, some common tools (i.e. Goalscape) and our in-house CPD. The main emphasis of our staff development work is around the challenges in the “doing” of good multidisciplinary teamwork in real-life settings. To achieve this we use case-study scenarios, role play, show-and-tell presentations, as well as workshops around self-management and self-care.

Relationship with athletes

We work on a daily basis with athletes and their support is our primary objective. So, there are some considerations that need to be borne in mind when engaging in this relationship.

First, the basics are the same - listen and try to understand where the athlete sees themselves, what they’re trying to achieve and how you may be able to help. It’s a good idea to engage in “contracting” from the outset - setting of clear expectations and commitments on both sides. Sometimes, support staff can be too eager to please and set up an unbalanced relationship with the athlete. This is not healthy for either party - the athlete can develop a sense of entitlement or even worse, dependency. The provider becomes a resentful martyr.

Second, understanding your orbit is critical. By this I mean that as you enter into a sport, you are typically in an outer orbit around the coach-athlete relationship, which is at the centre of this system. If you’re good at what you do then your orbit moves closer to the centre. Ideally, you position yourself so that you have sufficient influence and gravity in the system to create impact but

without getting too close. So, it’s a good idea to be intentional in positioning oneself within the complex social structure around an athlete and coach. Too often I’ve seen support providers who have drifted unintentionally into ineffective relationships that end up with a lack of engagement on both sides (orbit too distant) or over-involvement and dependency.

The ideal that we’re aiming for is a relationship built on mutual respect, with clarity of expectations that helps to foster the athlete’s sense of autonomy and competence. This must always be a primary aim in the support relationship. Some simple things can help here such as setting boundaries on your availability - do you respond to texts on a Sunday evening for non-critical issues?

Finally, psychological self-care is essential for the provider of support services. It’s too easy to say yes to every request for help and end up feeling stretched and stressed. This path leads to burnout. Recognising the need to decompress after competition is critical as is an investment in “normal” relationships. My own experience of about a decade of being heavily involved in direct support work was that over time my social network outside of the applied work dwindled. Debriefing with colleagues can help to unpack, learn and close off episodes of high investment in support work and should be built into work programmes.

Summary

I hope that I’ve provided an insight into the complex, dynamic, non-linear world of support work. If you take nothing else, I would re-emphasise the centrality of the inter-related nature of the work and consequently, the need to embrace more holistic and integrated approaches to doing applied support work with a clear focus on performance questions. Underpinning this approach is a need to invest in relationships as a primary objective rather than as a by-product of doing “proper” work. ■



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References:

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