

Guidelines for Providing Feedback

by Richard K. Stratton

There are two general categories of feedback: sensory feedback and augmented feedback. In this article we are going to discuss some of the guidelines to keep in mind as you, the coach, give your athletes augmented feedback. Remember that the purpose of augmented feedback is to provide error correction information, assist with motivation, and act as a form of reinforcement. Although this article will address several specific guidelines which you should follow, if you cannot remember anything else, remember to THINK before you SPEAK. Let's address some of the guidelines in the form of questions.

How much information should my feedback contain?

The most straightforward answer to this question is to avoid the extremes, that is, do not give too much or too little. Too much information on each feedback message can overload the athlete. It will likely give them too much to think about and produce confusion. It can even lead to "Paralysis by Analysis" in which the athletes are thinking so much about what they are trying to correct, they can barely perform the skill at all. Too little information in the feedback message is not helpful. The athletes need enough information in order to fix the problem you are trying to address. A modified version of the old acronym KISS is relevant here; that is Keep It Short and Specific, short to prevent overload, and specific to focus the athlete's attention on the correction you are trying to make. Phrase the corrective information in a positive way. For example, to a swimmer having a problem with flip turns, do not say "Don't turn too early" but rather "Remember to wait for the turn marker" or "Wait until you see the end of the pool". Negatively worded statements focus on the problem, positively worded statements focus on the correction. You are trying to help the athlete correct the skill, not worry about the problem.

How often should I give feedback?

There is no absolute answer to this question. You need to consider two factors: the skill being taught and level of learning the athlete has reached. As we teach many skills, athletes are able to do a lot of repetitions of the skill during practice. In those situations you do not need to give feedback as frequently. In a few skills, however, the repetitions may be limited and thus you may need to provide feedback after virtually every attempt the athlete does. As the athlete first learns a skill, feedback should be provided more frequently so that the athlete doesn't become too frustrated or learn bad habits. As performance improves, you should reduce the rate of feedback so that the athlete will think more about how the movement feels and not be dependent on you for error identification and error correction.

How precise should feedback be?

The degree of precision of your feedback is directly linked to the level of learning the athlete possesses. As skill performance progresses from novice to expert, feedback should also change from general to very precise. In early stages of learning, skill errors are usually relatively large and/or random in nature. General feedback is most appropriate for this stage of learning, e.g. "Remember to swing level" or "You need to keep your hand closer to your body." As the athlete becomes more proficient, the error correction should be phrased more precisely. What we are saying is that performance done by an expert may need some correction but may be good enough to

not require correction if it is done by a beginner. Motor learning specialists use the term error bandwidth to describe this concept. The error bandwidth shrinks, requiring more precise performance, as learning progresses.

When should I give the feedback?

Feedback should be given relatively soon after the activity is completed that you are providing information about. The idea is to make sure that the athlete links together the feedback and the specific behavior you are targeting. When you are able to provide feedback immediately after the behavior occurs, you need to allow the athlete a few seconds to process their own sensory feedback before you start giving augmented feedback. This is especially crucial when correcting skill execution. We want to make sure that the athlete will combine the information about how the movement actually felt with the corrective information you provide. In sports, however, considerable time may pass by between when the behavior happens and when you get an opportunity to provide the feedback. If this happens, make sure that you clearly link the target behavior and the feedback.

What methods could I use to give feedback?

This is probably the easiest of the questions to answer. Use any method that you have available to you. By far, the most commonly used method is verbal feedback, that is, telling the athlete what they need to do to correct the problem, e.g. "Remember to pull all the way through on your stroke" or verbally reinforcing them for doing something well, e.g. "Great job, that's the way to spike the ball!" Another method that can be used is video tape of the athlete performing. This can help the athletes see for themselves the problems they are having and can help with visualizing the solution. If you choose to use video tape, you should use it fairly regularly to ensure that the athlete is able to actually use the information he or she sees. In some activities the athlete needs to be more advanced in their skill level in order to see the problem and devise a solution, even with the help of the coach. Other methods such as still photography or white boards are of potential but restricted value for providing feedback.

This article by Dr. Richard Stratton, Health and Physical Education Program, Virginia Tech