



Communication and the Coach

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(Incl General Masters Swimming Information)

Masters Swimming Australia Overview

Introduction

Masters Swimming Australia is the national sports organisation/governing body for Masters Swimming, which is a not-for-profit organisation for adult swimmers aged 18 and above. Coaching adult swimmers is in many ways identical to coaching adolescent or age-group swimmers, but you will need to keep in mind some specific points when planning a Masters program. This section discusses these points and offers some possible solutions to situations you may encounter.

Who is Masters Swimming Australia?

It is a non-government, not for profit organisation, constituted in 1975. Masters Swimming Australia Inc. used to be referred to as "AUSSI", which is an acronym for "Australian Union of Senior Swimmers International". This acronym was dropped from the name in October 2009. The organisation does not receive funding from any government source; however, some Branches are eligible for and receive funding from State Governments.

Our Mission Statement

To provide at club, branch, and national level an environment that encourages all adults, regardless of ability, to swim regularly, to compete to promote fitness and improve their general wellbeing.

Our vision

Enrich and Inspire Adults to Swim for Life

Our motto

FITNESS, FRIENDSHIP and FUN

What does Masters Swimming Australia offer?

Masters Swimming Australia caters for those who can only just swim through to the experienced swimmer, emphasising participation in a fun and friendly environment which encourages and facilitates adult involvement in swimming. Only 30% of members compete in swim meets, so you don't have to be a champion swimmer to join!

Who can join?

Membership is open to all people who have turned 18 or are older in the calendar year of joining.

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Masters Swimming Club coaches are increasingly told that they must be effective communicators to succeed as coaches. Such advice highlights the importance of communication for creating a positive swimming experience. However, merely advising a Masters Swimming Club coach to 'communicate effectively' is like a school teacher telling a student to study for a test without providing guidance as to how and what to study.

To be an effective communicator, a Masters Swimming Club coach must have a full and clear understanding of the objective of communication, what should be communicated and how and when to best do so. These issues relating to the 'what', 'why', 'when' and 'how' of effective communication will now be explored together with some tips for coaches who are keen to optimise this critical skill.

The scope of the following material will focus on communications between Masters Swimming Club coaches and swimmer although it is recognised that coaches will have communications with others including assistant coaches, administrators, club members, support staff and possibly the media¹.

Communication Defined

'Communication' is "*a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the transmission or exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, or information through verbal and non-verbal channels*"² (p.187).

Building on this definition, 'effective communication' involves mutual sharing and understanding. It occurs when individuals are connecting in a meaningful way and feel engaged in a mutually caring exchange³. As such, effectively communication between a Masters Swimming Club coach and swimmer goes beyond merely talking and listening. Rather, it implies that the challenge for a Masters Swimming Club coach is to ensure his/her swimmer feels like the only, or most important, person in the world!

Purpose of Communication

The communication process involves sending, receiving (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) messages through a variety of sensory modalities (mainly vision and hearing but we also communicate through the senses of touch, taste, smell and feel)². While this process occurs in all communications, Weinberg and Gould⁴ suggest coaches communicate for a variety of reasons including to:

- Persuade

- Evaluate
- Inform
- Motivate and inspire
- Solve problems

These authors suggest coaches may incorporate several purposes at any one time. For example, a Masters Swimming Club coach may use motivation and persuasion to convince a squad as to the benefits of a new program and then inform them of the program's details.

Types of Communication

Communication is typically classified as '**intrapersonal**' or '**interpersonal**'⁵. Intrapersonal refers to our 'self-talk', inner monologue or conversation we have with ourselves. Burke argues that this type of communication is perhaps the most important type of communication because it affects one's views on life, confidence, daily actions, and reactions.

The second type of communication, 'interpersonal', refers to an individual sending or receiving a message(s) from another individual or group. It invariably includes not only verbal (spoken or written) content but also nonverbal cues known as body language (e.g., facial expressions, body language, body positioning, signals, gestures, voice intonations etc).

It is estimated that as much as 50% to 70% of all communication is nonverbal^{4,5}. This estimate has significant implications for Masters Swimming Club coaches who may be unaware, or forgetful, of the information they are imparting with facial expressions, hand gestures and tone of voice for example. There is good reason for the well-known adages, "*it's not what you say but how you say it*" and "*a picture tells a thousand words*"!

Communication Techniques

There are many suggestions in the coaching literature of techniques designed to facilitate effective communication. For example, Anshel⁶ developed a set of 'commandments' to include one must be honest, consistent, empathetic, and not defensive; one must praise and criticise behaviour not the personality, respect others, use positive non-verbal cues, teach skills and interact consistently with team members.

Ansel's⁶ suggestions show a close correspondence with those techniques proposed by Yukelson² when he proposed that one must be honest, have good listening skills, be good at asking questions, be able to develop a rapport, promote various views of the same situation, use the

proper terminology, and establish a trusting relationship. Yukelson also proposed that individuals must take the time to practice these important attributes.

Drawing on these proposed techniques for how to be an effective communicator, it may be useful to further explore (a) attending and listening; and (b) sending effective messages. Without these critical skills, errors, misconceptions, and breakdowns in communication are more likely to occur.

A. Attending and Listening

Recently Murphy and Murphy⁷ highlighted several suggestions for how to become a good listener. Given it is estimated that most untrained listeners hear less than 20% of what is said to them⁸, Murphy and Murphy's 'building blocks of helpful listening' may provide useful guidance. These building blocks are:

- **Initiation of Relationship** – when an individual approaches a coach for assistance, the coach arranges a quiet and relatively private setting to discuss issues, concerns, and goals
- **Attending Behaviour** - in the first instance a coach spends time listening. This involves eye contact and expressing appropriate emotions via facial expressions and attentive body language.
- **Questioning** – everyone has a story to tell, and a coach facilitates 'storytelling' by asking focused questions (e.g., "*what brings you to this swim squad?*").
- **Paraphrasing** - a coach restates the essential content of discussions using different words.
- **Reflecting feelings** – a coach tries to feel what the other is experiencing and seeks feedback of his/her understanding.
- **Reflecting meanings** - a coach paraphrases the other's story and fills in any blanks as to its meaning for that individual.
- **Summarising** - a coach paraphrases both the information and emotional content of what has been shared.

In embracing these building blocks, a coach demonstrates empathy and an ability to understand the situation from the other individual's perspective. This is important as a good listener must be able to show caring, concern and understanding of situations and circumstances. In conclusion, Murphy and Murphy⁷ propose:

- (a) Attending behaviour includes the critical aspects of eye contact, positive vocal qualities, questions, verbal tracking, and attentive body language
- (b) Listening skills includes paraphrasing, reflection of feelings and meaning and summarising

These authors further conclude that a coach can analyse his/her own listening and attending micro skills using recording of actual sessions with others or conducting practice interviews with colleagues.

B. Sending Effective Messages

A central tenet of effective communication is to seek first to understand the individual, then seek to be understood⁹. This tenet highlights the significance of understanding the other individual's goals, interests, values, and abilities. Extending this concept to swimming, good Masters Swimmers Club coaches should be mindful that, to get the most out of their swimmers, it is important to understand each swimmer's likes, preferences and needs and then to individualise their communication style accordingly.

Martens⁸ sheds some light on the relationship between personality and communication in proposing that coaches can be characterised as **Command**, **Submissive** or **Co-operative**. Each style of personality is thought to typically communicate in a specific manner.

In brief, a Command-style coach typically communicates aggressively by issuing orders and instructions. The coach does most of the talking, listens spasmodically, tends to blame others when things go wrong and often adopts intimidating body language.

Submissive-style coaches avoid difficult issues and seldom 'take a stand'. These coaches are often uncertain, speak in a soft voice, and preface what they say ("*perhaps, maybe, hopefully*" etc). Their style contrasts with coaches who are characterised as Co-operative and communicate in a straight forward, positive and clear way with good listening and questioning skills.

Although styles of communication vary from coach to coach, it is important for a coach to communicate in a manner consistent with his/her personality and coaching philosophy². In this context, Martens⁸ notes that clear, direct, and honest communication with no hidden agenda is what coaches should strive for in developing successful relationship with their athletes. To this end, Martens proposes that coaches take an individualised approach with each athlete considering differences in that athlete's personality, abilities and needs.

What does all this mean for Masters Swimming Club coaches? Masters Swimming Club coaches who are good communicators explain, clarify, and individualise instruction to meet a swimmer's needs, personality, and goals. They observe performance and can provide clear and constructive feedback in a non-threatening way. How might such feedback be achieved?

One possible approach has been labeled the 'sandwich approach'¹⁰. This approach begins with a positive statement (e.g., "*good effort Jo*"), followed by a future-oriented corrective statement (e.g., "*next time you might relax more*"), and ends with a positive and encouraging statement (e.g., "*keep up the good work*"). Masters Swimming Club coaches who find a positive way of communicating what needs to be said – even if strong criticism is necessary – are more likely to engage their swimmer compared with when they use derogatory, negative and/or sarcastic comments.

Matching Communication Strategies and Cue Words to the Target Audience

Coker¹¹ provides guidance to Masters Swimming Club coaches who wish to target their communication strategies to the needs of individual swimmers. Coker proposes that individuals process new information according to whether they are visual, kinesthetic, thinking or listener learners. Visual learners learn best by watching someone else demonstrate a movement. The kinesthetic learner wants to know what the movement feels like. The thinker requires information and needs to understand concepts and principles. The listener focuses on sounds and rhythms to learn movement patterns. Suggested strategies to target these types of learners are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Strategies to Target Specific Types of Learners

Visual	Kinesthetic	Thinking	Listening
Demonstrate	Move	Use analogies	Clapping
Model	Touch	Use principles	Music
Charts	Simulate	Research	Focus
Pictures	Guidance	Test	Rhythm
Graphs	Trial and error	Comparisons	Accentuate
Film	Comparisons	Analyse	Sound

Coker¹¹ further proposes that there a variety of cue words to target the visual, kinesthetic, thinking and listening learners. These cue words are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Cue Words to Target Specific Types of Learners

Visual	Kinesthetic	Thinking	Listening
See	Feel	Analyse	Rhythm
Look	Experience	Examine	Hear
Imagine	Simulate	Investigate	Pace
Focus	Sense	Contemplate	Detect
View	Perform	Compare	Tempo
Watch	Do	Study	Flow
Observe	Move	Assess	Pulse
Search	Demonstrate	Explore	Beat
Perceive	Practice	Probe	

To achieve the best outcome when providing instruction and feedback, Coker¹¹ proposes that coaches incorporate instructional strategies and key cue words that accommodate individual learning styles. A learner's preferred style can be assessed by using both observation and trial and error as a guide. For example, Masters Swimming Club coaches may identify a swimmer as a visual learner knowing he/she likes to see video footage of his/her technique compared to the technique adopted by Ian Thorpe or Michael Phelps.

In some situations (e.g., coaching and demonstrating a new skill to a group), Coker¹¹ suggests that an eclectic (more than one) approach might be adopted. This is entirely consistent with Wieland's¹² recent suggestion that coaches can address individual differences in learning by using various means. Specifically, Wieland suggests a coach,

“could (if the budget allows) stimulate learning and make use of simple or interactive whiteboard, laptops, above and below water video analysis, even MP3 or iPod, heart-rate monitors, pacers, DVD to other ‘training toys’. Simple methods such as tennis balls, closed hands, eyes closed and

static floating exercises to further engage the senses and possibly derive even more ‘feel’ (and interest) throughout the entire body can also be used” (p.38).

To facilitate an eclectic approach in communications, Wieland¹² provides a list of suggestions of current aids that a coach might consider. The list includes:

- Sport-specific DVDs for a swimmer to visualise the skills and drills required
- Video hard drive players to provide immediate feedback via a visual portrayal on screen before a swimmer repeats a skill
- Cameras with memory sticks to download images for analysis
- Video editing programs to freeze frames and slow-motion movements on digital video
- Race planning and biomechanical analysis software for analysis purpose
- Display goal times, laminated and placed on the wall for swimmers to see
- Chinagraph pencils and individual Perspex boards to aid understanding
- Internet and text (SMS) messages to aid visualisation of a skill or drill

Again a key to the appropriate choice of tools and teaching aids is client (swimmer)-driven. The critical consideration is what is going to best optimise the learning, training, and competitive environment to facilitate a swimmer to achieve his/her goals.

When and Where to Communicate

Masters Swimming Club coaches should be mindful that communication is an on-going process of giving and receiving information. Communication is always occurring. As articulated by Burke⁵,

“We cannot not communicate. Whether or not we speak, gesture, acknowledge others, or return emails and text messages, we are communicating” (p. 315)

As suggested above, knowing a swimmer’s personality can guide a Masters Swimming Club coach as to when, and where, he/she might give specific instruction, advice and/or feedback. For example, some Masters swimmers prefer to ‘take time out’ after a heavy training block or competition. For these swimmers, delaying feedback from the coach may be a sound strategy. As noted above, often a quiet spot is more conducive to meaningful and respectful discussions than those discussions conducted in front of a group of swimmers or onlookers.

It is interesting to note again in this context that many communication avenues are now available (e.g., mobile phone, email, instant and text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, blogs etc). Masters Swimming Club coaches should familiarise themselves with these communication possibilities, and perhaps consider using some of these to supplement face-to-face contact^{2,5}. One drawback of engaging in this technological communication boom might however be to suggest that Masters Swimming Club coaches are on call 24 hours!⁵

Summary of Key Messages

It may be useful to summarise some of the key messages for Masters Swimming Club coaches working with swimmers. These messages include:

- Effective communication is a dynamic 2-way process (i.e., involves phases or steps and a shared understanding between 2 or more individuals).
- Effective communication between Masters Swimming Club coach and swimmer addresses 3 integrated issues - *What*, *Why* and *How* – *what* a swimmer is to do, *why* he/she should do so, and *how* he/she should do it.

- Effective communication generally stems from a coach/swimmer relationship based on respect and trust (rather than criticism and control). Remember that comments to swimmers need not be judgmental. Masters Swimming Club coaches should *acknowledge* a swimmer's strengths, achievements, and efforts (thereby facilitating learning whereas judgment generally interferes).
- The appropriate use of non-verbal cues (e.g., hand and body movement, voice tone, and gestures) can greatly enhance effective communication. Use these powerful tools wisely! Also, the ability to "read" a swimmer's non-verbal cues/body language can be invaluable in understanding your swimmer.
- Swimmers should know that coaches genuinely "care" about them as people. Masters Swimming Club coaches therefore need to be concerned about the individual (e.g., being able to recall what a swimmer told you in previous discussions is a good way to show a swimmer that you really listen and care).
- All the ideas, theories and techniques will be ineffective if you cannot make them relevant, practical, and meaningful to the individual.
- There will be times when you must be willing to honestly tell a swimmer what you think (e.g., when a swimmer is not putting in the effort to achieve his/her goal). The challenge here is for a Masters Swimming Club coach to communicate respectfully and tactfully.
- Critical micro-communication skills (e.g., questioning) should be practiced until such time as it becomes instinctive to adopt such skills in one's communications.
- Electronic communication methods can satisfactorily supplement face-to-face communication.

How to Optimise Effective Communication Skills

Considering the key messages detailed above, what specifically can a coach do to improve his/her communication skills? Here are a couple of suggestions adapted from Young¹³.

Table 3. Tips for Masters Swimming Club Coaches

1. Be a good listener – to what a swimmer wants, to what works for him/her, to his/her suggestions. Does the swimmer feel he/she is the only or most important person in the world when interacting with you?
2. Take the time to know each individual – what does a swimmer bring to a situation (e.g., age, experience, attitude) that allows you to see it “through the eyes” of that swimmer.
3. Take a case-by-case approach – not only is each swimmer different but the same swimmer can react to a similar situation in different ways over time. Be aware that Master swimmers are motivated to swim for different reasons (e.g., test skills, health and fitness concerns, social reasons and extrinsic rewards and these reasons may change over time.
4. Gain an awareness of what *you* bring to each situation (e.g., your beliefs, experience, goals). Be aware that you create the ‘coaching climate’ such that the criteria for a swimmer’s success can be winning and/or getting better and improving one’s times. This should be tailored to each individual and continually monitored.
5. Don’t rely on “my door is always open” approach with your swimmers - also go out and find them to discuss how things are going or if there are issues to address.
6. Use positive terminology – for example, instead of talking about “choking” rephrase it in terms of being tough and determined to find a way to fight back.
7. Keep it simple – use words and terms understood by the swimmer.
8. Use non-verbal cues to appropriately complement what you want to convey.
9. Use open-ended questions – this facilitates understanding a swimmer’s feelings, opinion or problem because such questions require more than just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Open-ended questions usually begin with *What, How, Could, Would* e.g., “*How would you like me to help you?*” “*What do you have to achieve this session?*”
10. Use paraphrasing to show a swimmer you understand what he/she is saying. For

example,

- i. *Swimmer – “I don’t know what to do. I keep getting slower. It is getting me down”.*
- ii. *Coach’s Response – “You are training very hard. Naturally you are feeling discouraged”.*

11. Avoid “communication blockers/blunders” as these tend to negate the rapport you have with a swimmer, invalidate a swimmer’s feelings, and imply he/she is wrong, inferior, or unworthy. For example,

Ordering, commanding: “*You must get your times down*”

Warning: “*You had better not lose this race*”

Criticising, disagreeing: “*You are wrong to get another training partner. How could you possibly think that was going to help your swimming?*”

Berating: “*You’re acting like a 12-year-old. “You shouldn’t act like that”.*

12. Give and get feedback - *Short, Simple, Constructive, Immediate and Direct* feedback tends to be most effective and accelerates the learning process.

13. A good sense of humour generally goes a long way!

14. It can be a useful guide to communicate with others in a manner you would like others to communicate with you.

Conclusions

Masters swimmers train and compete for a number of reasons^{1, 14}. These include fun and enjoyment, opportunity to test one’s skills, fitness and health concerns, social interaction and friendships and extrinsic rewards (e.g., trophy, medal). Research¹⁴ suggests that the main motives are intrinsic and psychological in nature (e.g., well-being, self-esteem, confidence, attaining flow state or mindfulness etc), with lapses in motivation most likely to occur because of injury, burnout and family and work responsibilities.

Masters Swimming Club coaches therefore need to be mindful of individualising their communications to address each swimmer's personality, goals, circumstances, and reasons for participation. To do this successfully, Masters Swimming Club coaches need to communicate to swimmers with sensitivity, respect, and honesty. This requires taking the time to know each swimmer, listening to him/her, and then thinking before you set the direction for that swimmer in what you say and do (or fail to say and do). Remember there are different 'coaching styles' but all good Masters Swimming Club coaches are effective communicators who adopt strategies – developing mutual trust, empathy and understanding, actively listening, providing positive feedback and being honest and consistent – that keep swimmers optimally engaged in the sport. It is not an easy task for any coach but one that undoubtedly requires a Master Swimming Club coach's on-going full attention and commitment. The reward for coach and swimmer who consistently communicate effectively is knowing that, together, they have both achieved something very special.

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