



ASSISTING COACHES UNDER PRESSURE

By Lawrie Woodman

"I think the reason for not performing is pressure. When you get under pressure ... it does build when you are not getting the results you are after, what you can find is players try harder but in the wrong areas."

An unnamed senior coach.

When Adelaide Crows senior coach, Don Pyke, resigned after 4 years in the role in 2019, he revealed his concerns over the state of the AFL and his fears for the future of the game as pressure continues to rise on players and clubs.

"The reality is the game is about people - and I think at times we can lose sight of that. I hope in the future we find a better balance of how we view the game - regardless of result. Otherwise, I do fear for the enjoyment of AFL footy."

Last season, deeply affected by COVID-19 Restrictions, with so much uncertainty, life in hubs, tight Covid-safe protocols, reduced staff and salaries, and other things, the pressures on players and coaches piled up.

After Rhyce Shaw initially took personal leave and then stepped down after his short tenure at North Melbourne, veteran Hawthorn coach Alastair Clarkson said the AFL community had to do more to protect the health and well-being of coaches.

"We've always looked after everyone else in the club and put everyone else in the club before ourselves. It might be time for us to take stock ourselves of just what our workflow is and our schedule because it's now getting to a point where we're seeing some real casualties out of our industry."

In the last couple of weeks, a lot of issues currently challenging coaches have come to the fore:

- Club legend Frank Lampard sacked after 14 months at Chelsea FC in the English Premier League ("...it was decided a change is needed now to give the Club time to improve performances and results this season.")
- Australian Cricket Coach Justin Langer challenged on his coaching style in mid contract (about rumours of discontent from players)
- Don Pyke has re-emerged into AFL coaching as an assistant coach to John Longmire at Sydney Swans, amongst other things, "to ease the pressure on Longmire".

Even when a coach is relatively new, and safe in the position in the short term, when the team is facing a severe and sustained losing streak (possibly not experienced by the club before), the self-perceived pressure on the coach can be high, especially for younger or inexperienced senior coaches.

What can be done?

Start with a little bit of analysis – through asking key questions about specific aspects relevant to coaching and team performance. The development of a pro-forma or matrix to record the information gathered is essential for an efficient process.

Here are some areas to consider:

Club Culture

Expectations: what is done and how it is done - How do we do things around here?

What are the expected behaviours?

What are the observed behaviours?

Do the two match-up?

Does everyone reinforce the expected behaviours (all the time)?

In the end, are the players, as David Parkin says, “playing **with** and **for** each other”? This is a sign of high trust.

Football Department

What are the strengths of the Football Department at the club?

What is the level of combined coaching experience?

Can the coaching group grow together (like Hawthorn’s initial group under Alastair Clarkson)?

Is there a senior manager in the football department (or elsewhere in the club) who can help the coach in the high-performance sense (for example: Neil Balme, Neil Craig, Tim Livingstone, and others)?

Does the club, as a whole, provide appropriate support for the senior coach and the football department?

Playing list

Does the club have a realistic view of their playing list – strengths and weaknesses relative to their underpinning game plan (or “style of play”)?

Are the players approaching training, playing and club expectations in the right way (culture again)?

Are the players buying in (or willing to buy in)?

Who are the key players to invest in for the long term?

Game Plan (Style of Play)

If the team has generally been on the backfoot for most of the season, the key elements of the game plan will not likely be totally apparent to outside observers.

Internally:

Is the game plan clear to everyone?

Is it well communicated (as a pathway to winning) and understood by coaches, players and relevant staff (including the receptionists for that matter)?

Are the players clear regarding their on-field roles and expectations?

Are their expected roles focused on their strengths?

Are they training to the game plan?

Are all staff clear re their roles and expectations?

Senior Coach*

Following are a few suggestions about things which might help a senior coach under this type of pressure. Some ideas will have higher priority or be more practical than others, depending on the individual circumstances.

In the cold light of day, in a line regularly used by Leigh Matthews, “Things are never as bad (or good) as they seem.”

Capability

As an individual, you are capable, or you would not have been appointed in the first place. You are not an imposter – a type of thinking many people, including ultimately successful ones, often have when they first start at a new level. Focus on your known strengths – what were the qualities you demonstrated to get the job in the first place? – make sure these are at the forefront of your daily operations.

Operational choices (managing the environment)

Can the environment be better managed? Are there ways to spread the load – in areas across the coaching/management aspects of the role?

Essentially this can optimise the strengths and roles of all coaching and support staff, including football and performance managers. It should not diminish the coach’s authority or integrity in any way (whose expectations are you responding to?).

Can you delegate areas of the role (ongoing, or from time to time) – some media activities, specific communications, meetings, planning training, elements of training?

Do you have a seamless path to succession (or temporary replacement) if you are unable to continue your duties for a period – e.g. Brendon Bolton filling in for Alastair Clarkson at Hawthorn for five weeks when he suffered from Guillain-Barré Syndrome in 2014.

Relationships

Build relationships – with coaching and support staff, players, whole of club, members. This is a critical element, and within the competence of most people.

Positivity

Look for the positive things people (players and staff) have done and provide feedback on those things.

Celebrate the “small wins” along the way. The things you are coaching/training for – game plan execution, for example. The good decisions and executions made by individuals and team subgroups. Examples could include:

- Winning quarters (see Kevin Sheedy quote regarding early GWS days in *The Age* article)
- Clearances from centre and stoppages – and their ultimate outcomes
- Longer periods of competitiveness in games
- Team defence, chains of play in attack, goal kicking accuracy, etc.

Emotion

Allow emotion to show, but don't let it control you. Provide a positive focus for the group. Let people enjoy things – implement things for them to enjoy.

Attend to the culture

The senior coach is a critical person in leading (developing) and maintaining the culture in the club. Ensure you are continually attending to it.

Mentor (critical friend)

Do you have a mentor or critical friend you can talk to – in the club, around the club, externally. You need someone to confide in, who will give you very honest feedback (and tell you exactly how it is). Many coaches had mentors as formal parts of their coaching courses or individual development programs – are any of those still potentially valuable or accessible?

Well-being

You should not totally be defined by being a coach – you are someone who coaches. Everyone needs a little bit of balance. Take care of your own well-being – personal fitness, diet, sleep, family connections, mental breaks (some “self-time” – time where you are not thinking about the game or the job). As Cody Royle[^], AFL Canada head coach, says “Looking after yourself first, will do more to improve team performance than anything else.”

Engage in some external interest, hobby, other sport, joint family interests, self-education, etc, so the whole process is not totally consuming and there is a little bit of balance (to the extent it is possible as a senior coach).

Be curious and keep learning (formally and informally).

External help

What is available externally which could assist a coach in these circumstances? There are many places to look:

- AFL Coaches Association (your sport's coaches association)
- AIS, State Institutes of sport
- External consultants: organisations like Leading Teams, any number of individual consultants – including some coach developers, psychologists, university staff, etc.
- Books, articles, podcasts, documentaries, etc

*The terms Senior Coach (generally used in Australian Football), Head Coach and Manager are generally interchangeable.

Further Reading

[^]For those interested further in looking at the role and pressures on head coaches today, a new book released this week, *The Tough Stuff*, by Cody Royle, AFL Canada Head Coach and regular writer and podcaster on coaching, leadership, culture and performance, is worth reading (available from Amazon). Cody offers some enlightening and certainly different perspectives on the role of the head coach, much of it around the challenges and pressures

raised in the introduction in this article. In particular, what he calls “The Weight” or the cumulative stress and anxiety created by the role expectations and current coaching environments, and how looking after yourself first will do more to improve team performance than anything else.

All direct quotes in this article have been sourced from publicly available, previously published material.

Whilst this article has been written with an Australian Football perspective, the principles proposed can be applied across many sports and at different levels, scaled appropriately to the environment. The ideas discussed can be also applied at any time, as a type of program health check – pre-season, mid-season, post-season, change of coach, new board, and other reasons.

Lawrie Woodman is a physical educator and coach developer who worked as a sport professional for almost forty years, including at the Australian Coaching Council, the Australian Sports Commission, the AIS, Athletics Australia and the Australian Football League. He has observed coaching and coach development up close at all levels during that time. Lawrie is currently Chair of the Australian Coaching Council Advisory Committee.