

Bringing out THE BEST

A good coach can work wonders, not just on the playing field but in the classroom too. **Miguel Dean** shares his experiences

What image comes to mind when you hear the word coaching? If it's not Alex Ferguson in a tracksuit, there's a good chance it's a touchy-feely guru promising to turn your life around armed with only the latest buzzwords and jargon for weapons.

But this sells coaching short. Many coaching techniques are applicable to working with challenging and unmotivated learners, and many of the beliefs that underpin successful coaching are the same as those that underpin successful teaching.

Nowhere was this clearer to me than through working with a group of Year 11 boys. These were boys who provided a challenge to their teachers, to say the least. Their attendance was poor and they took little interest in lessons. But at the end of a year of intensive work, their behaviour ▶

What makes a good coach?

■ A good coach genuinely wants to support the individual and remains committed to helping them progress. You can't always choose your classes, but you can choose your attitude and beliefs about the children.

■ A good coach invests time and energy to build a rapport with the children. It is important to show an interest in challenging learners and try to understand the causes of their behaviour.

■ A good coach always believes the children have the resources to enable them to achieve their goals. A teacher's beliefs about their pupils' abilities are a key influence on their success.

■ A good coach suspends judgment and tries to take an objective perspective. It is crucial to try to understand why the pupil is making the choices they are making and gain some insight into their world.

◀ had improved dramatically and their attendance had increased by an average of 32 per cent.

How did we do this? Simply put, by using coaching techniques to help them learn. My fellow coaches and I spent three days a week with the group, pupils at a secondary school in Worcestershire. The first session of the week was a literacy session, which became known as "the journal lesson". To begin with, each of the boys would take it in turns to tell the rest of the group what sort of weekend they'd had. Everybody was encouraged to be silent and listen until the speaker had said as much as they wanted. Then there was the opportunity for others to ask questions. This was all done in a respectful way with no put downs or negative feedback permitted.

This simple exercise was excellent for building group rapport. It enhanced speaking and listening skills and built confidence. It also had the effect of showing the boys that we were interested in them as people and gave me an insight into their lives outside school. Over time we found that it became an opportunity for the boys to let go of their weekend and "arrive" fully in order to be more present and ready to learn.

After the oral part of the lesson the boys were given their own journal and asked to write about their weekends. The amount they wrote depended on their ability, although we pushed them to do a little more at times. We corrected their punctuation and grammar to some extent, but the emphasis was on participation and effort.

Once the written work was complete, their journals had space for artwork. They would be given a word such as friendship or learning that they were required to represent artistically.

Of course there were the usual moans of: "I can't draw", but with consistency and patience this activity, which helped build creative and imaginative skills, became accepted and enjoyed. It also gave an interesting insight into the boys' internal worlds, helping me to develop empathy with them.

This simple lesson became a valuable

routine. Routine is an important element not to be underestimated when working with challenging learners. Over the years I have found that the more empathetic I am and the more I endeavour to understand my learners' worlds, the better our relationships become. This means they are more willing to listen to me, and I can help them see the relationship between their choices and the quality of their lives.

Empathy is a key factor in building rapport and positive rapport is key to enabling challenging young people to learn. I make a point of listening to young people, especially when they are talking about something that is important to them, and the journal lesson was an excellent opportunity to do this while still learning.

Quality of lessons is particularly important with challenging learners and finding out what will engage them and further their learning is not always easy. It is essential to be creative and come up with ideas that are relevant to a particular group of young people. With learning, one size does not fit all.

When I was at school I remembered building a balloon-powered balsa wood car in woodwork. We decided to transfer this to the classroom by giving the boys the task of planning, designing and building a balloon-powered Lego car.

They worked in pairs and when they had finished we held a competition to see which car traveled the furthest. This popular exercise was excellent for building problem-solving skills and teaching the boys to persevere.

When they became stuck I coached them by asking questions to enable them to work out how to get unstuck. There was also an element of numeracy, as the boys measured and recorded the distances travelled, and then represented the data in a bar chart.

When working with challenging learners it is important to be aware that they are doing the best they can with the knowledge and tools that they have available to them. Often they have missed out on key developmental stages and genuinely struggle with interpersonal relationships and this is one of the many



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reasons for challenging behaviour. Although the boys were in Year 11 developmentally, they were all still at the stage where they were happy to play with Lego pieces.

The last part of learning in the boys' week was point scoring. This was an excellent way of encouraging the boys to learn about responsibility, which is central to the coaching process. They were required to take it in turns to verbally give themselves two scores and give reasons why they had chosen the scores. The two areas were attendance/punctuality and behaviour. If the rest of the class disagreed with their decision it could be debated and the coaches would have the final say if required. The scores were recorded on the display area and we awarded prizes at the end of each term.

This exercise was great for forcing the learners to accept responsibility for the relationship between their actions and

their scores. Self-assessment is an essential skill and the boys became proficient at being honest and grading themselves accurately.

Anybody who has ever worked with a challenging class of young people knows there isn't a magic wand that will make them a pleasure to teach. Nor will coaching transform a difficult situation overnight. However, my experience has shown that a more coaching approach to learning is often a key factor that differentiates between a challenging class with no respect for their teacher and a challenging class that pushes the boundaries in a good-natured way, who respect their coach because their coach respects them ■

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“ I THINK I'LL BE A GARDENING TEACHER WHEN I GROW UP BECAUSE I LIKE GARDENING AND GETTING MUDDY ”
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