

The Motivational Captain

Question a world-class rugby captain and they will say, nearly to a man, that they were better captains at the end of their career than at the start. Some players exude captaincy ability early in their playing days, others grow into it. So what sets apart a good captain from a great motivational captain?

Simple, stupid

Whatever the captain says should be simple and understandable. When a captain starts to ask for complicated, over-elaborate or over-ambitious targets, players become demotivated. The difficulty and the size of the task seem too daunting. To avoid this, on the pitch, the captain should translate targets into small segments of effort. For instance: "Let's up the pressure for the next five minutes, boys."

Security

A motivational captain keeps the players feeling secure. Fear of failure will severely inhibit

players – players need encouragement when they are afraid and the captain will often be the closest person of authority to ensure this happens. A secondary message, a message passed via another player from the captain, can also boost player confidence should they feel under pressure.

Understanding fears from a player's point of view is a skill a captain should develop. Often a player will fear for his place in the side. A captain will be able to communicate this fear to the coach and together they can work to make the player feel secure for this match. Of course, should the player be too secure, then the reverse might be required!

The role of the motivational captain

Takes on responsibility

Gives simple messages

Challenges players

Keeps players secure

Creates fantasies

Builds self esteem



The Motivational Captain (cont.)

Self-esteem

Once a player feels secure, especially in his role and position in the team, the next level of motivation is to build their self-esteem. The key to this is to make the player understand their self-worth. You are born with self-worth and it grows as your ability grows. A captain can show the player what they are capable of, remind them of their best moments in previous games or training. It is a bit like the unconditional love of a parent – you actually make the player think they are wonderful, boost their ego without reference to their downsides.

Because the captain is on the same level as the player, it can be more effective than the words of the more distant coach. Plus, the captain can do it quietly and quickly in the game, judging the moment.

For example: “Come on Johnny, I’ve seen you hit these penalties loads of times in training with your eyes shut, just do it again.” “Richie, you’ve beaten faster wings than that on the outside, give it a go.” “The lineout’s looked class all week in practice, let’s show them today.” “Great tackle Gerry, I can see the fear in the eyes of the fly half now.”

Fantasy!

A captain needs to help the players imagine their best. This prepares the mind, and focuses the thoughts. Clive Woodward, though since much maligned, certainly prepared the “top two inches” of the World Cup winning squad, in other words their brains. Every player will improve with the ability to close his eyes and “see” the next process. And the captain can encourage this – “remember what it was like when” should be a well-worn phrase as the captain gathers the players at a stoppage.

Creates a challenge

A competitive player responds to a challenge – and the captain’s role is to create this challenge as the game progresses. “Are you better than that player? Do you want to beat that target?” might be the words ringing in the ears of the good players as the captain individually addresses each man.

Takes responsibility

A good captain can be motivational to a team, because he is the “team”. When a decision is made, he takes responsibility – and, should an error of judgment occur, then it is the captain who shoulders this. The buck stops at the captain.

Help Make Captain Fantastic

The referee’s point of contact

The captain is the main point of contact between the referee and team. Rugby has a lot of respect for the referee and much of this stems from this relationship.

The captain needs to feed through any problems from the team and vice versa from the referee. For instance, the front row might want the referee to watch the binding of their opposite numbers, whilst the referee might ask the captain for players to keep on their feet at the breakdown.

This “one-to-one, one-to-many” form of communication is an efficient way of getting a message to a whole team. The captain needs to be able to feedback both ways.

Static decisions

The captain will probably be the decision maker when it comes to what to do when awarded penalty kicks and free kicks. Some coaches feed

The Motivational Captain (cont.)

information onto the pitch, but the captain needs to be alert to step in to prevent a quick penalty being taken, or judge whether the kicker is ready to go for goal.

Other players, like the scrum half, may be able to judge for themselves. However, a captain needs to balance the possible outcomes, as well as potential disagreement. Ultimately, the captain takes some responsibility for the outcome.

The junior level captain

At a very junior level, every player should have a go at being the captain. The role is really restricted to calling the toss of the coin, and probably being told what decision to make if guessed correctly.

The tactical captain

Tactics are on-field decisions based on what is happening in the game. In the first instance, it is what should be done from each set piece. The captain might want to indicate the type of play and then let the backs and forwards captains' decide on the move. So, if he calls a wide play, then the forwards know to give quick ball and the backs know to use a wide move. All the players should then know where to run from the restart.

Coaching the captain

How often do we as coaches' work with our captain on options? There maybe more than a dozen situations where there is more than one option and he will need to have thought about it beforehand to make the most informed decision. 🍌