

Chapter 2: Program management

by Peter Spence

The aim of program management is to provide integration of planned activities and support to enable athletes to achieve their short and long-term objectives. In essence, program management enables the coach to pull all aspects of the program together in order to satisfy the needs of each athlete. It is based on systematic planning and requires fluent, ongoing communication among athlete, coach and support personnel.

As a process, program management should be applied flexibly, so that it suits the personal style of the coach and satisfies the unique needs of each athlete and team/squad. As Tapscott and Williams (2006) noted in their book *Wikinomics*, at times ‘... you should throw away some of your detailed plans’ and ‘manage chaos the way a kindergarten teacher manages her students ... allow a degree of freedom at the start of the session, then intervene to stabilise desirable patterns and destabilise undesirable ones’. It is vital to plan thoroughly, but when it comes to the crunch, a coach needs to interest and inspire the athletes and enable them to do what they are capable of, not what others expect them to do. A coach and program manager should remember that athletes are all unique ... and so are coaches!

The program network

The delivery of the program will be enhanced by a well-coordinated support network, which can comprise everyone associated with the plan and who has the potential to impact on an athlete’s short and long-term performance. When identifying members of the network and negotiating their level of involvement, roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined. This will clarify their expectations, to whom they are responsible, with whom they will communicate, and will imply a level of commitment, accountability and the need for their ongoing development and that of the athletes.

The program network, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, should engage anyone who can assist the coach and athletes to enjoy the coaching and playing experience and to develop their individual and collective performance levels. The program network may include:

- . the coach, who takes responsibility for planning the program and coordinating the activities of any assistant coaches who may be available to add support
- . specific support personnel, who can assist in the following areas:

- first aid — it is strongly recommended that a person with first aid qualifications is available for all training and competition sessions
- trainer, physical education support — this person may be able to assist with specific physical training advice and direction
- manager — this person organises the off-field needs of the players. Their role may include communicating arrangements and forward plans to the athletes and parents (if applicable) and to clarify logistics for the use of training and competition facilities. They may also manage fluid and nutritional replacement
- statistics — a person to record performance statistics in training and/or competition. They may also assist with video support, if available
- equipment support — a person to ensure that equipment is maintained, accounted for and available at training and competition, as required.

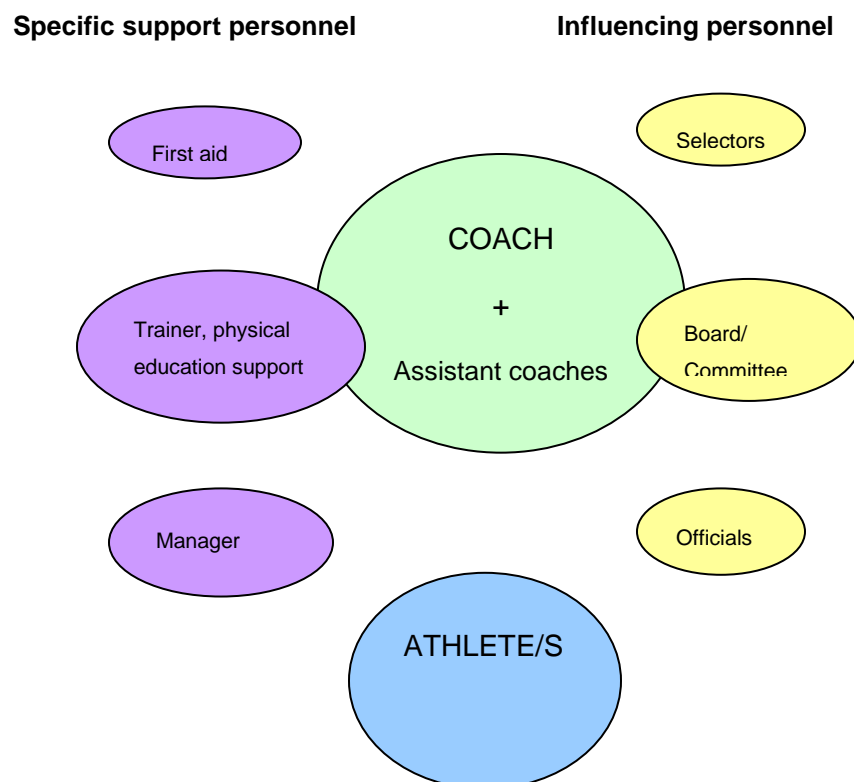
When resources permit, and at higher levels of competition, it may be possible to establish a more comprehensive specific support network. This network could provide a higher level of sophisticated and professional support for the athletes and the program. If such a network can be assembled, some of the following positions may be considered:

- technical experts — positional/specialist coach, video operator, skill analyst
- medical staff — doctor, physiotherapist, massage therapist, nutritionist
- sports science — exercise physiologist (fitness assessment), biomechanist (skill analysis), performance analyst (charting tactical trends, video analysis, etc.), sport psychologist
- physical preparation — strength and conditioning staff, gymnastics coach, Pilates instructor
- personal and professional development personnel to advise athletes on personal behaviour, presentation and career development
- communications personnel — technology specialists who will be able to provide electronic communication among athletes, coaches, officials and parents (if applicable), with links and updates to the media and other program partners.

• influencing personnel, who are not a direct part of the coach's support team, but have a significant influence on the program. They may include:

- selectors — depending on the policies of the overall organisation, selectors may be responsible for choosing athletes to represent the club, team or organisation
- board/committee members — who are responsible for policy and the overall direction that the program must follow
- officials — including referees, judges and umpires who are responsible for the management of the competition environment
- media — it may be possible to identify a parent or interested person who will ensure that the media is well informed of results and potential story-lines. This can also help to integrate the program into the broader community
- significant others — while care must be taken not to introduce biased support, it is clear that those close to the athletes may have a genuine interest in the program and be willing to provide assistance. Such support can be productive, provided that responsibilities and expectations are clearly defined. Significant others may include:
 - . parents/family members
 - . spouse/partner
 - . friends
 - . teachers/employers.

Figure 2.1: The program network





Communications

The success of any coaching program can be enhanced by the quality of communication among all parties. With the rapid changes in the information and communications technology area, it is worth considering ways in which communication at all levels can be improved (for example, using text messaging, instant messaging, email and other online processes such as websites, blogs, wikis and online forums). Younger generations are usually familiar with these methods and will be very comfortable using them to communicate. Additionally, they will be in a position to make valuable recommendations on improved communication between coach and athlete, athlete and athlete, and throughout the club community. It may be valuable to establish a club communications plan to ensure that communication is optimised in the club, and that there is continuing engagement of new communications technology as it becomes available.

Case study

John was a former player at a suburban Australian football club, who retained an interest in the club through his younger brother, who was a current player. John was completing a communications degree and the coach approached him to coordinate the submission of results and reports to the local media. He set up a system to forward results and performance details to media outlets, and also suggested to the coach that the performance stats could be forwarded electronically to the players. This was possible, as several parents routinely compiled the stats for each match. As a consequence, individual reports were sent electronically to all players who had email access. John then suggested to the coach that a club e-newsletter could be compiled to inform players, parents, sponsors and other interested parties of the performances of the teams and the forthcoming events. He recruited another student to coordinate the information and compile the newsletter. The result was an upsurge in interest in the club and the performances of its teams and players, as well as the coaches and support personnel.

Working effectively with others

Working effectively with others calls for thorough planning, open communication of the plans, good listening skills to foster communication, and clear links to individuals and groups. The aim should be to keep everyone informed, and make sure that there are no secrets.

The coach should clarify the roles of those in the program network, and work hard to develop effective working relationships by engaging each person in the contribution that they can make to the program. Communication channels should be set up to encourage ongoing exchanges of information as a stimulus for positive discussion. In order to develop strong relationships, face-to-face communication is ideal and must always be encouraged, but this is not always possible. Electronic communication can provide prompt and broad distribution of information and should be used to complement face-to-face communication. With the prevalence of web-based communication, access to online methods can help to keep everyone informed and promote open communication.

Regular hardcopy and/or e-newsletters and updates are valuable ways to keep the program network and the community informed and engaged.

Working with athletes

Coaches should always encourage athletes to learn about development opportunities, and to contribute to the establishment and ongoing refinement of individual and squad training plans. An agreed level of commitment should be established so athletes are engaged in the process and accountable for outcomes. This can be achieved by obtaining information through face-to-face discussion and completion of individual surveys and self-appraisal forms on:

- . goals and priorities (short and long term)
- . individual strengths and weaknesses
- . preferred activities at official training sessions
- . activities that can be completed at other times (for example, at home).

If athletes are engaged in this process, it is essential that information is reviewed regularly by coach and athlete in order to improve the individual athlete program.

Working with committees and boards

To manage a program successfully, the coach must work effectively with committees and boards regarding strategy, policy and procedures surrounding the athletes and the program in general. Communication is most important when dealing with committees and boards. As with

most aspects of the coaching role — and in order to seek the best position for athletes, coaches, support personnel and the organisation — the key processes are to prepare, communicate, discuss and follow up in order to ensure that the outcomes of the discussion are actioned.

There are a number of areas where committees and boards set directions, strategies, policies and guidelines that apply to athletes, coaches, parents and other supporters. These include:

- . behaviour — policies on behaviour, commitment, discipline, attire, alcohol, smoking, drugs, nutrition, training and competition
- . medical management of athlete injuries — emergency procedures and routine care of individuals (who is responsible; access to an ambulance, club medical staff or the local clinic/hospital)
- . training — attendance, expected attire and behaviour, availability of facilities and equipment, attendance of coaches and support personnel, special arrangements for extreme conditions (for example, wet weather, heat, drought, transport disruption)
- . selection — what is the selection policy of the club or organisation for choosing players to represent the club or association
- . competition — behaviour and attire for competition when representing the club or in other selected teams/events, and policy on dealing with on-field discipline reports and unacceptable interaction with officials
- . employment — any assistance with employment opportunities for athletes
- . sponsors — expectations of sponsors and other support agencies, and the responsibilities of athletes, coaches and program support personnel, particularly when acknowledging sponsors. This includes state and national sporting organisation acknowledgments, as well as government support
- . schools — relationships with schools in the area, particularly the way in which schools contribute to the athlete pathway, and promotion of the sport and the organisation
- . community groups — the relationship with local government and community groups and the organisation's forward strategy regarding community engagement.

Selection

Selection is a vital, and at times litigious, part of sport and, as such, must be thoroughly planned and well documented. The selection process must be clearly stated through a selection policy, with an appointed selection panel and recognised processes to follow.

In order to establish and maintain a successful selection system, the following questions should be addressed:

- . What are the defined selection criteria?
- . Who is eligible to be on the selection panel, to make decisions on selection, and whether exceptional circumstance can be considered?
- . When does the selection panel meet?
- . What performance information is expected to be available for the selection panel to consider?

The coach's role in selection

The coach can play a variety of roles in the selection process, including sole selector or part of the selection panel, or they might not be involved in the selection process.

Any selection role brings with it advantages and disadvantages. By being the sole selector the coach has total control, but also total responsibility for the outcome. It also brings the potential for greater conflict with individual players who have not been selected. When a coach is not involved in the selection process, they are unable to ensure the selection of players required to implement a particular style of play. But it may also bring an independent viewpoint to selection, as coaches can often become too close to the players to make tough decisions when needed.

When coaches are involved as part of a selection panel, it enables them to have a say regarding which players are selected, but also provides the opportunity for an independent viewpoint to be part of the process.

Selection policy

The selection policy should be fair, reasonable and internally consistent. It should be communicated to athletes, the program network and significant others well in advance of selection. The policy should specify:

- . Eligibility for selection — Who is eligible for selection? Are athletes required to nominate for selection?
- . Selection criteria — What are the specific criteria against which athletes will be considered? Include objective criteria where possible. Are extenuating factors, including illness and misadventure, to be considered should athletes fail to meet the criteria? If so, is an examination by a designated medical practitioner or consultant required?
- . Selection panel — Who is eligible to select? Are coaches, players, parents and partners eligible to sit on the panel? When is the selection panel formed and when does it meet?
- . Selection process — When and where does the selection panel meet, what is recorded, and does selection require ratification?
- . Selection announcement — How, when and by whom is the selection outcome announced? Are successful and unsuccessful athletes advised prior to the announcement?
- . Challenge to selection — Is there a process for protest or challenge to selections? If so, when and by whom will the challenge be heard?

Case study

A volleyball team with a keenly interested support group began to complain about team performance, and the selection of young developing players at certain times in the competition schedule instead of relying on more-experienced players. The selection policy had been agreed to by the club's board, with the involvement of the coach and key senior players; however, the selection policy had not been communicated more broadly. The coach engaged the players and the support group and discussed the philosophy behind the club's selection policy and the long-term view that they were taking at this stage of the club's development to ensure future success. Once the parents and supporters understood the philosophy of the program and reasons for the selection process, a unified outlook was achieved, which was greatly appreciated by the players and the team.

Conflict resolution

Conflicts are a normal part of the group development of any team or training squad and are more likely to occur when there are pressures associated with upcoming competition, school

exams, etc. The 'in-fighting' stage, which follows the formation stage of any group, is believed to be an integral part of the evolution of the life cycle of a team.

The challenge is for the coach to recognise that this is likely to occur, to identify its onset, and to introduce team-building and focused-direction activities in order to minimise conflicts. By dealing promptly with conflict, the proactive coach will facilitate opportunities for the athletes or members of the coaching team to work through the conflict stage and progress to the 'settled team' stage.

In order to resolve conflicts, individuals should be made aware of the stages of development of groups, and then they should be brought together to address the issues in an open and positive fashion. This may involve the consideration of some broader issues:

- . What is the background of the problem? Has there been any breach of the agreed program plans or rules?
- . What are the overall goals and objectives that will enable these to be achieved?
- . What are the alternatives that may enable the conflict to be resolved? Is there a win/win position?
- . Will the conflict have any broader impact on the program?
- . What can be learnt from this situation to improve the program and minimise future conflicts?

If the coach recognises that the conflict is escalating, it may be wise to seek professional advice from a counsellor or sport psychologist.

In all conflict resolution scenarios, remember to be 'hard' on the principle of the problem or dispute, but 'soft' on the people.

Case study

In a senior netball team, two of the prominent players became openly disruptive and exchanged hostile comments on court, particularly at training. The coach had a discussion with both players and reaffirmed their importance to the development of team morale and cohesion, and the overall performance of the team. She then had a post-training team meeting at which she stressed the core principle of the entire program, which was to give total support to each other and commitment to the team. She then asked players to nominate how they planned to provide support for team-mates, to which both players in question contributed comments and pledged

commitment to the team and to each other. By doing this, the coach was 'hard' on the principle but 'soft' on the players.

Negotiation

Negotiation is a constant reality in the world of the coach (for example, negotiating with athletes, parents, officials of the club or organisation, opposition teams and facility managers). In entering into negotiations, it is important to be thoroughly briefed on all details and prepared to discuss the issues in an open and unemotional way. The following questions may be considered during preparation for productive negotiations:

- . What are the expectations or preferences of both sides in the negotiation? What is in it for me? What is in it for them?
- . Are the other parties aware of my circumstances? Do I understand their position?
- . What are the key issues involved? What is the preferred position or outcome of the organisation? To what degree is the position negotiable? Are there any non-negotiable circumstances or expectations?
- . Is there a win/win position?

Case study

Two junior swimmers from the same training squad were vying for state selection and were becoming distracted by each other. The coach discussed the situation with each swimmer individually and foreshadowed the meeting that he was to have with them together. At the subsequent meeting, the coach stressed the long-term objectives of each swimmer's training program and that they should aim to support each other. He pointed out that if each swimmer prepared in isolation, neither would be likely to prepare optimally to perform as well as possible at nationals. It was agreed that the swimmers would prepare together and compete in a number of component trials (starts, turns, shorter distance races, finishes, relays, etc.), before competing head-to-head in the final lead-up to the nationals. In this way, both swimmers recognised the role that each could play in support of the other and that, in this way, they could both be better prepared for future competitions, particularly in the years ahead.

Time management

Time management is vital for people in sport, many of whom are in part-time or honorary roles and all of whom tend to be 'time-poor'. Clear foundations, systematic planning and well-developed negotiation skills are valuable prerequisites for good time management at any level.

Time management for athletes

By engaging the athlete in the planning process a good foundation is laid for good time-management practices. Key elements to this engagement are:

- . developing individualised program plans for each athlete
- . encouraging the athlete to engage in the planning process, ensuring that the program fits within their overall life, and that they make a personal commitment to the program, thereby establishing a level of accountability for the delivery of the program
- . maintaining communication among the athlete, coach and support network to ensure that everyone is well informed about the program, the expectations and the progress achieved
- . providing an electronic communication platform to back up face-to-face communication.

Time management for coaches

In order for the coach to manage their own time effectively and efficiently, it is important that all those involved in the program are aware of the foundations, policies, objectives and culture of the organisation and the style of program that is planned. If everyone is well informed, there should be less misunderstanding and fewer demands on the coach's time. In order to achieve this, it is wise to:

- . continually remind all athletes, coaches, support network personnel, selectors and officials of the key elements of the program, so that there is no misunderstanding
- . systematically plan the program
- . communicate the plan to each athlete, coach and all those engaged in the specific support network.

Closely associated with the planning process is the delegation of responsibility for aspects of the program planning and delivery. In determining the roles and responsibilities of other coaches and specific support personnel, it is important to clarify the expectations in the preparation and competition phases, with arrangements outlined for before, during and after

competition. Unless everyone involved understands what is expected of them, there may be unnecessary reference to the coach.

For the coach to manage their own time, they must learn to delegate responsibility to appointed personnel, encourage them to develop their area in ways that are consistent with the agreed policies and culture of the organisation and program, then support them and give them the room to deliver on this delegated responsibility.

Leading and managing athletes during an event

The coach must accept the responsibility for educating the athletes and everyone involved in the support of the program. For the coach to deliver a stimulating and efficient program, it is essential that an open and challenging culture is established and maintained, with continuing communication.

Organising and managing athletes during competition

To organise and manage athletes effectively during competition, the coach must plan thoroughly. The coach needs to ensure that all athletes and support personnel know where and when they are required throughout the competition.

Communication is an essential part of successfully leading a team during a competition and needs to start in the lead-up to, and then throughout, the competition.

In the lead-up to the competition, engage the group in discussing the 'what ifs' in order to develop coping strategies to deal with expected and unexpected occurrences at competition.

'What if' discussion topics may include:

- . What if transport is disrupted and the team arrives only ten minutes prior to competition?
- . What if the referee cannot control the match?
- . What if there is a serious injury during a match?
- . What if there is disappointment with selection?
- . What if the coach falls ill during competition?

Case study

Because of mechanical problems, the under-18 basketball team arrived only five minutes before the scheduled match. This scenario was the topic of one of the 'what ifs' that were discussed

during the pre-season training program for the team. The coach was able to speak with the team in the bus prior to arrival at the venue, and to remind the team of the steps to be taken. As a consequence, the players undertook some modified warm-up activities in the bus, changed on arrival at the venue, accepted responsibility for their own 'mini' warm-up, and engaged in some mental rehearsal and personal 'quiet time' prior to the coach confirming a simplified game plan immediately prior to the game.

Responsibilities when travelling with a group

The coach is responsible for the entire group and must be proactive. This is a great opportunity to engage athletes, key support personnel, parents and supporters who are travelling with the group. Responsibilities that may be delegated include:

- . pre-tour arrangements, including parent/guardian permission forms (where applicable), travel details and contact points, bags and packing of belongings
- . general equipment for the tour, including specific training and competition gear
- . accommodation liaison
- . meals and fluid replacement protocols for training and competition
- . first aid and health supervision
- . oversight of supervision of athletes during 'down time'.

It is wise to check the policy of the club or organisation regarding travel. It is usual to ensure that parent/guardian permission is obtained for young athletes (under 18 years). Furthermore, the parents/guardians must be well-informed about arrangements and contact points of the coach and other appointed personnel for the duration of the tour.

Additionally, ensure that the coach, manager or whoever has overall responsibility for the group, has a full copy of the details of the trip, schedule of events and next of kin contact points for all athletes, coaches and support personnel throughout the trip. Another copy of this information should be given to a responsible non-travelling official of the organisation for safe keeping. This is to facilitate prompt action in the event of injury, illness or some other accident to any or all of the touring party.

Dealing with behavioural issues during a competition

Many of the issues that may occur during a competition can be the subject of 'what if' scenarios during the lead-up to the event. In spite of the best-laid plans, unexpected occurrences may have to be addressed. It is wise to have nominated a disciplinary panel, which may comprise the coach, an assistant coach or manager, and a senior athlete or other support person, to adjudicate on any breach of discipline.

Other aspects of conflict, such as those relating to selection or personality clashes, should be handled by the coach and senior support personnel. Such action should be discussed prior to the trip to ensure that everyone concerned understands the processes that are to be followed.

It is wise to have an agreed attitude to 'down time' at events, with a clear policy on individual responsibility and an understanding of the importance of recovery and regeneration time.

Experienced athletes may be better prepared to handle free time in a positive fashion, but for less-experienced groups, activities should be scheduled to make constructive use of down time. Some of these activities will be focused on recovery and regeneration, but others may be useful distractions to ensure that athletes are actively engaged and do not have time to get into trouble. While you do not want to fill up all down time with unnecessary activity, it is important to structure the athletes' time so that the risk of ill-disciplined behaviour is minimised.

Summary

Program management aims to ensure that coaching and support systems are integrated in order to satisfy the needs of each athlete. This entails systematic planning, well-developed time-management capacities, sensitive program delivery and fluent communication. Face-to-face communication is vital and can be supplemented by electronic communication.

Thorough planning and ongoing communication will enable the coach to manage relationships with other stakeholders, including regional, state and national sporting organisations, education authorities, community organisations and sponsors. The coach should communicate regularly with everyone in the program network — athletes, assistant coaches, specific support personnel and influencing personnel.

Clear policies and guidelines are required to ensure that selection, management of injured athletes, standards of behaviour, style of play and support at competition are successfully overseen.

The skills of negotiation and conflict resolution must be continually developed in order to ensure that problems can be managed and opportunities optimised.

Through astute program management, the coach will be able to manage their own time, delegate responsibility to appointed personnel, encourage them to work in ways that are consistent with the agreed policies and culture of the organisation and program, and then support them and give them room to deliver on this delegated responsibility.

References and further reading

Gorgenyi, I 1998, 'Hunting territory: the structure of team life', *Sports Coach*, 20(4), pp. 18–21 and 21(1), pp. 14–17.

Stafford, I and Balyi, I 2005, *Coaching for Long-term Athlete Development*, Sports Coach, Leeds, United Kingdom.

Tapscott, D and Williams, A 2006, *Wikinomics: how mass collaboration changes everything*, Portfolio Press, New York.