POSITIVE COACHING ALLIANCE

RECOGNIZING BIAS THROUGH SELF-REFLECTION



Bias is a natural part of how the human brain processes information. However, it can lead to unfair judgments, assumptions, or blind spots which can impact how coaches react and respond to their athletes' emotions and behaviors. By recognizing and reflecting on biases, coaches can ensure they are treating their athletes fairly, supporting all to reach their potential, and setting them up to succeed.

WHAT IS BIAS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE?

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes, reactions, stereotypes, and categories that can influence the behaviors and reactions coaches have towards their athletes. Coaches can hold assumptions about athletes' skill development and capabilities based on their gender, socioeconomic background, disability status, neurodivergence, or characteristics in a way that can hinder their growth[1] and affect how opportunities and support are distributed. How could this show up on the field?

- A coach may assume an athlete's superior ability based on physical characteristics, such as height or strength, and look to confirm that bias while ignoring areas for improvement.
- A coach may interpret similar behavior differently from athletes of different races based on their own biases. [2][3]
- A coach may perceive an athlete's lack of engagement as disrespectful and have lower expectations for them.

Coaches should acknowledge and assess their biases to create a positive, equitable, and accessible team culture which helps athletes develop as competitors, learn life skills, and perform at their best.



"Possessing bias is part and parcel of being human. And the more we think we are immune to it, the greater likelihood that our own biases will be invisible and unconscious to us!"

– Howard J. Ross (Author of Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives)

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The first step in resolving biases is to increase awareness and reflection. This enables coaches to be more intentional about their responses and understanding of each athlete. Use the following questions after practices and competitions:

- Which athletes did I praise most this week? Why?
- Did I give all athletes the same chance to speak, play, or contribute?
- Am I holding some athletes to higher or lower standards? Based on what?
- Have I made assumptions about an athlete's effort, attitude, or potential?
- Did I let one athlete's past behavior affect how I treated them today?

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES TO REDUCE BIAS

- **Get to Know Athletes:** Devote time to listen and learn about athletes. Understanding who they are, what motivates them, and the context behind emotions and behaviors can help soften any potential biases.[4]
- **Assemble a Diverse Coaching Staff:** Diversity in your coaching staff can expand perspectives and opportunities for growth while providing athletes with additional role models.
- **Acknowledge Impact vs. Intent:** When athletes share that they've experienced bias, it's important to acknowledge the impact of those actions, to validate athlete feelings, take responsibility for any harm caused, and demonstrate a commitment to learning and building trust.
- **Seek Input:** Create avenues for athletes to share feedback and opinions. Involve athletes in shaping team norms, routines, and conflict resolution strategies. Ask assistant coaches to look out for and share observations on potential blind spots.
- **Be vulnerable:** Acknowledging biases and receiving feedback on shortcomings can be hard to accept or understand. Believe the perspectives of those sharing feedback and stay open to learning and growth.

1. *Awareness of Implicit Biases, Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning.* https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/ImplicitBiasAwareness
2. *Karter, Erin. Study Finds Discipline Disparities in Preschool Driven by Racial Biases, 9/28/21.* https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2021/september/study-finds-discipline-disparities-in-preschool-driven-by-racial-bias/
3. *Legette, Kamilah B., Amy G. Halberstadt, Amber T. Majors. Teachers' Understanding of Racial Inequity Predicts Their Perceptions of Students' Behavior, 10/20/21.* https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0361476X21000734?via%3Dihub
4. *Salzbrenner, Susan. Fit Across Cultures. Are You a Biased Coach?* https://balanceisbetter.org.nz/are-you-a-biased-coach/