

Communicating with Swimmers

Excerpts from *Coaching Swimming Successfully*, Ch. 2

by Dick Hannula

You may have the most up-to-date scientific technical information available. You may know the best that there is to know in coaching. But if you do not communicate that information to your athletes, then that information is useless. This is the X factor in coaching. The ability to communicate effectively will determine in large part the success of any coach. It is a skill that can and must be developed throughout your career.

A number of traits are identifiable in successful coaches. The most important trait is enthusiasm. Communication must be done with enthusiasm by the coach. Great coaches are enthusiastic coaches. They know where they are going, and they know what needs to be done. Enthusiasm is catching. It affects attitude, work ethics, and personal pride in swimmers.

You have beliefs that are vital to success. What is the most effective training for particular events? What is the most efficient technique for each stroke, and each individual? These beliefs are constantly being communicated to each swimmer. The communication methods must reach each individual. Some communication must be on the team level, and some must be on the individual level.

I have to communicate with our swimmers so that the individualization of training groups is understood by all team members. Each training group will sometime be doing its own special training. Some groups may swim less distance or sprints than another group. Every team member must understand that this is in the best interest of our team in order to best prepare each group for the specific needs of their particular events. Team unity and team cooperation are the result of effective communication.

Early season communication could include many of the following:

- The competitive meet schedule
- Attendance policies
- Team standards
- The seasonal training plan
- Warm-up, warm-down procedures
- Goal-setting procedures

Once you have set your schedule, then place it into the hands of your swimmers and parents. Discuss and explain the schedule in one of the first team meetings. Explain when the team must be ready to swim fast and the preparation necessary in order to swim fast.

Communication will be necessary throughout the season to keep the team and individuals directed toward that championship meet at the end of the season. This is challenging for the coach to anticipate the needs of each swimmer to avoid problems. Everyone must be reminded occasionally of the *why*, *where*, and *how* of the direction of the program.

Swimmers must believe that they can talk to their coach. They should be able to ask questions and get some of the answers. The coach must provide time for those athletes who need to talk. Almost all swimmers will doubt themselves at some time. Talking to the coach can dispel some fears and restore their self-confidence when they realize that the coach has total confidence in them. Most swimmers train more effectively when they understand the goal of a particular training load, and they will need to talk to their coach to get these answers.

I prefer to meet with my swimmers on the deck of the pool before or after workout. Both the swimmer and the coach are in their own environment, and if the swimmer has a problem, it can be resolved before it

is blown out of proportion. I recommend that most team meetings be held before practice, and I prefer to have the individual swimmer meetings after practice. If you have an office, reserve regular hours for swimmer/coach meetings.

In the pool

A large part of swimmer-coach communication is actually in the water. It can be difficult to hear. Get the athlete's attention and eye contact. Keep it short. Keep it simple. Communication may be a hand signal on technique, or it may be an enthusiastic "Right on!" during a hard training set. The important thing is that your swimmers believe that you are watching them and evaluating each of them all the time that they are swimming.

I used to position myself at different positions around the pool. The ends, the sides, on a high stepladder over the pool, and sometimes in the pool. I believe every swimmer should believe you are watching each of them during each training session.

Coach Dave Robertson told me of swimming for the legendary Matt Mann at Michigan. Matt would call out his name when he entered the pool, "Robby, how are you today?" Matt cared, and Dave got a lift for that training session.

Former world record holder, coach Mike Troy, stated that when he swam for Doc Counsilman at Indiana, he believed that Doc was always watching him while he was training.

In the pool area, out of the water

Team meetings are usually best when there are the fewest distractions. A classroom with desks and comfortable seats is ideal. The pool deck can be a practical and time-saving area for team meetings. If the

pool has another team, divers, or a class in it, eliminate as much of the distraction as possible. Pick a corner, and have the team facing you and a wall.

Make eye contact with each swimmer. Don't talk to them when they are talking to each other. Get their attention. Talk to each swimmer. Encourage feedback, and ask for questions.

The surprise question

I remember one training session several years ago. I had gone over the training program for that day on the blackboard. I then asked if there were any questions. One of our team captains asked me why we were doing one particular hard training set. He obviously didn't think it was necessary for his 100 breaststroke event, and it was an endurance set. My first reaction was to overreact and excuse him from that practice. I decided quickly to give him and the team—who were in a state of mild shock—short, quick, meaningful reasons why we were doing that set, and I did it emphatically.

He not only was a team leader during the swim set, but he did the set enthusiastically. He had a great training session. After practice he came to me and thanked me for explaining that particular set and then went on to say that I was exactly right about the swim set. I was happy that I chose to communicate on this occasion instead of overreacting.

Away from the pool

Many communication opportunities occur on trips and at team social functions. Sit with team members during the meals and during the drive or flight on road trips. There are long periods of time at some of the full- or part-day swim competitions. Your team members may have an extended period of time between competitions. These are excellent opportunities to increase the level of communication on your team.

At the competition

Communication prior to competition will make the communication at competition more meaningful for the swimmers. The swimmers must know what you expect from each of them in warm-up and warm-down. They must know where to sit and what responsibilities they have while a teammate is competing.

Talking briefly to all swimmers prior to each of their events and soon after they have completed an event is recommended. A brief positive reinforcement of the race strategy and some attention to technique may be in order before the race. The key is not to change a race plan at the last minute. At the conclusion of a race, the coach may share the positive aspects of the event, the race splits, and what would improve that race in the next competition.

It may be necessary to relax a particular swimmer before his or her next race, and it may be necessary to excite some swimmers before the next event. The swimmer must know that the coach is watching his or her swimming event very closely. The coach's comments after competition can be critical for an athlete's future success. Be positive, but be honest. Be concise and brief. There will be time for more details in the next training session.

Communication should be positive, but every performance is not always great. Sometimes we need to be told that we can do better. Be honest. If a competitive performance is below expectation, it should be put in the proper perspective.

An honest answer

For example, after a competitive race, one of my team captains came to me for a post-race evaluation. He asked me, "How was it?" I told him the race performance was bad and then explained why. He had taken the race out too slowly and placed himself in a deep hole. He did not break out aggressively off the walls on his turns, and he had lost control of that race. I told him that this par-

ticular performance was below his level. He didn't like to hear the evaluation, but it was accurate.

A couple of weeks later—after the same event in another dual meet—he had performed very well. He then asked me the same question: "How was it?" I said that his race performance was great, and I told him why. He then said something that I will never forget. "Coach, remember two weeks ago when you told me how bad my race had been. You were right. I didn't like hearing it, but thanks for being honest. It helped!"

Communication tips with the swimmer

- Stress the positive, but be honest about the negative.
- Emphasize what they are doing right, avoid emphasizing what they are doing wrong.
- Praise to reinforce good performance.
- Correct only when the swimmer can do better.
- Speak to every swimmer every training session. An ignored swimmer is an unhappy swimmer.
- Coach at the swimmer's eye level or close to it. Kneel, crouch, sit close to the swimmer whenever possible.
- Create pictures with your words. "Arm out front like a spear."
- Be specific as possible. "Finish the hand of the arm stroke here."
- Use simple words that are easy to understand.
- Use your body—arms, hands, shoulders, hips, and legs—to emphasize a point.
- Be short, concise, and to the point.
- Call your swimmers by name when speaking to them.
- Ask for feedback from the swimmer on technique. How does it feel?
- Concentrate on one point at a time.
- Be patient. If the swimmer hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught.