

Cultivating Your Ecosystem - Part 1

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In June of 2015, Ian Jeffreys wrote an extremely insightful article, *Managing the Ecosystem: a forgotten factor in effective Strength and Conditioning Delivery*. This ecosystem refers to the development of a more global view of our training environment and our ability to identify and manage all the elements that impact the execution of a programs vision (4). This ecosystem is the cornerstone of any successful team and is a direct extension of the head football coach, so it is imperative that everyone involved is aware of the programs vision. We've all seen "Coach X" accept a new head coaching position and the first statement they make to the media and to their new team is "we're going to establish and build our culture". Conversely, when the same "Coach X" gets fired from this position, his exiting comments are usually themed with "we got away from our culture and lost sight of our values and standards". So clearly the rise and fall of these powerful empires revolve around the effectiveness of their institutional ecosystem. In American football, the role of the strength and conditioning coach has largely become focused on creating and driving this ecosystem and the cultural development of the entire football program and/or organization. As strength and conditioning coaches, we truly are the "Directors of First Impressions" on our athletes. Therefore, we must initiate the implementation of the programs vision and ecosystem.

In reality, the training ecosystem transcends much further than the weight room and is embedded in a larger global perspective. The management of this ecosystem requires skill and intuition to multi-task the many moving parts required for your organization's vision and ecosystem to function harmoniously. This all-encompassing task is a never ending and always progressing objective. Some would consider this task a "goal" for their program, but in my opinion, a "goal" signifies a task that has a definitive end point and has the ability to be completed. Your ecosystem should always be evolving so it is critical that your ecosystem is tied in directly to your overall program vision.

The purpose of **Part 1** of this article is to illustrate what I believe are the guiding pillars of implementing and cultivating a successful ecosystem. The pillars of the ecosystem are the 5 "C's": 1) Culture, 2) Competency, 3) Capacity, 4) Competition and 5) Coaching. Having a well-prepared template and blueprint of what these pillars represent is vital for success and sustaining organizational adaptability. An ecosystem, biologically speaking, is a community of living organisms interacting with a symbiotic flow where every facet has an effect on the functioning of the system as a whole (4). It is not my intent to define your "ecosystem", as it is your job to translate this information in a manner best suited for your unique environment. However I will present a broad categorical umbrella for each pillar to provide content depth and value. Each pillar must interact and influence all the pillars of the ecosystem; these pillars can't operate in isolation. This being a performance training article, the content will focus on how these pillars function within a High Performance training environment.

Culture:

The New Zealand All Blacks rugby team is regarded as the most successful team in any sport, anywhere in the world. Their success is largely attributed to the development and value they place on their team's culture over the talents of any one individual (5). One major reason for the All Blacks success is their ability to manage culture and a central narrative by attaching each player's personal meaning to the teams' higher purpose (5). How well you execute your team's cultural development and standards is ultimately more important than how well you

execute your training program. Your training program, albeit the mode of development we use to drive performance adaptation, is highly dependent on the structure of your team’s culture and all the people involved in impacting the ecosystem.

Culture within an ecosystem has to be holistically integrated, which is why utilizing the “*High Performance Lifestyle*” (Table 1) will allow the organization to speak a common language and have a common starting point to initiate building your culture. Implementing a *High Performance Lifestyle* for your athletes will provide the underpinning values required for your organization to leverage all the pillars of your ecosystem. Building the infrastructure for your ecosystem will allow your culture to operate and function optimally. Table 1 shows categories of potential lifestyle qualities and cultural values that are synergistically connected. The cultural values within the *High Performance Lifestyle* table are centered on the internal and external life choices of the athlete, but are deeply rooted and hopefully become aligned with the vision of the organization. This table serves as a system of checks and balances to evaluate if your *High Performance Lifestyle* choices are having a positive or negative impact on your ecosystem and the subsequent impact of the individual athlete on the collective whole (team) and vice versa. Culture in and of itself must be the foundation of your program and must be laid with precision detail and with a methodical relentlessness.

Table 1: High Performance Lifestyle

Athlete: Internal – Personal →	← Team: Organizational →	← Athlete: External-Social/Behavioral
Quality social habits/ Time management	Program standards / Values/ Ethos	Community involvement
Sport Psychology (Brain)	Mental Toughness	Sport Psychology (Mind)
Sleep quality / quantity	Program expectations	Social Media
Finances	Finances	Finances
Nutrition / Hydration	Leadership	Life Balance
Stress Management	Character development	Family / Friends Balance
Religion	Student Athlete Welfare	Religion
Academics/ Post graduate goals	Academics/ Post graduate goals	
Injury / Health Status	Sport Development / Roster Status	

Competency:

This refers to your athlete's level of deep understanding of the "why" behind everything you're implementing and how well you're actually teaching. Competence is a balance of learning skills and understanding why each skill is important within the context of the larger program. Devoting time to explaining why you're teaching things a certain way, why things are done in a specific order, why it transfers to sport and why you want specific outcomes, will take time. This time is an effective and efficient use of your time and is a direct investment into the athlete's performance outcomes. Athletes will experience better long-term performance results the earlier the "why" is emphasized in their introduction to training. A quote I keep from Tony Strudwick of *Manchester United* is, "Never confuse familiarity with knowledge and don't confuse knowledge with understanding". Just because athletes perform thousands of repetitions of the same exercise (i.e. -they are familiar with the exercise), does not guarantee they have retained the knowledge and understanding of why they're performing these repetitions. As coaches we are responsible for educating the team on the direction of the organization as well as the benefits of training and transfer to the field. By mastering the coach and player relationship, we as coaches are able to create a "we" environment built on trust, education and, therefore, competency (Trust + Education=Competency).

As coaches our spoken word is powerful and when our message has a purity of purpose, we increase our athlete's competency. Education is the cornerstone of coaching. From a teaching and motor learning standpoint, our athlete's competency can improve if we utilize external over internal cueing and use analogies with implicit coaching; this learning environment will crystallize their competency. Motor learning research has shown that coaching with external coaching cues (instructional cues related to the external environment – "Explode off the ground") results in higher learning rates compared to internal coaching cues (instructional cues directed internally on their body – "Explode through your hips") (1). This will allow for optimum transfer of training to sport and increase your athlete's ability to retain and display technical proficiency under stress. This is a great example of their competency (not to mention your competency as a coach).

We must always evaluate the technical proficiency, skill acquisition and skill mastery of our athletes and consistently explore how we as teachers and coaches are holding our athletes to an agreed standard. The more your athlete's skill competency improves, the more adaptable they become to performance, on and off the field, in addition to becoming more resilient. Having strategic teaching progressions, coupled with the necessary lateralization's and regressions (7), will allow your athletes to go through a proper learning curve continuum so that they become "self-aware" and can learn to auto correct their own training. This illustrates an athlete's personal investment into their own development and the difference between athlete compliance (following the values of the ecosystem because they have to) and athlete buy-in (believing in the values of the ecosystem because you inspired them to want to). This is the highest level of athlete competency.

Capacity:

To excel on the football field, an athlete must possess several different physical qualities (key performance indicators), including: power, speed, strength, agility, reactivity and instincts to name a few. An athlete's "capacity" would then refer to their ability to adapt and accumulate all of these numerous and necessary physical attributes together and combine them into their performance output. Therefore, a well-rounded and comprehensive training program and environment should adequately address all factors that impact and affect your athlete's biological power capacity (biodynamic, bioenergetics and biomotor). This encompasses your cardiovascular system, metabolic system, hormonal system and neuromuscular system (3). Using marketing terminology, if *Competency* referred to your "product depth" (how deep is your mastery and how deep does your training positively affect your training outcomes), then *Capacity* would refer to your "product width" (how much variability in stress is your training environment exposing your athletes to). Competency + Capacity = Brilliant at the Basics. Just refer to how many different variables were mentioned in the *High Performance Lifestyle* chart and you will see the true width of this ecosystem pillar.

I'm aware that to truly become competent and possess sufficient skill mastery requires an excessive volume (capacity) of purposeful repetitions or intentions. I believe *Competency* should be obtained before *Capacity* in the prioritizing hierarchy similar to Gray Cook's "movement quality before movement quantity" paradigm. Properly developing an athlete's capacity will enable them to perform at optimal levels repeatedly and consistently. Over time, improving an athlete's capacity, will expose them to the appropriate application of unaccustomed stress which is necessary for gradient adaptation to occur (6). The difference between a great athlete and an elite athlete lies in movement coordination and variability; the great athlete can generate the necessary coordinated summation of effort to perform in only one way, while the elite athlete can do this in a multiple of different ways (2). Diversifying your athlete's capacity within the training environment will improve their key performance indicators and allow them to reach their athletic potential as well as manage the stress from training and competition better.

Competition:

This pillar is much easier said than actually accomplished. Competition is the life force and life blood of any successful football program and possibly of all the pillars of the ecosystem. Competition needs to permeate within the DNA of each player at any given moment and transcend deep into the collective whole of the entire organization. Just as there is no substitute for sprinting, there is no substitute for competition. Competition can't be fabricated; it must be obtained with a violent grace. Competition should be a personal investment of the individual athlete that transcends and raises the transfer of benefits from team competition throughout the ecosystem. Team competition creates energy within the ecosystem. This flow of energy can be positive or negative, so competition must be directed towards the performance outcomes and goals of the ecosystem. Why do we only isolate this commodity to the athlete, the coaching staff, the weight room and the field? Shouldn't competition be strategically enforced through the entire ecosystem including sports medicine, equipment staff, video and technology staff, media relations, sports information, academics and community outreach? The consistently successful programs are already doing this.

Competition within training shouldn't be something that we have to mention, it should be an outright standard and a given. Yet we lose sight of this and relegate competition to test exercises, test days, pre and post offseason comparisons and record boards. Every rep and every workout is a test and therefore competition. When your athletes train and operate with this mindset and this is the standard you routinely hold them to without exceptions, this is where real "mental toughness" and "discipline" emerge from your program. Allowing your athletes to test with substandard proficiency is NOT real competition, it is NOT mental toughness and it is NOT discipline. This will not transfer to on field performance in any meaningful way because it will not equate to what the daily expectations of your football program.

Coaching:

This is a descriptive verb in most of our job titles; *strength and conditioning coach, sports performance coach, physical preparation coach, speed coach*, etc. Coaches are the greatest commodity within the ecosystem; they are the executors of all the pillars. Great coaches *invest* in their athletes, are *involved* in athlete interactions and *inspire* their athletes; this all leads to a positive *influence* on their athletes. As coaches we also have the ability to *impact* more people's lives in one year than the average person does in their entire life. I hope this is a positive impact. Sticking with the "C" theme for this article, coaching should encompass Communication, Clarity, Conviction, Compassion and Connection.

Communication: Communicate your "why", communicate your standard, communicate instruction and feedback. Only get on your soapbox when warranted. The responsibility of all people directly and indirectly involved in impacting the ecosystem is to communicate a cohesive and consistent message. And remember, 2-way dialogue is always better than 1-way monologue.

Clarity: If you're Clear and Concise with your message, then you avoid Confusion. If you had to go to an all-day clinic to obtain a certification or become educated in a specific area of expertise, don't expect your athletes to understand it after a 30 second explanation and

demonstration. No coach has ever won a game by what he knows; it's what the players know that counts – Bear Bryant.

Conviction: Believe in your training program and your ecosystem. If you don't firmly believe in your training program, how do you expect your athletes to? This is where applied sports science is really making its impact. The player monitoring and data collection that is available now provides all the subjective and objective statistics (along with your own coaching expertise, experience and intuition) that we need to confirm what training adaptations are occurring.

Compassion: Care more about your athletes as people and coach them more on life than training principles and the coaching stock of your ecosystem will rise. Compassion creates positive energy throughout the ecosystem; this is a prerequisite for a successful ecosystem.

Connection: This is a relationship business surrounded by an entertainment business and entertainment schedule. Relationships can't be built without being connected throughout the ecosystem. Great communication leads to a connection; they are not one in the same. Connections are the equal sum of all components involved in the coaching pillar; Communication + Clarity + Conviction + Compassion = **Connection**. These connections are built with "drops" and lost in "buckets" so never take this for granted. Your skills in child psychology and sport psychology will be useful and are tested here. A strong connection is created by making the individual feel valuable and involving the player in the decision making process's within the ecosystem. Strength and conditioning coaches don't have the greatest impact on an athlete's development because we spend the most time with them, but rather it's because we develop the deepest connection with our athletes.

Conclusion:

The pillars of the ecosystem, 1) Culture, 2) Competency, 3) Capacity, 4) Competition and 5) Coaching are just that, "pillars". You are the architect! Every block of stone has a statue in it, it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. Your ecosystem and your training environment is your brand. Are you developing brand loyalty and brand equity? The gene lottery is the prerequisite for elite human performance, but training and performance outcomes are the result of nature AND nurture. Cultivate your ecosystem.

Cultivating Your Ecosystem – Part 2 will illustrate how the difference between “process driven” and “results driven” outcomes have created a paradigm shift in how to orchestrate the pillars of the ecosystem.

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