The Anger Trap: How did we get in? And how can we get out?

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Anger is used frequently in all relationships to control another's behavior, but one of the most common that we see is the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches seem to have fallen into the "Anger Trap" and do not know how to get out. In order to understand how this could happen, it is important to understand the principles of operant conditioning. Simply put, in order to control the frequency of a behavior in the future, we apply consequences to that behavior. If we want the frequency of the behavior to increase in the future, we use reinforcement; if we want the behavior to decrease, we use punishment.

Coaches use anger to punish poor performance

Athletes try harder to perform to perfection to avoid the anger. This concept is called negative reinforcement. A person will increase the performance of a desired behavior in order to make an aversive stimulus go away, in this case anger. Gymnasts, then, are negatively reinforced to perform well to avoid the wrath of the coach's anger (an aversive event). The coach is positively reinforced because whenever he/she gets angry, the gymnast performs better (a positive event). A very strong behavior pattern is being established because both parties are being reinforced for their behavior (See Figure 1). At first glance, this seems like a good thing, and it may be, for a while. But eventually, the "Anger Trap" will backfire. Here is how that happens.

Figure 1. Comparison of Reinforcement and Punishment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF EVENT:</th>
<th>POSITIVE EVENT</th>
<th>AVERSIVE EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Operation Performed</td>
<td>Positive Reinforcement</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After a Response</td>
<td>Presented:</td>
<td>Removed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive Reinforcement</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative Reinforcement</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Gymnasts look up to their coaches and work hard for their approval at all costs. However, even the best gymnasts cannot perform to perfection all the time. Knowing that a sub par performance will result in the coach being angry, the athlete performs better out of a fear of the coach's anger. The coach interprets this as motivation to do well. The gymnast's fear creates anxiety. How anxiety effects an athlete is very individual. This can best be explained through the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning Model (Hanin, 1989). Each individual
athlete has an optimal zone in which the best individual performances are achieved. When anxiety is within this optimal zone, performance improves. However, when anxiety is either below or above the individual's optimal zone, performance deteriorates. Simply put, a moderate amount of anxiety improves performance, too much anxiety decreases performances. The problem is that the optimal zone is different for each athlete and also different for each task the athlete performs.

If, in fact, coaches are using anger to increase anxiety in an athlete in order to improve performance, it is easy to see how a number of problems could occur. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for a coach to predict the zone of optimal performance for each individual athlete for each task performed. And even if that prediction were made, it would be difficult to control the anger to create just enough anxiety to be within the optimal zone and not exceed it.

When coaches observe that some anger improves performance, it is easy to see why, when the performance begins to decline, they would assume that either they had not gotten angry enough or did not show enough anger to produce the desired results. So, not only does the anger increase in intensity, but the public display of it increases as well.

The coach does not know any other way to get the athlete to perform to his expectations so he degrades the athlete even more. The athlete is now in a dilemma, the anxiety is increased because she is trying to do her best but is out of her optimal zone. The coach is angry and assumes he needs to get angrier. Once this dilemma presents itself, there are a number of possible negative side effects that may occur with the athlete. These include:

A. Decreased Self-Esteem

Young athletes, particularly those whose personal identity is clearly linked to how they perform in their sport, are not able to separate the criticism of a performance and the criticism of the person. This is often because the coach does not separate the performance from the athlete in their feedback. Comments like, "You aren't even trying to do better" or "You are too lazy to be a competitive gymnast." This kind of feedback makes the gymnast feel that her identity is being attacked. In an atmosphere where anger prevails and fear of criticism is present, what is intended to be an achievement motivator may be perceived as a reflection of the gymnast's level of competence or a reflection of who the person is (or is not). As a consequence, the gymnast may develop devastatingly low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. Feeling attacked may lead to the gymnast feeling defensive, vulnerable, and may experience a sense of losing control.

B. Decreased Motivation to Try

Gymnasts who participate for the love of sport have an inner striving to be competent and self-deterring, to master increasingly difficult tasks, and to be successful (Martens, 1987). However, when a coach continually uses punishment (such as anger) to decrease sub-par performance, that inner drive to improve is significantly squelched.

C. Increased Callousness

To be yelled at and condemned on a seemingly continual basis, is painful to the psyche. The easiest way to cope with the pain is to become emotionless or callous. The pain goes away,
but with it so does the pride, joy, and excitement of performing. Consequently, when the
coach does reward the gymnast with an approving comment, the gymnast continues to
respond without emotion. For the gymnast it is much easier to just "go through the motions"
in practice, competition, and in interacting with others (coach, teammates, and media) than
to knowingly invest one's emotions in what is repeatedly a painful experience.

D. Increased Fear

The use of anger as a punishment often creates fear in the athlete. This fear of punishment is
often exhibited in such behaviors as making excuses for poor performance and even
developing injuries to decrease the athlete's expectations.

E. Increased Rebelliousness

An athlete may respond to the coach's anger by becoming pessimistic and acquiring a "bad"
attitude. Athletes with a bad attitude often get labeled as "problem athletes" because their
behavior frequently takes on a rebellious overtone. Talking back to the coach or throwing
tantrums may be outward expressions of this rebelliousness. A less obvious display of
rebellion may be an athlete who becomes lazy as a means of defiance (Tutko & Richards,
1971). Bad attitudes are contagious and often result in a negative spiral downward. If
coaches are frustrated, disappointed, and angry they tend to yell more. The athlete's attitude
worsens and the coach gets angrier—a vicious cycle.

F. Increased Escape Behavior

An athlete's response to the coach's anger may be depression, withdrawal, and avoidance
behavior. It is often devastating for a gymnast who has devoted her life, energy, body, and
mind to gymnastics only to be exposed to criticism and anger. As a result, the gymnast may
decrease any efforts to try, come late to practice, make excuses not to come at all, or even
drop out of the program. The sad ending to this story is she may never participate in
gymnastics again. We must be doing something wrong with children in organized sports
because results of several studies indicate that after the age of 14 there is a clear drop-off of
membership in sport clubs (Campbell, 1988; Seppanen, 1982). The impact that these side
effects have on athletes varies with each individual. Some of the factors which have been
known to impact the effect of the coach's anger on the athlete include:

1. **Amount of Respect the Athlete Has for the Coach**
   The more the athlete respects and admires the coach, the more she will be motivated
to perform well to get the coach's approval and to avoid his anger.

2. **Athlete's Self-Esteem**
   The lower the athlete's self-esteem, the greater the effect of the coach's anger.

3. **Severity of the Display of Anger**
   The more severe the display of anger by the coach, the more emotional damage
   experienced by the athlete.

4. **Frequency of the Emotional Display**
   The more often anger is displayed, the more callous the athlete becomes to the anger
   and the less effect it has.

These effects may occur when a coach is working one on one with an athlete. However,
when there is a team practice in which a group of athletes are observing, the effects become
much more complicated. The athlete is embarrassed in front of her teammates so the emotional damage is more severe. In addition, the teammates who are observing the coach's anger and have compassion for their fellow teammate may internalize the emotional effects. This is referred to as the "ripple effect." The effects are intensified and exponentially damaging.

Now that we understand what happens in the "Anger Trap" and realize the potentially damaging effects it can have on the athletes involved, several questions arise: Is it worth it? Isn't there another way to get athletes to perform to their potential without using anger? Aren't there some positive ways to improve performance?

Let's Analyze The Situation

When a gymnast is not performing a skill to the satisfaction of the coach our first question is "Why?" We must know the cause before we can find a "cure."

- If it is because she presently does not have the skill to perform at that level, then we need to task analyze her skill level and teach the skills she needs to perform at that level. If we think we have already taught the skill then we need to examine our teaching technique and the gymnast's learning style to see what needs to be modified so that learning takes place.

- If it is because she has not practiced effectively, then we need to find out why she has not been practicing and correct the apparent problem.

- If it is because she is not trying to do better, then we need to find out why she isn't trying and attempt to change the situation.

By examining the cause it is more realistic that a solution can be found. Once learning occurs and performance improves, good performance needs to be reinforced if you want it to continue. There are many different ways to reinforce a behavior or performance. The most commonly used reinforcers in coaching include verbal and nonverbal reinforcers. When giving a verbal reinforcer it is important that you state specifically what behavior you are praising so the athlete knows what was done well. Examples of verbal reinforcers are:

"Way to go Morgan, I liked the way you held the pike on your jump."

"Good job keeping your legs together on your handspring front vault."

"The way you held the block before your double back was excellent."

Examples of nonverbal reinforcers are giving the athlete a high five, a smile, a nod, a wink, or a hug.

It is important to be careful when we give verbal reinforcers to be sure that our nonverbal cues are also positive. Saying "good job keeping your legs together" while you are looking disgusted, will negate the verbal reinforcement.

If the gymnast does not perform to expectations, the coach should give a positive response with specific feedback as to how to improve. An example of this would be, "That was a good beam routine, Mary, I like the way you stuck your landing after your series. Next time, try to push off your hands more in the round off leading into your dismount so you get
a better set and more height."

When the gymnast takes the specific feedback and completes the task successfully, make sure to praise that success and set another goal, i.e., "That was a great dismount, now let's work on sticking the landing."

If the gymnast is still not performing the skill correctly with the verbal instruction, try to utilize visual learning by having the gymnast observe someone else doing it correctly. Another good technique is to videotape the gymnast and let them view it to see what they are doing and compare it to a videotape of someone doing it correctly.

References


Conclusion

If we want our athletes to perform to their potential, then we need to create a conducive learning environment in which they feel safe and secure and willing to take risks without angering the coach or risking the loss of his approval. Don't get caught in the "Anger Trap." There are too many negative side effects of using anger to manage behavior. Coaches and athletes do have a common goal, but far too often the strive for the common goal gets lost in the battle, creating a lose-lose situation. There are much better ways to improve performance while maintaining the integrity of the athlete-coach relationship and the learning environment.

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