AIS

The Kookaburra Experience: Leveraging friendships, networks and connections to scale learning across a landscape of practice

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Summary

This report provides an overview of a recent experience that helps demonstrate how the people involved with the AIS Coach Summit Program are not isolated entities focused only on localised practices and solutions, but critical elements of a broader interrelated sociocultural system that are dependent on each other for the scalability of learning across an entire landscape of practice [1-3].

Acknowledgements

Attribution

Background

In November 2021, the Australian Institute of Sport launched the AIS Coach Summit Program. Whilst designed to be delivered over a six-month period, it has become perpetual and is demonstrating what is possible when key personnel from multiple organisations work together to achieve a common goal. Although this evolution was not originally foreseen, it has produced a number of key learnings that are helping to shape the direction of the program and assisting with the scalability of learning across the Australian high performance coaching landscape of practice. For these reasons, it is important that the program is not seen as a time-constrained event entailing delivery of predefined content to coaches, but as a learning mechanism that is being continually fine-tuned and increasingly more effective in meeting the needs of its members "by placing control of, what will be learnt, when it will be learnt and how it will be learnt in the hands of the learner" [4, p:3]. This short report aims to highlight the benefits of this less structured and self-determined approach to development by shedding some light on a recent 7-day, job-embedded learning experience.

Photo: By Ian Schneider available for free on Unsplash and a timely reminder that "sharing knowledge occurs when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capacities for action" - Peter Senge.

Setting the scene

The information presented in this report was generated over a 7-day period during the recent Kookaburra-India 5-match test series in Perth, Western Australia. It covers all aspects of the experience and makes use of collective knowledge thereby increasing the likelihood that any learnings from the event will be translated to practice [5-7]. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the friendships, connections and trust that underpinned the experience were formed over a 2-year period and emerged from the author's participation in the AIS Summit Program.

As can be seen throughout the report, these friendships not only assisted with the generation of high-quality data but created a sense of joint endeavour for the authors in settings that strongly favour the transfer of learnings to real-world practice [8-10] through exposure to different thinking, the modifying of existing beliefs, and the expansion of current cognitive structures (i.e., "a learner's conceptions of knowledge, experiences, and emotional make up" [11, p:7]). The latter is of particular importance because an individual's cognitive structure influences what that person pays attention to and what they choose to learn [12].

Framing the work

The work undertaken by the authors was framed by an epistemological constructivist understanding that knowledge is contextually tied to the settings and situations in which it is learnt [13], and guided by an ontological point-of-view that there are different versions of a reality [14] that when analysed provide a rich and detailed understanding of an experience [15]. It is a philosophical position that acknowledges the interrelated positions of socially co-constructed relationships and recognises that people must be critical of their beliefs and prepared to challenge any taken-for-granted assumptions when undertaking their work [16-19].

From this perspective, the author's influences on the environments in which data were produced (particularly Colin's and Neil's) are therefore "not something that can be neutralised, acknowledged, or simply explained away" [20, p:243]. Instead, they are seen as an integral part of the iterative and interconnected data generation and analysis processes [21,22], and as something that requires constant scrutinising and high levels of reflexivity (i.e., a continuous, multifaceted and self-critiquing approach used to recognise, understand and record the possible influences a person's role can have on the relationships and social structures of a setting so that their effects on the knowledge building process can be considered [23-25]).

Information gathering techniques

A highly systematic and deliberate approach to the processes of observation and reflection (as recommended by action research experts [26-29]) was employed by the authors to determine what aspects of the experience were the most meaningful, helpful and impactful. The process involved examining and interpretating real-world coaching practices and included the following actions:

- Documenting ideas and observations.

- Summarising salient discussions.

- Cataloguing thoughts and impressions.

- Generating theories and themes.

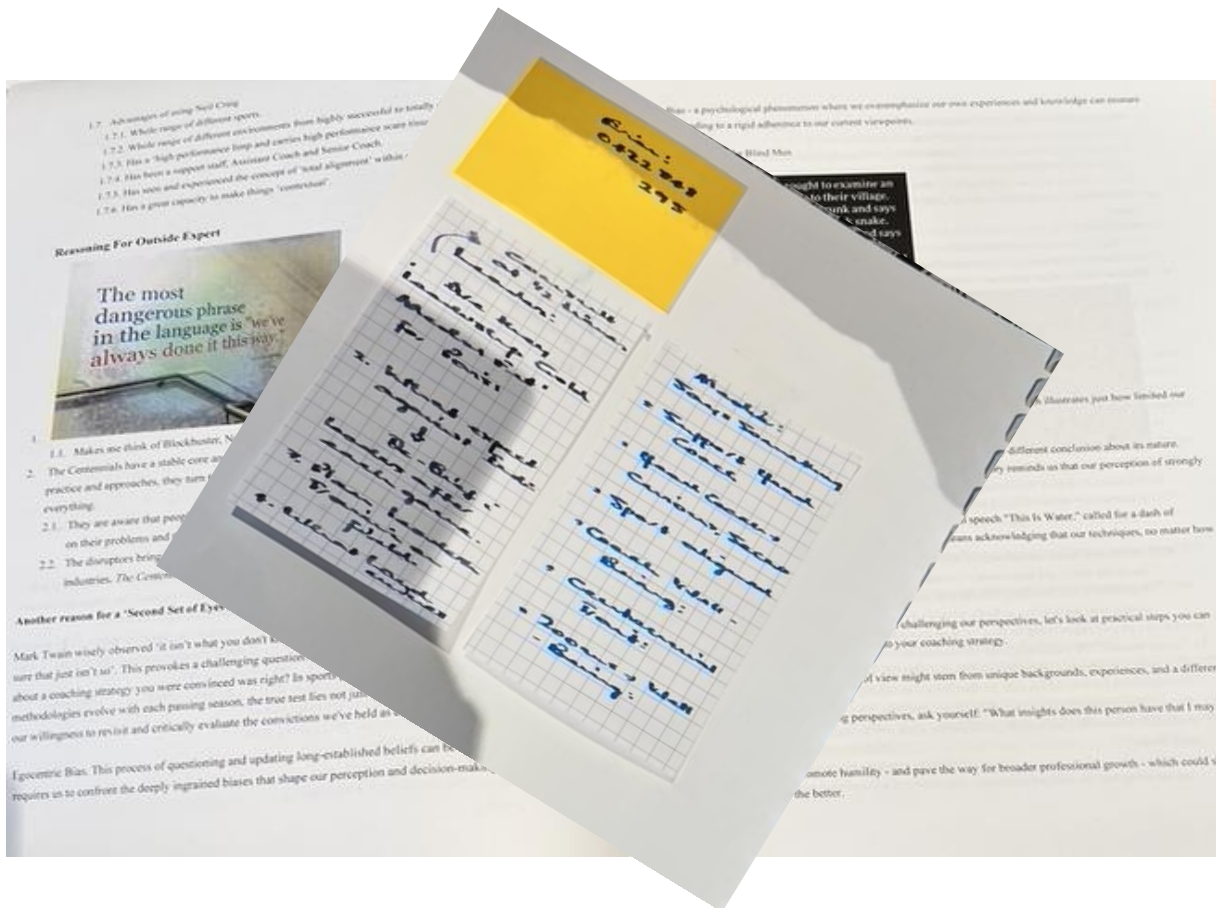- Challenging existing beliefs.

- Clarifying interpretations.

Photo: Some of the field notes from the week-long event intended to show how they helped provide an accurate, detailed and iterative interpretation system for the reporting of findings by connecting the data collection, generation and analysis processes.

Interpreting the experience

The above methods generated a rich and diverse body of unstructured text-based material and facilitated the insights presented in this report. The importance of such sources in analytical reflection is well documented [26-31] and, since the process of collating and writing it up gives substance to reflection that otherwise could remain tacit and produce little practical benefit, researchers who advocate for interpretive inquires consider this type of data critical to the instigation of change [30-33]. Accordingly, the latest phase of critical reflection - undertaken for the purpose of preparing this report - is seen as integral to the efficiency and effectiveness of ongoing decisions and actions regarding future iterations of the AIS Summit Program.

Giving meaning to the data

In an effort to find common patterns across the data and present a "phenomenological sense" [34, p:23] of the experience, artifacts generated from the project (field notes, documented reflections and summaries of key points) underwent a reflexive thematic content analysis. The process involved categorising the unstructured text-based datasets into logical and meaningful themes by reducing the amount of raw information, identifying the significant patterns within the text and building a chain of evidence through the use of inductive (findings arise from the themes inherent in the data) and deductive (themes are developed from existing concepts and ideas) analytical methods [35-37].

Photo: By Brands&People that aims to show what the early stages of a manual thematic analysis can look like and how the non-numerical, conceptual information presented in this report was interpreted and reported.

Key learnings and takeaways

The analysis process outlined above produced three predominant themes relating to the week-long experience that are intended to contextualise what was observed by the authors based on their personal perspectives of the events and situations [38-41]. It is hoped the information (in a more incidental way) also helps bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing a brief overview of each theme and demonstrating how similar outcomes could be occurring in other settings.

Theme 1. Critical friendships: They are important for professional development

There was a strong consensus amongst the authors that the critical friend concept has enormous potential in sport and additional work focused on understanding how these professional relationships can support and enhance coach development is well worth pursuing. In the present context, the critical friendship between the authors produced a number of important and highly reciprocal outcomes including that it added a new dimension to the reflective process by offering alternate perspectives to the critiquing of current practices.

Photo: Colin and Neil demonstrating how authentic friendships between people with mutual understanding of one another's careers, context and aspirations can assist the knowledge production and transfer processes.

Underpinning rationale: linking theme to the literature

A critical friend is a "trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, offers critique of a person's work as a friend, and is an advocate for the success of that work" [42, p:50]. Whilst this definition helps frame the work, defining the characteristics of a successful critical friendship is not that simple as they can differ quite markedly [42-44]. In response to this challenge and in an attempt to provide greater operational clarity, researchers [43] have produced a Critical Friend Definition Continuum to demonstrate that a critical friend may be a previous close friend of the learner, a stranger, or lie somewhere in between. In a similar way, there can be variation in the extent to which the critical friend is associated with the organisation within which the learner is located, the level of expertise of the critical friend, and the degree of contact between the critical friend and the learner [43]. Although the ideal settings for the parameters included in the Critical Friend Definition Continuum depend on the objectives and context of the relationship [43], several factors have been identified that generally influence the effectiveness of critical friendships. These include role clarity, the existence and progressive building of mutual trust, the duration and stability of the relationship, the critical friend having a genuine understanding of the situation in which the learning arising from the relationship is being applied, the willingness of the critical friend to provide honest feedback even if it could be unpalatable, and continual scepticism as to whether the relationship is fully achieving its aims [44-47].

Critical friendships

Close friends	Strangers
Insiders	Outsiders
Experts	Non-experts
Fully invovled	Loosely involved
Multiple critical friends	Single critical friend
Productive	Non-productive
Defined expectations	No defined expectations

Critical friendships
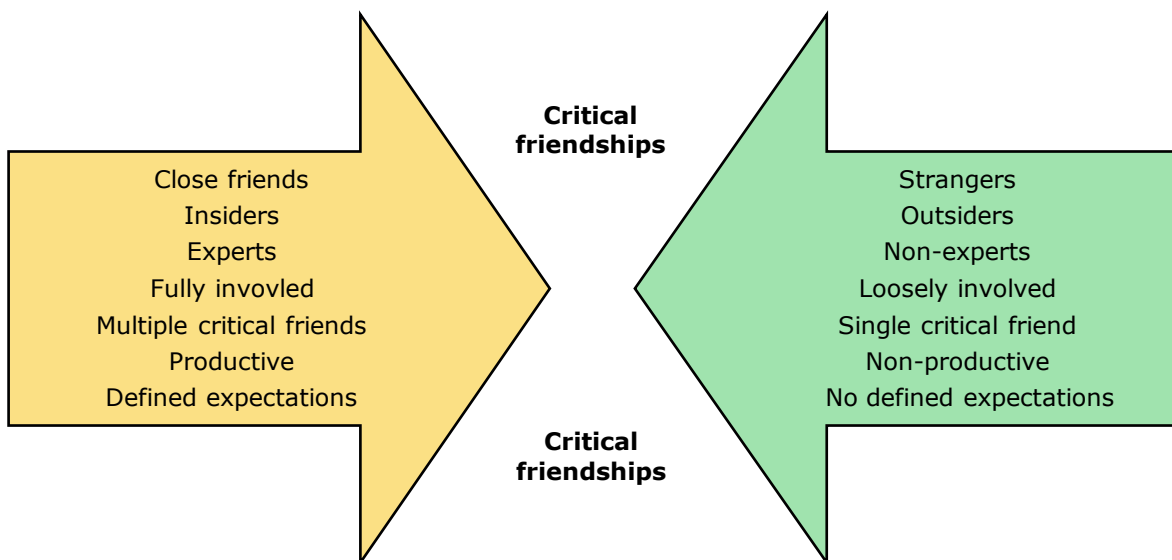
Image: Simplistic illustration of the Critical Friend Definition Continuum showing how the descriptors reflect the definitional terms used within the literature to describe the different ways these professional relationships can operate [42-47]. It is worth noting, however, that the continuum only demonstrates variances in the terms and does not imply that one approach is more effective than another (e.g., critical friends who are fully involved in a relationship are more productive than those who are only loosely involved or vice versa) [43].

Suggestions and considerations

We have observed and directly experienced the establishment of what can be seen as mutual critical friendships across a number of high performance sport systems that appear to have been highly efficacious in promoting coach learning in fields relevant to their vocation, while also affording other professionals increased understanding of challenges associated with the practical implementation and utility of their disciplinary knowledge. We therefore believe that a focus on creating and building appropriate critical friendships can provide a powerful means to support coach learning and development. However, we also believe that potential critical friends of coaches need to understand the over-arching rules of their engagement and should strive to:

- Encourage continual learning.

- Be a sounding board for new ideas and work practices.

- Engage in regular dialogue with the coaches (face-to-face discussions, video calls, informal catchups, emails, Zooms, etc).

- Support and encourage reflective practice.

- Provide support to the coaches when the going gets tough.

Equally, it would be important for critical friends to be aware that they should not:

- Judge or undermine the authority of others.

- Impose their own agendas and/or offer "quick fixes".

- Presume to know more than the coaches about a coaching situation [42-47].

Photo: Colin and Neil discussing group dynamics and demonstrating how their critical friendship is based on mutual trust and respect and an ability to speak openly, honestly and constructively about the challenges and demands of high performance coaching.

Theme 2. The conditions: They were conducive for learning

Providing positive learning spaces where everyone felt safe, engaged, connected, and supported was another important outcome attributed to the week-long event. The emergence of this theme suggests that the Kookaburra program is achieving one of the primary goals of the High Performance 2032+ Sport Strategy – we lead with vision, integrity and accountability to create environments where people thrive - and aligns almost perfectly with the strategy's core values:

- Pursuing excellence.

- Creating belonging.

- Displaying courage.

- Building connection.

Perceptions that the program is enabling achievement of these important outcomes is clearly demonstrated in the following extracts that have been de-identified so that the identity of the people who expressed their thoughts is no longer apparent and cannot be reasonably ascertained from the data.

- "It's about being the best you can be and performing when it matters".

- "We are always learning and trying to improve".

- "The way the program is structured and delivered means everyone is learning from each other".

- "We're a pretty tight group and have developed a strong culture".

- "I know my options matter and are having an impact on the direction of the program".

Photo: The Kookaburras winning well and inspiring others to do the same.

Underpinning rationale: linking theme to the literature

Cultivating safe, positive and encouraging sport environments that foster autonomy and higher-order thinking whilst allowing for appropriate low-threat challenging is a key skill to master and something all coaches should strive to achieve [48-51]. Although these conditions were clearly present in the current context, observations and discussions from the week-long event suggests they were not created by a single person but by the entire Kookaburra team (coaches, players, support staff, administrators, specialist, and scientists). For example, a key component of the program at the time of the visit was focused on enhancing the psychological capacities and mental readiness of the team through use of specially designed mindfulness training sessions that are part of a broader, program-embedded intervention and helps demonstrate the Kookaburras' "collective action" approach to improvement. The value of this type of training, however, is definitely worth noting since its benefits have been observed across multiple settings [52-55], including sport where it has been used to improve performance in ways that were similar to what was observed in Perth (i.e., development of important goal-focused processes that enable athletes to regulate their behaviour much more effectively [55-58]). In the present context, this outcome was achieved by:

- The experience and expertise of the mental skills coach.

- The "buy-in" from the team.

- The willingness and openness of the coaches to explore new possibilities.

- A clear understanding of how performance-related skills can be improved with regular mindfulness practice.

Photo: Pre-game mindfulness and mental skills activation session intended to highlight the importance of goal-oriented behaviour and automatic goal-focused processes in sport.

The model below provides a framework to understand the Kookaburras' commitment to continuous improvement and is intended to demonstrate how real world experiences are used as active experiments to explore, modify and clarify ideas based on what is being learnt [59,60]. Nevertheless, to fully appreciate the model, it needs to be considered within a broader context and as something that is part of a continuous and ongoing interprofessional learning experience, rather than as an isolated one-off activity. When viewed this way, it is possible to see how the socially constructed relationships and interconnected partnerships that make up this shared endeavour are constantly transforming critical pieces of information into tangential assets (e.g., new thoughts, solutions and behaviour) by assessing situations together, reflecting openly and honestly, making joint decisions, and checking each other's behaviour.

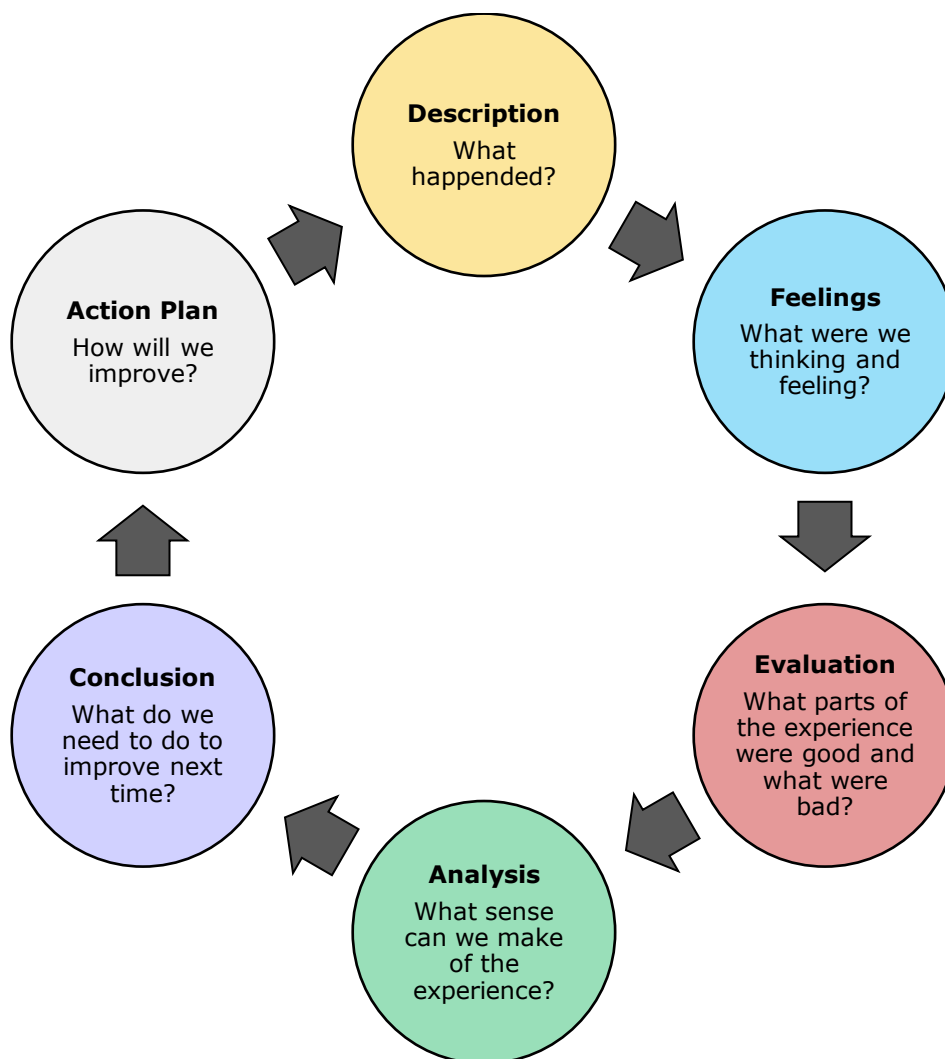**Figure:** Interpretation of the Kookaburras approach to personal and professional growth and development based on Gibbs' 6-step reflective cycle model [61]. Whilst not apparently clear, it is hoped the framework also highlights how learning within this context is not just an internally structured cognitive process but a social and collaborative endeavour situated in the dynamic interactions of everyday life [1,2]

Suggestions and considerations

The following is based on information that was shared by the coaches (Colin Batch, Anthony Potter and Rob Hammond) over the course of the week and summaries the pedagogical strategies and key actions that were observed by Neil and Paul during their time with the Kookaburras. They are presented with a profound sense of respect for what the team has achieved and aims to provide a basis for future discussions and/or personal exploration around the importance of instructional methods and the ways in which they can impact task performance in sport.

Teaching strategies demonstrated by the coaches
Personal stories, experiences, achievements and cultures were acknowledged and valued.
Learning activities promoted mutual trust and respect.
Responsibility for learning was shared across the team.
Skills needed for teamwork were explicitly called out and constantly reenforced.
Time was provided for people to share their thinking, clarify their ideas, and inspire each other.
Strategies that highlight the power of a learning community were modelled and employed.
Coaches shared their passion and excitement with athletes and other team members.
Individuals had to work collaboratively to achieve clarity and overcome challenges.
Athletes were willing participants in activities and discussions.
Individual achievements and shared successes were acknowledged and celebrated.
Coaches modelled and reinforced the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback.
Environments were driven by challenges and possibilities rather than threats.
Athletes were continually nudged and asked questions like: "What else could we do?"
Learning conversations and yarns were engineered in ways that extended current thinking.
Open-ended learning tasks that challenged athletes to show initiative were employed.
Athletes were encouraged to solve problems and "raise the bar" with their expectations.
Procedures were in place to maximise learning time (e.g., athletes driving discussions).
"Real world" problems were solved with collaborative thinking and synchronised intelligence.

Theme 3. The coaches: They are authentic leaders and enablers of success

The final theme to emerge from our analysis highlights the important role coaches play across the participation spectrum and helps demonstrate how they positively influence performance and organisational outcomes [62-64]. This was definitely the case in Perth, where the coaches demonstrated a style of leadership that is consistent with what has been reported in the literature – promoting transparency, strengthening relationships, accomplishing key goals, and inspiring teams to do their best [65,66]. Known as authentic leadership, the concept consist of the following actions and is based on the idea that a leaders' behaviours are in line with their values [67-71].

- **Self- awareness:** Assessing weaknesses, strengths and values in order to be more authentic with team members by practicing critical self-reflection, asking for feedback and having a strong awareness of peoples' feelings.

- **Mission-driven:** Putting the goals and mission of the organisation and/or team in front of their own interests.

- **Relational transparency:** Remaining honest when sharing thoughts and feelings by offering constructive feedback to team members when necessary and admitting mistakes when wrong.

- **Long-term focus:** An ability to motivate people to strive for goals and objectives that may take more time than initially expected and require additional work and patience.

- **Fair and balanced processing:** Considering opposing opinions by encouraging people to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences while avoiding potential conflicts [67-71].

Image: Visual representation of the type of leadership that was displayed by the coaches over the 7-day period and why Neil and Paul believe that Colin, Anthony and Rob should be seen as authentic leaders and enablers of success.

Underpinning rationale: linking theme to the literature

A scoping review of the literature [65-71] highlighted that authentic leadership is a particular approach to guardianship that inspires people to achieve more than they thought they could by constantly challenging the limits of their beliefs. However, and perhaps most importantly, the review also revealed that authentic leaders possess certain characteristics that enable them to achieve a wide-range of positive workplace outcomes by building cultures that align personal beliefs and behaviours with clearly defined goals and objectives. These traits are highlighted in the Figure below and include:

- A commitment to personal growth and development.

- High levels of self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

- An acute focus on long-term goals and objectives.

- Transparency and consistency when dealing with others.

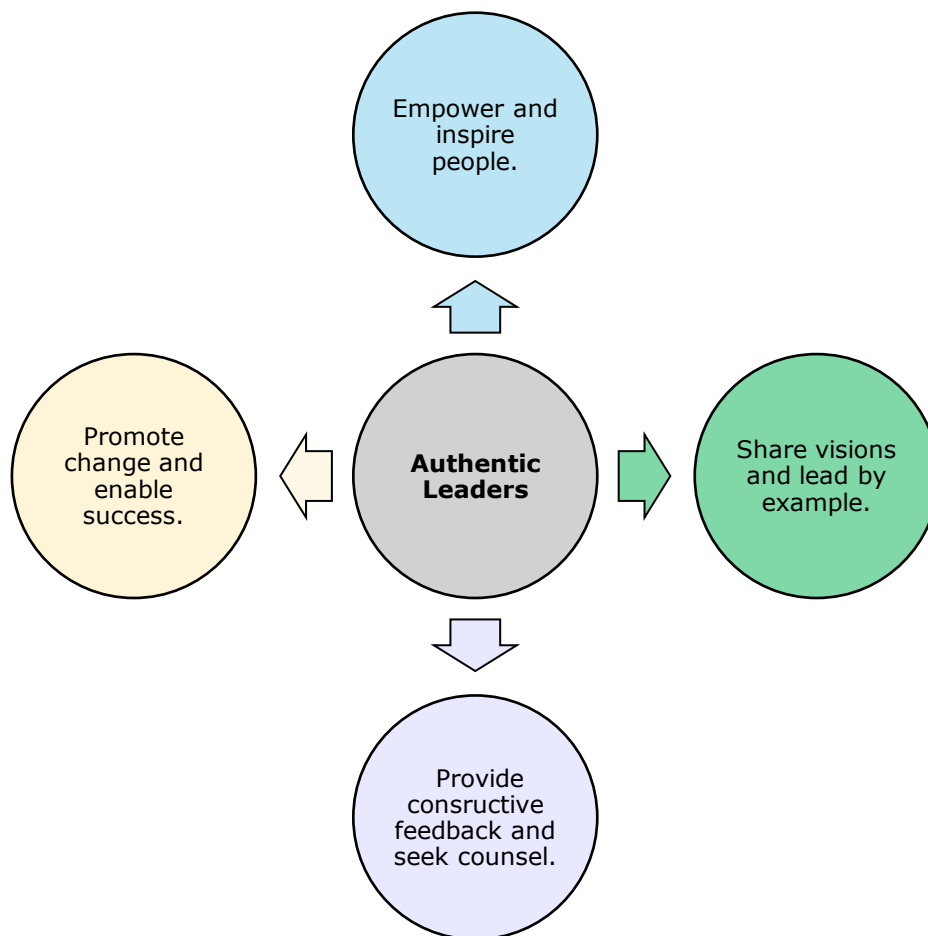- An ability to create inspired workforces [65-71].

Figure: Overview of the characteristics that enable authentic leaders to achieve a wide-range of positive workplace outcomes [65-71].

Suggestions and considerations

Neil and Paul's observations and reflections of the coaches suggests that their leadership style greatly encouraged the degree of connection, commitment and enthusiasm the players and staff displayed toward their work and each other. These factors are essential ingredients for high performance outcomes [72-74] and are demonstrated in the present context by the three forms of personal investment:

1. **Cognitive engagement:** The level of focus and engrossment team members displayed toward the tasks.

2. **Emotional engagement:** The amount of joy team members demonstrated when performing a task.

3. **Physical engagement:** The level of intensity team members applied to the tasks [75,76].

Something to consider here is the positive impact the above can have on workplaces and the ways they help create:

*   Positive thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

*   Emotionally connected and more enthusiastic team members.

*   More attentive, focused and responsible workforces [75,76].

Photo: Colin demonstrating how trust, respect, empathy, active listening, and a deliberate focus on mutual well-being and development ensures the people he works with feel highly engaged, valued and connected.

Concluding thoughts

This report provides an interpretive summary of a 7-day, job-embedded learning and development experience and uses available research evidence to provide a strong rationale for implementation of similar initiatives elsewhere. Whilst this could present considerable budgetary and logistical challenges, the benefits to sports and to coaches could be extensive and consideration should be given to the effectiveness of this approach and whether the costs involved with staging these events might be offset by greater long-term impact. Nevertheless, and regardless of the exact nature of any operational model, success of any future endeavours will almost certainly depend on the willingness of key personnel from multiple organisations to work together.

Things to consider

It is worth noting that the themes, learnings and key lessons presented in this document are based on the authors observations, experiences and reflections and should not be considered as necessarily representing the opinions of everyone involved with the Kookaburra program, or as having horizontal generalisability (i.e., applicability across multiple settings). Instead, they should be seen as having vertical generalisability (contributing to the building of an interpretative theory) [77,78] and readers should consider the extent to which the findings resonate with their own experiences, relate to existing theories, provide insights into the investigated phenomenon, and promote understanding of the coach learning and development processes, rather than concentrating primarily on how relevant they might be to other times, settings and people [77,88]. The questions below are intended to help this reflective process and demonstrate how constant negotiation of meaning-making experiences and the re-using of shared information could support the development of high performance coaches and the teams they work with.

Reflections and critical self-analysis

- How do you express yourself physically, cognitively and emotionally when performing your role?

- How would the athletes and people you work with describe your approach to leadership?

- How important are critical friendships to you and your program/team?

- Do you have a critical friend?

- What pedagogical strategies do you currently use and how do you assess their effectiveness?

- Could mindfulness and mental skills training be of any use to you and your team?

- To what extent does this quote resonate with you? "The most dangerous phrase in the English language is: We've always done it this way" – Rear Admiral Grace Hopper.

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"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much" – Helen Keller.

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