

**Be Comfortable with the Uncomfortable**

*Justin Miller<sup>a</sup> and Brad Strand<sup>b</sup>*

<sup>a</sup>Justin Miller teaches and coaches in the Bismarck Public School system; <sup>b</sup>Brad Strand is a professor in the Department of Health, Nutrition, and Exercise Sciences at North Dakota State University.

**Abstract**

Coaches and athletes must be careful not to confuse comfortable with correct. Whenever one undertakes changes, he or she feels uncomfortable and it is easy to slide back into the comfortable, even though that might not be correct. This paper speaks to the process of being comfortable with the uncomfortable.

If one learns anything over many years of coaching, it is that there will be plenty of moments that are uncomfortable, but necessary. Not just the huge public and newsworthy issues that one hears about so often, but simply the things that take one outside their comfort zone. If at any point one wants to grow, he or she must go outside that comfort zone. The fear of entering the Bermuda Triangle of new coaching tactics, activities, and interactions is sometimes too much to bear. WHY? If we stick with what we know, and only what we know, we will no doubt become stagnant in what we do and it will eventually become a thing of the past.

Paying attention to those who are successful across the world of coaching, it is easy to notice they all have one thing in common - they innovate (Carmichael, 2015)! They are okay with stepping out of their box and into the wild world of change. Absolutely they are uncomfortable trying new things, for good reason. Will it work? Who might it affect? Will it create more problems? Can I reverse the decisions and results? These questions come with plenty of uncertainty. However, as O’Sullivan (2019) tells his team, “Risk feeling the lowest of the low because you will never know the highest of high achievement if you risk nothing (p).”

Introducing new components or activities into a program can bring a coach to a low point because coaches are used to immediate results in too many areas, and adding something new will take time to

develop. That is, unfortunately, the culture in which we live. Immediate results without the need for patience. Most can agree, however, that everyone needs a little more patience in life. One might feel low right away when adding something to their program, albeit with a little excitement about what the change could bring. It will take time to gain traction, buy-in, and an understanding of the new change; but with a little patience, that low will eventually start to climb to those high levels of achievement one which one hopes. Coaches would not implement a change if they did not have the hope or thoughts of it being successful, so why let ourselves get so low? Belief in what one is doing will go a long way towards success.

**A Personal Example**

I (Justin) speak from personal experience. As the new head coach of an already successful program, I was faced with the thoughts of what I should change, if there was anything that needed to be changed. After all, it was successful so why change something? I took this as not necessarily changing something for the sake of change itself, but how can I make something better than it already is? What can I do that will reach the student-athletes of today? What can I do to push our staff to the next level?

After tossing a few ideas back and forth in my mind, I made the uncomfortable decision to talk to my veteran coaching staff about the changes, some of which are components they put in place with their time in the program. I believe a key part in this conversation was that after I told them my ideas, I sought their honest feedback. I listened to their worries and concerns, thoughts about the changes, what it will do to the culture we had developed, and how it might impact them personally. This is massively important because in order for true and successful change to happen, we need to empower those we work with on this coaching journey. We need to ensure them that their hesitation about the changes will be eased with each other’s constant support. Engaging conversation

and a few uncomfortable moments occurred, but we all came to the conclusion that we could take our program a step further, and these might be some of the changes to do so.

### Implementing the Changes

Implementing the changes caused some uncomfortable moments as my fellow coaches were a little uncertain how the results would play out. I was with them in this nervousness because I did not want to look like a fool in front of my highly respected assistant coaches, many of whom were my coaches as I went through the program as an athlete. Some of these changes were our goal setting process, ideas for team bonding, and a different approach to our yearly pre-state speech/activity.

Our goal setting took the process from solely the hands of the athletes, to a 50/50 approach of coaches and athletes. Each coach was to sit down and visit with athletes about what they felt would be achievable for goals. This was uncomfortable at moments because some athletes were fairly unrealistic and it caused the coaches to have that conversation to create realistic goals. While these moments may not have always been picture-perfect, the bond it increased between athlete and coach was noticeable. It created the idea that coach and athlete would be working on it together because both were now vested in that goal. The athlete, no matter their skill level or experience, was noticed and cared for by the coach.

The pre-state activity was where I had the most discomfort of the changes. We usually did something that had the athletes out of their seats and challenged them. I am a huge fan of athletes diving into their thoughts and working on their mental game. The activity had them create their own story, how they saw it, not how everyone else saw it. They had to look at those who may have said negative things or insinuated they were not capable of something. Some of those people were sitting in that very room. I then had them write a positive statement to immediately counteract each negative they wrote. Culminating with having them write down a short phrase or one word that defined them.

Doing this with a team of high school boys was risky. Making them get personal was uncomfortable for them. Walking around and looking at what they were writing was uncomfortable for the coaches too, as it was the first time the coaches knew what some athletes were dealing with throughout the season. But that is where we also saw the beauty of making them uncomfortable. The positive statements and phrases they wrote were powerful and inspiring. Seeing their posture become straighter, their body language more prominent, and the smiles and resolve on their faces

was worth every second. Many of these athletes had these papers with them at the meet, going back and reading through them, reminding themselves of what they were capable of.

### The Result

Fast forward to the end of the season, the changes that were made were successful. The team scored more points than they ever had at the state track and field meet, leading to another championship, qualified more athletes than ever before, and had the largest overall team we have ever had.

It took patience, some tweaking, and yes, some uncomfortable moments, but we got there nonetheless. I was willing to risk this for the student-athletes we were privileged to coach. I was willing to risk this for our program because everyone involved deserves the best they can get. After all, we should be doing this for them, right? What a comfortable feeling it was to know we made someone's life better by the way we did things. Maybe being uncomfortable isn't so bad.

### Implications for Coaches and Athletes

Strand (2017) suggested a number of ways in which coaches need to develop open mindedness in order to foster coaching expertise: 1) open to self-reflections, 2) open to feedback from others, 3) open to seeing things from other perspectives, 4) open to questioning you, 5) open to leaving one's comfort zone, 6) open to fair evaluation of all athletes, 7) open to using social media, and 8) open to applying technology. Engaging in these open-minded practices may be uncomfortable at first, but with time, they become comfortable.

### References

- Carmichael, S. G. (2-15, Feb 25). How to coach, according to 5 great sports coaches. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2015/02/how-to-coach-according-to-5-great-sports-coaches>
- O'Sullivan, J. (2019). *Every moment matters: How the world's best coaches inspire their athletes and build championship teams*. Changing the Game Project.
- Strand, B., & Christofferson, J. (2017). Developing open-mindedness for coaching expertise. *Strategies*, 30(2), 17-21.

This paper was written as a portion of the course work required in the Master's Degree in Leadership in Physical Education and Sport; Department of Health, Nutrition, and Exercise Sciences; North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND.