

# TEN TOP TIPS

## Five Key Tips on Instruction

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Providing instructions to players is a massive part of a coach's role in training and matches. Instructions help them to learn new skills and correct problems in technique. Recent research has shown that a well thought-out instructional approach is vital to the development of technique, tactics and insight. So, when "how you say it" is just as important as "what you say" what guidelines can be given to coaches to ensure that they choose the most appropriate instructional techniques to educate their players?

### 1. Using Explicit Instruction to Correct Tactics and Technique Springly

A traditional approach to instruction is to use explicit instruction whereby the

player is told what to do in certain situations, what went wrong and exactly what should be done to fix the problem. This type of approach is very often used because problems in tactics or techniques can be communicated and corrected over a short space of time and players' quickly understand what they are required to do next time. It usefulness is clear in a match scenario, for example, when it is important to quickly get instructions onto the pitch to correct players mistakes. No doubt, most coaches can recall some instances when failure to do so resulted in a goal being conceded. When using explicit instruction precise communication is essential. To insure you get your message across, the 3-step SITUATION-PROBLEM-CORRECTION method can

be used. First, the situation you are referring to is described, e.g. "when we were defending that corner", then the problem is highlighted, "your position was not correct. You drifted into the centre of the goal" and finally, the correction is prescribed "make sure you stay on the back post next time". Similar principles have been applied to coach technical skills in an explicit manner. However, recent evidence suggests that there may be negative effects when over reliant on this instruction technique.

Over recent years sports scientists have been interested in the usefulness of explicit instructions under stressful situations. They have found that when players who have learnt a skill through explicit instructions are made

anxious they tend to go back to thinking about these explicit instructions when they perform the skill under stress. This results in the technique breaking down under pressure – a form of paralysis by analysis. Because of the negative consequences of explicit instruction in certain situations there has been a growing interest in other instructional approaches that may not breakdown under pressure. Guided discovery, analogy learning, and discovery learning may all be resistant to breaking down under pressure. Furthermore, these approaches have other positive benefits too.



## 2. Use Guided Discovery to Develop Clever Players

Guided discovery can be used by the coach to help players diagnose their own technical or tactical faults or to discover how to perform new techniques. Guided discovery works by allowing players to work out for themselves what they should have done to correct performance. The coach guides the player to the problem needing correction, makes them think about what they did wrong and

how they should this error should be corrected. The 3-step method for guided discovery is described as SITUATION-PROBLEM-QUESTION. Using the example above, the situation step remains the same but here the problem step highlights what needs correcting (in this case positioning) “your position was not correct” and does not tell the player what they need to do. The final step is to provide a question that guides the player’s attention to the problematic part of their game “where should your position have been?”. They are challenged to work out for themselves what they should have done. Although the example above is a relatively simple one, the approach can be quite powerful when it is used in combination with practice situations where players are given ample opportunity to work out for themselves what they should in certain situations. Consequences of good and bad decisions can be explored and learnt using this method. In addition, structuring questions in this way not only gets players to think for themselves but also allows the coach to find out the reason why a player made an incorrect decision and adapt their practice session accordingly.

## 3. Analogies Help to Convey Complex Techniques and Tactics

Using analogies to instruct players can be particularly

useful when learning a new or similar technique to one already learnt, especially when the technique is complex. The analogy used by the coach helps the player to understand something complex in terms that are familiar to them and, as a result, they quickly understand what they have to do. An example of an instruction using an analogy would be when a player is trying to learn how to kick the ball with more power. The coach might say, “When you kick the ball turn your body like the action of a whip”. This instruction conveys the complexity of teaching a player how to exploit the kinematic chain to generate extra power in terms of a simple analogy. The player can quickly relate the action of a whip to how they are supposed to kick the ball. To avoid confusion, make sure the link in the analogy is clear (i.e. *action of a whip*), after all, any other characteristics of a whip would not be useful.

Many coaches typically already use analogies to some degree. For example, crossover or overlapping runs are analogies of sorts. The challenge therefore, is for the coach to think up more and more analogies to help them communicate more complicated concepts. A relatively recent example of this creativity is the use of “ghosting in” to describe a well-timed blindsided run.

#### 4. Use Discovery Learning To Develop More Creative Players

Discovery learning can be used when the primary learning goal of the coach is to help players think for themselves and put their own style and flair into the game. Discovery learning works by allowing players to solve problems for themselves and to try alternative solutions. When the coach does not constrain a player to perform a skill in a certain way, the player will try several different, often novel approaches. An example of when a coach might use discovery learning is if, in practice, a winger was trying to learn how to beat a defender and the coach simply says, "Try and work out how to beat this defender". The player will try a number of alternative ways to do so, some being successful and some not so successful. They will also discover which situations certain skills work better in. When the player is next in a game situation and is unsuccessful in beating a player they will try alternative ways to do so until the correct one is found. Furthermore, players will find novel ways to perform skills, thus increasing the number of skills at their disposal.

This type of instruction is probably the most difficult to

use effectively however, the rewards of developing players who can think for themselves, correct their own faults and know when and where to use skills is arguably the most valuable in the long term. Because of the difficulties in successfully using discovery learning, sometimes hints from the coach have to be given to the player, particularly when they can not see a problem with their incorrect use of a technique in a certain situation. In such circumstances instructions will become more like guided discovery. Another alternative option would be to change the practice drill so that the player is constrained in some way to try new things out. This latter aim can be achieved via different conditioned or small-side games.



#### 5. In Practice - Give Players Time To Learn

The final tip for using a variety of instructions is to give players the chance to learn via the selected instructional approach. In practice, just because players do not immediately

perform the drill correctly it does not mean they never will. Coaches should give players the chance to succeed with the latter three types of instructions because they foster other vital skills (e.g. problem-solving). If coaches normally use explicit instructions they will probably want to revert back to explicit instruction because it has a more immediate effect on performance. By reverting back they risk losing the positive effects associated with guided discovery, analogy learning and discovery learning and should resist from doing so. Similarly, players who do not master a skill or technique quickly can potentially lose motivation therefore the coach should provide words of encouragement to maintain effort whilst learning via these instructions.

Table 1. Summary of points to consider when choosing an instructional approach

<b>Instructional Approach</b>	<b>Speed of learning</b>	<b>Other points to consider</b>	<b>Additional benefits to performance</b>	<b>Useful situations</b>
<i>Explicit</i>	Fast	Tendency to choke under pressure	--	Matchplay
<i>Guided discovery</i>	Medium/fast	Requires practice opportunity	Problem-solving	Practice
<i>Analogy</i>	Medium/fast	Make the links clear to the analogy	Performance under pressure	Practice
<i>Discovery</i>	Slow	Requires practice opportunity and motivation	Creativity	Practice

### Further Reading

Reilly, T.P. & Williams, A.M. (2003). *Science and Soccer* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). E & FN Spon, London, U.K.

Williams (Insight article)

Williams, A.M & Hodges, N.J. (2005). Practice, instruction and skill acquisition in soccer: Challenging tradition. *Journal of Sports Science*, 23, 637-650.

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