

DEVELOPING DECISION MAKERS: AN EMPOWERMENT APPROACH TO COACHING – A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THEORY, PRACTICE, AND TRANSFORMATION

Dr. P.G. Sunadamma

Associate Professor in Social Works
Roda Mistry College of Social Work and Research Centre

Abstract

*This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the empowerment approach to coaching, as articulated in the foundational text *Developing Decision Makers: An Empowerment Approach to Coaching* (Kidman, 2001). It positions this approach not merely as a collection of pedagogical techniques but as a coherent philosophical and ethical framework aimed at fundamentally transforming the traditional coach-athlete dynamic. The central thesis is that the primary purpose of coaching, beyond skill acquisition and competitive success, is to cultivate autonomous, critical-thinking athletes capable of effective decision-making both within and beyond the sporting arena. The article traces the historical evolution of coaching from authoritarian, coach-centred models to more humanistic and athlete-centred paradigms, culminating in the explicit formulation of empowerment as a coaching philosophy. It establishes the critical need for this paradigm shift by examining the limitations of directive coaching in complex performance environments, the psychological and developmental needs of modern athletes, and the ethical imperative for coaches to foster athlete agency. Through a methodology of conceptual synthesis and critical interpretation, the article deconstructs the empowerment framework, exploring its core principles—including athlete ownership, democratic participation, and holistic development—and its practical expression through pedagogical strategies such as questioning, reflection, and shared leadership. It rigorously examines the significant challenges to implementation, including deep-seated cultural resistance, coach identity conflicts, and the perceived performance-autonomy paradox. The article concludes that the empowerment approach represents a radical re-imagining of coaching as a facilitative and liberating practice. Future directions call for nuanced, context-sensitive research, the development of sophisticated coach education models, and a broader cultural shift within sporting institutions to value athlete voice and long-term development over short-term, coach-dependent outcomes.*

Keywords: *empowerment coaching, decision-making, athlete autonomy, coaching pedagogy, coach-athlete relationship, critical reflection, shared leadership, athlete-centred coaching, coaching philosophy.*

Introduction: The Case for Empowerment

The prevailing image of the sports coach, deeply embedded in popular culture and historical practice, is that of the omnipotent figure: the strategist on the sidelines, the disciplinarian on the training ground, the singular voice of authority whose knowledge and will determine the fate of the team. This archetype, while often celebrated, embodies a fundamental imbalance of power and agency. It positions the athlete as a largely passive recipient of instruction, a body to be trained and a mind to be commanded. In this model, decision-making—the cognitive core of performance—remains the guarded domain of the coach. The athlete is a decision-follower, not a decision-maker.

It is against this backdrop that Lynn Kidman's seminal work, *Developing Decision Makers: An Empowerment Approach to Coaching* (2001), emerged as a transformative and provocative intervention. Kidman proposed a radical alternative: a coaching philosophy where the explicit, central aim is to empower athletes to become intelligent, autonomous, and

responsible decision-makers. This is not presented as a softer, gentler form of coaching, but as a more sophisticated, effective, and ultimately more ethical approach to athlete development. Empowerment coaching represents a fundamental shift in the locus of control, the purpose of practice, and the very definition of coaching expertise.

This article undertakes a deep and critical examination of this empowerment approach. It moves beyond a simple summary of Kidman's text to situate it within broader theoretical currents, analyze its practical implications, and confront the formidable challenges it faces. The empowerment approach is framed not as a prescriptive method, but as a values-driven philosophy rooted in humanistic psychology, constructivist learning theory, and critical pedagogy. It redefines success not only by wins and losses, but by the growth of the athlete's capacity for judgment, problem-solving, and self-leadership.

The structure of this analysis will first chart the historical pathway that made such an approach conceivable, tracing the intellectual journey from command to collaboration. It will then articulate the pressing contemporary needs—psychological, performance-related, and social—that make this approach not just desirable but necessary. The core of the article will deconstruct the empowerment framework, detailing its philosophical underpinnings, core principles, and practical pedagogical tools. A rigorous examination of the significant barriers to implementation follows, acknowledging the very real tensions and resistances within sporting cultures. Finally, the article will propose essential directions for future research and practice, arguing that the full realization of empowerment coaching requires nothing less than a cultural transformation in how we understand sport, coaching, and athletic development itself.

Historical Background: The Long Road from Command to Empowerment

The empowerment approach did not emerge in a vacuum. It is the product of a century-long evolution in educational, psychological, and sporting thought, a gradual but decisive movement away from authoritarianism and toward a recognition of human agency.

1. The Military-Industrial Paradigm (Early to Mid-20th Century):

The foundations of modern coaching were laid in an era deeply influenced by Taylorism (scientific management) and military hierarchy. The coach was the "boss" or "general," the athlete the "worker" or "soldier." Knowledge flowed one way: from the expert coach to the compliant athlete. This model, exemplified by legendary but autocratic figures, prized obedience, discipline, and uniformity. Learning was seen as the mechanical imprinting of correct techniques through repetitive drill. Decision-making was irrelevant for athletes; their role was to execute pre-ordained plans with precision and without question. The psychological theories underpinning this era were largely behaviorist, focusing on stimulus-response conditioning and external reinforcement (punishment and reward).

2. The Humanistic Incubation (1960s-1980s):

A significant challenge to the mechanistic view arose from humanistic psychology, particularly the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Rogers' client-centered therapy emphasized unconditional positive regard, empathy, and the inherent tendency of individuals toward self-actualization. This introduced the revolutionary idea that the relationship between helper and client was therapeutic in itself. Translated to coaching, it suggested that a coach's acceptance and belief in an athlete could be as powerful as their technical instruction. Concurrently, in education, theorists like John Dewey advocated for experiential, democratic learning where students were active participants. These ideas slowly permeated coaching, fostering early concepts of "athlete-centered" environments, though often in a nascent and unsystematic form.

3. The Cognitive Revolution and the Rise of "Game Sense" (1980s-1990s):

The limitations of a purely technique-focused, coach-directed model became glaringly apparent in complex, dynamic team sports. The "Teaching Games for Understanding" (TGfU) model, developed by Bunker and Thorpe (1982), marked a pivotal turn. By starting with modified games and tactical problems rather than isolated techniques, TGfU inherently required athletes to perceive, understand, and make decisions. It positioned the coach as a designer of learning environments and a facilitator of understanding rather than a fountain of technical solutions. This period saw the coach's role begin to expand from pure instructor to include that of a cognitive guide.

4. Formalization of Athlete-Centred Coaching and the Empowerment Explicit (1990s-2000s):

The 1990s witnessed the consolidation of these ideas into explicit coaching philosophies. Lynn Kidman's work was at the forefront. Her PhD research and subsequent publications, culminating in *Developing Decision Makers* (2001), provided the first comprehensive, book-length argument for empowerment as the central aim of coaching. Kidman synthesized humanistic values, constructivist learning theory (which posits that learners actively construct their own understanding), and the tactical focus of TGfU into a coherent framework. She gave a name and a structured philosophy to what had been intuitive for some progressive coaches: the deliberate transfer of responsibility and ownership to the athlete. This period also saw the parallel development of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which provided empirical backbone to empowerment, demonstrating that supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness was crucial for intrinsic motivation, persistence, and well-being.

5. Integration with Ecological Dynamics and Critical Reflection (2000s-Present):

The empowerment approach has since been enriched by other theoretical streams. The Constraints-Led Approach (CLA), rooted in ecological dynamics, provides a powerful motor for empowerment. By manipulating task, environmental, and individual constraints, the coach designs a "learning landscape" in which athletes self-organize and discover effective solutions through exploration—a process fundamentally driven by their own perception and decision-making (Davids et al., 2008). Furthermore, the field has embraced the concept of the "reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1983), emphasizing that empowerment coaching requires

coaches to be critically reflective of their own practice, biases, and the power dynamics they inhabit.

Thus, Kidman's empowerment approach represents the maturation of a long-evolving critique of authoritarian coaching. It is the point at which athlete-centred ideas coalesced into a clear, principled, and transformative coaching philosophy with decision-making as its flagship outcome.



Need for the Study: The Imperatives for an Empowerment Approach

The advocacy for empowerment coaching is driven by a powerful convergence of practical, psychological, ethical, and societal imperatives. The deficits of the traditional model are no longer merely philosophical concerns; they are practical liabilities in the modern sporting world.

1. The Performance Imperative: Developing Athletes for Modern Sport.

Contemporary sport, at all levels, is characterized by increased speed, tactical complexity, and unpredictability. Pre-programmed plays and coach-directed robots are easily countered by adaptive opponents. Success hinges on the ability of athletes to read dynamic situations, solve novel problems in real-time, and make effective decisions under pressure. A coaching model that retains decision-making authority solely with the coach during training produces athletes who are cognitively impoverished and dependent during competition. Empowerment is, therefore, a performance necessity. It is the training ground for the cognitive agility required to win.

2. The Psychological Imperative: Fostering Intrinsic Motivation and Well-Being.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) offers robust evidence that human flourishing depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Authoritarian coaching explicitly thwarts autonomy and can undermine perceived competence through controlling feedback. This leads to athletes who are extrinsically motivated (playing for praise, fear of punishment), which is associated with higher anxiety, burnout, and dropout. Empowerment coaching, by supporting autonomy and fostering genuine competence through understanding, cultivates intrinsic motivation—the drive to participate for the inherent enjoyment and challenge. This leads to greater persistence, enhanced creativity, and better mental health.

3. The Developmental Imperative: Preparing Athletes for Life.

The vast majority of athletes will not become professionals. Therefore, a coaching philosophy that focuses solely on sporting performance is, for most, a pedagogical failure. Sport is a powerful microcosm of life, presenting opportunities to develop responsibility, leadership, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving. Empowerment coaching intentionally harnesses this potential. By giving athletes ownership, involving them in decision-making, and encouraging reflection, coaches help develop these transferable life skills. The empowered athlete learns to lead, to take responsibility for their actions, and to think critically—outcomes far more valuable in the long term than any trophy.

4. The Ethical Imperative: Respecting Athlete Agency and Safeguarding Welfare.

The authoritarian model concentrates power in the coach, creating conditions ripe for abuse—psychological, physical, and sometimes sexual. It diminishes athlete voice and can normalize a culture of fear and compliance. Empowerment coaching is fundamentally an ethical stance. It respects the athlete as a person with rights, intelligence, and agency. It promotes a relationship based on mutual respect and dialogue rather than fear and obedience. By distributing power and encouraging athlete voice, it acts as a safeguard against maltreatment and promotes a positive, healthy sporting environment.

5. The Sustainability Imperative: Creating Lifelong Engagement in Physical Activity.

Dropout rates in youth sport are alarmingly high, often linked to negative experiences with overbearing coaches and a lack of fun. Empowerment coaching, by fostering ownership and intrinsic motivation, makes sport more enjoyable and meaningful. Athletes who feel they have a stake in the process are more likely to remain engaged, not just in a single season but in a lifetime of physical activity. This has profound public health implications, positioning the empowerment coach as a key agent in combating sedentary lifestyles.

Objectives and Methodology

Objectives:

This conceptual analysis aims to:

1. Provide a comprehensive exegesis and critical interpretation of the empowerment approach to coaching as presented in *Developing Decision Makers* (Kidman, 2001), positioning it as a foundational text in coaching pedagogy.
2. Situate the empowerment approach within the broader historical and theoretical evolution of sports coaching, highlighting its roots in humanistic psychology, constructivism, and critical pedagogy.
3. Deconstruct the core philosophical principles of empowerment coaching, including athlete ownership, democratic participation, holistic development, and the coach as facilitator.
4. Articulate the practical pedagogical strategies that operationalize the empowerment philosophy, such as reflective questioning, shared goal-setting, constraints-led design, and the development of shared leadership structures within teams.

5. Analyze the proposed benefits of this approach for athletic performance, psychological well-being, personal development, and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.
6. Identify and critically examine the multifaceted challenges and barriers to implementing an empowerment approach, including cultural resistance, coach identity, assessment difficulties, and athlete socialization.
7. Evaluate the existing empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of empowerment coaching and identify significant gaps in the research literature.
8. Propose a detailed and forward-looking agenda for future research, coach education development, and systemic change necessary to realize the potential of empowerment coaching across diverse sporting contexts.

Methodology:

This article employs a critical conceptual and hermeneutic methodology. As a work of theoretical analysis and development, its primary mode of inquiry is the deep engagement with and extension of existing ideas rather than the generation of new empirical data.

1. **Hermeneutic Analysis of Primary Text:** The core of the methodology is a close, interpretive reading of Kidman's *Developing Decision Makers* (2001). This involves:

Structural Analysis: Mapping the book's argument, identifying its core propositions, and understanding the logical relationships between its chapters and concepts.

Conceptual Explication: Unpacking key terms (e.g., "empowerment," "decision-making," "ownership") as defined and used within the text, and tracing their conceptual lineage.

Critical Interpretation: Moving beyond description to interpret the text's deeper assumptions, its silences, and its potential contradictions. This includes reading "with and against the grain" of the text.

2. **Interdisciplinary Synthesis and Contextualization:** To build a robust understanding, the analysis synthesizes literature from multiple fields:

Coaching Pedagogy & Sport Science: Works on athlete-centred coaching, TGfU, Constraints-Led Approach, and reflective practice.

Educational & Learning Theory: Constructivism (Piaget, Vygotsky), experiential learning (Dewey, Kolb), and critical pedagogy (Freire).

Psychology: Humanistic psychology (Rogers, Maslow), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan), and motivational climate research (Ames, Dweck).

Sociology & Philosophy of Sport: Literature on power, ethics, and the socio-cultural context of coaching (Cassidy et al., 2016).

3. **Conceptual Mapping and Framework Development:** The insights from the hermeneutic and synthetic processes are used to construct a detailed conceptual map of the empowerment approach. This map illustrates:

The hierarchical relationship between core philosophy, guiding principles, and practical strategies.

The bidirectional influences between the empowerment approach and its theoretical foundations.

The connections and tensions between empowerment and other coaching paradigms.

4. Critical Application and Problematization: The framework is then applied to contemporary issues and contexts:

Application: How would an empowerment coach handle specific scenarios (e.g., team selection, a losing streak, a conflict between athletes)?

Problematization: Where does the framework struggle? How does it account for cultural differences, very young athletes, or highly institutionalized high-performance environments? This involves a skeptical engagement, identifying the limits and potential weaknesses of the approach.

5. Normative Argumentation: Ultimately, the methodology supports a normative argument—a case for why the empowerment approach should be adopted. This involves marshaling the evidence from the historical, theoretical, and practical analyses to persuade the reader of its superiority over traditional models on grounds of efficacy, ethics, and human development.

This methodology allows for a rich, nuanced, and intellectually rigorous treatment of the empowerment approach, moving from textual exposition to broad contextualization, and



The Empowerment Framework: Philosophy, Principles, and Practice

Core Philosophy: Coaching as the Facilitation of Autonomy

At its heart, the empowerment approach is built on a fundamental belief in the athlete's capacity for self-determination and growth. The coach's primary role is not to command but to create the conditions—physical, psychological, social—in which this capacity can be realized. The ultimate sign of coaching success is an athlete or team that can function intelligently and independently. This represents a shift from a deficit model (the coach fixes what's wrong) to a capacity-building model (the coach develops what's possible).

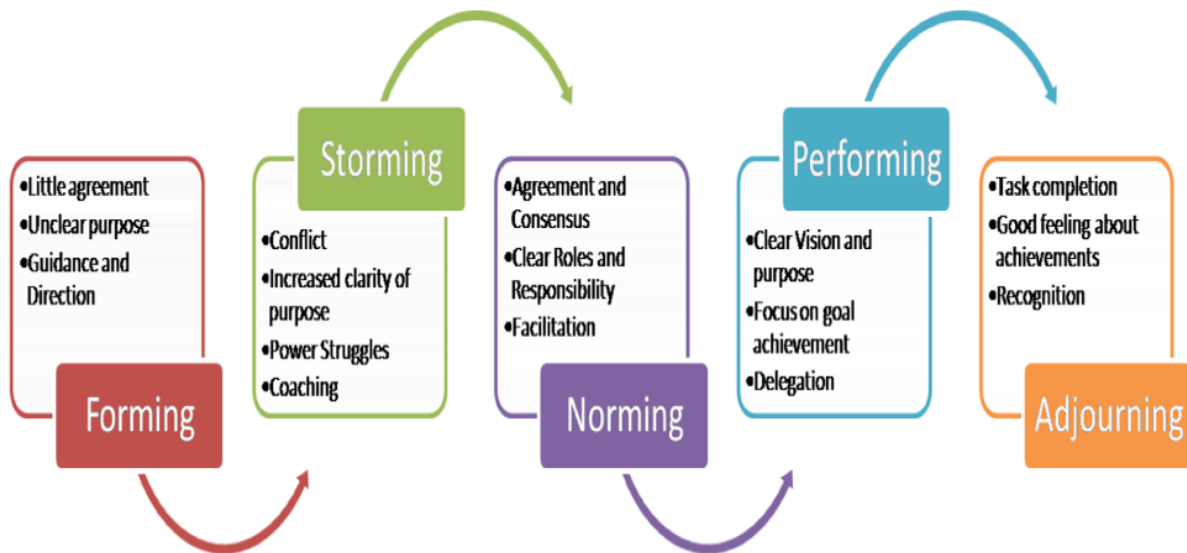
Guiding Principles:

1. **Athlete Ownership:** The most central principle. Athletes must feel a genuine sense of ownership over their learning, their performance, and their team. This means involving them in decisions about goals, training content, tactical plans, and team norms. Ownership fosters responsibility and commitment.
2. **Democratic Participation:** The coaching environment is a shared space where voices are heard. This involves structured opportunities for athletes to contribute ideas, provide feedback, and participate in problem-solving. Leadership is distributed; captains and senior players have real, not symbolic, roles.
3. **Holistic Development:** The athlete is coached as a whole person—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical. Developing decision-making is inherently holistic, as it integrates technical knowledge, tactical understanding, emotional control, and social awareness.
4. **The Coach as Facilitator and Co-Learner:** The coach's expertise is redirected. They become a designer of learning experiences, a asker of probing questions, a resource when needed, and a guide for reflection. The coach is also open to learning from the athletes, adopting a stance of humility and collaboration.
5. **Learning Through Meaningful Engagement:** Athletes learn to make decisions by being placed in situations that require them. Practice must be structured around authentic, game-like problems that stimulate perception, cognition, and choice.

Pedagogical Strategies (The "How"):

1. **The Art of Questioning:** This is the empowerment coach's primary tool. Instead of providing answers, the coach asks questions that stimulate thinking and analysis: "What options did you see in that situation?" "Why did you choose that pass?" "What might be the consequence of that defensive shape?" Questions move from convergent (one right answer) to divergent (multiple possibilities), fostering tactical creativity.
2. **Reflective Practice Routines:** Empowerment requires metacognition—thinking about one's thinking. Coaches build in structured reflection through post-session discussions, video review led by athletes, and individual learning journals. The focus is on understanding the process (the decision) as much as the outcome (success or failure).
3. **Shared Goal-Setting and Negotiation:** Goals are not dictated by the coach. Through dialogue, individual and team goals are co-created. This process ensures goals are meaningful to the athletes and builds shared investment. Training plans can be negotiated weekly, giving athletes choice within a framework.

4. **Constraints-Led Design of Practice:** Instead of prescribing "perfect" technique, the coach manipulates constraints (e.g., rules, field size, equipment) to channel athletes toward discovering effective solutions. In a small-sided soccer game where goals only count after a set number of passes, athletes must collaboratively problem-solve to create passing opportunities—they are empowered to find their own way within the task.
5. **Developing Shared Leadership:** Empowerment extends beyond individual decision-making to collective responsibility. Coaches can delegate roles: a player-led warm-up, a subgroup analyzing opponent footage, a player committee to handle team social events or minor disciplinary issues. This builds leadership capacity and a sense of collective ownership.
6. **Creating a "Mistake-Friendly" Culture:** If athletes fear punishment for wrong decisions, they will not take the cognitive risks necessary to learn. The empowerment coach explicitly frames mistakes as essential information for learning. The response to an error is not criticism but curiosity: "What did you learn from that?"



Team Development stages

Challenges and Critiques: The Rocky Road to Empowerment

Despite its compelling rationale, the widespread adoption of empowerment coaching faces profound and deeply embedded challenges.

1. **Cultural and Institutional Resistance: The Tyranny of "The Way Things Are Done."** Sporting cultures are often conservative, valuing tradition and visible, short-term results. The empowerment approach, with its focus on long-term development and shared control, can appear subversive. Parents may equate a questioning coach with a weak one. Administrators may pressure coaches to win now, using methods that guarantee immediate compliance. In elite sport, the multi-million dollar stakes intensify the perceived risk of granting autonomy. The hegemony of the win-at-all-costs ideology is the most significant external barrier.

2. Coach Identity and Philosophy: The Struggle Within.

For many coaches, their identity is intertwined with the command-and-control model. Being the authoritative expert is a source of status and self-worth. Adopting an empowerment philosophy requires a painful identity shift—from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side." It can feel like a loss of control, expertise, and even purpose. Without deep self-reflection and support, coaches may superficially adopt questioning techniques while subconsciously sabotaging the transfer of real ownership.

3. The Performance-Autonomy Paradox: The Perceived Trade-Off.

The most common critique is that empowerment is a luxury that compromises performance, especially in high-stakes moments. "In a championship final, you need soldiers who obey orders, not philosophers debating options." This critique sets up a false dichotomy. Empowerment proponents argue that the training environment must be autonomy-supportive to develop the robust decision-making capacity required in the high-pressure performance environment. The soldier who only knows how to obey is useless when the battle plan falls apart. The empowered athlete has the cognitive toolkit to adapt.

4. Athlete Socialization and Readiness: "Just Tell Me What to Do."

Athletes socialized in authoritarian systems may initially be confused or resistant to empowerment. They may interpret the coach's questions as a test or a sign of indecisiveness. They may feel anxious without clear, direct instructions. Developing a shared understanding and "buy-in" is a slow, educative process that requires the coach to patiently articulate the philosophy and its benefits.

5. Assessment and Accountability: The Measurement Problem.

How do you measure empowerment? Wins and losses are easy metrics, but improvements in collective decision-making, team cohesion, or individual leadership are qualitative and long-term. This makes it difficult for empowerment coaches to demonstrate their effectiveness to skeptical stakeholders (club boards, parents, sporting bodies) who demand quick, quantifiable results.

6. Contextual Nuance: Is Empowerment Always Appropriate?

Critics rightly ask about limits. Does this approach work with very young children who lack cognitive maturity? In highly technical, individual sports like gymnastics or weightlifting, is there a narrower band for tactical decision-making? How does it function in cultures with high power-distance, where hierarchical relationships are deeply ingrained? A rigid, universal application of empowerment is as flawed as a rigid application of command-style coaching. The skilled empowerment coach must be context-sensitive, adapting the degree and form of shared ownership to the athletes' developmental stage, the sport's demands, and the cultural setting.

Future Directions and Conclusion

The future of empowerment coaching depends on moving from principled advocacy to nuanced application, supported by rigorous research and systemic change in coach development.

Future Research Directions:

1. **Longitudinal, Ecologically-Valid Studies:** Research must move beyond laboratory-style experiments to track teams and athletes over seasons and years in real-world settings. Studies should use mixed methods to capture both performance outcomes (objective measures, win records) and developmental outcomes (interviews, surveys on autonomy, motivation, leadership).
2. **Studies of Coach Transformation:** How do coaches successfully make the philosophical shift to empowerment? Research should investigate effective coach development interventions, mentorship models, and the role of critical reflection communities in supporting this identity change.
3. **Cross-Cultural and Context-Specific Research:** Empirically exploring how the empowerment philosophy is interpreted, adapted, resisted, or transformed in different cultural contexts (e.g., East Asia, Scandinavia, Indigenous communities) and across different sports (invasion games vs. aesthetic sports vs. outdoor adventure sports).
4. **Investigating the "High-Performance Empowerment" Model:** In-depth case studies of elite coaches and teams who successfully integrate athlete autonomy with the demands of winning at the highest level. What does empowerment look like in the pressure cooker of professional sport?
5. **Tool Development and Assessment:** Creating and validating practical, usable tools for coaches to assess their own empowerment practices and to evaluate the development of their athletes' decision-making and leadership skills.

Implications for Practice and Systemic Change:

1. **Revolutionizing Coach Education:** Current competency-based certification programs are inadequate. Coach education must become philosophy-based, immersive, and experiential. It should involve sustained mentorship, video analysis of one's own coaching interactions, and critical engagement with sociology and ethics, not just sport science.
2. **Educating the Entire Sport Ecosystem:** Empowerment cannot succeed if coaches work in isolation. Parallel education is needed for parents, administrators, sports board members, and even the media to value process, long-term development, and athlete voice over short-term outcomes.
3. **Developing New Organizational Metrics and Rewards:** Sporting organizations must develop funding, evaluation, and reward systems that recognize and incentivize coaching processes that foster athlete development, retention, and positive psychosocial outcomes, not just championship titles.
4. **Creating Communities of Practice:** Empowerment coaches need support networks to share challenges, strategies, and reflections. Professional associations and online platforms should facilitate the growth of these critical communities.

Conclusion

Developing Decision Makers: An Empowerment Approach to Coaching issued a profound challenge to the sporting establishment. It argued that the true measure of a coach is not found in a trophy cabinet, but in the enhanced capacity of the athletes they guide—their ability to think, to choose, and to lead.

This article has argued that empowerment coaching is not an idealistic fantasy but a practical, evidence-based, and ethically superior pathway for the 21st century. It addresses the cognitive demands of modern sport, the psychological needs of athletes, and the broader educational purpose of sports participation. The challenges are formidable, rooted in deep cultural norms and personal identities. Yet, the imperative for change is clear.

The journey from a coaching culture of command to one of empowerment is a journey from treating athletes as objects to partnering with them as subjects. It is a shift from a pedagogy of transmission to a pedagogy of transformation. In embracing this approach, coaches do not diminish their importance; they elevate their role to that of an architect of human potential. The final, and most meaningful, decision an empowerment coach facilitates is the athlete's decision to become an author of their own sporting experience, and ultimately, their own life.

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