Development of a Swim Coaching Philosophy

"What the heck is a "philosophy" …. and what do I do with it once I have one?"

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Well, you already have one whether you know it or not. Maybe not a fully developed "coach" philosophy, but you have a set of guiding values, beliefs, and life experiences that you use to make and justify your actions and decisions in everyday life. This includes how you treat others, how you raise your kids, and even form your political beliefs. This is also shaped by your personality. Are you outgoing? Quiet and thoughtful? … or somewhere in between? (Tom Landry vs. Bill Parcells) Do you think with your head, or your heart? What did you learn from your parents, teachers, and coaches as you were growing up?

These all form the central basis for how you "react, think, teach, and choose" things in your everyday life. Your decisions or actions will all depend on your morals, your ethics, and the principles you are comfortable living with. (For example, do you believe a well-timed "kick in the butt" can be a good thing?)

In a nutshell, your coach philosophy is made up of your "life" philosophy applied to your swimming and coaching experience(s). It is making choices based on what you feel strongly about.

The term "**C**oaching **P**hilosophy" will be used frequently from now on so it will be shortened to "**CP**" for the rest of the article.

A common misconception is that a **CP** is made up of a collection of tips and tools you learned to train swimmers, such as stroke drills, workout sets, or motivational techniques you are fond of. This collection is often called a coach's "toolbox". A **CP** is not the contents of the toolbox but "why" the contents are chosen and used. Also "when" they are applied… being channeled through your unique personality. Do you see the difference?

If you coached with workouts grabbed from different coaches, added some stroke drills you saw online, and motivational techniques you read in another article, you have puzzle pieces that came from different boxes. There is no consistency, it won't come together, and your swimmers will be confused. Just as if you said or did things that were out of character for you. BUT … don't you have to try different things to help develop your CP?

That's the dilemma! You need to try many different things to flesh it out. The more you watch, research, sample, and experiment, the more it is established. You learn to find effective methods that are comfortable for YOU.

Your CP is constantly evolving as you try new things and evaluate their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, if you don't have a wealth of swimming or coaching experience, you will not have had a chance to build your toolbox and experiment with different methods of applying them. Coaches who have a sound philosophy will usually have coached for years, dealt with hundreds of people, made thousands of decisions, and made lots of mistakes. But each mistake was a learning experience and helped hone the way they made choices from then on.

Mentoring is better than learning from books or articles. Some of the best coaches today have been mentored by, or been assistants for, great coaches of the past such as George Haines or Don Gambril. They observed what their mentors did, but developed their **CP** by asking why they did it. The mentees adopted things they liked but also modified things they didn't to fit their own values and beliefs.

You must be true to yourself and understand the "why" of your choices because your swimmers, parents, and assistants will ask for clarification.

Following are some real-life dilemmas that a well-grounded **CP** might help you resolve. There will always be consequences but there is no right or wrong choice. Use every method to work around the problem if it does not conflict with your values or team goals.

- A mother wants her child to swim on the team for fitness and to lose weight. She insists that her child not swim in meets. What would you do?
- Your team has a policy that the coach decides what meets swimmers attend. You have planned for all swimmers to go to meet X. A parent and swimmer want to go to an out-of-state meet Z that weekend because grandma lives in that town. Dad says, ***"The other swim team in town would let us go. Maybe we should think about switching teams."*** (Meet X is only a mid-season meet but one of your relays would be scratched.)
- You have a National Top 16 level 12-year-old girl who fits perfectly in the Senior group (mostly 14-older) but misses her friends in the top Junior group. She handles it OK, but you sense it weighs on her. What should you do, if anything?
- An assistant coach comes to you and wants to take more control of their group. (Currently you write most of the workout and choose the stroke drills, etc.) ***"I feel like a puppet coach. It would motivate me, and I would feel more empowered. Plus, I would learn more, even from mistakes I might make."***
- What level and age of swimmers do you prefer coaching? What level do you have the most success with? They may not be the same. Why?

A coach with a well-developed philosophy will be happier and more comfortable in their coaching "skin". This makes everyone around you happier as your positive energy radiates.

If you don't have the benefit of working on-deck with an experienced coach, here are some things you can do. Join the ASCA Mentor program, review the 600+ articles or videos on the ASCA website, attend clinics, talk with coach, etc.

You are now gaining knowledge, but what do you do with it? Education is one thing. Experience is another. You can't fully develop as a coach until you make important choices in real life and witness the results, good or bad. If something you have learned or read "feels right to you", then try it! If it works, great! If it doesn't, you have learned something.

Start by looking for content about motivating swimmers and goal setting. Part of my **CP** is thinking of swimmers as race cars. I would rather steer the car than push it. Motivating each athlete in a personal way "builds their engine" and gives their car more HP.

Our CP helps guide us in making well-judged decisions we can feel comfortable and secure with. There is no right or wrong CP. Many different ones have been successful, but yours needs to fit your character, personality, and goals.

Imagine you are coaching a workout of high-level Senior swimmers and it is not going well. Most have been unfocused and not working to their potential for almost an hour, regardless of what you have tried. You use your **CP** to select the following option you saw a successful coach do once, even though it is out of character for you. You slam your clipboard on the deck and yell to your assistant, ***"You finish the workout with these nitwits! I'm not wasting any more time with them!"*** You then storm off the deck and leave the pool.

If you are not comfortable doing this, it would not fit with your **CP**, and explaining your actions to your parents (or BOD) would be difficult. But if you think you can weather the fallout from your ***"Wake 'em and shake 'em"*** method, it could be a good choice for getting your athletes back on track for the rest of the season. Would you have the guts to try it, to see if it's effective? What if you had prepared your assistant 5 minutes before you did it?

Good luck learning, experimenting, and evaluating!