



The importance of mentors

Mentoring systems are crucial to developing and maximising the attributes of all club football staff, whether they be coaches or players. Hawthorn's Alastair Clarkson explains in the *AFL Record's* Coaches on Coaching series.

It's a pretty insular existence as an AFL coach. Relatively few people have done the role and know the demands of the role, so it's of real value where you can link in with people who understand it.

And that's not always someone who has actually been a senior AFL coach, but maybe somebody who has had experience working with senior coaches; those type of people are invaluable in terms of providing you with guidance and advice about how you best go about it.

I've had a number of people who have given me assistance over the journey. Some of it is in direct day-to-day dealings, and it doesn't always necessarily have to be an older person. We've got a very strong coaching group at Hawthorn, and the everyday stuff we bounce off one another within our own football program.

We've got Chris Fagan at our footy club, whose specific role is to oversee the development of both our players and our football staff. Jason Dunstall has also got great experience in the game, and outside of that on a more irregular basis, I tap into the advice of David Parkin, Allan Jeans and John Kennedy. All of those guys are invaluable

because of their strong Hawthorn connection; I really value the views they have on the game and how it's evolved since their time coaching AFL/VFL footy.

I also still touch base with Tim Watson, and I've got a great relationship with Mark Williams from Port Adelaide. Even though the game is very tribal and it makes it difficult to talk day-to-day or week-to-week with Mark, he's helped my development enormously as a coach.

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I won't hesitate to sound out any one of those guys, especially Chris, my fellow coaches, and our footy manager Mark Evans.

Sometimes though, you just need an outside perspective, and I've got another really good friend from my South Australian days, Ken Russell, who has been a player and president at Central District (SANFL), as well as a successful

businessman. Ken's just got a great knowledge of the game and an understanding of the politics of footy and the landscape of the game itself. I speak to him regularly about the game and where we are going, and he gives me a great outside perspective.

It's of even more benefit that Ken is outside Victoria; he lives in Adelaide so he doesn't see the goings on from day to day, but makes casual observations from afar. Some of that is reasonably critical and some is praiseworthy, but whatever feedback I get, I know it's honest and forthright, and he tries to help me as much as he can.

But there are many levels of mentoring within a football club.

It is a people's game, and the development of relationships is absolutely crucial.

What has been an enormous focus over the past six to eight years with the drafting of young players is their specific development programs. Just as importantly at our club in more recent times, we have been focusing on development programs for all of our staff.

A great by-product of that has been the appointment and emergence of (former Hawthorn assistant) Damien Hardwick



as a senior coach at Richmond. It is a direct result of the work that Chris Fagan and our footy club have put into Damien and his development and, while we are disappointed to lose his services, we also recognise that he has achieved his aspiration of becoming a senior AFL coach.

The whole process has involved a lot of mentoring, both by his peers and through the relationships he has developed with the players, as well as external mentors who have given an outside perspective from time to time.



PART OF THE TEAM: Alastair Clarkson values the input of his coaching staff including ??????????

It shows you why mentoring is just so important at this level – you can maximise the attributes of all of the people filling roles in your organisation. We know that the game is not a product, it's actually a service that is provided, and all services rely predominantly on people skills to ensure they are successful.

By having a properly managed development program for each individual within the football program, whether they are a coach or a player, means you have the greatest chance of maximising your

output, developing people and satisfying them, as well as motivating them to achieve the levels they aspire to.

At Hawthorn, we have got various mentoring systems, and they are across a number of different levels. There is a strong relationship between the line coaches and the players, there is the relationship that develops between senior and junior players, and we have a mentoring system with ex-players and current players.

There are also mentoring systems put in place to provide

external business, career development-type mentoring to our players. So at different stages, while we don't want to dilute the influence of any one particular mentor, a certain player could have as many as three or four people they have built close and trustworthy relationships with to provide the best possible outcomes and influence.

When you are allocating a senior player mentor to a junior player, there are a number of factors to consider.

Some of it is to do with where they grew up; if two guys were

from a similar type of area, you might set them up. Or it might be to do with the position they play; you might see a real benefit with a young defender linking up with a guy who has been playing in defence for the past 10 years. You also take a look at the personality type; two guys might simply get along particularly well.

The important thing is, we don't select mentors on day one of the pre-season – we do so after a period of time, when you have watched the establishment of relationships >>



and seen how the different players have gelled together.

Some guys just click straight away, and you think that would be a great little relationship to build upon, but there's no one right or wrong way of doing it – you just try to find the best fit based on the demographics that you think suit both players.

It's hard to tell exactly how much difference effective mentoring can make, but what I do know is this is such a demanding and evolving game and there are challenges constantly thrown at you from every angle. To cope with all those challenges in isolation as an individual is pretty demanding and difficult, so any people from within and outside the club who can provide some sort of support and guidance are really important.

I just know that using people for advice and assistance along the way makes the whole journey more rewarding, but also provides critical support in those tough times that inevitably come in this very demanding game that we play.

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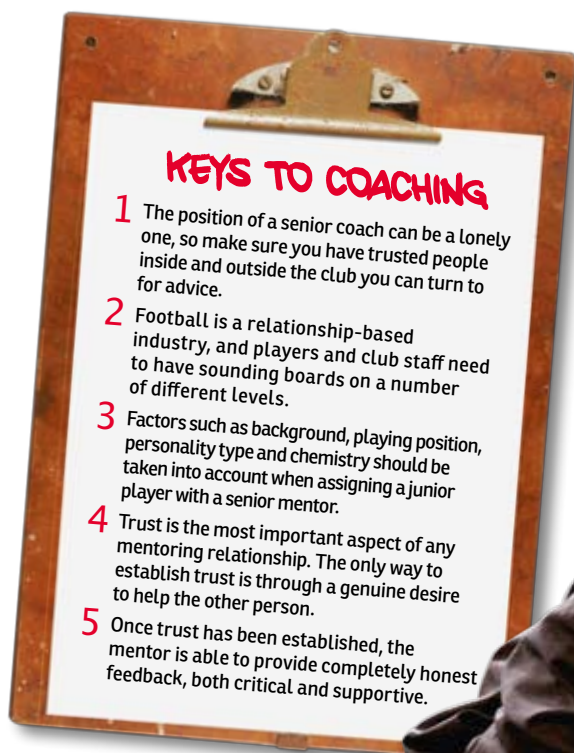
I've got a strong view that it's very difficult to try to do it all in isolation. We have got so many players at our club who benefit from either providing advice to other players, or seeking advice from others inside or outside the club.

For as long as I'm involved at Hawthorn, I'll continue to try to foster those types of relationships that assist with the players' development, both as footballers and as citizens.

While we've got that in place, we'll be a lot more comfortable with being able to live up to our motto of making sure that whoever comes into our football program leaves as a better person.

So much of any mentoring relationship is based on trust. To build up trust with the player, they need to feel like you are genuine in trying to provide them with assistance that will make them a better person.

As soon as you can develop



that level of trust, you can be as challenging and confronting as you like, you can be as supportive and as comforting as you like. When that genuine trust has been built, you have got a real chance of being able to maximise potential.

It even applies to mistakes you might make as a mentor. Everyone has got their weaknesses, and when you are a more senior figure providing advice to others, the whole idea of the relationship is that the junior member can be providing advice to the guy doing the mentoring.

The building of that relationship is a two-way street and, while initially it might start off as one person providing more advice to the other, if the relationship is built on trust, there will be advice going both ways, which is important.

One thing I will never do is tell my players who they should or shouldn't be listening to.

It doesn't come down to my advice on who is best to trust; that element of trust only comes after you have built a strong relationship.

I would say to any person, not just our players but any person in life, that you build trust only with people you have established a strong relationship with, who you have got a good rapport with.

And when you have built that, you know that the guidance they will provide is genuine, and you can't go too far wrong. ”

AS TOLD TO ANDREW WALLACE

