

The Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Form

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An evaluation inventory was developed to help sport psychology consultants assess and improve the field services they provide. Consultant characteristics included in the inventory were based on extensive interviews with Olympic athletes and coaches. The inventory was administered to 104 Canadian Olympic athletes who assessed 26 sport psychology consultants. Data from this survey were used to determine the validity and reliability of the Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF). Practical suggestions are provided for enhancing the quality of sport psychology consultation services through the use of the CEF.

Evaluating sport psychology consulting is important for a number of reasons. Ethically, it is important to understand what is going on in order to ensure maximum assistance to athletes and other clients and to protect them from possible harmful effects of psychological interventions. Scientifically, the knowledge base of our discipline could be enriched from empirically verified experiences reported by sport psychology consultants who are working with our most talented athletes. Educationally, it would be desirable to know what skills provide the necessary ingredients for change, in order to guide future preparation of applied sport psychologists. Professionally, it is important to learn how to improve effectiveness, and for professional associations it is important to know how to assess professional practice for reasons of accreditation and investigation of complaints. Finally, evaluation leading to improved effectiveness of sport psychologists should be of concern to the national and multinational bodies that have a clear vested interest in high level sport achievement, as well as for those who want to ensure that athletes have a positive re-entry to society upon retirement.

Characteristics and services provided by effective sport psychologists were described in two previous studies, based upon intensive interviews with Olympic athletes (Orlick & Partington, 1986, 1987) and Olympic coaches (Partington & Orlick, 1986, 1987). The present study determined the stability and generality of these findings by surveying a larger sample of Olympic athletes. Validity of

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the Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF), which we developed for the survey, was assessed as a step toward providing sport psychologists in the field with a useful tool for monitoring and improving their own services, and for clients such as sport administrators, coaches, and athletes to use as one of several indices for evaluating their particular consultant.

For the latter situation, in which the services of the sport psychology consultant are being evaluated by others, we advocate an interdependent evaluation model similar to that developed to assess programs in education, health care, industry, and correctional services (e.g., Patton, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1982). Briefly, in sport this model would involve athletes, coaches, the sport psychologist, and other central persons in an ongoing evaluation process. Every major contact with a team would include some discussions among key persons about how everyone involved can help improve the overall effectiveness of the mental training program. Through this team approach, everyone would learn from this evaluation process and gain from the improved product. We view evaluation primarily as a means of personal and professional development and believe that the CEF can help with this process.

Method

Subjects

A total of 104 Canadian Olympic athletes evaluated 26 sport psychology consultants who worked with them in preparation for the 1984 Olympic Games. The ratio of athlete raters per consultant ranged from 1:1 to 15:1. The athletes were selected from a larger survey sample (Partington & Orlick, 1986) based on their own judgment that their pre-Olympic contact with a sport psychologist had been frequent enough and recent enough to warrant completing an evaluation form. The resulting sample comprised 60% males. There were 23 Olympic sports represented, of which 17 were summer events. Some 70% of the sample had participated in individual sports, though many of these athletes actually competed in interdependent events such as pairs figure skating, rowing and canoeing crews, and cycling teams. The sample included athletes who had achieved a wide range of Olympic performance success, with 23% placing fifth or better in their field and 15% placing in the lowest quartile.

Materials

The Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Form was developed as part of a large-scale survey documentation of Canadian athletes' mental readiness for the 1984 Olympic Games (Partington & Orlick, 1986). It comprised questions about the amount and type of athlete-consultant contact, as well as items about consultant characteristics. The specific items were based on experience gained from extensive interviews about consultant effectiveness with 75 Olympic athletes and 17 national team coaches (Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987).

The CEF includes 10 items about consultant characteristics (e.g., "Seemed willing to provide an individualized mental training program based on my input and needs," "Fitted in with others connected with the team"). Each item is rated on an 11-point numerical scale, which ranges from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("yes, definitely"). Six additional items were included concerning the duration of several types of contact between the athlete and consultant (e.g., "How many contact

hours in a team setting, and in individual sessions’’). Finally, perceived consultant effectiveness was assessed by two rating criteria, consultant’s “effect on you,” and “effect on team.” The 11-point numerical scales for effectiveness ranged from “hindered/interfered,” –5, to “no effect,” 0, through to “helped a lot,” +5 (see Table 1).

Procedures

A survey package was first mailed in June 1985 to all Canadian athletes who had participated in the 1984 Olympic Games, excluding 75 who had already been interviewed by us earlier. The package contained the following items: (a) a letter of introduction from the Director General of Sport Canada, (b) a letter from the investigators that explained the contents of the package and assured confidentiality, (c) two questionnaires (one about the athlete’s mental readiness) and the CEF, and (d) a stamped self-addressed return envelope. All materials were provided in both English and French. Due to high athlete mobility and resulting address changes, a second mailing was undertaken in September 1985. This multi-stage procedure generated a 70% return rate.

Test-retest reliability of the set of 10 consultant characteristic items was determined by administering the CEF to a small group of athletes twice over a period of 2 days. Fifteen national team athletes attending a training camp in a Summer Olympic individual sport evaluated their consultant twice. They were told that the second test administration was necessary in order to learn more about how one’s mood might affect ratings of this type. Test-retest reliability of the consultant characteristics total scale score involved correlating the two sets of scores.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics in the form of means, standard deviations, and ranges were determined as a basis for illustrating the potential of each item for discriminating along each dimension. Internal consistency of the 10 consultant characteristic items was assessed by computing coefficient alpha and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between each of the 10 items and the total scale score, respectively. Validity of the consultant characteristics scale was assessed by computing the correlation between the total scale score and each criteria rating (i.e., “effect on you,” “effect on team”). Validity at the item level was assessed by stepwise multiple regressions between the 10 consultant characteristics items and each of the two criteria ratings. Utility of the consultant characteristics scale was demonstrated by comparing the relative contribution of consultant ratings for explaining consultant *effectiveness* against the contribution from items about the amount and type of contact made by the consultant. This comparison was made possible for each of the two criterion ratings (“effect on you,” “effect on team”) by regressing them against the two sets of independent variables (i.e., consultant characteristics, and amount/type of contact).

Results

The discriminating potential of each consultant item is demonstrated by the obtained standard deviations shown in Table 2, which ranged from 1.4 to 2.5, as well as by the rating ranges, most of which included the entire 0–10 scale.

Table 1
The Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Form

Name _____

Consultant's name _____

Sport _____

Please rate your sport psychology consultant on each of the following characteristics by using a number from 0 to 10 as seen on the scale below.

not
at all
0

yes,
definitely
10

1. Consultant Characteristics

Ratings

Had useful knowledge about mental training that seemed to apply directly to my sport.

Seemed willing to provide an individual mental training program based on my input and needs.

Seemed open, flexible, and ready to collaborate/cooperate with me.

Had a positive, constructive attitude.

Proved to be trustworthy.

Was easy for me to relate to (e.g., I felt comfortable and that he/she understood me).

Fitted in with others connected with the team.

Tried to help me draw upon my strengths (e.g., the things that already worked for me) in order to make my best performance more consistent.

Tried to help me overcome possible problems, or weaknesses, in order to make my best performance even better and more consistent.

Provided clear, practical, concrete strategies for me to try out in an attempt to solve problems, or improve the level and consistency of my performance.

2. How effective was this consultant?

hindered/
interfered

helped
a lot

effect on you: -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 +4 +5

effect on team: -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 +4 +5

3. Do you have any recommendations to improve the quality or effectiveness of the sport psychology consultation service being offered (write suggestions on back of this evaluation sheet).

Table 2**Mean, Standard Deviation, and Range of Consultant Characteristic Item Ratings, Total Scale Score, Temporal Variables, and Criterion Ratings**

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
1. Useful knowledge about mental training to apply directly to my sport	7.6	2.5	0:10
2. Individualized mental training program based on my input and needs	8.1	2.5	0:10
3. Open, flexible, and ready to collaborate with me	8.9	1.6	2:10
4. Positive, constructive attitude	9.1	1.4	3:10
5. Trustworthy	9.0	1.6	1:10
6. Easy to relate to (felt comfortable/understanding)	8.4	2.3	0:10
7. Fitted in with team	7.8	2.5	0:10
8. Helped me draw upon my strengths	8.0	2.3	0:10
9. Helped me overcome possible problems	7.9	2.2	0:10
10. Provided clear, practical, concrete strategies	7.6	2.4	0:10
<i>Total scale score</i>	82.4	17.7	9:100
<i>Temporal</i>			
Months of contact	14.7	16.3	1-48
Contact hours in group setting	11.7	10.6	0-40
Hours in individual sessions	8.3	24.1	0-30
Number of training camps consultant attended	1.9	1.6	0-7
Number of training sessions consultant attended	8.1	25.2	0-200
Competitions attended	2.6	6.5	0-50
<i>Criterion</i>			
Effect on you	+2.9	1.6	-1: +5
Effect on team	+2.5	2.0	-5: +5

The set of 10 consultant items is internally consistent, as shown by coefficient alpha, $r = .94$, and by item-to-total scale score correlation coefficients that ranged from $r = .76$ to $r = .88$ (all p 's < .001). The test-retest reliability coefficient, $r = .81$, obtained for this 10-item scale is acceptable, given the small sample used for this index.

Validity of the consultant characteristics scale can be inferred from significant correlation coefficients obtained between the total scale score and each of the two criterion ratings (effect on you, $r = .68$; effect on team, $r = .57$; p 's < .001). Validity is further demonstrated at the item level by the significant multiple correlation coefficients shown in Table 3. Some 60% of the variance in ratings of consultant effectiveness with the athlete ("effect on you") can be explained in terms of the athlete's perception that the consultant "provided concrete strategies" and was "easy to relate to," while nearly half of the variance in ratings of consultant effectiveness with the team ("effect on team") is explainable in terms of the athlete's perception that the consultant "fitted in."

Table 3
Regression of Criterion Ratings on Consultant Characteristics
and Temporal Variables

Criterion	Independent variables	Multiple R	Multiple R ²	F	P
Effect on you	Consultant characteristics				
	Step 1: provided concrete strategies	.76	.58	106.9	.001
	Step 2: easy to relate to	.78	.60	58.1	.001
	Temporal: amount/type of contact				
	Step 1: hours of individual sessions	.33	.11	5.5	.05
	Step 2: number of competitions attended	.45	.21	5.8	.01
Effect on team	Consultant characteristics				
	Step 1: fitted in	.69	.48	71.2	.001

The scale of consultant characteristics items was found to account for three times more of the variance in effectiveness ratings than was possible from knowledge about the amounts and types of consultant contacts. Table 3 shows a multiple $r = .78$ for the consultant characteristics items, compared to a multiple $r = .45$ for amount/type of contact.

Notwithstanding the above, it can also be inferred that the temporal questions identify important components of consultant effectiveness. Results in Table 3 show that 21% of the variance in athletes' ratings of consultant effectiveness is explained in terms of the number of hours of *individual sessions* experienced, and by the number of competitions the consultant attended.

Discussion

The CEF utilized in this study comprised 10 items that assess consultant characteristics and 6 temporal items that characterize the amount and type of contact provided by the consultant. The consultant characteristics items were found to be discriminating, reliable, valid, and useful for understanding athletes' judgments of consultant effectiveness. The temporal items (amount/type of contact) were also found to be useful for identifying important components of consultant effectiveness. Further examination of retest reliability is advised, however, due to the short interval necessitated by exigencies that operated in this study.

The model of the effective sport psychology consultant that emerges from athlete evaluations of their consultants using the CEF is as follows:

- Someone who provides clear, practical, concrete strategies for the athlete to try out in an attempt to either solve problems or improve the level and consistency of the athlete's performance;

- Someone who is easy for the athlete to relate to;
- Someone who fits in with everyone connected with the team;
- Someone who provides a minimum of several hours of individual sessions for each athlete during the year;
- Someone who attends at least two or three competitions (national and international) with this team (or athlete).

This prototype for an effective sport psychology consultant, based on data generated with the Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Form, parallels the detailed descriptions of effective consultants gathered in intensive interviews (Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987). This convergence across methods and between samples not only authenticates important consultant characteristics and practices but serves further to validate the CEF.

Using the CEF

The CEF can be a useful tool for assessing consultants and their services. It provides an accurate reading of how athletes perceive us as people and as consultants. It is also an effective vehicle for guiding personal and professional improvement.

Before administering the CEF, give yourself a fair chance to be effective by setting the stage for quality consulting in a number of ways. First, have the coach or contact person set a positive expectation about you and your service before you become involved. Second, be sure your first contact with the athlete or team is at an appropriate time (e.g., when athletes are relaxed, rested, and attentive, as opposed to being forced to face tired athletes between their other training or competitive demands. Third, provide individual sessions that focus on the needs of individual athletes. And fourth, attend some training sessions and competitions to gain both credibility and understanding of the demands these athletes face.

After having set the appropriate conditions for success, conduct your client-centered intervention program for a season. Then request that athletes complete the CEF. Examine the ratings with a view to identifying your strengths and weaknesses. Your results can be used as a springboard for identifying specific suggestions from athletes or coaches about how you can improve in a particular area. Communicating one-on-one with athletes and coaches is an effective way to learn precisely what they are seeking in terms of concrete strategies, as well as to learn which kinds of behaviors are likely to help you fit in and be accepted by the team.

Keep in mind that truly effective consultants received athlete ratings between 9 and 10 *on all items* in the CEF. Our judgment of an effective consultant is based both on CEF scores and our understanding of this term as projected by athletes during individual interviews (see Orlick & Partington, 1987). Some of the most effective consultants in our sample received 10's across the board. If a consultant's rating from an Olympic athlete is 8 or less on a particular item, it is a good indication that area should be targeted for improvement.

Once an area has been targeted for improvement, talk with athletes, coaches, and perhaps colleagues for suggestions about how to improve. Develop a specific strategy for improvement and implement it. Follow this with a subsequent athlete assessment using the CEF. In this way the CEF can serve as an ongoing device for monitoring and improvement.

If a serious attempt is made to improve within a particular domain, improvement will normally follow. However, athletes have told us that some people simply do not have the interpersonal skills to be effective consultants. They have a difficult time relating and fitting in. If, after several attempts at improvement, athletes continue to find it difficult to relate to a particular consultant, yet the consultant has something concrete to offer, he or she might consider offering service in alternative ways. For example, he/she may write materials or work through a coach and thereby still provide a service, but avoid strained, uncomfortable, or ineffective person-to-person contact with athletes.

If employers (e.g., sports associations or team management) choose to use the CEF to assess consultants, they should first be certain the consultant has had the opportunity to introduce a complete mental training program and that he or she has done so in a supportive atmosphere (e.g., appropriate administrative support, coaching support, and reasonable timing for intervention). If this condition is not met, assessment of the consultant's characteristics, services, and effectiveness will likely be invalid.

A cautionary note: Although we are confident that this inventory effectively identifies important consultant characteristics for persons working with national team athletes, we are not yet certain of its appropriateness for those working with athletes at lower performance levels. Nor are we able to suggest what numerical ratings are associated with effective consultants for younger athletes.

For those of you interested in administering a shortened form of the Sport Psychology Consultant Evaluation Inventory, the multiple regressions suggest that the following three items would provide the most significant information: Item 10 (provided clear, practical, concrete strategies), Item 6 (easy to relate to), Item 7 (fitted in with team).

Coaches who are committed to developing their own mental coaching skills might also find the CEF to be a useful tool in guiding and evaluating their progress. It will provide them with important feedback on their interpersonal skills and mental training skills, all of which are critical ingredients for becoming an effective mental coach.

We recommend that "mental coaches," sport psychology consultants, and other professionals in the helping fields (e.g., clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors) follow monitoring procedures similar to the one proposed here. By subjecting ourselves to critical client evaluation, we open ourselves to growth and to fulfilling the real needs of our clients. Taking this step is a clear indication that we are committed to pursuing personal excellence in our consultation field in the same way that athletes are committed to pursuing excellence in their field of sport.

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