Working in Danish ice hockey
Psychological services derived from the context
Larsen, Carsten H.

Published in:
Journal of Sport Psychology in Action

DOI:
10.1080/21520704.2017.1383957

Publication date:
2018

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark.
Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving.
If no other license is stated, these terms apply:
• You may download this work for personal use only.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim.
Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk

Download date: 29. Sep. 2023
Working in Danish ice hockey: Psychological services derived from the context

Larsen, C. H.
Institute of Sport Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark

Corresponding author: Carsten Hvid Larsen, Institute of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense, Denmark. Tel: 0045 3131 0111, Fax: 0045 6550 3480, E-mail: chlarsen@health.sdu.dk
Abstract

This article describes my experiences of working in Danish national junior ice hockey. I will describe the professional philosophy underpinning my services in ice hockey. I will outline the psychological services provided for the Danish junior national team that are derived from the context. In terms of identifying psychological areas of development, I used information from multiple sources, including the coaches, staff, the players and also observations of practice and competition. Three different but connected areas were targeted with the junior national team. Firstly, creating an understanding and acceptance of roles within the team. Secondly, developing effective team communication under pressure. Thirdly, learning the ability to register thoughts, release thoughts and refocus under pressure. I have then made conclusions by reflecting upon the effectiveness of services for the junior national team and the lessons learned from them.

Keywords: applied sport psychology, elite sport, team sport, mindfulness, acceptance and commitment therapy
Working in Danish ice hockey: Psychological services derived from the context

Ice hockey is a small sport in Denmark. In total there are 17 clubs and 25 ice rinks around the Danish countryside, with a total of 4,066 active players. Internationally, the senior national team has been part of the best World Cup group since 2003. The senior national team achieved its best ever result - reaching the quarterfinals - in both 2010 and 2016. Currently at senior national level, the national coach can pick from about nine active Danish players in the world's best ice hockey league, the NHL. Measured in relation to population, this is the highest in the world (NHL-Danmark, 2017). The majority of junior national players are playing in the Danish national league. However, in recent years, several young players have made the transition to North American junior ice hockey and an increasing number are playing in Swedish junior ice hockey. In 2014, the Danish Ice Hockey Association targeted sport psychology as a new area that would contribute to player development and performance enhancement in the national teams.

This article describes the sport psychology services for the Danish junior national ice hockey team (under 20) with the aim of developing: firstly, an understanding and acceptance of roles at the team, secondly, effective team communication under pressure, and thirdly, the ability to register thoughts, release thoughts and refocus under pressure.

I am part of Team Denmark (Danish Institute for Elite Sport) that manages applied sport psychology in Denmark. My educational background comprises 10 years’ experience as a practitioner and a PhD in sport psychology. I have worked in several different team sports (soccer, handball and ice hockey) at national and international levels. I have also worked in individual sports at the national level (e.g. tennis, swimming, badminton, taekwondo, disability sports, cycling, athletics and cricket), and I have prepared athletes for entering world championships and the Olympics Games.

Professional philosophy underpinning the services

In 2008, Team Denmark established a sport psychology team with the aim of enhancing the quality and consistency of applied sport psychology services. It is suggested that optimal sport
Consulting in high performance teams psychological interventions require a coherent service delivery model (Pozwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). As such, the professional philosophy of a practitioner is a driving force of the consulting process and makes his or her services transparent for coaches and players (Corlett, 1996). Along these lines, the team began their work by creating a professional philosophy. The organization of elite sport in Denmark is characterized by federations receiving funding from Team Denmark for elite activities, as well as the opportunity to integrate experts to work with their world-class athletes. The professional philosophy of Team Denmark is founded on coherence between five levels (Henriksen, Hansen, & Diment, 2011). The first level defines the vision for our team. The second level presents the basic beliefs and values of the team. Beliefs and values represent the consultant’s fundamental beliefs and values about the athletes and coaches, and the nature of elite sport. The third level describes the theoretical paradigm and psychological theories upon which our interventions are based. These theories are connected to the overall objective of ensuring that Danish elite athletes obtain the right mental skills to perform at the highest international level, while experiencing meaning and value in life as elite athletes. The fourth level presents Team Denmark’s sports psychological model, which describes the content and focus of the team’s work. In terms of content and focus, Team Denmark’s sport psychology model highlights awareness of personal values and motives alongside focus and emotional coping as key focus areas of the sport. Finally, services offered include individual and team sessions, as well as championship support (Henriksen, Hansen, Diment, & Larsen, 2016). A good intervention requires consistency between all these five levels.

Specifically, I was guided by three different theories of intervention that underpinned the "Why?", "What?" and "How?" of delivering services to the national team. Firstly, I was guided by a holistic ecological approach and, amongst other things, being sensitive to and analyzing the environment and organizational culture of the specific team (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013). Secondly, I was guided by social exchange theory (Sullivan & Callow, 2005), which conceptualizes the exchange of activity between at least two persons (e.g. communication).
Consulting in high performance teams

Third, I was guided by third-wave cognitive therapy methods, such as mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., Gardner & Moore, 2007) and acceptance and commitment therapy-based interventions (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson, 2004).

**Context of Danish ice hockey and the national teams**

The junior national team assembles about five times a year for physiological testing, training camps, Four Nations cups (in Europe) and world championships. All coaches are employed part-time and have other jobs when they are not working with the team. For a long time, the junior teams had the same head coaches, assistant coaches and experts connected to the teams, such as nutritionists, a physiologist, physical trainers and a sport psychologist.

Being a small nation has some benefits. Because of the limited number of players in Denmark, the ones that reach the national teams are very familiar with each other. Most of the national junior players know each other from the Danish junior leagues and from the under-16 to under-18 national teams. Frequently, the players at both junior and senior level recount to the media and others that the initial assembly when participating on the national teams is like going home to meet up with your family and friends.

**Players’ major challenges derived from the context**

Because of being a small sport and a small country at the national level, performing against international opponents involves several major challenges. One of the challenges of being a small nation is the level of players compared to other nations. The Danish players are not used to competing at the high level that is required at the world championships. A psychological challenge is that at championships, the Danish nationals are most often playing against opponents that play at a higher level on a daily basis, and are heavier, faster and stronger. Therefore, each player has a shorter timeframe than usual to make the correct decisions (due to playing in lower leagues than the Canadian junior league or equivalent level). This applies to communicating the right things (helping each other), while at the same time being aware of the game, staying focused, moving to the right position, being in control of the puck when on the offensive or reading the position of linemates and
Consulting in high performance teams

opponents, and foreseeing the game in the defensive zone. When the player experiences a faster
game than he is used to, he makes mistakes. This puts the player under pressure and challenges his
ability to focus on what he can influence during the game. Despite being under pressure or making
mistakes, the player should be able to stay focused, while not being hijacked by thoughts,
frustrations or other distractions. An organizational challenge of the junior national team is the very
short time that the players spend with each other. This means that there is a limited amount of time
to get to know each other’s playing styles, strengths, weaknesses and roles in the team. The players
are fulfilling roles on the junior national team that are often different from their roles at their clubs.
Another challenge is related to the practitioner providing sport psychology services for the junior
national team. Being part of the staff for the national team means having about 40 days in which to
provide services. In that time, the practitioner needs to provide his or her services to about 25
players and seven members of the coaching staff.

Psychological services for the junior national team

Fifer et al. (2008) outlined the need for practitioners to be aware of the context (e.g. assessing
the subculture or the sporting situation), to learn the politics of the organization, to determine the
team and staff dynamics, to understand the amount of support the practitioner will have, to
determine who the leaders and decision makers are, and finally, to identify the gatekeepers. Along
those lines, I would argue that there are three basic competencies that practitioners need to have
when joining a high performance team. Firstly, the practitioner needs to be aware of politics and
forge alliances within the team. Gustavsson, Holmberg and Hassmén (2008) described that
practitioners who desire to work at the highest levels of sport need to learn to work as part of a high
performance team. If practitioners are not able to make their value known, then it is possible that
the role of the practitioner will be ignored. Therefore, to work successfully within a high
performance team, there is a need to possess an understanding of politics that is focused both on the
role and the staff (McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016). If the practitioner understands micropolitics, this
could avoid conflicts with staff members and coaches. Practitioners who are aware of how they
Consulting in high performance teams might develop a reputation are able to forge effective alliances (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004) that aid not only their goals, but also the goals of the entire team. Secondly, it is important when you join a team to build trust and relationships with staff and players. Besides having a coherent philosophy, practitioners have long recognized the importance of the interpersonal process in providing sport psychology services (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011). A fundamental part of applied sport psychology is paying close attention to the relationships practitioners build with the athletes and coaches they work with and constantly build upon this relationship. In this case, I found that components of establishing relationships were integrity, genuineness, nonjudgmental caring, empathy, and attention to the experiences of coaches and players. Thirdly, it takes time to build a culture and create a shared vision of sport psychology with the head coach. Joining the staff of the junior national team in many ways meant not only a change in culture (i.e., doing what’s already being done, but better), but also a change of culture (i.e., introducing new principles and practices) (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). As an example, in the beginning of my commitment with the junior national team, I devoted a lot of time to “lobbying” and making sure that coaches and the staff knew about my role and range of services.

My commitment to the Danish national junior team started in 2013. In the first couple of months of my services, I tried to gain an understanding and assess relationships, communication and key persons in the team. Being part of the junior national team involved travelling with the teams, being part of training camps, the Four Nations cup in Europe, preparations for the world championship and then the world championship itself. During that time, I performed individual interviews and consulting sessions with players and staff and then group sessions later on. Individual and group interviews were conducted that aimed at getting insight into the individual players’ and also the team’s perception of strengths, weaknesses and challenges in the context of high-pressure games, in periods when performing well and in periods of adversity. Additionally, I made observations of the team during the Four Nations cup in Europe, where the players...
Consulting in high performance teams

experienced pressure and adversity during games. I observed team dynamics, communication, and how the players coped with pressure and adversity.

After the initial assessment, I commenced the services for the under-20 team. The services consisted of team talks (the whole team), group sessions with each line (5 athletes at a time), individual consultations (one-on-one) and exchanging ideas with the head coach and occasionally the other coaches (e.g. video coach, goalkeeper coach, defensive coach). Individual consultations made it possible for each player to have an in-depth conversation about personal issues both on and off the ice. The individual consultations were about 30-60 minutes long and in the beginning targeted interested players and took place at the gym, at hotels, before practice, after practice, before, during and after competitions and on the bus. In order to establish relationships and gain trust from the players and staff, I explained what the players could expect from the sessions. I showed respect, maintained open and constructive communication, and ensured confidentiality in my sessions with the players. As the players became more accustomed to my role in the team, the number of players taking part in individual consultations increased. The increase in familiarity seemed to be related to my time in the teams, as well as to the consistency in my communication and behavior towards the players and coaches. Group sessions with each line aimed at creating mutual sharing of experiences (Windsor, Barker, & McCarthy, 2011) and teaching the players to reflect (Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, de Roos, & Visscher, 2012) and analyze choices and behavior.

Alongside player development, sparring and a consistent, trusting relationship with the head coach were crucial for successful sport psychology services. The head coach was a “gatekeeper” for my services and my ability to be effective with the team and gain insight into the culture at the team. First of all, in order to be effective in each of these types of services, I needed to have a trusting relationship with the head coach (with the rest of the staff then following). The head coach also needed to rely on and trust that I was able to make a difference, and he had to genuinely believe that psychological training in ice hockey was important. If the head coach did not support my role in the team, I would not be able to make sustainable changes in the team. Once I described
my services, made the services transparent, worked on the relationships in the team and was able to show that my services were related to results, the head coach started supporting my services and trusted my expertise and experience in sport psychology in ice hockey. The support of the head coach made me able to create coordinated services (e.g., within the tactical and psychological area), in which issues from group sessions were discussed with the head coach (with the permission of the players) and he was able to use the information to further optimize the tactics, roles, relationships or communication before or during games.

In terms of identifying psychosocial areas of development, I used information from multiple sources, including the coaches, staff, the players and observations of practice and competition. This broad approach made it more likely that important issues were identified. Moreover, an ongoing evaluation helped me to identify areas where development was needed. Three different but connected psychosocial areas were targeted in the junior national team: (1) understanding and accepting roles; (2) effective communication under pressure; (3) the ability to register, release and refocus under pressure.

**Understanding and accepting roles**

The first psychosocial area related to team functioning is the individual player’s ability to understand and accept new roles in the national team. As the players are at clubs all around the world, there was a need to clarify and accept the appointed roles in the teams. The literature on group dynamics and team functioning highlights the importance of role clarity, acceptance, satisfaction, efficacy and performance as related to team effectiveness (Carron, Hausenblas, & Eys, 2005). The players were all used to different roles at the clubs, but in a very short space of time had to accept that their often more dominant role at the club was not the same in the national team. Each player needed to be aware of that and accept the tasks that were related to his position in that specific line in the national team. To cope with role-challenges, I devoted time with the head coach to clarify new roles, expectations and tasks, in order for the team to be functional and stick to the task and agreements when in adversity. Role acceptance has been thought of as the degree to which
the player is satisfied with a role. However, it is possible for a player to accept role responsibilities, but not be satisfied with them (Carron et al., 2005). Therefore, in every training camp and at the world championships, we (head coach and the practitioner) sat down with players to clarify their expectations in order for them to accept and perform in their roles. The talks could be with two forwards, two defenders, or also the three leaders in the team (one captain and two assistants). With the pairs of players, each of them would recount their thoughts about their role to the other player, the head coach and me. We would asked open-ended questions about their own perception of the role, and tried to clarify problems in this specific role if it was in contrast to their role at club level. Additionally, we outlined if we had certain expectations about role performance. We spent time to clarify the role of a leader, especially with the leaders of the team; during a game, a leader needed to be aware of not only his own, but also his teammates’ reactions during a game. Despite being under pressure, the leader needed to be able to analyze the dynamics of the team and how the team responded to critical situations or adversity. And he needed to be able to respond and communicate constructively in intermissions in the game, either to shorten or to end long periods of adversity. Moreover, he should be able to consider who needed feedback or encouragement at certain times.

**Effective communication under pressure**

The second psychosocial area was targeting the role of effective communication during performance. Based on social exchange theory (Sullivan & Callow, 2005), communication is the exchange of resources between two or more people. In this area, I aimed to teach the players that effective communication guides each player or the team towards their goal, while ineffective communication removes something of value from each player and pulls the team away from its goal. In group sessions with the lines, we talked about what effective communication would provide: structure, organization, self-confidence, security, focus, direction, support and so on. On the other hand, we talked about there being barriers to effective communication when players did not think that it was important to communicate, lacked the confidence to communicate (both on and off the rink), did not know what to say, did not think it was their place to communicate (due to the
Consulting in high performance teams

hierarchy in the team), or were “hijacked” by negative thoughts or feelings and therefore lacked the energy to give something back to their teammates. As an example, in the group sessions I wanted to create awareness about positive and constructive communication that aimed to accumulate valued resources (e.g., information) in the lines and in the team (Sullivan & Callow, 2005). Providing more positive and constructive communication with his linemates and teammates consisted of five steps. Firstly, the players needed to be aware of how communication could affect performance, how they individually communicated and how their teammates experienced the communication. Secondly, we discussed what characterizes constructive communication under pressure. In this step, each line constructed different focal points that the players were able to address on the ice during training and during games. Thirdly, these focal points were implemented in training sessions. Fourthly, the focal points were evaluated and adjusted with the players and the head coach. Fifthly, the focal points regarding constructive communication were implemented as part of the head coach’s tactical talk before games and during intermissions in the game.

The ability to register, release and refocus under pressure

The third psychosocial area was targeting task-relevant focus (self-focused attention) and its relationship to performance. A recent addition to the consulting philosophy (Henriksen, Diment, & Hansen, 2011) is an increased focus on third-wave cognitive therapy methods, such as mindfulness and Acceptance Commitment Training (ACT). In cognitive therapy, the aim of interventions is to change dysfunctional patterns in the interactions of thoughts, emotions and behavior by teaching athletes to control their internal states, for example by engaging in positive thinking and regulating arousal (e.g. Beck, 1995). In contrast to CBT, third wave approaches assert that thought suppression and control techniques can trigger a metacognitive scanning process (Purdon, 1999). Excessive cognitive activity and task-irrelevant focus disrupts performance and the aim of interventions is to increase athletes’ willingness to accept negative thoughts and emotions in pursuit of valued ends (Henriksen, 2015). Success on the ice was related to the degree to which a player was able to accept the presence of negative thoughts (e.g., due to a mistake or a bad call), physiological arousal (e.g.,
Consulting in high performance teams

taking a hit from an opponent), or emotions such as anxiety or anger, and remain committed to the
task in terms of his attention and behavior, while also behaving in accordance with his values.

Values described how the player wanted to behave or “what kind of athlete he wanted to be” (e.g.,
“I want to be a constructive leader or defenseman, to work hard and to motivate the team during
adversity”). Being successful in the world championship was therefore related to the degree in
which the player could accept the presence of negative thoughts, physiological arousal, emotions
such as anxiety or anger, and still remain engaged in the task, while behaving in accordance with
his values (Henriksen, Diment, Hansen, & Larsen, 2016). Under pressure, the player was constantly
at risk of being “hijacked” by dysfunctional thoughts and emotions (Hayes et al., 2004), often
resulting in a loss of focus that might have consequences for the result of the game. It was my task
to help players with three key aspects: (a) teaching players to open up, accept, and be willing to
experience the full range of thoughts and emotions during high pressure games; (b) teaching players
to mindfully engage in the present moment, including task-focused attention; and (c) helping
players to behave in accordance with personal values that described how they would like to be as an
athlete and helping them engage in actions that display these values. Through individual consulting
and guided by ACT and mindfulness, I worked with the players to train their ability to be aware and
register when this happened, then direct focus back to the task or values. This process involved
three skills – 3R’s (inspired by Ravizza & Osborne, 1991):

1. Register: Be aware of the thoughts, feelings and bodily reactions that direct the player away
from the task at hand or from the type of person he wants to be.

2. Release: To accept uncomfortable or distracting elements instead of trying to fight against
them.

3. Refocus: To direct your attention towards the task at hand or reestablish contact with values.

In individual and group sessions, I focused on teaching the players to register and release
dysfunctional thoughts that are not within their control, such as: decisions of the judge, the result,
actions of parents, agents, scouts, spectators, opponents trying to “psych”, or a bad call or decisions
of the past. To be able to release thoughts, I introduced breathing exercises and other mindfulness methods related to noticing thoughts and getting present in the moment. Following these steps, each of the players attempted to refocus on simple focal points within their control, such as: tasks for their specific position (defense, forward, goalie), tactics (according to opponent), courage (willingness to make the hard decisions), supporting and helping each other and communication (what you say and how you support each other during adversity). As an example, a defensive player that finishes his shift and sits down on the bench should be able to register his thoughts or feelings. He might be frustrated about a mistake, bad decision or his involvement in a goal for the opposing team. When he hits the bench, it was his task to register thoughts such as: “Now I am thinking about that mistake, I realize that these thoughts are related to that mistake, I am unable to change that mistake now, but I am able to focus on what I want to do next”. He releases the thoughts by shifting his attention to his breathing, staying in the present moment, right there on that bench focusing on his breathing and not in the past. After those steps, he needs to refocus on his focal points or values - values and focal points such as: “I work hard and love challenges and now I need to focus on what I am about to do in the next shift. I need to focus on tactical and psychological tasks and my role as a defenseman”.

**Effectiveness of services for the junior national team and lessons learned**

In this article, I outlined the sport psychology services for the Danish junior national ice hockey team with the aim of developing three psychological areas: firstly, an understanding and acceptance of roles in the team; secondly, effective team communication under pressure and thirdly, the ability to register thoughts, release thoughts and refocus under pressure.

In terms of assessment, I used a qualitative assessment from multiple sources, including the coaches, staff, the players and observations of practice and competition. This broad approach made it more likely that important issues were targeted, and moreover my commitment to the team made a longer and more in-depth assessment phase possible. An ongoing evaluation is an important part of any sport psychology intervention, in both youth and senior sport, although the effects of
Consulting in high performance teams

1. Sport psychology interventions are hard to measure. Analyzing my commitment to the team, we can distinguish between the sources used for the evaluations (how to evaluate) and the actual focus points of the evaluation (what to evaluate). Therefore, the evaluation was ongoing in order to improve the process and so that it was not only an end-point effect measurement. In terms of the focus points of the evaluation, I looked for several indicators of the success of their intervention, including engagement in sessions, coach satisfaction, and a higher degree of self-awareness expressed in how the players’ communicate. However, the most important indicator of success was the players’ use of acquired psychological skills in training and competitions. Looking back at the years of developing psychosocial skills in the junior national team, the staff have been able to see progress over those years. However, the junior national team assembles about 40 days a year. This is a very short amount of time to make individual psychological changes. Despite the fact that the players grasp sport psychology more easily, the amount of time available that I need in order to teach each player to accept negative thoughts, anxiety or anger, and remain committed to the task in terms of his attention and behavior, is limited (Hayes et al., 2004; Ravizza & Osborne, 1991). Making changes in the player’s ability to register, release and refocus (3R model) is therefore not only still a priority, but also a challenge. Besides continuing psychological services for the junior national team, Danish ice hockey clubs also need to consider integrating sport psychology as part of player development. Training in psychological skills is at present not integrated in Danish clubs and the players only train in psychological skills when they are assembled on the junior national team. The professional philosophy of a practitioner is a driving force of the consulting process, and makes his or her services transparent for coaches and players. In order to be effective as a practitioner, a trusting relationship with the head coach is crucial (and then with the rest of the staff following). Before commencing services with a team, thorough assessments are beneficial. It is important to spend some time “lobbying” and making sure that coaches and the staff know about your role as a practitioner and your range of services. Finally, athletes need time to learn how to cope with challenges at high-pressure events. From a third wave cognitive approach, athletes need
Consulting in high performance teams

to: (a) open up, accept and be willing to experience the full range of thoughts and emotions during high-pressure events; (b) mindfully engage in the present moment, including task-focused attention; and (c) behave in accordance with personal values that describe how they would like to be as an athlete and that help them engage in actions that display these values.
Consulting in high performance teams

References


Consulting in high performance teams


