

CHAPTER 1

A Different Approach

It's about the person. Technicals and tacticals follow that.

—NICK LEVETT, soccer coach

HIGHLIGHTS

- ✦ Motivating athletes is a challenge at every level of sports.
 - ✦ Solving problems for athletes often backfires.
 - ✦ MI can be added to your coaching toolbox for helping athletes to lift motivation and realize their potential.
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It's one thing to want someone to change and improve, but another to help them do it. In sports there are many moments when you try to help an athlete and then you wonder, *What's going to motivate them? What do I say now?* One simple answer, the foundation for motivational interviewing (MI), came from French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who captured it thus in the 17th century: "People are better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those that come into the mind of others" (Pascal, 1670/1958). MI simply provides the tools for making this happen.

THE KICKOFF

Imagine a scenario where, whatever the pressure you are under, you and the athletes around you are in a great place, facing competition like champions, smart and effective. The setbacks might come rolling in and yet there you are, talking through the struggles and really supporting each other. You have many a tough conversation in and around this squad, and yet you

never sink into a destructive blame game. Problems get solved, relationships remain solid, and you laugh and move on, together. Over time, results improve.

Learning MI can help to open these doors, where conversation helps to improve relationships, motivation, and performance. The first part of this book provides a roadmap of what's involved, about how you can use improved relationships to have really effective conversations.

BETTER CONVERSATIONS, BETTER OUTCOMES?

"I want my athletes to be up there, free of doubt, trusting each other, feeling fit, focused, rested, and raring to go." In other words, you want them to be motivated—to enjoy their sport and master the skills that make a difference, not just as individuals but in teams too.

It's also a challenge faced outside of sports, helping people to be focused and committed to change, and MI emerged in the 1980s in a corner of the mental health field where this challenge could not be avoided.

FROM THE FRONTLINE

In my first job I was faced with a schedule full of people who needed motivating, in a center for treating addicts, surrounded by colleagues in the coffee room who were full of talk about which were the really motivated patients and what we needed to do with those who were not (the majority). The answer was more or less clear-cut: it was our job to motivate them, to eliminate all doubt about getting rid of drugs, to make them realize the folly of their ways, and to give them insight into why and how they should change. For their part, the patients were generally resistant to these efforts, and there was never any question that the fault lay with them and their lack of motivation. We sat back and blamed them, and our conversations were frustrating and combative—it never crossed my mind that there was an alternative to meeting force with force. It took a murder to wake me up. A quiet young man walked out of a group one day and shot his wife and then himself. MI was born a few years later when William R. Miller published a paper that turned the logic of motivating others upside down, and it went some distance to explaining what had been going wrong in that treatment center: there was another way of going about it. He and I became friends and collaborators, and some 35 years later MI has spread around many fields and been studied and supported by more than a thousand scientific studies. At its core, MI is about shining a light on what is good about people and using empathy to empower them to be part of the change process. Sports is an ideal home for MI because we all want to help athletes thrive, and that's the essential aim of MI too.

—S. R.

Let's take a look around the world of sports to meet some familiar athletes:

1. *The professional “diamond in the rough.”* Age 19, riding high with his first big contract, and yet his diet seems all over the place. You raise the subject, and he says, “No, I’m fine thanks. I can look after myself these days.”
2. *The low-morale team.* Your group of players is having a joyless time since losing important teammates in the off-season, and morale is low. Everything you try to change seems to be ignored.
3. *The total beginner.* You can see a problem in this runner’s stride immediately after the starting gun, so you take a deep breath and say, “You did really well there, but can I just say that if you had only pushed a little harder right at the beginning of the race, you would have got into a groove earlier and done better. So that’s something to think about for next time.” The athlete looks distracted. No impact.

Now what? “If only they would listen to me,” you probably grumble to yourself. You can see how making a change would help them, but can they? What can you do or say to them that might make a difference and help them move from saying things like, “No, thanks . . .” to “Maybe . . .” right up to “Yes, I really want to do that”?

All three scenarios above involve a coach who cared, who expressed the optimism and enthusiasm that sits at the heart of quality coaching. Yet caring was somehow not enough for lifting motivation and making progress.

WHAT DO YOU SAY NEXT?

Imagine that coach carrying on with the same strategy—solving the problem *for* athletes.

1. *The “diamond in the rough.”* You might suggest, “Well, I’m sorry, but being at an elite level comes with responsibilities to look after your health and your diet. I’ll get the nutritionist to have a word with you.” His reply is, “Yes, *but* I know how to eat and how it affects me on the field. I mean, I don’t go stuffing myself with junk food just before a game.” You get pushback, and this diamond’s motivation might have even gone down. He doesn’t like to be told what to do. What happened to the trust you thought he had in you?
2. *The low-morale team.* You offer, “We all miss our colleagues, who made us so strong last season. I want us to really focus now and be positive, enjoy ourselves, and go for it this season, OK?” The team

captain thinks, *But what's the point?* The team looks at the ground, in dead silence. Your shot has missed its mark. Maybe there's something else preventing them from moving ahead. Do they trust you and each other?

3. *The total beginner.* With the runner you might continue, "Do you see what I mean? Start well and it will end well, if you get my meaning." He may reply, "Well, yes, *but* I was focusing on the middle part of the race, to be honest, because that's where I need to really focus and use all my best energy." A coach sees it one way, the athlete another. Any sign of the fire of motivation being lifted?

The strategy used here was to try harder to persuade them, to "make them see" the best way ahead and to "drive sense into" them.

Pushing Athletes Can Backfire

Did you notice the athletes' use of the word *but* in each of those three conversations above? Persuading, commanding, and solving problems *for* athletes are useful tools, and we will clarify why and how in the next chapter. However, if they are your *only* tools, and you use them routinely for every challenge, you could get tired and grumpy, and blame athletes for low motivation—and in turn they might respond with arguments, blank looks, sulking, or worse—feigning compliance ("Yes, thanks for the advice"). We use the term "righting reflex" to describe the reaction we have as coaches when we see a problem and automatically assume, *without thinking*, that it's our job to "right it," to jump in and fix it. It's when there's a sudden rush to solve problems that mistakes are so often made. In the examples above, focusing on convincing athletes what they should do results in both parties falling into a persuasion trap. One sign we're approaching that trap is the word *but*. "Why don't you . . . ?" is met with, "Yes, *but* that won't work because . . .," or another passive, even evasive, response. This kind of exchange becomes a trap because every time athletes use "but" to pivot away from the direction you want them to go, the fire of motivation inside them dies out a little bit more.

"Yes, but . . ." from the athlete is a signal to change tack.

Here's what we discovered in MI: by using other tools from the toolbox, you can make it possible for athletes to stoke that fire for themselves. This is a practical way of realizing a widely held view in sports, revealed when football player and coach Homer Rice apparently said, "You can motivate by fear, and you can motivate by reward. But both those methods are only temporary. The only lasting thing is self-motivation."

MI: A DIFFERENT KIND OF CONVERSATION

What if our job is to motivate athletes *not* solely by advising, pushing, and persuading but through something else instead? Take a look at this conversation, and notice what happens. A coach wants to assist a runner to get going after an injury and feels she is probably a bit too hesitant for her own good.

COACH: How is that ankle feeling now?

ATHLETE: They say it's ready for the real thing. I'm not so sure.

COACH: How ready for action do you really feel?

ATHLETE: Yeah, well, I guess so, but what if I push it too far (*looking a bit doubtful*)?

COACH: You're not sure.

ATHLETE: Nah, but it might be OK; how can I tell?

COACH: You're wondering whether the ankle will take all the pressure.

ATHLETE: And yeah, I need to believe in myself too.

COACH: What's going to help you feel more confident?

ATHLETE: I want to try it out. I mean, I am determined to try it out under pressure, like maybe not full on but under pressure for, say, half an hour.

COACH: That feels like the right next step for you.

ATHLETE: It's got to be. I'm, like, ready for that, for sure.

The coach's attitude was one of helping the athlete find her own path to improvement. Instead of trying to instill ideas and motivation into her, he drew this out of her. That's MI. As with a technique to throw, catch, or run more efficiently, MI is way of doing things that can be powerful and effective.

If that exchange above reads like a normal-sounding conversation, it's no coincidence, because that's exactly what you want to aim for in using MI. It is simple, but as any athlete will tell you, learning a simple new play or adjustment is not necessarily easy. It initially takes a conscious effort to break free of old habits and work in a new way, and it takes practice to master. When it comes to MI, we must be willing to imagine that there are strengths and resources in that person that we cannot necessarily put our finger on but believe are there. Notice the use of the word *person*—it will only be a normal conversation if you see them as people first, athletes second.

Now consider one of the skills used by that coach, what we call a listening statement. It's a technical device for expressing empathy, a foundation of MI.

Empathy Used as a Motivator

You might have heard about the power of empathy. As we will show you, it is possible to channel empathy in ways that motivate athletes to do better. It happened in that conversation with the runner above.

Empathy means “standing in another’s shoes” or imagining their experience, not the same as sympathy or feeling sorry for someone. Athletes feel and appreciate it, and it can and has become an essential ingredient in successful coaching that improves connection and helps athletes to make progress. In MI empathy is used not only to build a relationship but also to promote behavior change. This is achieved with a technical skill, something you say to the athlete, what we call a listening statement. Looking back at that conversation above, this technique was used three times. You can spot its use by the absence of a question mark and the presence of a statement, not a question.

In MI, empathy is used to promote behavior change.

Here's how it works. You start by trying to imagine what it must be like for the athlete, “to stand in his or her shoes.” Then a critical second step: you convey this to the athlete in the form of a statement, as that coach does above, for example, by saying, “You’re wondering whether the ankle will take all the pressure.” The athlete will sense your empathy, curiosity, and desire to understand; take the conversation baton from you; and run with it. She replies to that statement with “And yeah, I need to believe in myself too.” Right there she is expressing *greater commitment to taking the next step*, and her motivation is improving as she says it. That's the simple art of MI: She is talking herself into changing, rather than relying on the coach to do this for her. What researchers have uncovered by analyzing conversation is that the more people say things like this, the more likely they are to act on their own advice.

Doubt Is Normal

This next aspect of MI might come as a surprise: Doubt and low motivation are viewed not as problems but as keys to unlocking progress. It's a question of how you handle a conflict that we call “ambivalence,” a topic to be covered in many places in this book (see Chapter 3).

Athletes seem to thrive on overcoming that battle between optimism and doubt, and yet sometimes we see doubt winning over, to affect their focus, confidence, and performance. We saw this above in those three examples that opened the chapter: “Should I do something about my diet?” (the diamond in the rough); “Maybe our team will work together more now or maybe not” (the low-morale team); or “I might focus on the early part of the race, but I’m not sure” (the total beginner).

People seesaw between “staying just as I am” and “making the change that might be worthwhile.” Were those athletes in the examples above really *only* thinking of one side of their doubt, the negative side? Unlikely. The rough diamond, despite his denial about his diet, was probably at least a bit concerned about it. The depleted team might be feeling down, but they have turned up, also wanting to do better. And the race runner might have also wondered about pushing harder at the beginning of the race. Doubt reigned supreme. It’s when they are in this state of doubt that using a direct approach so often backfires.

A direct approach
backfires when an
athlete feels doubtful.

Let Them Make the Case for Change

Imagine how a conversation might go if instead of you making the case for change, the athlete does. Recall the persuasion trap we discussed above (the “righting reflex”). If you spell out all the reasons a change is a good idea, it’s as if athletes flick a switch in their minds and start telling you why the change is *not* a good idea. As they hear themselves say this, they become even more convinced *not* to change. Their motivation starts heading down, not up. Athletes are not alone in this. Most people like to make up their minds for themselves. MI involves helping them to unscramble their doubt and give voice to what will lift their motivation, not lower it.

How might you do this, let’s say with those three athletes above? Our best advice is to step aside for a moment, take a short breather, and then find a way of letting them make the case for change, a bit like lifting your head up in a game and looking for a pass. A question is a good move to start with, like an invitation to face change; you feed them the ball with a question and then let them take it and move forward.

- *Scenario 1:* To the “rough diamond,” the coach might have asked, “How might you do a little better with your diet?”
- *Scenario 2:* The team that is depleted and feeling down might have been asked, “How can we take the first step to improving this

season? What would that look like for you? What would you enjoy doing more of in practice?”

- *Scenario 3:* The racing athlete might have been asked, “How might you make better progress at the beginning of the race?”

You’ll notice that the questions all have a searching, forward-looking quality, designed to get the athletes to sift through the answers. You switch from a stance captured by “I have all the answers” to one captured with “What do you think? Let’s look at this together.” The player will more than likely start talking about change, about some of the difficulties, but also about how and why it could come about. Their positive statements about change are what we call “*change talk*.” You get the player thinking about the benefits of making the change, and the means to making it happen.

What About Your Expertise?

You might well be thinking at this point, *Hang on a minute. My job is to notice what’s needed and make sure I get my message across. And this athlete hardly knows what she needs. How can I hand the baton over to her?* Think of it like this: the more you invest in uncovering the athletes’ point of view, the more interested they will be in yours. Then when the time comes to take back control and offer advice, it’s more likely to be heard and acted on. If you dance rather than wrestle in a conversation with athletes, learning happens in front of your eyes.

FROM THE FRONTLINE

There’s a saying that coaches use in some teams that goes like this: “You don’t have to be sick to get better.” Its use highlights an attitude to athlete improvement that has roots in the psychologist Carol Dweck’s research on why some people give up too easily but others make noticeable improvement (Dweck, 2017). Her advice to sports coaches is to help athletes develop a “growth mindset,” to see setbacks as learning opportunities. If they adopt a fixed mindset—for example, “My inborn talent is all I need to progress”—they risk failing to reach their potential because their mistakes are seen as problems, something wrong with them, to be avoided or to feel bad about. Athletes in this state of mind tend not to stretch themselves and give up too easily. To get better and improve, so the logic goes, a growth mindset has athletes willing to take on harder tasks because they will see mistakes as opportunities to stretch and enjoy themselves. They focus on the learning, not just the outcome.

MI is a practical way of encouraging this growth mindset. Pointing out faults and using the righting reflex at every turn will not lift motivation and performance as much as supporting athletes to take risks, free of fear of judgment, and to get into the flow and focus on the process of their athletic effort. This book is geared toward realizing this approach through conversation.

The Benefits

MI is just one way to help athletes improve, and it's not the only road for all coaches and athletes. "Try it and see" would be our advice, not just once but a few times, and even ask the athletes how helpful your conversation was and what might improve it.

You might be wondering about what evidence there is for the effectiveness of MI. While there's lots of literature on using MI in many fields—and it points squarely at the power of listening and valuing the resourcefulness of the person you are speaking to—MI is new to sports. However, there is probably more immediate evidence right in front of you: If you hear and see the athlete talking brightly about the possibility of change, this tells you that you are getting something right. Keep going. If you hear the opposite, it's a signal to change course. Just as we know the likely progress of a game, even outside a stadium, by the noise of the fan reactions, we can assess the effectiveness of our coaching conversation by closely watching our players' reactions to what we say. In this way your athletes are giving you real-time feedback, and they effectively become your teacher.

Here are some of the benefits we've observed in our work with coaches:

Improved Relationships

As coaches, we all highlight the importance of having good relationships with teammates. The more you put into building relationships, the better the outcomes will be. That said, it can be difficult to know just *how* to improve relationships with individual athletes and the team as whole. MI calls for setting up a foundation of trust and mutual respect, and *there are skills you can practice daily to achieve this* (Chapter 4).

Improved Performance and Well-Being

Every team is looking for the next edge. If you kindle the fire of motivation inside athletes, their performance should improve. This will in turn improve well-being. MI is about the athlete *doing things* differently. In other fields, such as health care, MI has been credited for improving behavior on a wide range of fronts.

In Brief Exchanges

In sports we are often pressed for time. MI can be used in very brief conversations, in and around the field of play, to encourage creative decision making and bind the threads of linked conversations over time. Indeed, the

more skillful you are, the less time it will take to have effective conversations.

When There's Conflict—with Individuals and in Teams

As coaches, we are often also referees. MI emerged from settings rich in conflict, and it is designed to alleviate, minimize, and even eliminate it. We have noticed that the skills of MI can be used not just to resolve doubt and lift motivation but also in numerous tight corners where trouble is brewing, in difficult relationships with athletes, with problem behaviors, or when a group or squad is sliding backward.

In a Culture That Champions the Love of Sports

Most coaches are trying to build a strong, positive culture for their team. Sport is full of slogans and mission statements that talk about improving culture, enjoyment, and good relationships, yet these good intentions are all too often driven sideways by obsession with profit, results at all cost, and the shabby treatment of those who don't succeed. Our clear bias is toward getting the process right; building better relationships using the practical skills described in this book will produce better outcomes of all kinds, including in results themselves. When we help athletes to express themselves, say what they think and feel, and talk about change, our relationships improve and we change the culture there and then, bit by bit. We notice that coaches who are remembered with the most respect are those who treated players as people, not just as athletes, and kept a keen eye on their sense of self-worth and journey through life, and who took concrete steps to support players off the field. MI provides a roadmap for doing this.

Of Benefit to You?

Your desire to support athletes most likely motivated you to pick up this book. No one can say it's easy being a coach, having to keep an eye on so many things, or that you won't make mistakes. Your well-being also deserves to take center stage so you can help players reach for their dreams. Preserving your energy, not wasting it in needless argument, and channeling your conversations into efficient efforts to build motivation and performance are some of the benefits of improving your communication skills. The more you feel you can "be yourself," comfortable in your own skin, genuinely expressing optimism in the potential of athletes, the easier it will

be to use MI and to enjoy the conversations. The work of improving your communication in this simple but powerful way gives you a new outlet to improve and measure your success. It's not just about results. Instead of only reflecting on your win/loss record, a new path emerges, one that has you as a leader who will be the best you can be no matter what the record is.

THIS BOOK

You can approach this book in many ways. The list of chapter titles should help you to locate the topics of greatest relevance. You might wonder, for example, what we mean by “resistance” in difficult situations, in which case reading Chapter 6 will give you a feel for how MI might be helpful, or you might be interested in teamwork. Chapters 11 and 12 look at practical things you can do with MI to build morale and togetherness, even in those challenging team meetings or halftime talks.

Whichever route you take, you'll notice the book overall offers you a shift in mindset, which is why you might do best to read Chapter 2 before jumping to later chapters. There, you'll get a good feel for how MI can be viewed as an extension of a familiar coaching style in which you guide rather than command. That's the platform for MI, and principles and skills are described after that, in Chapters 3 and 4.

YOUR CHOICE

When your usual approaches are not working, where do you go next? We all know that nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right in a conversation with an athlete. We also know what it feels like to really nail it. Our experience working alongside some of the world's most successful coaches suggests that flexibility is key. They think about what's going to make a difference, and they shift their approach, because what works with some athletes falls flat with others.

There's clearly no single way to lift motivation, which is why building up a coaching toolbox is in order. The famous psychologist Abraham Maslow is reported to have said, “If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” You don't just want a hammer in your hand for banging away at every challenge. You inspire players, encourage them gently, use tough love, make jokes, and sometimes say nothing, simply observing and letting them learn from their own mistakes. MI can be there

in the toolbox so you can take advantage of those many opportunities to motivate athletes that arise in corridors, in locker rooms, and on the field itself.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What drew you into working in sports?
- What's the most significant conversation you have had in your sporting life? Why was it so important?
- Are you different with athletes depending on whether you like them?
- If good relationships in sports are important, then why is so little attention paid to this in education and training?

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