



## PHILOSOPHY IN STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING— CLARIFYING COACHING AND TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

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Coach educators recommend that coaches have a coaching philosophy, yet many scholars and coaches are unclear what exactly this recommendation means, especially in the field of strength and conditioning (2,3,6). In strength and conditioning, experts recommend that strength and conditioning coaches possess a background in exercise science and/or related fields (5,10,12). The National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) standards and guidelines support these recommendations, stating that strength and conditioning coaches should have at least an undergraduate degree from an accredited college or university in a scientific discipline, such as an exercise science program (3,10,12). It is common practice in a strength and conditioning coaching job interview to inquire not only about the coach's experience and academic background, but also about their "philosophy" (6).

While liberal arts universities often require students to take a one- or two-semester philosophy course during their freshman or sophomore year, the study of philosophy is not required in many exercise science degree programs. As a result, most strength and conditioning coaches have little to no formal training in philosophical thinking and thus, confusion exists as to what a coaching philosophy means. It appears likely, then, that strength and conditioning coaches are ill-prepared to thoroughly answer the question: "what's your philosophy?" In fact, Dr. William Kraemer in 1997 said that it is the most commonly asked question of coaches (3,6). In addition to this practical limitation, it remains perplexing that philosophy continues to play no central role in the

formal education of strength and conditioning coaches, though it continues to be asked in real-world and job interview settings (2,6). Compounding the matter is the confusion surrounding the definition and function of a coaching philosophy compared to a training philosophy. Greater conceptual clarity is needed to help coaches ask and answer questions about their coaching and training philosophy, as the two terms being synonymous may cause misunderstanding. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide clarity on the types of philosophies found in strength and conditioning, the differences between coaching and training philosophy, how to examine coaching philosophy, and offer practical applications for strength and conditioning coaches to develop their coaching philosophy.

### DEFINING THE COACHING VS. TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

Determining what is a coaching philosophy versus what is a training philosophy can be wrought with confusion. In general, philosophy can be defined as a way of thinking about the universe and the interactions of all that happens within it (2,3,9,10). Another definition of philosophy is as the "love of wisdom" or the study of the basic nature of reality, knowledge, and social interaction (4). Defining the difference becomes a bit more convoluted when looking at philosophy in terms of coaching and training, as there are diverse and varying terms, definitions, and approaches to developing a coaching or training philosophy (1,2,7,9,10,11,13). In a critical review of the literature related to coaching philosophy, Cushion and Partington found that most definitions, terms, and

examples have limited explanation and a lack of conceptual clarity (2). In addition, Garity reviewed and synthesized the literature in *Strength and Conditioning Journal* and *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* into five categories that captured how the term “philosophy” was used in the strength and conditioning field. The five categories described by Garity are: system of training, specific method of training, attitude/belief, theory of training, and aim of training (3). Garity’s analysis showed that while philosophy is often mentioned in strength and conditioning, the field continues to suffer from a lack of consistent definition and application to coaching.

One way to think about this moving forward is to conceptualize coaching philosophy as the “why,” and training philosophy as the “how” (3,6,9,14). The “why” in training typically comes from the coach’s previous experience, knowledge, and beliefs that could be from education as well as influences such as previous work situations and mentors they have had. The “how” refers to the methods which Garity referred to as a system, method, theory, or aim of training and is the specific day-to-day action that happens in the weight room. Coaches have demonstrated that their own beliefs and values have a significant influence on the actions they take with their athletes (2,14). The beliefs and values a person holds will impact their daily actions as they are guiding standards to what is important to them, and thus influences their coaching behaviors (2,14). Beliefs and values should change over time as practical experience and implementing new methods provides feedback to the coach of the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) in training. A coaching philosophy can be thought of as a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that guide a strength and conditioning coach’s daily practice, whereas a training philosophy should be a system which is based on principles (2,14). An example of training philosophy is using periodization to develop the year-long training program that is based on scientific principles and structured order (3,5). A training philosophy can play a role in the overarching coaching philosophy, as it underpins the methods that intertwine with values and beliefs, and together influence the decisions the strength and conditioning coach makes. An underdeveloped training philosophy could leave gaps in the physical training program that a coach may not fully anticipate, such as lacking knowledge about how to work around injuries to keep athletes involved or how to be flexible when working with sport coaches. A thought-out and developed training philosophy will have all areas in training considered and allows the strength and conditioning coach to make decisions quicker and easier when problems arise by having already thought of how to handle situations ahead of time. The coaching philosophy is the overarching support developed from how strength and conditioning coaches have been brought up, what they have learned, and what areas or values they want others to know about themselves (2). An organized and thoughtful coaching philosophy gives the strength and conditioning coach clarity when dealing with issues of ethics, rules, and interpersonal relationships. Developing the two types in congruence gives the strength and conditioning coach a balanced approach to preparation and the support that will help them make decisions related to training and people.

**TABLE 1. COACHING PHILOSOPHY VS. TRAINING PHILOSOPHY**

COACHING PHILOSOPHY (THE WHY)	TRAINING PHILOSOPHY (THE HOW)
Values	System of training
Beliefs	Specific method of training
Tradition	Aim of training
Ideology	Theory of training
Personal preferences	Attitude/belief toward training

### DIVING DEEPER INTO THE COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy does not necessarily refer to the categories described by Garity when looking at the discipline of philosophy in general (3). Strength and conditioning coaches should critically think about what they believe, value, and want their athletes to know about their expectations for the team. For example, if the strength and conditioning coach values empowering athletes and allowing them to make decisions, but then never gives them an opportunity to exercise these qualities, they are not showing their athletes how these values are important to them. An organized and well-thought-out philosophy can help strength and conditioning coaches deal with dilemmas, make decisions, and handle real-world situations in accordance with their values and principles (10,14). Similar to rules clearly stated on a weight room wall, a written coaching philosophy can be a guide to emphasize all that underpins a comprehensive strength and conditioning program (14).

The ability to reflect and evaluate one’s practice, thereby becoming more self-aware, can be a powerful tool that enables personal and professional growth for strength and conditioning coaches (2,9,13). When engaging in the practice of self-reflection, strength and conditioning coaches should consider all aspects mentioned in this article including values and beliefs, as well as types of training. The ability to be philosophical requires continual review and consideration of these aspects along with how they work in real-world settings. With a better understanding of philosophical thinking, a strength and conditioning coach should try to connect research with practice in each facet of the strength and conditioning program (5). The coaching and training philosophies of a strength and conditioning coach should be aligned ideally to help reinforce the strength and conditioning coach’s values (2,3,9,14). For example, if a strength and conditioning coach believes athlete development should be holistic or whole person centered (i.e., the why), then the strength and conditioning coach should use practices (i.e., the how) such as career advice, mentoring, and support for success in school and other areas. Another example would be regarding athlete safety. If a strength and conditioning coach believes in providing a safe training environment, then consideration must be given to proper exercise technique while also weighing the costs, risks, and benefits of that system or method of training. A misalignment or dissimilarity in values and practices demonstrates a divide between the interrelated coaching and training philosophies resulting in fragmented approaches that may be apparent to

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athletes and others (2,3,14). For example, if a strength and conditioning coach says that educating athletes to be leaders is a value they possess, but then never give athletes information about why they do particular exercises at certain times of the year, then the strength and conditioning coach demonstrates misalignment between values and practice. Likewise, a strength and conditioning coach who values safe training principles, but does not teach athletes how to spot or miss lifts properly is not following their own philosophy.

**TABLE 2. EXAMPLES OF MISALIGNMENT IN VALUES WITHIN A COACHING PHILOSOPHY**

VALUE	MISALIGNMENT IN PRACTICE
Timeliness	Allow athletes to show up late frequently
Attention to details	Allows equipment left out of place
Safety	Does not teach proper spotting/missing
Empowering leaders	Never give athletes a chance to lead

### THE COACHING PHILOSOPHY “TOOLBOX”

Encouraging coaches to formulate their own personal “philosophical toolbox” containing philosophical “tools,” such as reflection, self-awareness, and evaluation can show them how to develop a better understanding of their own coaching practice (2,3,9,14). The examination of a coaching philosophy should be a foundational step for any strength and conditioning coach interested in achieving their goals and improving their effectiveness (10,14). By evaluating and developing weak areas within a coach’s philosophy, strength and conditioning coaches can improve their skills as a strength and conditioning coach just like an athlete can by improving athletic weaknesses (2,10,14). One example of how a strength and conditioning coach can use a philosophical “tool” would be using self-reflection to review their practice and interactions with athletes, and evolving their coaching philosophy based on this evaluation. It is important to develop the ability to review one’s practice in order to establish if their actions and approach make certain they achieve the outcome desired. If the outcomes are positive, then they move forward, but if they are not, then they review and change their philosophy until they achieve what they want (10,14). An example of a reflection exercise would be for a strength and conditioning coach to think of three adjectives to describe themselves and then ask their athletes to do the same to see if the athletes’ perceptions align with those of the strength and conditioning coach. Identifying problems and addressing them in one’s coaching philosophy can be valuable for gaining a more consistent understanding of coaching in general (2).

In strength and conditioning settings, strength and conditioning coaches need to also consider what rules to apply with athletes in a facility, and these rules must factor into their overarching guidelines that fall in line with their coaching philosophy. The nature of teaching complex exercises in the weight room, as

well as the inherent risk, makes a considerable case for strength and conditioning coaches to think about behaviors that will and will not be tolerated, which can also fall into an overarching philosophy of coaching. The attention to detail a strength and conditioning coach demands related to having all the weights put away in proper places at the end of each session to keep the room safe and efficient for the next training group should also fall in line with their philosophy. There is no single road map to developing a coaching philosophy, but there are several areas for strength and conditioning coaches to consider when creating or evaluating their coaching philosophy.

### A FRAMEWORK TO CREATE A COMPLETE COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Reference to coaching philosophy is often thought of as a magical unicorn that everyone should know about but nobody has never seen. Because of the complexities involved in understanding a strength and conditioning coach’s values, beliefs, and interaction with behavior, developing and evaluating one’s coaching philosophy is demanding and requires consideration of many factors (2,14). The following provides a framework for strength and conditioning coaches to create their coaching philosophy.

The strength and conditioning coach should define his or her coaching philosophy on paper. Writing it down is an important step in creating a coaching philosophy (4,19,14). This enables the strength and conditioning coach to go back to their coaching philosophy often and evaluate it as one changes, hopefully growing personally and professionally. This ability to look at one’s coaching practice and evaluate what methods work well and which ones do not allow the strength and conditioning coach to change and evolve as their knowledge and education grows. The following offers three steps as a practical approach for strength and conditioning coaches to begin to write their coaching philosophy.

First, strength and conditioning coaches should consider the beliefs and values they stand for and how they want these to be demonstrated in practice (14). Beliefs are defined as trust or confidence in something from experience, which could come from their knowledge, past results, family environment, or future aspirations (2). Pre-existing beliefs are often framed over time, developed early in life, and could be related to aging, independence, health, and people’s rights. Values are principles or judgment of what the strength and conditioning coach holds important in life. The following is a list of example values: dedication, passion, determination, honesty, work ethic, compassion, fame, faith, justice, kindness, leadership, learning, openness, respect, responsibility, service, and wisdom. Demonstrating these values is up to each strength and conditioning coach to decide including how they teach and how they show athletes to interact and communicate with each other.

Second, strength and conditioning coaches should write down their strongest beliefs and values about training and life, and then reflect on how these appear in their own lives. They should think about why they coach—what is their purpose? Writing it down, then evaluating it, gives the strength and conditioning coach the opportunity to see if what they believe in and what they do daily

are in unison. A gap or misalignment could be easier to notice once beliefs and values are written down and thought about critically, and if there is misalignment, it can give the strength and conditioning coach insight as to why they might not be as effective as they could be, or why a method might not be working. The use of this evaluation and reflection gives strength and conditioning coaches an opportunity to look at both training and coaching philosophy to ensure they are aligned. The following questions can help in this evaluation:

- How do their daily actions reflect their values and beliefs?
- What do they consider important?
- What comes most naturally to them each day?
- What do they like most about their job? Least about it?

Third and finally, strength and conditioning coaches should list the training principles that they believe in; as mentioned previously, training principles play a role in the overarching coaching philosophy because they support the actual day-to-day methods of training. A few examples of training principles are specificity of training, progressive overload, individualization, recovery, and training with ground-based movements. This framework and combination of values, beliefs, and training principles will give strength and conditioning coaches a strong list of areas from which to base their coaching philosophy (2,14).

## SUMMARY

Once strength and conditioning coaches have a better understanding of some of the differences between coaching and training philosophy, they can build their coaching philosophy and ensure it is a combination of both the “why and how.” Strength and conditioning coaches who can evaluate their program, methods, and outcomes thoroughly should have a better grasp of how their philosophy works in daily practice (2,10,14). If strength and conditioning coaches recognize something in practice that is not in alignment with a value or training principle, then they should adjust the behavior to match the desired outcome. Philosophy and coaching can be thoughtfully intertwined for strength and conditioning coaches who are willing to evaluate their program and reasoning, which will help them grow as professionals (10,14).

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