

Doubt Matters: A Practical Guide for Coaches

BY CAREY TINKELENBERG, RFS, CM, MG, MPD

I clearly recall the complex emotions of being a new director. I had the opportunity to dive into uncharted personal territory and create a program and a skating culture from scratch. I was motivated by the challenge and committed to giving it my best effort. I was also very conscious of my inexperience. It was daunting when former authority figures, like my employers and professors, joined our program and looked to me as an expert, even when I didn't feel like one. I pushed myself to think through every contingency, worrying, "Can these people see it when I don't know what I'm doing? Who am I to enforce policies on them? Why do they seem to think I know everything and that I'm an elite-level coach?" I felt pressure to catch up when I wasn't, in fact, behind. As a result, it was difficult to ask for help at times, or to appear like I didn't have the answers.

While the experience has been more fulfilling, fun, and full of growth than I could have anticipated, I can now recognize that doubt has played a role in my experience as a director and coach—just as it does for every athlete, every director, and every coach at periods in their careers.

None among us are immune to self-doubt, especially in a competitive field that attracts high-achievers. Doubt is a common experience that can either fuel us to produce our best work, or inhibit us from performing at our true ability level.

Doubt can be uncomfortable to acknowledge. Though it is nearly universal, we tend to feel like we're the only ones who experience it. The trouble is, if we avoid it or if we're unclear how to work with it skillfully, it is more likely to hold us back. We may avoid asking for help out of fear of exposing ourselves as weak or unskilled, or become less likely to embrace new challenges. We can become more risk-averse, or, as is common for athletes, have a difficult time performing consistently.

For athletes, doubt surfaces in training and performance obstacles. For coaches and leaders, the way we manage - or don't manage—our doubts can impact our athletes, our training environments, and all of those with whom we interact in our sport. It's time to explore some practical strategies for dealing with doubt.

Doubt explored

While all humans experience self-doubt, research shows that 70% percent of us will also experience at some point during our lives or careers a particular variety known as impostorism.

Impostorism, or impostor syndrome, is defined by *Harvard Business Review* as, "A collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success." Heather Whelpley, impostorism speaker and life coach, describes it as, "Assessing yourself as lower or worse than you actually are, and feeling doubt, insecurity, or like a fraud even though you're qualified and successful. It begins to manifest around the middle-school age, and it's not something you *have*; it's something you *experience* in certain situations." Notable figures such as Maya Angelou, Albert Einstein, and Michelle Obama have all openly acknowledged their experiences with it.

For skaters, expressions of doubt or impostorism may sound like, "I'm not ready, I don't belong in this group/rink. I'm not good enough to be landing this jump, I don't deserve to be at this competition/level."

Many athletes and coaches can identify, including Rachael Flatt, Olympian and 2010 U.S. Ladies Champion. "Even when I was finishing in the top ranks nationally and internationally and I knew how hard I'd worked to get there, I still questioned why I was doing as well as I was," Flatt said. "I would pick apart my performances, and it could be challenging to feel confident."

According to Dr. Caroline Silby, Team USA sports psychologist and recipient of the 2019 Pieter Kollen Sport Science Award, impostorism is, "The inner turmoil created by the belief that you're being inauthentic." There are pivotal moments when athletes are more vulnerable to doubt running amok, such as after a breakthrough performance. "Athletes can understand that with a blink of an eye the result could have turned out differently," Dr. Silby said. "The attention athletes receive after an achievement can lead to intense worry about rejection, criticism, scrutiny and being 'found out' that they aren't as good as everyone thinks."

Doubt can also be useful—sometimes. "Setting high



standards, an aspect of perfectionism closely associated with impostor feelings, is a behavior that contributes to successful outcomes,” says Dr. Silby. “However, turning on oneself when an expectation is not met will negatively impact performance.”

What can coaches do to guide athletes through these experiences and to foster the best possible outcomes?

Normalize doubt for your athlete

“One of the most powerful things I do is tell clients, ‘Hey, I have doubt, too,’” said Dr. Silby. For Flatt, “It was most beneficial when my coaches made sure I knew it was a normal process, both from an athletic perspective and a general personal growth perspective.” She recommends that coaches, “Be present and honest with your athletes, validate their concerns, and be supportive.”

View mental training as preventative skill-building

According to Dr. Silby, “Mental training is the first line of defense for mitigating issues before they take hold.” She describes a juncture during adolescence when increased expectations collide with decreased confidence, and performance and sport enjoyment suffer (typically age 12-14 for girls and age 15-17 for boys). “Let’s try to get ahead of that so kids are armed with strategies when it hits. Self-doubt is something we can all learn how to acknowledge, accept, and manage.”

Debrief successes and failures

“Confidence is built not through succeeding, but by understanding how you created that success,” says Dr. Silby. She recommends helping athletes identify personal strengths and actions that contribute to their success. For example, in the “two pluses and a wish” exercise, athletes list two things that went well and one thing they wish had gone better. This teaches them that both can be true simultaneously. Things could have gone well, and things could also need to improve. “Athletes don’t tend to think like that,” Dr. Silby says. “They think, ‘I missed my double Axel today, everything was terrible.’ Or, ‘if I’m stressed, my problems are impossible to solve.’ That’s not true. We can feel stressed and we can be perfectly capable of solving problems.”

Provide conscious feedback

“Be careful of statements like, ‘you always,’ and ‘you are’ in moments of frustration with athletes who are underperforming,” says Whelpley. “Our brain interprets those as permanent states; things we can’t fix. Instead of, ‘you always fall apart if you miss the double Lutz,’ try, ‘let’s take a look at what’s going on after the Lutz for you,’ leaving it more open for dialogue.”

Use “fake it ‘til you make it” with caution

According to Dr. Silby, this popular mantra has its limits.

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“Athletes need to know that they don’t have to fake it. They can use their strengths to navigate it and choose effective responses.”

Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness, a calm and non-judgemental awareness of the present moment, can be cultivated through meditation and other exercises. Mindfulness fosters the clear-headedness to recognize choices for moving forward, rather than reacting out of raw emotion. It makes us more aware of our thoughts and helps us “see the forest for the trees.” As Dr. Silby points out, mindfulness can also strengthen emotional recovery, focus, and optimism.

When Doubt Strikes Coaches

Think about the last time you experienced self-doubt as a skating professional. Was it when your athlete was struggling? When you made a difficult leadership decision? When you experienced a setback or a success? How did it affect you? How did you cope with it?

The strategies suggested above can also be effective for coaches. Whelpley recommends identifying a personal “doubt recovery toolkit” of three to five actions that inspire you to move forward, whether through self-care, movement-based practices like yoga or running, engaging in creativity, community activities, nature, or mindfulness. For me, I’ve learned—sometimes the hard way—that regular yoga and mindfulness practice, setting boundaries with respect to my time, and engaging in creative activities outside of skating bolster my ability to maintain perspective and stay grounded most effectively.

This has required a significant shift in the way I perceive self-care, and it’s certainly not a one-size-fits-all formula. Coaches are a busy and driven bunch, and we often deprioritize self-care as a luxury for which we have no time. However, there is a reason why Stephen’s Covey’s popular book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* identifies “sharpening the saw” as its final habit of effectiveness. Research shows that understanding what rejuvenates us - and seeking it out regularly - is well beyond a luxury. It is a practical and responsible tool for long-term success and for leading others skillfully.

Coaches have a formative impact on the way athletes think and feel about themselves and their skating. Dr. Silby reminds us, “A coach’s behavior is never neutral as it relates to impacting an athlete. If coaches are putting outcome pressure on themselves, ultimately they’re putting it on their athletes. It’s important to redefine success at different points in your career, otherwise the outcome goals

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can become suffocating. Talk with a trusted confidante or seek professional assistance. Identify personal strengths that contribute to positive outcomes and job satisfaction. Seek mentors with whom you can share experiences.”

The people and the culture around us will either encourage or discourage feelings of doubt and impostorism. Ask yourself, which do you want to cultivate in the rink? As Whelpley points out, “We are all harder on ourselves than other people are on us. We do best in an environment where you can try hard things and be supported.” It’s important that we recognize our personal accountability in cultivating an environment that leads to the best outcomes for our athletes, not to mention a healthy workplace culture. Flatt’s recommends, “If you see someone struggling or asking for help, that’s a great chance to step up to supply your own knowledge or help them problem solve. That will foster rapport within the rink and within the skating community more broadly.”

Through conscious leadership and self-awareness, we can all take charge of doubt, for ourselves, for our athletes, and for our sport. ❖

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