

LECTURE 1

Core Skills of a Personal Trainer

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- **Core Skills**
- **Skills of a Successful PT**
- **Educating your Client**
- **Observing & Monitoring**
- **Correcting**
- **Motivating**
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Core Skills

Let's take a look at the role of a personal trainer, what the core skills are and how they can be applied.

When compared with, for example, a fitness instructor (who is not as well qualified), some of your most important skills when working with clients are ...

- **Knowledge** – clients can be assured that as a personal trainer, you have a higher level of knowledge which will help them achieve their goals faster.
- **Individualisation** – a good PT will always ensure that a programme is specific to the needs of that client. This can be more difficult for a fitness Instructor as their knowledge is limited and they are less involved in the day-to-day training process. Because of this, fitness Instructors would not be able to take into account the client's goals, current ability and other lifestyle factors that the personal trainer will be able to account for.
- **Feedback** – because you are present session to session as a personal trainer, you are able not only to offer feedback on the session but also exercise corrections as the client is performing them.
- **Problem Solving** – as a personal trainer, different clients will present you with different barriers. By working with them directly and helping your clients become more consistent, you will be better placed to solve these problems and overcome the barriers.
- **Integrity** – a personal trainer should ensure that they always place the needs of their clients first and foremost. The client can be assured that everything you do is with their goals in mind.

It's important that you understand these skills and expectations because you will be expected to comply with them and they are how you will be judged.

Skills of a Successful Personal Trainer

The identification of client needs comes through the screening and consultation process. By discussing with the client their aspirations and goals, followed by carrying out a comprehensive health screening including physical assessments and fitness testing, a PT will be able to identify needs related to...

- Lifestyle modification.
- Exercise prescription.
- Corrective exercise inclusion.
- Progression strategies.
- Further support the client may need.

Planning

The programme design stage should include thoughts around the client's health, safety, progression, training frequency, training volume, recovery strategies and the training approaches to be included. These should all be related to the goals and aspirations of the client.

Delivery

Delivery of a PT session includes considerations around effective demonstration, client learning styles, communication skills, correction, intensity monitoring, client observation and effective use of training methods to support the client's goals.

Reflection

The reflection of personal training practice is a valuable inclusion for any PT. It will highlight areas of strength and weakness, help to identify skills and knowledge gaps, and might influence the trainers CPD and career progression path. It can help to form an action plan for future progression.

Adaptability

Successful PTs will be adaptable. There are so many things that can interrupt a session, including client fatigue, equipment availability and technique issues, among many others. As a PT you need to be able to think on your feet and make amendments within the session. Here are a few things you may need to adapt to...

- Clients form.
- Injury or illness.
- Special populations.
- Low client confidence.
- Client capabilities.
- Equipment available.
- Intensity fatigue.

Educating Your Client

Among the most important things you can do for your clients is to impart knowledge that will serve them well going forward. There are a number of aspects to consider here - namely dominant learning styles, and the stages of knowledge acquisition. Let's look at these areas now...

Learning occurs in different ways and it is important to cater to the client and the way they learn.

We have discussed exercise explanations and demonstrations and their value to a client learning new skills. For some people, having an exercise and its benefits explained will be adequate. Others will need a demonstration in order to understand the demands, while some need to actually perform the technique in order to fully grasp the finer points.

There are different ways in which people learn so you will need to take this into account when working with clients.

Visual



This type of learner will need to have things visually displayed to them. Your demonstrations are vital with visual learners. They must be very clear and you may need to ensure the client can observe from multiple angles of instruction to guarantee their understanding. Gaining their confirmation of understanding is also important.

Kinaesthetic



This type of learner will learn by being hands-on. Once they have a level of success in a movement and you confirm their technique is sound, they're likely to be able to replicate this again and again without any major issues. They may need to feel this success again if they have a break from performing a particular exercise but their performance, coupled with your reassurance, will ensure continued success.

Auditory



Auditory learners need to hear and comprehend the words you're saying. They will then be in a position to succeed based on their interpretation and confirmation to enhance their learning. Clarity in your speech when delivering teaching points is important so that auditory learners can be certain they are clear in their understanding.

Observation

Observation skills are some of the most important to hold as a PT. They will help you recognise if a client understands the concepts you are trying to get across through their body language etc.

In addition, they will also assist you in identifying the needs of the client to a greater degree. Consider a client who is performing a plank exercise for example. If you notice that after only a few seconds they start to fail in technique and their midsection drops towards the floor, you can make the judgement that they have pretty poor core control, which will influence your programme design in future.

There are different ways in which observation skills can enhance your delivery.

Monitoring Technique



As mentioned above, a client with poor technique should be offered a regression or an alternative exercise. You may need to observe client technique from different angles to make your assessments. Exercise performance that is too far away from ideal alignment etc would be a reason to adapt the exercise for the client.

Monitoring Intensity



Redness, sweating and breathlessness are all visual signs of exertion and may form a part of your session with healthy clients. However, if these signs are not in keeping with the component of the session, it is worth noticing and regressing the intensity. Other visual signs may be related to technique. For example, if a client starts to lean into the handlebars on a bike, rather than holding their posture, it may be a sign of fatigue.

Modifying Exercises



There are many reasons other than poor technique to modify an exercise or offer an alternative to the client. An example may be if you have a client who is very tall and the machine settings do not suit their build. In this instance it would be important to identify another exercise that would yield a similar result in terms of the target muscles etc.

Correction

As an extension of observation, we also need to be aware of how to adapt and correct what we are seeing. It is important that we step in and offer correction to technique if the client isn't performing something correctly. For example, let's look at the picture above. This client is being corrected to maintain his elbows in the correct position. He is also being coached to maintain his back in a straight position and not allow his midsection to sag. The attention to detail here is excellent, and will maintain a safe and effective environment.

Motivation

Motivation is one of the key barriers that many clients have to maintaining their exercise programme. It is something a PT should be able to offer to their clients through a range of various methods. During your sessions you may need to vary your delivery in terms of motivation. This is in part due to the different ways clients will need motivating, as well as being based on the phase of the training you are delivering. For example, a warm-up doesn't require too much in terms of motivation and volume, and nor would a more technical, education section of your session. Whereas when someone is attempting high-intensity efforts which require less technicality from you, a more encouraging approach would suit.

There are a number of different ways in which you can motivate a client ...

- Revisit goals..
- Positive reinforcement.
- Make exercise enjoyable.
- Set short & long term SMART goals.
- Use of visualisation.
- Progress trackers to look back on.

Communication

The next thing for us to consider is the trainers actual instructional ability. We need to ensure that our guidance, advice and plans are delivered to the client in such a manner that they are clear, concise and manageable. This will ensure the client can have a good chance of success.

When we communicate with clients, we do so both verbally and non-verbally through things like body language. Let's take a look at some examples of each.

Verbal

- The words you use – make it simple for your client to understand and use words that are positive and not negative. Also, when using teaching cues, make them understandable and not too technical as your client may struggle to understand. For example, when talking about scapula retraction you may ask your client to pull their shoulders back and down rather than asking them to “retract their scapula”.
- Motivational words – what you say is just as important as how you say it. Make sure you use words that empower your client.
- Teaching points – these can be really useful for clients in understanding how to perform an exercise. Make sure they are relevant and easy to understand.
- Corrections – there will be times that you need to correct your client. When doing so, make sure the words you use don't have negative connotations and that feedback is constructive.
- Timing – it's important to reiterate coaching points and important bits of information at the relevant point whilst the client is doing the exercise.
- Questions – asking questions is important as it's one of the best ways for you to get information from the client's perspective.

Non-Verbal

- Technique observation – watching your client throughout the exercises to make sure their form is correct.
- Physical contact – it's important first to make sure that you have gained permission to use physical contact as part of your client discovery. If so, you can use physical contact to make slight alterations to form and help improve technique.
- Demonstration – sometimes showing a client how to perform an exercise can be the best way for them to learn.
- Body language – your body language is an important way of communicating with your client. Think about the way you stand and carry yourself - for example, standing with your arms crossed may make you seem stand-offish.

Listening

Listening without any real communication or feedback is classified as 'passive listening'. You might be in this situation if you are listening to two clients discussing something that doesn't really require your input.

In truth, we would like to facilitate conversation with our clients and even if we are not responding, we would ideally be acknowledging what they are saying to us.

In fitness we tend to focus more on active listening.

Active listening requires more interaction between the speaker and the listener. There are many examples of when this would be used in a fitness setting between you and your clients.

If a client has a question for you regarding their programme or diet this would require a direct response and a conversation.

Equally, if the client is discussing their training and health background in a consultation, it may not require a verbal response but empathetic responses such as nodding, eye contact and facial expressions would be examples of active listening. In this way you are engaged in the conversation without using words.

