TODD BUMGARDNER

WITHOUT FRUSTRATING YOUR CLIENTS OR YOURSELF

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STRENGTH FACTION

"How do I cue, teach exercises, and make changes with my clients when they can't perform an exercise with good form?"

My business partner Chris Merritt and I travel internationally to teach workshops, and that question from above is literally the number one question about coaching that we field every time we present. And with good reason. There's a lot to consider when coaching someone toward good exercise form and putting them in a position to move successfully.

There's all of the X's and O's stuff to think about like joint positions, muscle tension, balance, etc. And there's the social stuff like making sure your client understands what is going on, and why, and is having a good session.

Mess up and you could, at worst, seriously injure someone, and at the very least, have a bad session. I have a shiny silver dollar tucked away somewhere in my desk drawer that says you'd like to avoid each.

That's exactly what this short book is going to teach you to do.

This is e-book is a selected excerpt from my longer work, *The Three Pillars of Fitness Coaching* (working title) and is written to answer the question from above while giving you actionable steps.

It covers how to identify good vs. bad movement, creating an environment that helps clients learn, when and how to cue, and all of the different cues you could potentially use to make a movement correction.

If at any time as you read this book a question pops into your mind I want you to do one, simple thing EMAIL ME! My email is Todd@beyondstrengthperformance.com. Drop me a line and we'll talk through your question and get it answered. I'll make sure you get the coaching you need to feel confident in coaching your clients.

Ok, let's get started with some talk on identifying movement and communicating changes succinctly.

Clearly Identify, Communicate Succinctly

We love to see a problem, offer an intervention, and see the positive outcome. Sometimes, however, it makes us verbose and overbearing—we say too much, and we try to correct too much. And, sometimes, as we offer those corrections we don't even have a clear objective in mind. We just need to fix something to prove our value to ourselves and to our clients. It's an immature thought process that we need to eliminate… and using this pillar of the paradigm is a practical way to squash it.

It begins with some upfront work—defining our movements, knowing our cues, creating the right environment, and understanding the person in front of us. But that work pays coaching dividends tenfold.

Movement Definitions

We all have an idea of a squat is and thoughts on how to cue it, but can you define a squat and what it should look like to you? What should move—when and where? What should be still—when and where? It might sound like a pain in the ass, but writing this out, and defining the squat for yourself, improves your ability to clearly identify what you're looking for in the moment that you're coaching. You can, with quick, concise precision, tell if everything is spot on, or if something looks slightly askew. You can move from Gestalt to Fault much faster.

The ability to clearly articulate to ourselves, and write down what something should look, like enhances our ability to visualize it in the moment because as we write our definition we have to continually visualize a good and a bad movement as we pen every line. We become absolutely sure of what we want, and how to

modify for individuals, in a super hurry. We've done all the thinking up front, so we don't have to think as much in the moment.

So, here's what to do:

Pull out the list of all the main movements in your training rolodex and define them. Start with the big guys—the squat, the hinge, the push, the pull—and then, on a needs basis so that you're working with context, define the rest of your movement rolodex. What should move—where and when? What should stay still? Where should the body, and its accompanying parts, be positioned—how and why? It's going to take time and effort, but you'll have much better identification skills for it.

Create the Environment

Let's pause for a hot second to consider the things affecting a client's brain as they perform an exercise under your supervision. They're sending efferent information down the chain to get their body to move, and often times they have to be more cognitive about it than you or I do. Afferent information is coming back from their sensory system to tell them just where their body is in space. There's motivation to do the exercise correctly—partly to please themselves, partly to please you, and partly to not look like a fool in front of other people in the gym. Also, a light just flickered, someone coughed, the floor feels weird under their left food, and that guy in the short-shorts that makes the sex moans while he does biceps curls just walked in.

The combination of the client's internal and the external environment puts a lot on the ol' processor when they're performing a movement. This is especially true in the early going when he or she is learning a movement. We have to take all of

this into consideration, and then, rather than indiscriminately using our words, we use them as tools.

Speak as little as possible, using only the necessary words, to improve someone's movement—making sure those words pertain to the current context. (Context, context, context…there it is a few more times just in case you haven't read it enough. But it's important, so keep reading it. Oh, and there's an entire section on it coming up. Hooray!) Most of your heavy talking work is done in the early going of working with a client. It's a learning environment—so the client must think more and we have to give them the context in which to think. Hence our words. This is when we introduce the cues that they can internalize, and it's when we deepen their understanding of the movements and their outcomes. We create an internal environment that allows them to coach themselves. That way, in the moment when they're performing, we only have to give them brief reminders—using the coaching mantras—or have a context-filled discussion between sets.

Once folks have context and understanding, communication then becomes succinct, and takes place mainly internally for the client. The goal is always to prepare clients to coach themselves and create the input that helps them understand. Some folks are visual, and others are more kinesthetic. Some are auditory, but need the information in small chunks and between action. No matter the input, the outcome is to create the internal environment that allows people to coach themselves. That's how they ascend toward mastery.

Rather than hearing us blabber on about how to perform a moment, our clients often learn better in an environment that teaches good bodily position and movement performance. While we'll never totally remove our need to verbally cue our clients, finding ways to create an environment that cues them without our words facilitates movement learning in a way that often helps people "get it" faster. I'd be remiss not to offer examples.

A lot of folks struggle with excessive torso lean when they are learning to squat. Rather than staying upright at the torso and sitting into their hips, they end up doing a squat-good morning hybrid and pop locking it to stand up. Not so bad if you're sweating it up on the dance floor (Pop lock and drop it. Pop lock and drop it. You're welcome for putting that into your head for the rest of the day.), but definitely bad for building a loadable squat. Two drills I really dig for creating an environment that keep folks out of pop lock land are the plate squat and the bottoms up kettlebell front squat.

Plate squats have a person press a light plate—five or ten pounds—straight out from their chest, holding their arms parallel, as they squat to the depth that works for them. Pressing the plate out and keeping the arms parallel to the floor gives the torso the stimulus to stay upright.

Bottoms up kettlebell front squats ask a lady or gent to hold two kettlebells in the bottoms up position while squatting. Keeping the kettlebells upright requires the person to position their upper-body directly over their hips and, voila, the torso stays upright.

The beauty of these two drills is they don't require any language for the client to "get it." They create an environment. Every coach needs a toolbox filled with these kinds of drills.

Let the First Rep Suck…Only Make One Change

It's often a *good* thing when a client makes a movement mistake in the early going. But it's also often that we let our inherent fixer open up it's mouth and make a correction way too soon. We have to tell that part of ourselves to shut up. Letting the first rep suck gives folks an understanding of what bad feels like which makes

it easier for them to find the contrast—what good feels like. It fast tracks their understanding of the movement while helping them to internalize it. As a result, it becomes easier for them to coach themselves. The caveat, however, is safety. If someone is likely to get hurt, then we intervene. But, if it just looks like a less than stellar rep, let it ride. If you've done a good job building context up to that point, you follow up with a quick intervention between the reps—a concise verbal cue, a quick kinesthetic cue, something else you've developed to intervene. Then, after the change is made and the set completed, follow up with a question. Something like, "What did you like about that set?" Then after that answer, contrast using something like, "Did you feel how what you liked contrasted with the first rep?" By letting the first rep suck, giving a small cue between reps, and then following up with questions, you helped the client coach himself or herself in the future.

We also must patiently make only one change at a time. Trying to change an entire movement during one set is not only unrealistic, it's overwhelming for the client. Use your Gestalt to Fault process, find your big-ticket item, and attack that. It might clear up the whole movement. If it doesn't, move on to the next priority down the chain between the next reps or after the set. If we can change one thing per set, or rep, by the end of a training session we can overhaul an entire movement. We just have to turn down the volume knob on the inherent fixer yelling in our head and be patient.

The Identification and Communication Rundown

Define your movements. Sharpen your Gestalt to Fault skills.

Teach a lot up front in the learning environment so you don't have to talk as much when clients are performing.

Let the first rep suck.

Cue one change between reps or sets.

Follow up with questions so that clients can internalize the contrast between good and bad.

Communication in Context

Cue in Context

Context is king—that statement applies to all facets of life. Applying understanding to a given situation in the correct way is the crux of success.

The key is thinking in terms of situations rather than broad, sweeping catch-alls. This is especially true for coaching movement. We have to understand the context of what's happening and what the situation needs from us. We must also understand how to create context for our clients so that they understand what's being asked of them.

Let's talk about that in terms of coaching the hinge as we consider different cueing environments.

External Cueing, Internal Cueing, and Context

Let's begin with simple, actionable definitions.

External cues direct attention away from the body and toward an external object with the aim of improving performance. "Spread the floor," is a common external cue to improve positioning and increase hip drive during squat and deadlift variations. Internal cues, in contrast, draw attention to a body part. Rather than saying, spread the floor, to get the hips working, we'd say something like "spread your knees."

During the past few years external cueing's been heralded while the industry's poo-poo'd internal cueing. There's been a collection of great research that's demonstrated external cueing's superiority in performance situations. So, before considering cueing in multi-dimension, we, collectively, thought unilaterally—jumping on the external bandwagon and hoofing internal cues in the pants. I think we've over-reacted.

Here's an admission: I used to be an external cueing Nazi. It was all external cues all the time. I based a part of my coaching paradigm, which I've since changed, on consistent, never-failing external cueing. I was wrong.

I, like most of the industry, failed to consider context. The context of different situations—whether or not clients had the context they needed to understand what was being asked of them and integrate an external cue. I was trying to fit every problem to a single solution rather than individualizing solutions to unique problems.

But as I coached and coached, strictly using external cues, I noticed something. They didn't always accomplish the desired end. It took a few sessions of aggressively beating my head against the wall until I was like, "Uh, hey man, stop being an idiot. This doesn't work all the time. But you're still really handsome and I love you."

Reality is internal and external cues fit into different contexts. To understand where they fit, we start with the question, *are we learning or are we performing?*

Learning

Consider a client that's woefully disconnected from their body—a mind traversing the earth with little sense of itself in space. They are incredibly kinesthetically unaware. This person needs a lot of physical learning.They need a combination of positional and internal cueing so they can learn and integrate what movements feel like. Integrating those feelings allows them to better understand where their body is in space and replicate movements.

Let's play-pretend that we share a client that can't dissociate their hips from their spine; where their hips go, their spine goes—and vice-versa. Before we can effectively use external hip hinge cues, we have to teach them the difference between their hips and their spine.

We start by having them attempt a standing hip hinge. Remember—letting the first rep suck is a good idea. It gives folks the opportunity to feel what shitty feels like—and that creates an important contrast to what good will feel like.

Now that we've done the hip hinge, we ask them, "Did you feel how your back rounded and you bent over rather than hinging at the hips." They're going to say something like, "no." Or a similar word. Then they'll express that they're not sure they know the difference. (They might, however, say yes. That is, indeed, in the realm of possibilities—this is where you say, "Duh, Todd." If that's the case it just makes your job easier. You can say something like, "Great! I'm glad you felt that. That's actually not the best case scenario… " And then continue on with your coaching.)

Now you get to pretend you're a magician.

Explain that you're going to try a few drills that will teach them the difference between their hips and their spine…and ask them if that's cool. They'll be like, "yes." Or something like that.

We start with the simplest of hip awareness drills—the glute bridge. With them lying on their back and knees bent so their feet are inline with their butt cheeks, we ask them to drive their feet through the floor and squeeze their butt like their trying to pinch something between their cheeks. Once they've done a couple of reps, and you can see that their glutes are doing the work, ask them if they feel their butt working. When they say yes, say good, those are your hips. That's where your hips are and that's what it feels like when they're working. But definitely figuring out phrasing that doesn't sound condescending.

Once they've figured out their hips, flip them over into the quadruped position. And I mean physically flip them over. You pick that person up and turn them over. You're the boss.

Please, don't do that. I'm kidding.

Once you have them in quadruped, coach them through the cat-cow (or as my friend Brendan Rearick calls it, the tiger-bison)—using your hands to kinesthetically cue if necessary. Once they start to get the movement, ask something like, "do you feel how that's your spine moving and not your hips?" They'll say something like, "Well, now that you mention it, indeed I do!" Smashing!

Now that you've created context with position and internal cues, return to the hip hinge and work on performance.

Performance

Quick aside before we go on. We're using the hip hinge as an illustration—this process applies to any movement/exercise/etc.

In the majority of cases, your client will now have a better understanding of their body and will be better able to integrate external cues. Now we'll use our hip hinge cue mantra to get them hinging—tall and tight, reach, drive (TRD).

We've shifted from a learning environment to a performance environment. Could we argue that it's still a learning environment? Of course, everything could technically be called a learning environment—attention, however, differs. At this point we're integrating information in the form of action so that they can perform a more complex movement task. If we have to think too much we can't perform as well.

Learning and performance exist on a continuum. One is never completely separate from the other, at least in the gym, but one is dominant over the other depending on the situation.

In a performance environment, we start with external cueing and work backwards. This means first try an external cue. If that doesn't stick, move to some kind of pattern assistance—use some kind of implement, a pole on the spine, etc., to give them input on position and movement. If you're still not getting anywhere, regress position and cue internally.

External cues keep us in the correct brain centers during performance. They direct action rather than initiate thought. Action keeps us in our lower brain centers—allowing for movement and faster reaction without much cognition. Thought directed by internal cues, pulls us into higher brain centers, which are much slower in producing movement. If a person has to think, they slow down—that doesn't work when fluid movement is the goal.

External vs. Internal: The Recap

If you have someone in front of you that's a poor mover, that's terribly kinesthetically unaware, use internal cues until they make better associations between where they are in space and their body. This denotes a strictly learning environment.

If you're in a performance environment, start with external cues and, if the person is struggling with performance, work backwards to a learning environment and internal cues.

Now that we have an understanding of environment, let's have a gander inside our cueing toolbox and fit the right types of cues to the right circumstances.

Cues: The Big 4 Types

One of the coolest things about being human, and one that we certainly take for granted, is how dynamically multi-sensory we are—and how quickly we can integrate the information that comes from our senses into a new understanding. Seriously, think about that. Try this brief, little thought experiment—take all of your senses away but one, I don't care which one, how would you gather information and understand the world? It would be a hell of a lot more difficult—you can bet your boots on that!

If we want our coaching to be as effective as possible, we have to create a multi-sensory experience for our clients—and fit that experience to the environment and the individual. While coaching movement, we draw on three, main sensory systems—auditory, visual, kinesthetic (or tactile), and environmental. Each coaching situation usually requires a blend of all three, but when we consider the person we are coaching, and the current environment, there's a sweet spot that applies each in the proper proportion. Type of application—the right kind of demonstration, the right kind of words, and the right kind of physical guidance—is also part of the equation. Let's look at each type of cueing and apply them in the learning and the performance environments for succinct communication that doesn't leave clients scratching their heads and feeling like they're taking a calculus final.

Verbal Cues

Simple rules the world of cueing internalization. Remember good old Occam's Razor?—the simplest solution tends to be the right one. Well, the simplest cue tends to be the right one. A convoluted series of words that displays how adept of a cunning linguist you are may impress your client. They might comment, "Well, my goodness gracious, does Jane ever know a lot of magical words! I'd love to hear her order ice cream!" But they won't understand a damn thing about what they should do…and if they do get it, it will take them longer.

Speaking isn't always appropriate and verbal cues aren't always the right coaching tool for a given job. But verbal cueing is still, and likely will always be, our main means of coaching. Humans like to talk to each other. And, when used in the right way, verbal cueing is seriously effective. Verbal cues simply need to fit the environment, the context, and the individual. As we mentioned during our chat on succinct communication, our words need to be well-timed and hold a lot of information in small packages. Let's examine verbal cues through the lens of each coaching environment.

Verbal cues in a learning environment are all about creating context around movements and positions to set clients up for future success. Whether the cue is internal or external, as both could be justifiably used in a learning environment, it has to help the client internalize a process for coaching themselves on a given exercise, or during a portion of a given exercise. If a verbal cue isn't designed to do this, well, it's just unnecessary verbal masturbation…and you can do that on your own time.

The first step in verbal cueing is determining what the problem really is, and we can usually narrow it down to three or four potential things—position, movement execution, and lack of understanding or focus.

If it's a positional issue, for example they've lost control of their hips and trunk and slide into either flexion or extension, our coaches use simple cues that are introduced to a client during their first day in our gym. Those cues are "tall and tight", "macho man", and "sad dog"—the last one we admittedly stole from our friends at Mark Fisher Fitness. Our clients learn these three positions as they are coached on the correct way to hold a plank—because almost every saggital plane strength movement is a moving plank, with the bench press being a definite exception.

INSERT SOME KIND OF RESOURCE THAT DEMONSTRATES THE THREE POSITIONS

Let's say that a client let themselves get a bit too extended during their deadlift set-up. We'd utter "tall and tight" to draw their attention to the fact that they were popping their chest out like Randy Savage (R.I.P.) after snapping into an Extra Bold Jalapeño SlimJim. An associated cue in that same vein is "get long." Since we've already taken the time to build context and associate these words with positions, just saying them can snap a person in and help them correct their movement. If they don't get it right away, it's never too late to stop a bad set before it begins and have a quick chat with them.

This chat would still use the simple cues that they were introduced to on day one. It would go something like, "So, you're pretty "macho manny" in your set-up right now, do you feel that?" Then they'd answer yes or no. If yes, the conversation continues by asking them what they have to do to get tall and tight. If no, then this is the time to blend in a visual cue. We'll walk through an entire scenario that blends all three in just a bit, but for now, back to the magic of the tongue.

It also may be the time to remove them from the deadlift's performance environment and move them back to a learning environment for a hot sec. They

may need a positional refresher as well as some awareness of their spine in space. Regressing them back to a foundational hip hinging pattern, say a tall-kneeling handcuffed hinge, to draw attention to the hips moving, and a cat-cow to draw attention to the spine. As we use these regressed movements, we actually use verbal, internal cues. "Do you feel how that's just your hips moving and not your spine? Do you feel mostly your spine moving there?" Then we bring back in the positional cues—tall and tight, macho man, and sad dog—and associate them with their appropriate positions in each regressed movement.

With a fresh, new load of context dumped on their brains, they return to the barbell to set up for their deadlift set. This is the time when we have to sharpen our coaching vision. If the set-up doesn't improve, and put them in a position to be successful during the exercise, you get one more crack at cueing them into a better position. Then, that's it. It's our cueing rule of three. *We get three chances to cue someone into a better position, and if we can't do it in three attempts we have to change the movement, or the starting position of the movement (e.g. Elevating the bar from the floor while deadlifting).*

You're probably wondering, why three chances at cueing the movement? Well, the simple answer is because if it's taking you more than three attempts to put someone in the right position, you've made a mistake, you've chosen the wrong movement for that person at that time. And that's ok, you just have to fix it. Here's why.

First and foremost, and most obvious, if they continue to do the exercise while starting from a poor starting position, there's a real solid chance that something bad is going to happen. Not like step on a crack and break your momma's back type stuff. But the cumulative, misappropriated stress could end up causing an injury.

Second, and slightly aftermost, you're likely to make the client think it's their fault that they can't get the movement. It's not. They are in the wrong position…and that's always our fault as their coaches. The often, unfortunate outcome is a high level of unnecessary frustration. Sure, people learn at the point of struggle, this is absolutely true. But if you introduce them to a struggle that they aren't ready for, the struggle won't teach them anything other than inadequacy. You get three cracks, if there's no positive change, change the position.

Moving on from position, let's tackle movement and how verbal cues apply.

In most instances, movement implies a performance environment. That means we are using succinct, external cues—drawing attention away from the body and allowing the person to just move. Staying with the deadlift example, let's talk about moving from the starting position to the lockout position and a simple cue that helps clients coordinate their hip and knee action.

"Drive the floor away."

(A lot of times, if it's during the movement, I'll just say "drive." Just saying that, after the client has had a bit of time to understand context, implies that they should drive their feet through the floor to stand up tall.)

Driving the feet into the floor by "driving the floor away" is something easy to visualize and actually feel, making the cue a dynamic dynamo of deadlift performance. Everyone knows what it feels like to push their feet into the floor, and when we use "drive" as a performance cue we don't burden them with a bunch of unnecessary words or get them thinking too much about their body. It's nice.

Simple, external cues such as this are the tried and true sherpas of movement in a performance environment—if you've done the work up front to teach and build context (e.g. With positional cues such as macho man, sad dog, and tall and tight), they guide people to solid performance without a lot of conscious thought. Let your folks be sherpa'd by simple words rather than thinking themselves into poor performance.

In a learning environment, internal cues are sometimes appropriate to build context. Since the goal isn't performance, and we likely need to draw attention to something for people to gain awareness, sometimes drawing attention to a body part is necessary to create a point of reference. The cat-cow example from earlier is a perfect illustration. The client is moving, but we're cueing them to move their spine while saying spine so that they understand that it's their spine that is moving. Spine. We want them to integrate that into their movement understanding so when we move forward, or back, into deadlifting they can perceive spine vs hips without a lot of conscious thought. Understanding gained through context-appropriate internal cues seems to improve application of external cues in performance environments because folks have a more integrated understanding of their body in space. Then the analogies, metaphors, and action statements of external cueing hit harder.

Maybe the problem isn't positional or movement-based—maybe the lady or gent just isn't getting the movement or they aren't focused intently on what they are asking their body to do.

If someone isn't understanding the movement that you're trying to teach them, well, it's your fault, not theirs. Understanding is all about building bridges between someone's currently held knowledge and the new knowledge they need to gain to be successful in a given situation. When it comes to coaching language, context is often built by understanding a person's experiences and using them to

draw a connection between their life and the exercise you're asking them to do. Here's an example.

Chris Merritt and I work with a full-time, tactical, federal, law enforcement unit. Most of the guys are former military, have been to war, been through all sorts of serious mental and physical tests, and have spent a fair amount of time working with firearms. So, to help bridge the gap between the gym and their work, we often use firearms analogies. Chris and I each have enough firearms experience to create useful analogies, and the guys can easily understand the relationships that we create between operating firearms and performance training.

Examples like this illustrate why it's so important to get to know and understand the individuals that you're training. When you see them in the full scope of their lives, bridges to understanding are more easily built.

Understanding is also derived from physical ability. If a person is having a hard time with a movement that you're asking them to do, they just might not have the physical capability to do it—yet. In that case, all the verbal cueing in the world won't bolster their ability to demonstrate the movement. Intellectually, they'll likely be able to grasp it, but they'll not be able to connect the dots between their brain and their body. You'll have to change position.

Here's another note of importance: situations like the one described in the previous paragraph are why it's so important to do a movement screen with all of your clients before you start training them. Learning about their movement capacities and inadequacies as early as possible allows you to put them into positions that they can physically understand and demonstrate earlier in the process. It alleviates a lot of frustration on their part and wasted words, and likely frustration, too, on your part. And it allows them to move from "yet" to "able" in a much faster, more seamless process.

Focus is another multi-headed beast. There are more reasons that someone could be unfocused than there are Baby Boomers named Bob. And there are approximately 9 billion Baby Boomers named Bob (not a real statistic).

If it's a focus issue, as you might have guessed, your normal exercise cueing likely won't work as intended. Maybe it will—maybe the person just needed to hear a word that would snap them in. But, most likely, something else is affecting their ability to focus and they either need help putting that thing aside or they need some kind of pattern interrupt that brings them into the present.

Sometimes, breaking their cognitive pattern and helping them focus is as simple as making a statement like, "You don't seem very focused right now. What's up? Everything ok?" That might be enough for them to compartmentalize whatever is distracting them and allow them to get back to work. Other times, they'll tell you what's up and you can help redirect them by getting them to change their focus to exercise performance. This shouldn't devolve into a counseling session if there's a big issue going on. It's simply an opportunity to help them focus in on what they're doing by helping them to redirect their attention.

It helps a ton to make focus the first priority for folks when they walk through the gym door. The G.A.B. System that we use to set daily goals, and focus in, is something that's helped our clients immensely to stay in the present moment of their training session. We'll talk more about G.A.B. In the section on Aims and Goals.

For now, remember that being verbose is no good for no one. But using a well-chosen verbal cue that matches the environment and solves the actual problem, whether it's positional, movement, understanding, or focus, is often effective.

Let's move on to visual cues.

Visual Cues

Let's start with a statement—visual cues sound a lot fancier than they really are, kind of like caviar. You get wooed by the name, but then you realize you're just eating salty fish eggs. Truly, visual cues are demonstrations of what to do and what not to do…as well as giving the client something to aim their eyes at. But don't let my downplay of the fancy name dissuade you, visual cues are super important and often necessary for a client's success with an exercise.

We use visual cues the same way in learning and performance environments. When teaching a new exercise, we always start with a solid demonstration of what to do before asking the client to perform the exercise. As we demonstrate, we introduce the coinciding verbal cues. Then we stand back, watch and let the client take a crack at the exercise without correcting them. It's part of our "let the first rep suck" philosophy. Letting folks try, and maybe fail, creates a great environment for teaching and learning. First, it allows them to learn the difference between poor performance and solid performance. Feeling what bad feels like before immediately being corrected allows the person some context about positions or movements they should avoid.

After feeling what bad feels like, we can demonstrate it for them, making our best approximation of what they were doing, so that they can connect their feeling with an image—taking full advantage of our sweet multi-sensory human experience. Two levels of understanding laid right on the ol' brain!

"Letting the first rep suck" also communicates that it's ok for them to try and fail—which is hugely important for their ultimate success. Learning is a process of exploration, and learning is at the foundation of any transformation. If we snuff out someone's eagerness to explore, or even baser than that, their safe feelings of exploration, by immediately showing them how wrong they are as soon as they try something, well, then we've completely undermined everything we are supposed to do as their coach.

Once we've established what bad looks like, we can again demonstrate what good looks like. Here's the flow:

Show them the exercise with a solid demonstration backed up by the corresponding verbal cues. Then, let them take a crack at the exercise. If they nail it, awesome! Let them know. If not, let them complete a rep or so without jumping in with a correction. Then, ask them to take a break for a second so you can show them what's happening—this is when you'll demonstrate what they're doing to them so they can slap a visual on top of what they're feeling. After that, you'll demonstrate the correct performance again so they have a contrast. I've heard my friends at Mike Boyle Strength and Conditioning call this visual cueing sandwich, "This, Not This, This." I really like that phrasing.

The "This, Not This, This" visual sandwich also works well for the first introduction of the movement. Start with a solid demonstration of the movement, then demonstrate a common mistake you want them to avoid, and then finish with another solid demonstration. After feeding them that sandwich, you can cut them loose to try the movement. Then, if they make a mistake, you simply return to the process above.

Now, what was all of that "giving clients something to aim their eyes at" mumbo jumbo? It's most easily illustrated with, but doesn't only apply, to medicine ball

throws. It's simply giving them a target to hit. Many times, if you have a person try to hit a target that's at an appropriate height or distance it helps them move their body through the ranges of motion it should move through—without a lot of thinking on their part or coaching on yours.

For example, having a person throw a ball at specific point on the wall often does wonders for putting their body in a good position to move—the trajectory requires certain joint positions and movements. If they aim their eyes at a given spot, and they move to throw the ball in a way that allows them to hit that spot, they've been visually cued and reinforced by the satisfaction of achieving that very short-term goal. It's nice.

Eye aiming also works for aligning the body in a good position. Let's say that you have a lady or gent performing a squat or deadlift and you need to help them keep their neck, along with the rest of their body, in a good position. We'll just call that position "neutral." Having them aim their eyes at a point across the room—the distance varies so you'll have to pick one in the moment—and keep their eyes there as they squat or deadlift will help maintain that sweet, sweet neck alignment.

The important thing to keep in mind is that we are super visual beings and our eyes can often override our other senses—we need to take advantage of that. Whether it's through demonstrations of what to do and what not to do, or giving your client a target to aim at, visual cues are an imperative part of the coaching process. Give people the opportunity to process information visually and integrate it dynamically into their movement. Back it up with the rest of your cueing.

Kinesthetic Cues

Sometimes folks just need a physical reference point to understand where their body is in space, where parts of it are in relation to other parts, and how to use all of that information to move. Touch, whether from another human being or from an object, is a lasting cue that also helps folks to quickly learn, and demonstrate, a new or improved movement.

I mostly use three types of kinesthetic cues in my coaching, and these are the names that I use for them, so if you know them under other names, I'm sorry, but this is my book. So we're using my words! O'doyle Rules! Ok, so I use hands-on cues, object-reference cues, and reactive neuromuscular training (RNT) cues. We'll have a chat about each of them.

Hands-on cues are just as they sound, I literally put my hands on the client to help them find the best position possible or to help them navigate the movement. Wait, tap the breaks. You probably already thought of this, but it's good to ask permission before touching someone. There are, of course, relationships that carry-on over a long time and the permission is somewhat implied, but it never hurts to revisit that permission. And, before we go any further into this foray on hands-on cueing, make sure you check the laws in your state. Not every state allows personal trainers to physically touch clients, so make sure you're aware. And if you're not allowed, and you do it anyway, don't you dare blame me. (You: The guy in the book said I could, officer! Officer Handcuffs: Tell it to the judge, sister!)

There are four types of hands-on cues that I use every day in my coaching—*positioning, resisting, point of reference, and RNT*.

Positioning goes down during the set-up of an exercise or between reps. Think of all those times when a client's set-up goes awry and your verbal cueing isn't getting the job done…and you physically guide them into position. That's hands-on positioning. I could carry on describing positioning, but I think the gist comes across better with an illustration.

Picture a lady or gent doing a set of incline dumbbell bench press, but as they perform the reps they have their elbows set too wide and they aren't pressing the dumbbells back far enough—ending with the dumbbells too far out over their chest and away from their shoulder joints. They're getting away with this mishaps because the weight is kind of light, but if they continue on this way as they use more weight something bad is going to happen.

Knowing that words are only going to cause confusion at this point, you mosey on over and ask if you can guide their next few reps. They, of course, give you the affirmative. Then you carefully grab their closed hands and turn them to align their elbows at an angle around forty-five degrees to their body. After that, you guide them through a proper pressing path. With a firm grip on their wrists, you assist them from the top position into a good bottom position and then guide their press through a motion that takes the dumbbells back to the appropriate top position—somewhere in the vicinity of a spot at arms length but above their face. You do this for a couple, or a few reps, then you cut the person loose to try it on their own. It sticks. Hooray!

The same works for set-up. If someone is doing a side-lying thoracic rotation drill, but they can't seem to get their legs in the right position, you help them out by moving them to the best position possible. Someone's back stuck in a super-flexed position before they're about to rip a deadlift off of the floor? Have them pause, press firmly but gently on the most flexed part of their spine, and ask them to "follow your hand" into the required tall and tight position.

Positioning is a great way for someone to feel their body moving from good to bad without the intellectual weight of words getting in the way. Sometimes just having another person physically guide us makes moving easier to understand.

Resisting, point of reference, and RNT are all weaved closely together in the tapestry of hands-on cues, so we'll talk about all of them at the same time.

RNT is the most complex of the three, so let's bang out a quick definition. During RNT, a dysfunctional movement pattern is driven further into the dysfunction that it's displaying so that the body's self-correcting mechanisms overcome the undesired movement. For example, a client is learning to squat with their bodyweight and their knee keeps caving in, so you press on the outside of that sucker and voila! The lateral muscle of the hip say, "No, no, no! That won't do at all!" and they start to do their job again—stabilizing the femur so that the knee doesn't cave.

Resisting and point of reference are subdivisions of RNT. While using a resisting technique, you apply some pressure on a segment of a client's body so that they feel something to push into. But it doesn't necessarily drive the person further into a dysfunction for self-correction like traditional RNT does. Let me explain with an illustration.

You have a lady or gent performing a set of rack pulls but they keep "scooping" their knees under the bar rather than driving through the floor and extending their hips and knees simultaneously. Verbal cues just aren't sinking in, so you walk on up to them and place your hand firmly between their shoulder blades and tell them to "stand up into my hand." Since your hand, and your pressure, is directly above the spot where they should be displacing force into the ground, the resistance teaches them where to push. Learning where to push allows them to "drive the floor away" and extend through the hips and knees simultaneously.

Essentially, you just gave the person a point of reference to move with, but the added resistance of your pressure changes the definition slightly. When using a point of reference, you're simply giving the person a little touch to either help them figure out where their body is in space or a subtle point to move around. Here are two examples.

A client is doing some sort of side-lying thoracic rotation drill with their legs stacked on top of each other. But as they rotate, rather than only moving through their upper-back and rib cage, their top leg slides on their bottom leg and their top hip rotates toward the floor behind them. No bueno. You, being aware of the no bueno-ness, drop on down to the floor and apply a little pressure through the top hip as you help them stack their hips back up. You maintain that pressure and ask them to perform a few more reps—your pressure keeps their legs and hips from sliding on each other. As you hold, you ask them if they feel the difference and if they think they could maintain that position on their own. Then you cut them loose to try.

Point of reference is also useful during the cat-cow exercise if a person can't sort out how to segmentally move their spine. Slight pressure on an individual vertebrae with concise verbal instructions like, "push into my finger, or arch away from my finger," helps folks figure just where in the hell that piece of their spine is. They now have a point of reference and they can integrate that point into the gross pattern. It's seriously cool to watch it work.

Now that we've hammered out all of the hands-on kinesthetic cues, let's move on to object-reference cues—which are similar to hands-on point of reference, but they use an object rather than a hand.

Ever align a PVC pipe, or some other kind of straight piece o' pole, aligned along someone's spine to teach them to hip hinge? If you just silently answered yes to yourself, then you've used a reference cue. Reference cues are simply using external objects to give clients an idea of where their body is in space and in relation to itself. Another common example is using a stability ball to help people maintain a solid arm to leg relationship during dead bugs.

The possibilities for reference cues are limited only by your imagination and, well, the things that you have lying around. Choosing when and how to use them is almost as expansive, but there are some simple parameters to help you decide when to use them.

Most of the time reference cues are appropriately applied in a learning environment that borders on a performance environment, and with a person that's lacking some situational, or gross, bodily awareness. The object is a better choice than a hands-on point of reference cue because they are going to use the object to perform entire sets. It would be kind of ridiculous, as well as impractical, to use a hands-on point of reference cue for an entire set. That's not so for an object-reference cue. They can appropriately give a person kinesthetic feedback for multiple sets, multiple exercises, hell, even multiple training sessions until the necessary awareness is earned and learned.

If you really need a position, and an accompanying movement, to sink in over the course of time, object-reference cues are dynamite-gold. I was going to choose either dynamite or gold as an obnoxious adjective, but I thought, why not up the ante? Use object-reference cues with your folks that really need a lot of input over a period of time to understand what a position, and a movement, should successfully feel like.

The doozy, the granddaddy, the pinnacle of all kinesthetic cues is RNT. We talked briefly earlier on about how RNT drives a movement further into dysfunction so that the body can self-correct and clean up a movement—and there are a ton of ways to use RNT. Let's break down knowing when it's an appropriate choice and a few solid examples for you to build on.

Like object-reference cues, RNT is helpful when improving movement over multiple reps, multiple sets, or multiple workouts. There are times, however, that it works as a quick movement reminder and then is removed. Either way, RNT is a powerful educator because it plays on two great natural functions of human movement: *we learn by making mistakes and we have a natural propensity to resist*. RNT amplifies the mistake and brings it to our awareness, and well, nobody likes to be "pushed." Also like object-reference, RNT is appropriate with persistent positioning and movement issues. The differences being that object-reference doesn't necessarily feed someone further into dysfunction and that RNT is more appropriately applied in a performance environment.

I bet you're wondering what kind of tools are appropriate for RNT. The most common tool is the elastic training band—jump stretch type bands and those small, flat broad suckers that are thin and super stretchy. You know the ones. But the reality is there are lots of great RNT tools. From medicine balls to chains, anything that you can use to safely nudge a person's movement and give them something to resist. Let's walk through some illustrations.

Here's one we've all experienced that's as guaranteed to happen as a morning poop after that first cup of coffee—a client sliding immediately into "Macho Man" posture (extension) as soon as they set up in a plank. Many times it's a simple lack of lumbar awareness that causes this nearly inevitable movement malady. Other times it's a lack of capacity that causes them to lose their solid position and slide into an easier position maintain. Other times still it's because they've trained themselves to use a poor strategy. RNT can help to solve each problem—gaining

awareness, building capacity, and replacing a poor strategy. And there's one simple application that works—lay something moderately heavy and flexible across their lumbar spine and have them hold that plank.

A chain, or several chains, works well.

The weight of the chain drives the back further into extension, into the dysfunction, raising awareness and giving the person something to resist against and correct their own movement.

How about those times when a person lacks lateral hip control during single leg movements and their knees collapse in? What a great RNT opportunity! Not only will the act of pulling the knee toward the midline of the body raise awareness and give the person tension to resist against, but it will also help to strengthen the lateral hip. Bang. For. Buck.

Anchor a band to the upright of something—a squat rack usually the most available option—and then have the person loop the band around their leg farthest from the squat rack, with the band running perpendicular to their body. The band should be pulling medially on the knee. Once you have the person set up, have them perform split squats and maintain control and alignment of their femur as they descend and ascend. Then, as they gain control and demonstrate more strength and proficiency, have them try some reverse lunging with that same RNT.

It's important to note that the tension of the band, or the level of any RNT input, should be enough to give the person feedback on position and tension worth resisting, but the person should be able to overcome it and maintain a good

position for the duration of a set or series of sets. If they can't, it's too much tension.

Outwardly, it seems counterintuitive to push someone further toward the dysfunction that they are having, but trust me, RNT is one of the best movement education tools that a fitness coach can maintain in their toolbox. Keep the few notes on application from above in mind and then let the movement problems that you have to solve bring out your creativity. You'll have your clients moving impressively and you'll look like some kind of exercise wizard.

Now, that we've moved through RNT, let's put kinesthetic cueing to bed and move on. I'll keep saying that it's tough to completely segment out different types of coaching cues in a real life coaching situation, but I'll also say that kinesthetic cues are often the most valuable that you can apply. People need to feel and integrate, and kinesthetic cues are truly the best cues for giving clients a feeling that they can understand and apply for themselves going forward.

Ok, on to environmental cues.

Environment Cues

Human movement is literally purposed by the environment. Our brain has our body respond to an environment, manipulate an environment, or simply move through an environment to achieve some kind of goal. It's, like, literally why we have a brain. So, setting up an environment for our clients that simply teaches them how to move without any excess talking, touching, or thinking is super cool and super productive. Environmental cues are also another type of tool that will make you look like Einstein's bastard great-grandchild—taking all that genius and applying it to exercise.

Environmental cues are exactly what they sound like—using the environment, or making small changes to the environment, to teach or correct a movement. They're used to improve position and movement path, making them dead ringer in learning and performance environments. And the best thing about them is that they are instant teachers—they offer immediate feedback about what went right or wrong with a rep.

Why do environmental offer such great and immediate feedback? Because we set them up to do so. We are controlling or creating an environment for the sake of educating without speaking—for the sake of letting a client's body educate itself. I can understand if that sounds ambiguous to you, so we're going to walk through some environmental cues.

Here's the scenario: your client is doing kettlebell swings and every time they hike the bell they swing it too low between their legs rather than hiking it up into their hips. The result is a discombobulated swing and a lot of spinal flexion. Not good.

You give the client verbal and visual cues—you could talk and move until you're blue in the face, but nothing is sinking in. So, here's what you do…you stick something between the client's feet that forces them to hike the bell up into their hips. If they don't hike high, they're going to smack that thing (at our gym we use medicine balls…we have some sizable ones).

During the first rep with your newly utilized environmental cue in place your client smacks the hell out of it and realizes that they are hiking too low. It clicks! Hooray! The next rep is a little higher, they just brush the top of the object. Then, Eureka! They hike the bell perfectly and snap up into a beautiful swing.

Smacking the implement between their feet with the bell instantly educated them and gave them an obvious, negative outcome to avoid. The result is an instant association between how they were moving—the position of their body and the path the bell followed—and the negative outcome. "I don't want to do that again!" They think to themselves. With that instant feedback in mind, they make a small movement improvement. (Let's take a minute to bask in the corniness of that last sentence.) After that, there's one more small improvement, but they still make a small error. Ok, they can note that. Then, finally, they move flawlessly and nothing bad happens. There's an instant reward, and our old pal dopamine helps them remember what they did to totally avoid the bad thing. It's pretty cool.

We don't always have to manipulate the environment to create a cue, often times we can use it as is. The floor, the wall, the squat rack—all of these immovable structures that give shape to the space around us serve as powerful movement educators. Let's walk through a half-kneeling example.

You're teaching a client the half-kneeing position (one knee up, one knee down) and they have a super hard time keeping their up leg in a good position with their hip, knee, ankle, and foot all in-line. Instead, their knee is diving in and, consequently, it throws off the alignment of the rest of the joints from the lower-body all the way up through the spine and into the shoulders. Everything you've learned about their movement capabilities lends you to believe that they can handle the position, they just need some awareness. So, you make a quick, environmental change.

Moving from the open floor, you set the client up so that they are in front of a post of a squat rack—the medial shin and knee of their up leg is aligned adjacently to the post and only an inch away. The goal is to keep their leg from touching the post—it automatically trains them to keep their knee from caving in. The rest of their body follows suit and they find solid alignment. It's very nice.

Closing Out Cueing

I don't typically like to just tell people what to do—it probably stems from my own aversion to such leadership—but I'm about to make a strong recommendation that leans not so subtly toward telling you what to do. There, fair warning. If there's only one thing you remember from this discussion on cueing, make sure it's that cueing isn't just a verbal phenomenon.

Remember that cueing makes use of the rich human sensory experience to help folks learn, understand, and consistently produce movements. Our job with cueing is to match the sensory experience to the person and to the circumstance—and given our ability to understand environment, personality, visual inputs, kinesthetic inputs, and auditory inputs, we have no excuse not to take a real-good crack at individualizing our cueing.

Conclusion

Choosing the right movements for our clients, and cueing them into the best positions during those movements, isn't as difficult as it seems. We just need some solid tools to help us guide our folks.

1. Know your movements so well that you can identify good vs. bad quickly and accurately.
2. Remember to let the first rep suck…don't immediately jump in with corrections.
3. Only make one or two changes at a time.
4. Communicate succinctly…don't use a bunch of words. If you can use a technique that doesn't require language, do it.
5. Keep the environment in mind…is it a learning or a performance environment?
6. Match the cue and the sensory experience to the person.

I've worked with hundreds of coaches over the years that have struggled to cue their clients into good positions so that they could train them harder and get them the results they were after.

The confusion associated with not being able to "make an exercise look right" left coaches frustrated and feeling like an imposter.

But applying the simple techniques and strategies from this book took their coaching skills to a level that they felt confident in. That confidence helped them transform their clients lives…and it transformed their careers.

A confident coach is an attractive coach.

If you apply these techniques, it will help you do the same. Commit to acting on this information, little by little, and you will become a great coach.

Thanks so much for spending this time with me.

Again, feel free to email me at any time with questions at:

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