

Starting Strength

Tactile Cues and Coaching

by

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I've noticed a problem recently. I don't know if it's been there all along, or if something has changed within popular culture that has severely encumbered an already difficult task. Either way, it must be addressed. **If you coach movement, you must physically touch your trainees.**

That you'd rather not is what I've noticed. I travel a lot with our seminars, and we've noticed that SSC candidates who are reluctant to physically correct their trainees on the platform are the people who fail the platform examination. And it's not limited to inexperienced coaches – I observed a SSC at a recent event who wasted three sets talking with a trainee squatting far above parallel (and by that I mean 10-12 inches) before I stepped in and took the trainee into a below-parallel position by the brute force of my hands, chest, knees, and elbows, thus demonstrating to him the position that had not been either taught or cued. He went on to squat to depth, even though he remained a Hard Case for the rest of the session.

The normal process starts with the recitation of the teaching method we have developed over hundreds of thousands of contact hours with clients and trainees in our gyms and seminars, followed by the coach's evaluation of the accuracy of the trainee's congruence with the model, and the subsequent use of cues – reminders of the elements of the movement instruction that need to be corrected. Cues can be short verbal reminders like "knees out!", visual reminders like knees-out motions with your hands, or tactile cues like touching the trainee's knees and gently shoving them in the desired direction.

These approaches work most of the time on better-quality trainees. But not all trainees and clients are physically gifted to the extent that these simple cues will always work. If less-invasive corrections do not work, you're still being paid to correct, so correct you must, and a more-invasive approach must be taken. This may require revisiting the teaching steps you started with, along with more detailed explanations of what, where, and why – depending on the trainee, since 14-year-old kids and 45-year-old scientists present the coach with differences in the "cognitive environment."

It may also require a more aggressive approach to tactile cueing as well. If a seminar attendee is leading with his chest out of the bottom, tapping him on the sacrum and blocking it with your hand with the instructions to "push up against my hand" corrects the problem most of the time, and that's why it has been incorporated into the teaching method we always start with. But maybe 20% of the room will continue to front squat out of the bottom, because this basic level of tactile instruction doesn't work for every trainee. Deeply embedded motor patterns are difficult to change, and sometimes

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it requires a more profoundly-perceived exposure to the difference. Or maybe the trainee is simply a physical idiot – it certainly occurs.

If your instructions and your cues do not penetrate within two attempts, you are wasting everybody's time by failing to escalate the situation – *people who cannot process repeated instruction about how to correct the movement problem must be shown the correct movement directly.* This involves a more disruptive level of tactile interaction, with the coach physically placing the trainee in the correct position and moving his body *for him* in a way that demonstrates the movement pattern the coach expects the trainee to execute. You stand behind him, put your left hand on his left glute-ham and your right hand on his mid-back and shove his ass up first out of the bottom, showing him exactly how you want him to lead with his hips. You stand behind him and pull back on his left hip with your left hand while pushing forward on his back between his shoulder blades with your right hand to show him exactly what the back angle should be and how he gets it there.

I think we all know this. You have seen me do this at every seminar, you've probably done it yourself, and you're surely already familiar with the effectiveness and efficiency by which this “enhanced” approach can correct a stubborn problem for a less-capable trainee. The question is: why are you still wasting time by hesitating to apply what you know works?

It may be that the growth of online coaching has presented many of you with a market for your services which does not either permit or require the use of tactile cueing, and some of you have forgotten about its power and usefulness. This is one of the few weaknesses in the remote/delayed approach to coaching, which works pretty well nonetheless. But there are clients for whom it does not work, and this is why we encourage all our SSOC clients to never waste an opportunity to get an in-person tuneup with an SSC.

But we see this in inexperienced coaches as well, people at the seminar who haven't had the opportunity (or at least should not have been afforded the opportunity) to handle online clients. So I think it really involves a basic reluctance to interact with a stranger at this level. We've been taught to keep our distance, that “personal space” must not be encroached, and that touching can be, and in some unfortunate situations will usually be, interpreted as either inappropriate, unwanted, or even as frank assault. This must be explicitly addressed with your trainee in advance – in writing if necessary. At the slightest indication that your professional physical interaction will be a problem, the coaching interaction must be immediately terminated, for your protection and for the trainee's. A client who does not trust you is not a client – he is a potential lawsuit, and he must be removed.

But if the problem is *yours*, *you* have to correct it. You are a professional movement coach, and it is impossible to select all your clients for their ability to be coached under the easiest of circumstances for you. There will be Hard Cases, and you must deal with them effectively and efficiently, or you are wasting their time and money, and *that* is unprofessional. When it is time to use a more invasive level of correction, you must do so immediately, dispassionately, and appropriately – in a way that gets the job done as quickly as possible and thus limits the time spent in physical contact with the trainee, so that it cannot be construed as unnecessary or excessive.



Rip demonstrates “enhanced” tactile cueing [in this video](#).

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And if this level of interaction becomes necessary more than a couple of times, *and* if you're confident in your ability to coach this way, the Hard Case will have been revealed as an Insolvable Problem. Once in a great while, there are people who cannot do barbell training – at least under your direction. If it becomes clear that you cannot get the job done, either online or in person, it is unprofessional to continue to take their money. A professional knows his limits and does not charge for what he cannot deliver.

But these people are rare, and the better the coach you become, the fewer people you will see that cannot be fixed. The first step is understanding that both you and your client may – for a few seconds – require engagement at a level that makes somebody uncomfortable. Overcome your social conditioning and do your job – as a professional.

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