
Developing Virtuosity in Coaching

The term [virtuosity](#)—“doing the common uncommonly well”—may be used to describe workout technique when an athlete displays near-perfect mechanics even at high loads and speeds. It is considered the mastery CrossFit participants seek to achieve. Chasing virtuosity can also be used to describe the path to becoming an elite CrossFit coach. Coaching virtuosos display an unmatched capacity to improve others’ fitness, and yet these virtuosos never consider their development complete and always seek to improve their craft.

The Level 1 Certificate Course is an introductory survey of the CrossFit methodology, and attaining the Level 1 Certificate should be considered the first step in becoming a CrossFit trainer. Passing the Level 1 test indicates an individual has basic comprehension of the CrossFit program and earns the designation CrossFit Level 1 Trainer (CF-L1 Trainer).

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance for how a new trainer can take additional steps to develop virtuosity in his or her coaching.

Qualities Of An Effective Trainer

An effective trainer must have capacity in six different abilities:

1. Teaching.
2. Seeing.
3. Correcting.
4. Group and/or gym management.
5. Presence and attitude.
6. Demonstration.

This list can be viewed as similar in principle to the list of 10 general physical skills for fitness ([What is Fitness? \(Part 1\)](#)). Athletes with capacity in each of the 10 skills are considered fitter than athletes who demonstrate excessive capacity in any one skill to a detriment of capacity in the others. Similarly, effective trainers demonstrate capacity in each of the six abilities listed above, not just one or

two. The more effective the trainer, the greater his or her capacity in each ability. This is also the focus of study and practical application at the [Level 2 Certificate Course](#).

1. *Teaching*—The ability to effectively articulate and instruct the mechanics of each movement. This includes the ability to focus on major points of performance before more subtle or nuanced ones, and the ability to change instruction based on the athlete’s needs and capacity.

A trainer’s ability to teach others effectively reflects both his or her knowledge as well as the ability to effectively communicate that knowledge. To communicate knowledge to others, a coach must understand what defines proper mechanics and what causes bad or inefficient movement. This requires continual study, and one’s teaching will improve with greater understanding in all fields that intersect with fitness.

An effective teacher also has a unique ability to relate to every student, regardless of his or her background and ability. This requires the teacher to distill a large body of knowledge to a single or a few salient points specific to the current need of the athlete and the movement being taught. An effective teacher also takes ownership for recognizing when communication between the teacher and athlete breaks down. Generally, the more forms of communication a teacher is able to employ (verbal, visual, tactile, use of different examples/analogies, etc.), the more likely training will be a success.

2. *Seeing*—The ability to discern good from poor movement mechanics and to identify both gross and subtle faults whether the athlete is in motion or static.

An effective trainer demonstrates the ability to see movement and determine whether the mechanics are sound or unsound. This ability first requires knowledge of when to observe and evaluate very specific aspects of the athlete’s movement (e.g., trunk-to-femur relationship

for hip extension, center of pressure on feet for posterior-chain engagement). It also requires knowledge of the differences between good and poor positions. An effective trainer has the ability to see faults both when the athlete is moving (e.g., hip extension) and not moving (e.g., the receiving position of a clean). Newer coaches tend to have the greatest difficulty spotting movement faults while athletes are moving.

3. *Correcting*—The ability to facilitate better mechanics for an athlete using visual, verbal and/or tactile cues. This includes the ability to triage (prioritize) faults in order of importance, which includes an understanding of how multiple faults are related.

Once a trainer can teach the movements and see faults, he or she is then able to correct the athlete. Effective correction makes an athlete's mechanics better.

Correcting hinges on the trainer's ability to:

1. Use successful cues.
2. Know multiple corrections for each fault.
3. Triage faulty movement.
4. Balance critique with praise.

Any cue that results in improved movement mechanics is successful and therefore a "good" cue. There are no specific formulas, formats or rules to follow for cues, and their value is based on the result. However, generally making cues short, specific and actionable tends to result in a greater success rate. A trainer needs multiple strategies for each fault because different clients often respond to the same cue in a different manner.

When multiple faults occur at once, a trainer is best served by attacking them one at a time in order of importance (i.e., triaging). The ordering is based on the severity of the deviation from ideal and the athlete's capacity relative to the task; no single ordering of faults can be used across all athletes in all applications. Throughout the cueing process, a trainer often needs to celebrate small changes or even just celebrate hard work to build rapport and

acknowledge a client's effort even when those efforts are not immediately successful.

Newer trainers tend to be lacking in their ability to see and correct movement. When coaching others, trainers need to focus on movement. Good coaches relentlessly watch movement with a critical eye. Good coaches are constantly asking the following questions: How could an individual be more efficient and safe? What cues would result in a better position? How can cues be delivered to produce the best response from the athlete? Good coaches produce noticeable changes in their athletes' movement. To develop this critical eye, coaches can work with great trainers, film themselves or other athletes, or film classes.

4. *Group Management*—The ability to organize and manage, both at a micro level (within each class) and at the macro gym level. This includes managing time well; organization of the space, equipment and participants for optimal flow and experience; planning ahead; etc.

Group management speaks to the trainer's ability to reduce the logistical set-up and preparation time during a class so as to maximize the amount of teaching and movement time. This means the trainer plans the instruction ahead of time and perhaps pre-arranges the equipment and/or weights to avoid excessively talking at the expense of moving.

Allowing for enough practice time in every class is necessary for both the trainer and client. Less practice time gives the trainer less time to observe and cue movement mechanics, and it gives the client less time to work on movement with improved form.

Every student should feel he or she received personal coaching within the group atmosphere. Regardless of experience, trainers should make an honest assessment of the time and attention given to each client after each training session. The goal is to maximize a trainer's effectiveness and reach.

5. *Presence and Attitude*—The ability to create a positive and engaging learning environment. The trainer shows empathy for athletes and creates rapport.

Although presence and attitude are more intangible than the other criteria, clients immediately feel their lack. “Positive” should not be interpreted as fake or forced. A

“We are practicing not weightlifting but commitment. Commitment spawns success. Only by redoubling our efforts do we best succeed. Expecting success to motivate our efforts is the loser’s gambit.”

-Coach Glassman

positive learning environment may take on many different forms. A trainer should be authentic, with a goal of creating a positive training experience for clients. An effective trainer recognizes each person has different needs and goals. It is the trainer’s responsibility to determine how to relate to and motivate each individual in order to help him or her reach stated goals. An effective trainer demonstrates interpersonal skills with an ability to interact and communicate with each client individually.

Care, empathy and a passion for service are traits commonly displayed by trainers with a positive presence and attitude. Effective trainers care about improving the quality of their clients’ lives. Clients perceive this care more quickly than they perceive a trainer’s ability to explain mechanics, anatomy or nutrition.

6. *Demonstration*—The ability to provide athletes with an accurate visual example of the movement at hand. A trainer may do this using himself or herself as an example or by choosing another athlete to provide the example. This requires a strong awareness of one’s own movement mechanics. Demonstration also includes the concept of

leading by example: A trainer should follow his or her own advice and be an inspiration to clients.

A trainer must be able to provide a visual demonstration of the movement. Demonstration is a useful teaching tool to show safe and efficient movement and range-of-motion standards. It is acceptable to use others for this purpose in cases of physical limitations. A trainer with a good eye should have no problem quickly finding someone for this purpose.

Demonstration extends beyond moving well in a single class; demonstration also means a trainer leads by example, adhering to the same range-of-motion standards as his or her clients, following his or her own programming or nutrition advice, or putting forth the positive and supportive attitude he or she wants to see in clients.

Guiding Tenets While Gaining Expertise

Expert training comes from years of experience and study long after the completion of the Level 1 Certificate Course. However, a novice or less experienced person can still train others. Three important principles should guide trainers at all levels:

1. Master the fundamentals.
2. Limit the scope.
3. “Know what you don’t know.”

Master the Fundamentals

New athletes are most successful by adhering to the charter of mechanics, consistency and then intensity. Coaches often manage the time frame in which clients reach high levels of intensity. A trainer should not be fooled into thinking new clients need overly complex movements and high-volume workouts to be “sold” on his or her services. Coach Glassman wrote specifically about this in an open letter to CrossFit trainers in [2005 \(Fundamentals, Virtuosity, and Mastery: An Open Letter to CrossFit Trainers\)](#). Trainers need to take time teaching clients proper mechanics and ensuring they move correctly before high levels of intensity are applied. Insist on consistently safe and correct mechanics, then very gradually increase load and volume—watching closely for

movement faults. Not only does this decrease the risk for injury, but it also sets athletes up for greater success in the long term: efficient and sound mechanics allow ever-increasing speeds and loads.

Applying intensity at either end of the spectrum—too much too soon vs. too little or none at all—blunts the overall benefit from the program. Pushing one's limits drives new adaptation, and this cannot happen without intensity. On the other hand, pushing too hard too soon may result in long-term inefficiencies or injury. When the trainer is in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and progress slowly. Even at low intensity, many participants see benefits simply from performing varied functional movements, and it will become more clear over time that intensity can be added.

Limit the Scope

Many CrossFit affiliates follow a group-class model, which can be difficult for a novice coach. The demands of teaching and class management often take the attention away from seeing and correcting movement. New trainers are encouraged to coach friends and family in individual or small group sessions (two or three athletes) to perfect their ability to improve mechanics before taking on large group classes. Another option is to assist a head coach for classes and small group training. The new trainer can improve his or her ability to discern poor movement and cue good movement, while the head trainer addresses the other logistics. New trainers should seek out internships or assistant roles at local affiliates to gain this experience. A trainer needs to increase the size of classes gradually to continually deliver quality training, as Coach Glassman articulated in 2006:

“The reduced trainer to trainee ratio can dilute the professional training standards that we’ve embraced. This natural dilution can, however, be compensated for by the trainer’s development of a skill set that is only very rarely found. To run group classes without compromising our hallmark laser focus and commitment to the athlete, the trainer has to learn to give each member of the group the

impression that he is getting all the attention that he could get in one-on-one training, and that requires tremendous training skill.

We’ve seen this skill fully and adequately developed by only one path—gradually migrating from one-on-one to group sessions. The trainers who are running group classes without growing into them are typically not working to the professional training standards that we’ve described.

All the demands on the trainer skyrocket in this situation, however. Attention, enthusiasm, voice projection, and engagement all have to escalate. It is an acquired skill—an art, really. Our goal is to give so much attention and “in your face” presence to each participant that each is actually grateful that he didn’t get more attention. The essential shift is that the level of scrutiny and criticism is ratcheted up along with the rate of praise and input for each client. The trainer becomes extremely busy. There’s no way a new trainer can walk into this environment and do well.”

Beyond the demands of running one quality class, there is also the demand of delivering that quality training for multiple sessions a day. As Coach Glassman said when training in Santa Cruz, California:

“Training with the attention and commitment that we bring to our practice, though fun and immensely rewarding, is also draining, and five appointments per day is about all we could handle without an unacceptable drop in energy, focus, and, consequently, professional standards.

My commitment to my athletes is clearly expressed and perceived in our first meeting. I am all theirs. They are the object of my focus and the focus of my conversation. They come back not because of my physical capacity but because they believe in my capacity to develop theirs.”

This notion of limiting the scope for the novice trainer means avoiding committing to too many clients or classes beyond what will result in quality training. Although quality training is subjective, the goal should be to have every athlete leave a session with improved movement and a positive experience so he or she is excited to return for the next session.

"Know What You Don't Know"

The directive know what you don't know means trainers should have the clarity and self-awareness to admit when they do not know something. Whether it is a question regarding anatomy in the squat, why someone has back pain or why excess sugar can compromise health, it is not wise to try to make up information when an issue is beyond the current level of knowledge or *scope of practice*. Working only within the limits of one's knowledge will help protect the safety of clients and build credibility. A trainer cannot be expected to know all things related to health and fitness. Develop and foster a community of other professionals clients can be referred to with confidence when necessary. Seek to learn the answers to any questions, and in the case of any medical condition, the trainer should always refer the client to a physician.

Pursue Excellence

To be a successful trainer (or affiliate), the recommended "business model" in CrossFit is the relentless and continual pursuit of excellence. Pursuing excellence was the guiding tenet from the early days of the original CrossFit gym in Santa Cruz, and the concept continues to guide larger decisions related to CrossFit.com, the CrossFit Journal, and the Level 1 Certificate Course, for example. The overarching purpose is to bring more quality training to more people. Rather than devising a business model in the pursuit of money, devise one that is focused on making the training (and, by extension, the clients) better. That difference is the difference between success and failure:

"The pursuit of excellence is the heart of the CrossFit business plan. Money is, for many, elusive because markets are unknowable. But while markets are unknowable, excellence is obvious to most everyone, especially in free

and large markets. If you can accept the three premises that:

1. Markets are largely unknowable
2. Excellence is obvious to everyone, and
3. Free markets reward excellence

it becomes obvious that the most effective business plan comes from achieving excellence and letting the market bring the money to you (Figure 1). The efficiency and effectiveness of this paradigm are breathtaking."



Figure 1. Free Markets Reward Those That Achieve Excellence.

Marketing (in the sense of advertisements or promotions) is not fundamentally at the heart of improving the product or service, and therefore, not in the pursuit of excellence. To pursue excellence, ask the question, "What would make the training or the affiliate better?" An analysis of pros and cons can muddle every decision, and most issues can be decided by a simple question: "Will it improve the quality of the programming or the training experience?" If the answer is "Yes!" you are most likely pursuing excellence.

Advance One's Education

It is recommended that trainers never stop learning. A CrossFit trainer should consider the Level 1 a first step in education and should continue to educate himself or herself in all subject areas related to fitness— anatomy, physiology, nutrition, biomechanics, etc. A greater understanding of each will help with teaching clients, specifically when answering why a particular method or movement should be included in training. Working with other coaches, including specialty coaches, can help a trainer better see movement faults and learn correction strategies. Understand the mechanics, cues and techniques of complex movements and be able to teach them to others.

To keep up with athletes' progress, a coach must continue to refine and advance understanding of advanced skills. If a trainer's clients are not testing the limits of his or her knowledge, the trainer is not doing a good enough job with them. An expert coach is eager and proud to have a student exceed his or her abilities but seeks to delay it by staying ahead of the athlete's needs rather than by retarding the athlete's growth.

Here are some specific suggestions for how trainers can advance their education:

1. First, and foremost, teach to learn. There are ways to teach to learn responsibly; i.e., by insisting on the points of performance taught at the L1 and adhering to the charter of mechanics, consistency and intensity. These guidelines enable trainers to learn and gain experience while safeguarding the health and well-being of people in their care. The key is actually working with other people in a dynamic environment, whether they are friends or family or athletes at a local affiliate. It is only through experience that a trainer will learn and gain competency. Understanding biochemistry, anatomy and teaching methodologies is important and supportive of this endeavor, but it is not enough to allow a trainer to apply knowledge in real time.
2. Watch other coaches—specifically those who are more experienced. Watch what they watch and when they watch for it. Listen to their cues. The best coaches often need very few words to produce noticeable improvement in mechanics. Also watch their rapport with clients. What draws clients to them?
3. Attend a [Level 2 Certificate Course](#) (L2). The L2 is for trainers to work on their training (specifically seeing and correcting movement) in the presence of their peers. The course is designed to give trainers practical feedback based on the six qualities of an effective trainer. Where the Level 1 Course is tailored toward understanding the conceptual framework of CrossFit, the goal of the L2 is to improve the skill set needed every day by a trainer.
4. Attend additional courses. CrossFit has a host of specialty courses: Weightlifting, Gymnastics, Endurance, Kettlebell, Kids, Football, Powerlifting, Movement and Mobility, etc. Some of these specialties are covered briefly at the Level 1 Certificate Course, but the dedicated courses offer an in-depth look at a particular modality or skill set. Specific methods for teaching these techniques may differ from the general information provided in the Level 1 Course. Seek to understand how the differing methodologies are appropriate for different applications. Courses are also offered under CrossFit's [Certification](#) branch and cover such topics as anatomy and physiology and best business practices. Those pursuing advanced credentials in CrossFit may use these courses for required continuing-education credits, but the courses are open to anyone interested.
5. Read and study everything related to training, movement and health. The [CrossFit Journal](#) is a great place to start and is free to everyone. It covers material from all the seminars and provides examples, opinions and practical experiences from some of the best trainers in the community.
6. Do not be afraid to step outside the CrossFit community for educational opportunities. It can be helpful to see how others teach, change mechanics and program. Even if a coach is training specialists, it is likely aspects of his or her methodology will be applicable to CrossFit clients.

7. Study [CrossFit.com](https://www.crossfit.com). The archives (since 2001) contain years of original CrossFit programming. It is a great resource for learning and experimenting with workouts.

Furthering one's education will also help in preparation for obtaining additional credentials, such as the Certified CrossFit Trainer (Level 3) and Certified CrossFit Coach (Level 4). More information about these certifications can be found [here](#). The CrossFit Coach credential is the preeminent trainer designation offered by CrossFit: the goal of this evaluation is to provide a distinction for expert coaches within the community.

CrossFit Community And Representation

Many participants at the Level 1 Certificate Course view their Seminar Staff trainers as "CrossFit" or CrossFit ambassadors. While the Seminar Staff are CrossFit ambassadors, the most important ambassadors are those participants who go on to become CrossFit trainers in the community. CrossFit trainers working at the affiliate level touch and change lives every day.

CrossFit hopes that these trainers care and protect the community as they would care and protect anything they value and respect. This would be reflected in adhering to guidelines presented in [Responsible Training](#), specifically with respect for all individuals. True experts never stop learning and never try to overstep the scope of their knowledge. Clients have entrusted their health to CrossFit trainers, and it is the trainer's responsibility to make safeguard and improve the health of all clients.

Much of what is now part of the CrossFit community was suggested by the community members and then implemented by CrossFit to bring more quality training to more people. The CrossFit.com website, the CrossFit Journal and even the Level 1 Certificate Course were all launched after suggestions from the community. The goal of CrossFit has always been to favorably affect more people with CrossFit training, and each of these resources has the power to do just that. CrossFit wants its trainers to be a vibrant and engaged addition to the community. The

CrossFit Certification and Training Department encourages each member of the community to attend courses and events, to pursue higher levels of credentials and to provide feedback. Level 1 Certificate Course participants are asked to provide feedback upon completion of the course, but anyone can write to coursefeedback@crossfit.com at any time with feedback.

Thousands of CrossFit trainers have used the Level 1 Certificate Course as a springboard to their coaching career. New trainers should use the material gained from the Level 1 Course and this Training Guide and slowly apply it to others, incrementally increasing their scope over time. Fitness can be improved throughout a lifetime, and so too can coaching. An expert coach prides himself or herself on a commitment to continually pursuing virtuosity in the interests of improving the health and performance of all clients.

