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Editorial: When Is A Person Believable?

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Believability, what is it? Is it about appearance? Is it a function of a person's job? Or, is it all about how a person says something? There are no quick or easy answers to these questions. When a person is believable, we trust the person. Most people want to have confidence in what is said by a friend or a colleague. But, first, let me lay the foundation for this brief piece. Recently, I've been updating a manuscript that has been in the works for several years. It is about flexibility. How should a person obtain the range of motion to be healthy or to do well in sports? I'm not in any hurry to publish the work since the content is very controversial. Ask any athlete or weekend warrior and he will tell you why and how to be flexible. Of course, my point is that, regardless of their success or the lack of it in sports, athletes only know part of the story. Although athletes think they know exactly the right steps to increase their range of motion, most waste a lot of time doing useless exercises. My academic background in anatomy and athletics causes me to question most of what is published about flexibility, especially the testimonials and the contemporary movement descriptions. In fact, 95.7% of the content is meaningless and a waste of time. The content is not believable. The athletes appear to be trustworthy, but should a person believe them?

This article is about believability. What would a person need to be believable? When would an athlete know that the coach's advice is incorrect, whether it is about flexibility exercises or training for an upcoming event? Is the coach believable? For many athletes, the answer is very simple. Athletes believe that the coach is right. After all, he is the coach. We are athletes. Our job is to follow the coach's advice. The answer is obvious if you heard athletes speak of their coaches. They expect coaches to tell the truth! And, many people do just that. They tell it without bias, and they tell the truth as they know it. This is not anything new. It is what we expect of coaches, family members, employees, friends, colleagues, and even politicians. We also expect it from our teachers and mentors. Professionals, who are recognized authorities in their field, are expected to tell the truth. This is what I expect (i.e., believability) when I read an article or listen to a presenter at a professional meeting. And, yet more than I would like to admit, I'm disappointed on many occasions. Unfortunately, there are too many so-called professionals playing politics. It is disturbing, unethical, and wrong.

Take, for example, a recent article published on the <http://www.detnews.com> web site known otherwise as The Detroit News LIFESTYLE Fitness. The author is a sports medicine person who works at a hospital in Detroit. The content is problematic. It appears to be driven by a political agenda that is wrong, unprofessional, and unnecessary. For many, reading an article is “the” connection they need with believable content. Readers want to believe that what they are getting is solid information that is presented accurately and fairly. They want to trust the information. No one wants to read an article that is an advertisement or an explanation that is unjust or unfair to others. Those who deliver the news every evening understand the importance placed on integrity and trust. It is exactly the same when it comes to offering advice in articles.

If the content of an article is not fair (i.e., given reasonable knowledge of specific information), and if it can be demonstrated that the comments are guided purposely toward a specific agenda, then the question of believability and trust is a fair one to ask. Bearing in mind that the article is a two-page “statement of the author’s beliefs” – a person should probably be more forgiving. However, this is not possible for several very important reasons. First, after the author jumps into the “characteristics” of the services expected of personal trainers, he identifies “tips” to get the most for one’s money. This, it seems to me, is the heart of his comments that bears questioning. Aside from several obvious statements about selecting the best personal trainer, he identifies two certifications (i.e., the Health//Fitness Instructor certification offered through the *American College of Sports Medicine* and the Personal Trainer Certification offered through the *National Strength and Conditioning Association*).

“All words are pegs to hang ideas on.” -- Henry Ward Beecher (1812-1887)

Okay, what is wrong with the statement? It is the author’s opinion and every person is entitled to his/her opinion. The truth is the public is entitled to a non-biased opinion! For example, it is not enough to use words to justify a person’s favorite flexibility exercise if in fact the exercise is contraindicated for the majority of those who read the article. Personal opinions and political agendas should not be part of the author’s comments, particularly when the comments are styled in a commercial format. In other words, to share health and fitness information with the public requires the author to be open and fair with what is known at the present time. *This is a requirement for believability.* Without it, all information is little more than a commercial or the selling of a product. This kind of thinking is likely to be biased and unfair. That is why the author’s comments are untrustworthy. Educators understand this point all too well. College teachers know that it is imperative that multiple sides of a question are addressed equally and forthrightly.

To side step this responsibility is a question of believability. Meaning, if a college teacher fails to present a reasonably balance expression on any topic, then it is clear that the students can interpret the lecture as biased if not propaganda. The purpose of this piece is not to address the question of propaganda. Rather, did the author purposefully present information that could be defined as biased when it should have been obvious that

a balanced perspective could have been educationally beneficial to the reader? It appears that the author purposefully misguiding the readers by not mentioning the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists'* board certification (i.e., the "Exercise Physiologist Certified" -- EPC exam). This is particularly important because exercise physiologists are also personal consultants, professional trainers, and educators. The difference between exercise physiologists and personal trainers *per se*, however, is huge both in terms of education and professionalism.

For the author to advocate the role of exercise training, rehabilitation, and/or therapy to personal trainers is an unfortunate use of words to hang a particular idea. Also, it is an effort to avoid the role of the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists* in the professional development of academically prepared professionals. The ASEP organization is totally responsible to the public's needs and concerns about professionalism, integrity, and accountability. This is not true for personal trainers because they do not collectively represent a profession. Exercise physiology, as defined by ASEP, is a profession. Members of the organization abide by a code of ethics. Board certified exercise physiologists are accountable to the ethical application of a scope of practice. And, very importantly, where possible, members graduate from academically accredited institutions and are, therefore, held accountable to a standard of professional practice. This is not true for personal trainers. The idea that the advice offered by the *American Council on Exercise* is the same as advice from exercise physiologists is misleading and, possibly, very badly argued.

Exercise is a business. There is a lot of money to be made and many companies understand this thinking. Exercise is fun, and many people do not want it to be much more than that. Exercise is also therapy. Even if it is defined by a medical doctor or an exercise physiologist who says to someone to go home and exercise three times per week for a minimum of 30 minutes at a heart rate around 150 beats per minute, it is therapy. The "exercise prescription" as most academic exercise physiologists have been taught in their college courses is a type of medicine. When it is prescribed with the right dose and frequency, then the intensity or impact on the mind and body is good. Like other medications, many people either do not take them as prescribed or stop altogether with frequently negative results. Exercise physiologists, as healthcare professionals, not personal trainers or exercise science majors, have the opportunity for board certification through ASEP. This is a believable professional step. Other certifications are neither the same nor believable. So, why would the author of the article avoid mentioning the ASEP certification?

Exercise physiology, as defined by the ASEP organization, is a healthcare profession. Members are educated to prescribe exercise in the same historical context as medicine is prescribed by physicians. For the author of the brief piece to avoid although the contribution of exercise physiologists in the development of proper and safe exercise programs is unbelievable. Here, a good piece of advice is that every time a person writes an article about "exercise" and/or any and all forms thereof and fails to mention the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists*, the reader should simply stop reading the author. The content is not believable. This thinking is no different from our

understanding of the healthcare professionals in regards to physical therapy, nursing, occupational therapy, medical doctors, and others who have a demonstrated body of specialized knowledge generated from decades of research-based evidence.

When it comes to dealing with health, fitness, rehabilitation, and athletic problems, the ASEP board certified exercise physiologist is academically prepared with advanced thinking and technology to handle different issues and concerns. This has been the case for decades, although less well-defined professionals with a variety of traditional connections have prevailed (e.g., kinesiology and/or exercise science departments). Today, exercise physiologists from within various hospital settings also have a strong voice. An example of this is the author of the piece who is a program director of preventive cardiology at a major hospital.

Just as the public may not realize that much of what we know today about coronary artery disease, risk factors, inactivity, and the physiological benefits of a rehabilitation program has been known for decades, the idea that somehow in the midst of the 21st century the sports medicine researchers *per se* have carried the “prevention-rehab” banner is entirely incorrect. Exercise physiologists paved the way for understanding the cardiovascular physiology of exercise and rehabilitation. The idea of medicine having done this is laughable. Exercise physiologists, as hybrid physical educators worked for decades doing research and proving themselves with scientific publications, have paid the price for their professionalism.

To not write of this point in the context of fitness development is beyond comprehension. There is no reason to believe that an exercise physiologist would not write about other exercise physiologists or the profession of exercise physiology. And, yet, not once was the ASEP organization or the exercise physiology profession mentioned. Clearly, to have done so would have at least argued for a balanced perspective. Therefore, the bottom line is this: Regardless of who writes an article and where he or she might work, the content is believable only if the writer is non-biased.