

CASE STUDY

Recommendations for Effective Coaching Practices: A Case Study using the Multidimensional Model of Leadership as a Guiding Framework

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Abstract

Universities, sport governing bodies, and industry associations have employed coach development programs to remedy gaps that coaches experience in their job preparation. The purpose of this article is to report on a single-participant case study that investigated the applicability of one popular theory used in coach development programs: the multidimensional model of leadership (MDML). A key tenet of MDML is that athletes will experience positive gains in their performance and performance satisfaction when coached in their preferred way. Research testing the MDML has produced a nearly universal list of athlete-preferred coaching behaviors (e.g., democratic coaching styles are highly valued). The present case study explored the extent such a list held true for one collegiate athlete during her playing days. A structured telephone interview was used. The participant's responses were analyzed using discourse analysis. The results of the discourse analysis were synthesized with findings from the research literature used to compose the interview questions (i.e., a critical interpretive synthesis). Findings from the present study indicated there was general agreement between the research-generated list of athlete preferences and the participant's own preferences as a collegiate athlete. Yet, findings of the investigation also revealed nuances in how situations (e.g., injuries, athlete empathy towards coaches) may influence/explain an athlete's choice in coaching preference. Namely what is preferred, and preference order, is not static. This study provides coaches with a tangible example of how theory connects to athlete experiences. Key findings are discussed as an educational tool for coaching preparation, including their application to future coach development programs.

Keywords: Athlete Training, Coach Development Program, Kinesiology, Leadership, Theory to Practice

Introduction

Unfortunately, many coaches experience a gap between their personal sport experiences and their readiness to be a sports coach (Ahmed & Cardinal, 2020). Paid positions in the United States and elsewhere do little to incentive coaches to complete training in pedagogy and related areas (Vernau et al., 2021). Universities, sport governing bodies, and industry associations have sought to fill this gap in preparation through coach development programs (Beith, 2020; Da Silva et al., 2020). These programs seek to teach coaches a variety of strat-

egies to work effectively with athletes (Da Silva et al., 2020). Beyond a list of strategies, coaches learn theoretical knowledge that could help them expand their toolbox (Da Silva et al., 2020), which could decrease a reliance upon prioritizing what had worked for them as an athlete or simply copying and pasting what their own coaches had done (Oldridge et al., 2016).

Article Purpose

Awareness of theoretical knowledge and lessons from research could empower coaches to use more than "personal experience" to

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plan how they work with athletes and solve problems. According to the Multidimensional Model of Leadership (MDML), athletes will experience positive gains in their performance and performance satisfaction when they are coached in ways that they prefer (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). The present case study explored the extent a general list of athlete preferences based on MDML research held true for one collegiate athlete during her playing days. In doing so, it provides pragmatic insight to ways coaching theory translates to effective coaching by showing ways principles impact athletes' motivation, wellbeing, and connection with coaches.

Methods

Recruitment

A convenience sampling method was used to identify a former collegiate athlete who was acquainted with the first author. The interview took place in February of 2016. The study was completed while the first author was at a different university (Graduate course on the psychosocial factors in physical activity, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA). According to that university's human subjects research policy, the study met criteria for an exempt IRB review because it involved one adult participant and used an anonymous style of reporting (Oregon State University, n.d.). The alias "Sasha" is used. Sasha gave permission to disseminate the results of the interview.

Participant biography

At the time of the interview, Sasha was around 24 years old and was a physical educator in a public school system. She had played several sports since a young age, including soccer and softball. As a collegiate athlete, her chosen sport was soccer. She did not join any other university athletic teams. The participant had trained and competed for 15 years within the sport of soccer and was a collegiate athlete all four years of her undergraduate education. This interview focused on her experiences as a collegiate athlete on a NCAA Division I women's soccer team (private university, western coast in the United States).

Protocol

To perform a structured interview, a list of interview questions was generated based on the key findings of three original

research studies that tested the MDML in the sport domain (Horn et al., 2011; Moen et al., 2014; Surujal & Dhurup, 2012). The three studies were found using the Google Scholar database. Sasha was asked to discern if, when she was a collegiate athlete, she would have agreed/disagreed with the list of preferences reported in each study article (e.g., Surujal and Dhurup observed that a preference for a democratic leadership style and social support were lower than training and instruction). Sasha felt the responses transcribed from the phone interview and the first author's interpretations were accurate and did not request any modifications (i.e., a draft of the full manuscript write-up was shared with Sasha for review; Birt et al., 2016).

Analytic Plan

A discourse analysis to produce a critical interpretive synthesis was performed (Thomas et al., 2021). The focus was on the reflections made by Sasha evidenced in the typed interview transcript. A critical interpretation was conducted by the first author (JDT), discerning how Sasha's responses provided insight into the application of theorized principles for effective coaching behavior (Elliot & Timulak, 2021). The second author (SMR) was invited to serve as a 'critical friend' (Smith & McGannon, 2018) and independently verify the results/interpretations of the first author (March 2021; Hodge et al., 2009). The second author independently judged the first author's interpretations (Lee & Yoon, 2020): (a) fully aligns with interview transcript, (b) aligns with transcript, but the interpretation could be extended for a complete analysis, (c) result/interpretation omits key content or does not fully align with transcript, and (d) result/interpretation inaccurately represents an interviewee response.

Results and Discussion

The critical friend (second author) identified 10 interpretations made by the first author, which she then evaluated for accuracy and completeness (Table 1). All interpretations made by the first author were ultimately deemed to be 100% accurate. The second author made suggestions on how to expand upon an interpretation, which would add clarity to how an interview response affirmed/challenged the results of previous research, or could inform future coaching practice in the sport domain. The Results and Discussion section were revised accordingly.

Table 1. Results of Independent Verification of Interview Interpretation Accuracy & Completeness

Independent Appraisal	
Category	Count: Interpretations
Full alignment with interview transcript	3
Full alignment with transcript, but the interpretation could be extended for a more complete analysis	5
Results/interpretations omits key content or does not fully represent totality of interviewee response	1
Misaligned, interpretation inaccurately represents interviewee response	1
Consensus Following Discussion	
Category	Count: Interpretations
Full alignment with interview transcript	4
Full alignment with transcript, but the interpretation could be extended for a more complete analysis	6
Results/interpretations omits key content or does not fully represent totality of interviewee response	0
Misaligned, interpretation inaccurately represents interviewee response	0

Note. The second author (critical friend) independently identified 10 conclusions/interpretations the first author made based on the typed interview transcript (approved by the interviewee). The second author categorized the 10 conclusions/interpretations into one of the four categories listed in this table. This provided a general assessment of how well results presented in the write-up accurately reflected interviewee responses and corresponded to the summarized findings of the select research articles (the basis to the interview questions). The first and second author discussed the results and came to a consensus on the most accurate category for each conclusion/interpretation (based on explicit review of the interview question, interviewee response, and summarized research findings used to construct the interview questions). The process informed the precise revision of the results presented and discussed in the present article.

Main Findings

Article one by Surujlal & Dhurup (2012).

Focus: Athlete preference of coach's leadership style

Key take-a-ways for practice

1. The most preferred leadership behaviors were training, providing instruction and positive feedback, while an autocratic approach was the least preferred.
2. Preferences for training and instruction were greater than for both a democratic leadership style and social support.

For Sasha, a democratic coaching style and an autocratic coaching style were both valued. This contrasts with the findings of Surujlal and Dhurup (2012), who reported athletes, irrespective of gender, age, and competition level, preferred an autocratic coaching style the least. Sasha appeared to weigh them relatively equally, suggesting that there exists a time and place where each would be effective. For example, in distinguishing the two, she made the following comment:

I feel like I can relate to both. At times [it is] appropriate to be autocratic to sometimes get your point across. There were times [when] my coach was not the nicest...[would not] say the nicest things to me...[but I] knew if I don't fix this right away, then I'm not going [to] get better or satisfy his needs to get playing time... maybe the way [the coach] is saying [the feedback] is to help me.

For Sasha, an autocratic coaching behavior was to be firm and direct, which helped athletes to understand their coach's standards and expectations, and that they could not take advantage of the nice tendencies. But she also shared that, in the moment, positive feedback is much more appreciated. Sasha concluded that effective coaching struck a balance between the autocratic and democratic coaching leadership styles.

Sasha's explanation about striking a balance between the two coaching styles presents helpful insight. First, athletes may work hard to understand the motive and perspective of their coach. However, because an autocratic coaching style is one-directional communication from coach to athlete, autocratic coaching may be more likely to cause athletes to feel dissatisfied about their performance status or progression. Specifically, an athlete's personal achievements or persistence may often be elided within a one-directional communication which prioritizes the coach's agenda/assumptions (Szedlak et al., 2020). Second insight from Sasha's explanation is that athletes may expect coaches to oscillate between autocratic (firm) and democratic (collaborative) coaching styles.

Surujlal and Dhurup's study addresses the idea of "self-determination." The more self-determined a person feels, the more intrinsically motivated they are. A democratic style of coaching likely affirms perceived autonomy, while social support affirms non-controlling fellowship. Both behaviors foster intrinsic motivation, which research has shown fosters/maintains skill development, tenacity, and performance satisfaction (De Muynck et al., 2017).

It is striking that, like Surujlal and Dhurup's sample of participants, Sasha also recalled having a preference that her coaches focus on training and instruction over a democratic leadership style and social support (not to say the latter two were not important). She felt that an emphasis on training and instruction sent a clear message that all players would be held to the same standards, both on and off the field. Sasha's response was further interpreted by the first author as an implicit preference for coaches to dedicate equal attention to the training and instruction of each athlete. This interpretation was substantiated by the following comments from Sasha.

I think...with the training and instruction [being emphasized], it's just better as a player to understand that everyone is on

an equal playing field and the coach doesn't hold other players at a higher level or show some players are more [in] high demand to play more minutes...that way, players could feel more [trust in the coach...knowing] that everyone is going to be treated [the same] and have the same consequences...

For Sasha, trust may have represented confidence in a coach's integrity to fairness and equality. This might bring into question how both a democratic leadership style and social support are popularly operationalized within the wider literature. Athletes may feel socially supported knowing that equitable attention will be paid to their personal development, and through equitable attention, a coach may be viewed as behaving democratically.

Article two by Horn and colleagues (2011).

Focus: Relationship between collegiate athletes' psychological characteristics and their preferences for different types of coaching behavior

Key take-a-ways for practice

1. Athletes who were highly self-determined (i.e., internally motivated) and who experienced somatic anxiety (physical symptoms of nervousness or worry such as butterflies in the stomach or dry mouth) preferred the following leadership behaviors:
 - a. Democratic leadership style
 - b. Dedicating a majority of time to training and instruction
 - c. Creating a socially supportive atmosphere
 - d. Recognizing and rewarding performance efforts (i.e., positive feedback)
 - e. Providing specific and achievable information for how an athlete may improve (i.e., constructive feedback).
2. Athletes who experienced nervousness and worry (cognitive anxiety), but little physical symptoms preferred high frequency of positive feedback and had a low preference for the use of punishment as a motivational strategy.

Horn and colleagues' (2011) findings indicated self-determined athletes who experienced somatic anxiety resonated with Sasha's own experiences. Within her collegiate career, Sasha experienced a terrible back injury that sharply undermined her ability to keep up with the training schedule. The challenge or struggle to meet training expectations in a rigidly defined way caused Sasha to feel physically anxious. For example, during team meetings, Sasha shared that she would commonly experience butterflies in her stomach area and physical symptoms of nervousness because she was never sure if she would be allowed to play. When afforded an opportunity to play, Sasha was uncertain for how long she would be kept in the game. This all changed once the coaches gave more credibility to the advice of the team's athletic trainers and Sasha's self-evaluations concerning her abilities while recovering from an injury.

Modifying the training exercises so as not to exacerbate her injuries and working with Sasha on how she could best participate helped to clarify Sasha's role on the team. It was no longer tenuous, but specific and appropriate to her needs as a person and athlete (e.g., playing for specific time durations during certain periods of games). The discussions that unfolded between Sasha, the athletic trainer, and her coaches helped all three stakeholders to arrive at what Sasha felt were promising solutions. This shared decision making represents a democratic coaching style in a traditional sense. Furthermore, through a candid discussion with Sasha, her coaches displayed empathy towards Sasha's situation. This display of empathy, as well as the use of clear communication to the rest of the team concerning Sasha's new role, may have contributed to Sasha's perception that the team environment be-

came more socially supportive. Specifically, Sasha expressed that when she felt secure in her role on the team—what her specific contribution was to be—she felt more self-determined. The socially supportive behavior provided by her coaches gave her reassurance about her role. This allowed Sasha to feel content in simply trying her best and she began to experience more joy from her participation.

Sasha's collegiate athlete experience also concurred with Horn and colleague's second finding. Athletes who have cognitive anxiety only/mainly preferred a higher frequency of positive feedback, and they had a lower preference for punishment as a motivational strategy. Sasha revealed that during, "hell week," she was beset with cognitive anxiety, not somatic (a.k.a., physical). She was constantly on edge contemplating what the coaching staff might have in store for them (next). Here are her thoughts on the matter: "There was always a sense of worry. What are we going to do at practice? Are we going to run? Are we going to have fitness? [It was a] time when [I was] most anxious...nervous [since we] had to run more..." Sasha speculated many possible reasons for why their practices became more physically demanding, including wondering if the extra physical conditioning was a form of punishment.

At times like these, Sasha wished that the coaches would offer motivation more often in their communications to the team. Sasha confirmed that by positive motivation she meant positive feedback (i.e., recognizing and/or rewarding performance efforts). This is also in-line with the findings of Horn and colleagues. It was clear from Sasha's description of her memories that positive feedback was not very common, and the same was true for the use of social support strategies. In their absence, she often questioned her abilities: "Am I going to survive this? Am I really mentally tough, and what is it to be mentally tough? How are these activities going to make us better soccer players?" These findings show the importance of not viewing athletes in passive terms, but rather as active agents interpreting their cultural environments (Barcza-Renner et al., 2016).

Article three by Moen and colleagues (2014).

Focus: Performance progress and leadership behavior

Key take-a-ways for practice

1. Athletes most satisfied with their performance preferred the following coaching behaviors
 - Democratic behavior
 - Positive feedback
 - Social support
 - Training and instruction
2. For athletes most satisfied with their performance, below lists their top three preferred coaching behaviors:
 - Democratic coaching behavior
 - Positive feedback
 - Training and instruction

Note. For both lists, the article authors did not appear to base them on a particular order.

Moen and colleagues (2014) found that athletes reported higher satisfaction if they recalled their coaches performing the following behaviors: dedicating time to training and instruction, facilitating a socially supportive environment, and providing positive feedback. Sasha agreed that these results aligned with her own experiences as a collegiate athlete. She recounted one game in which she believed her coaches integrated the latter of the three.

Sasha stated: at the time we were playing very well, but we still hadn't reached our peak performance. At half-time [the coaches] gave us this kind of very strong speech...which kind of

gave us an idea we weren't performing to our best, but we were close and just had to work hard...I remember going into that second half highly motivated, determined to work harder to achieve [my] greatest potential, [to] max out [my] effort... [The] result? We won that game. Looking back, [I] had very high satisfaction in my performance.

Sasha disclosed that her coaches' language was perhaps not the most appropriate and that they were curt (e.g., you need to get to work... get your job done). This discloser reveals situations in which autocratic communication could positively impact performance, even if the tone/wording itself does not directly lead athletes to feel satisfied with their performance (outcomes or effort).

Sasha also agreed with the lists Moen and colleagues reported. Sasha's interview reveals how a dynamic feedback loop may operate between athlete and coach to impact two ultimate outcomes which the MDML suggests should concern coaches: (a) athletes' performance, and (b) athletes' satisfaction towards their performance. Namely, athlete satisfaction with their own performance mediates athlete perception of if a coach is an effective leader. In the situation Sasha described, there was alignment between what she sensed/desired about herself and what the coaches encouraged, despite the gruff delivery that risked making Sasha into a passive agent. This spotlights the significance of alignment between a coach's behavior and the desires/self-appraisals of an athlete.

Several limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of this case study. This case study focused on the experiences of a former woman collegiate soccer athlete who attended a private university. The degree to which her responses may contrast with other players from her team, male athletes of the same university, or athletes at different educational levels cannot be accurately accounted for. Another limitation of this case study is the participant was personally acquainted with the first author. She may have been particularly motivated to participate and give favorable responses. However, methodology for a member check (Birt et al., 2016) and a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2018), increased the trustworthiness of the findings to the present study. Moreover, the overlap of our findings with those consistently reported in the peer-reviewed literature supported the coaching strategies we offered.

Conclusion

This case study provides insight as to why and at what times athletes might prefer certain coaching behaviors over others. This insight was generated by comparing the findings of three original studies that investigated the Multidimensional Model of Leadership (MDML) and the experience of a former NCAA Division I collegiate athlete. Though there were similarities between her preferences and the results of the three studies reviewed, there were also differences. The findings of this study provided information that could help coaches see the applicability of one theory common to coach development programs. The situations described in this study could be the basis for role-playing exercises, where coaches practice using theory-based strategies in scenarios commonly faced by coaches (e.g., Szarabajko et al., 2021). Situations highlighted in this article include: (a) communicating goals for each phase of training, (b) training plans for injured athletes, and (c) responding to 'stalled' or 'disappointing' performances. While true most coaches face gaps in their readiness to work with athletes, efforts to close them can be elevated by helping coaches see the relevance of coaching theory and research (Oldridge et al., 2016). When these connections are made, coaches and athletes stand to benefit (Massey & Whitley, 2021).

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflicts of interest.

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