WEP Warwick Evans Publishing

Journal of Educational Development and Social Sciences

ISSN: 3080-9967 (Print), ISSN: 3080-9975 (Online)
Volume 1, Number 7, Year 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62051/jedss.v1n7.06



Study on the Influence of Coaching Leadership Styles on Sports Training Willingness

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ABSTRACT

Coaching leadership style is an important social influence factor in sports contexts, directly affecting athletes' training motivation, persistence, and competitive performance. Based on leadership behavior theory and self-determination theory, this study employs literature analysis, questionnaire surveys, and statistical methods to investigate the impact mechanisms of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership on athletes' training willingness, using provincial and university team athletes as research subjects. The Sport Leadership Behavior Scale and Training Willingness Scale were used to collect data, while also examining the mediating roles of basic psychological needs and training satisfaction. Results show that transformational leadership significantly predicts training willingness positively, with personalized care and intellectual stimulation playing key roles. Contingent reward and active exception management within transactional leadership also have positive effects on training willingness, whereas negative exception management and laissez-faire leadership negatively affect it. Satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs partially mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and training willingness, while training satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between transactional leadership and training willingness. Therefore, coaches are advised to strengthen transformational leadership behaviors during training by providing individualized feedback, setting goals, appropriately applying rewards, and creating a supportive environment that fosters athlete autonomy, thereby enhancing both training motivation and performance. The findings offer practical guidance for improving coaching leadership styles and managing sports teams.

KEYWORDS

Coaching leadership style; Training motivation; Transformational leadership; Basic psychological needs Mediating effect.

1. INTRODUCTION

The level of development in competitive sports largely depends on the quality of athletes' training investment. Training motivation, as a driving factor that encourages athletes to actively participate in and strive for training while overcoming difficulties, has become one of the key research topics in both sport psychology and coaching science. In recent years, with the continuous improvement of China's competitive sports management system, team management models have gradually shifted from traditional experience-based and command-driven approaches toward more scientific and human-centered practices. Coaches' leadership styles play a significant role in influencing athletes' psychological states and training behaviors. Surveys indicate that among provincial teams and university athletic squads, there are considerable differences in athletes' psychological acceptance of training plans and their personal motivation levels. These differences stem not only from variations in individual abilities and goals but also from the leadership styles coaches adopt during daily training.

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Leadership behavior theory suggests that leaders influence subordinates' motivation and behavior[1] through modeling, goal setting, and personalized care. Self-determination theory further explains that individuals' intrinsic motivation arises from the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Applying these two theories to sports training can help better understand how coaching leadership styles affect athletes' training motivation through psychological and social mechanisms such as trust, communication, feedback, and social support. Therefore, this study focuses on examining the impact of coaching leadership styles on athletes' training motivation, analyzing the roles played by trust, communication, feedback, and social support, aiming to provide insights for coaches to improve their leadership methods and enhance team training effectiveness.

2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF COACHING LEADERSHIP STYLES

2.1 The Essence of Coaching Leadership Style

A coaching leadership style refers to a relatively consistent approach that coaches exhibit in training, competition, and daily life. It reflects the coach's attitude toward authority, tasks, and interpersonal relationships, as well as their method[2] of guiding athletes' behavior. In sports settings, coaching leadership style not only determines how coaches design and implement training programs but also significantly influences athletes' emotional states, motivation levels, and the overall cohesion and teamwork within the team. Compared to typical organizational environments, coaching leadership places greater emphasis on modeling behavior, interactive communication, and adaptability to specific situations. In practice, coaches often serve simultaneously as trainers, psychological counselors, and team managers. Therefore, coaching leadership style is considered one of the most important social factors within a sports team, directly affecting athletes' enthusiasm for training and their motivation to persist in training.

2.2 Main Types of Coaching Leadership Styles

According to leadership behavior theory, coaching leadership styles can be categorized into several main types-democratic, autocratic, and transformational-based on the degree of power centralization and relationship orientation. These styles exhibit distinct behavioral characteristics and effects[3] in different training environments. The democratic leadership style emphasizes equal communication and joint decision-making between coaches and athletes. Coaches seek athletes' input when designing training plans, allowing them to express their opinions and participate in goal setting. This approach helps enhance athletes' motivation and engagement. However, because decision-making requires more time, it may reduce training efficiency under high-intensity conditions. In contrast, the autocratic leadership style grants the coach absolute authority and relies on directives for management. Training content and disciplinary requirements are determined solely by the coach, leaving athletes with little choice but to comply and follow orders. While this method enables quick action and rapid completion of training tasks, over time it tends to diminish athletes' initiative and enthusiasm.

Transformational leadership has become one of the key research topics in sports psychology in recent years. It primarily refers to coaches influencing athletes through four dimensions—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—to encourage them to transcend personal interests and pursue higher goals. Transformational coaches typically inspire others with their dedication and professional expertise, ignite athletes' passion through a compelling vision, foster a sense of responsibility, and promote active thinking and bold attempts. Based on this foundation, they provide tailored guidance and care[4] according to each athlete's unique needs. In contrast, transactional leadership is based on contingent rewards and exception management, focusing on ensuring training proceeds smoothly and effectively through structured systems. While contingent rewards and positive exception management can have beneficial effects on athletes, negative exception management-characterized by post-hoc criticism and passive

handling-tends to provoke resistance. Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, involves coaches who remain uninvolved in training matters, neither setting goals nor providing feedback, which generally undermines athletes' motivation and hinders performance improvement.

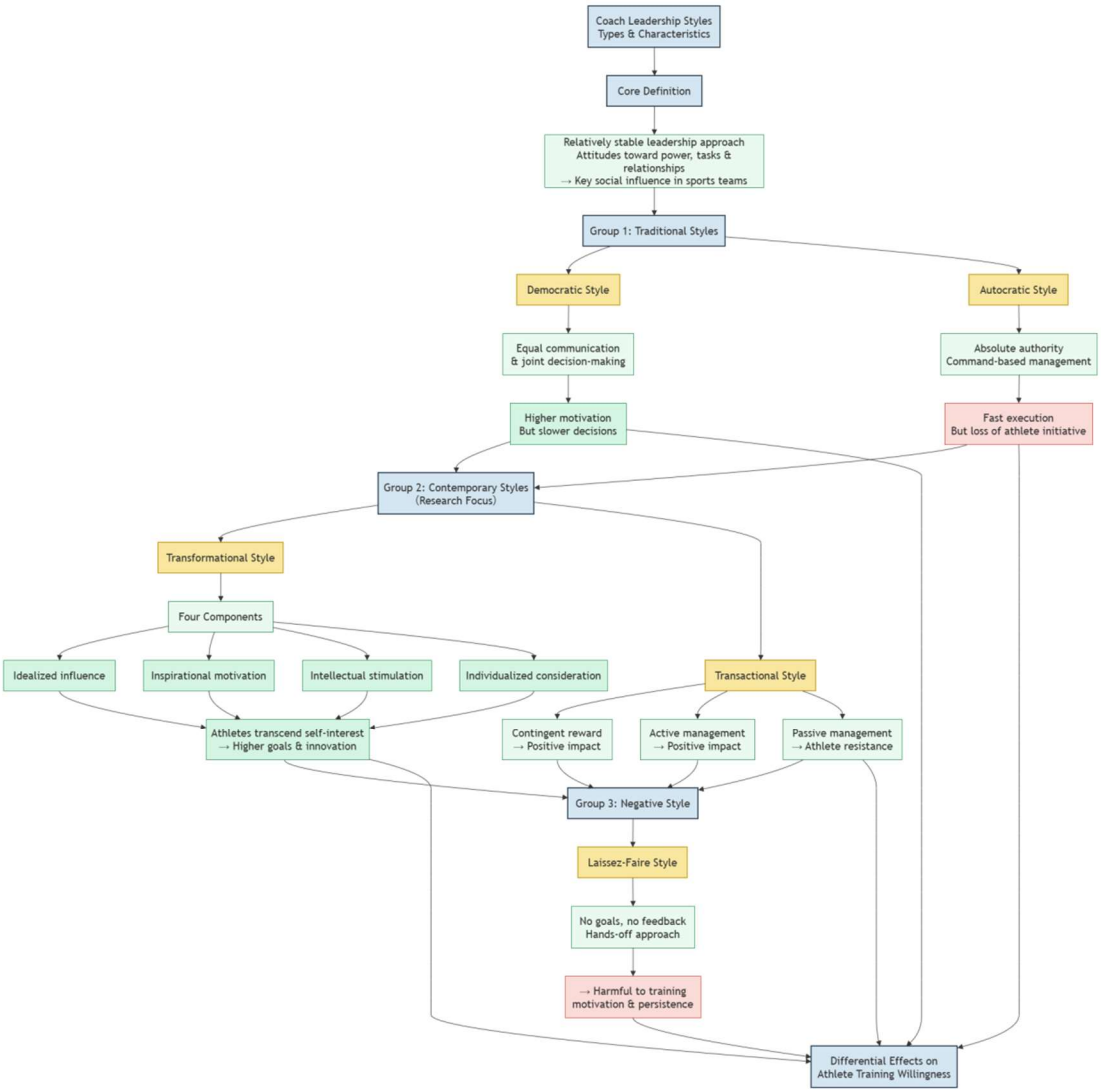

Figure 1. Main Types and Characteristics of Coaching Leadership Styles

3. THE MECHANISM BY WHICH COACHING LEADERSHIP STYLE INFLUENCES TRAINING MOTIVATION

3.1 The Role of Trust in Driving Training Willingness

Trust is the foundation for building a positive relationship between athletes and coaches, and serves as a key pathway through which coaching leadership styles influence athletes' training motivation. When athletes perceive their coaches as highly competent, fair, and genuinely caring, they are more likely to follow their guidance, strive to meet expectations, and transform the coach's demands into personal motivation[5]. Transformational coaches lead by example and provide athletes with sufficient attention and support, fostering trust in both their professional expertise and personal charisma. As a result, athletes are less likely to give up or avoid challenges when facing difficulties or setbacks. Therefore, trust plays a crucial role in mediating the impact of coaching leadership styles

on athletes' motivation, serving as a prerequisite for athletes to internalize and act upon their coaches' expectations.

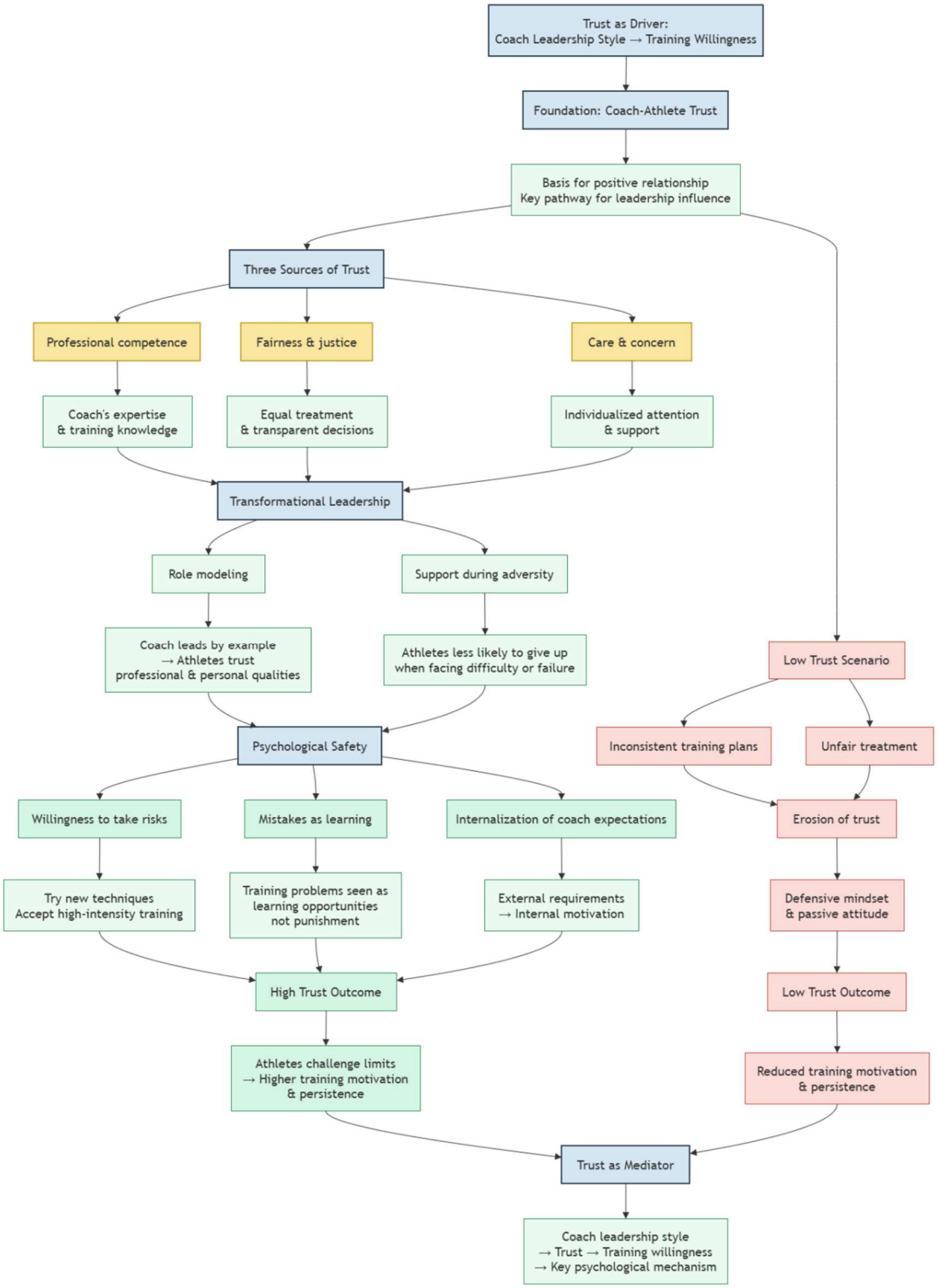

Figure 2. The Mechanism by Which Coaching Leadership Style Influences Training Motivation: The Mediating Role of Trust

Trust also plays a role in athletes' willingness to take risks and their psychological safety. To make progress, athletes must attempt new techniques, endure intense training, and accept the possibility of

failure-all of which require a strong sense[6] of psychological security. When athletes believe their coaches can design reasonable training programs and protect them from harm, they are more likely to push themselves to their limits, viewing challenges during training as learning opportunities rather than reasons for punishment. Conversely, if coaches frequently change training plans or treat athletes unfairly, athletes' trust in their coaches diminishes, leading to defensive mental states and negative attitudes that reduce motivation. Therefore, the influence of coaching leadership style on athletes' training motivation largely operates through the mediating variable of trust.

3.2 The Moderating Effect of Communication on Training Willingness

Communication is an important mediating factor in the process by which coaching leadership styles influence athletes' training motivation. Effective communication enhances a coach's leadership efficacy[7]. When coaches engage in open, two-way, and timely communication, actively paying attention to athletes' physical conditions and psychological needs, and clearly explaining training objectives and technical details in simple terms, athletes are more likely to understand the purpose and significance of training, thereby increasing their motivation. Conversely, if communication is one-sided and directive, lacking necessary explanations and active listening, even the best training plans will struggle to gain athletes' acceptance and support. Democratic and transformational leaders typically possess strong communication skills, which help boost athletes' training enthusiasm. In contrast, authoritarian leaders may create misunderstandings and divergences between their own ideas and those of athletes when communication is insufficient.

3.3 The Reinforcing Effect of Feedback on Training Motivation

Feedback serves as a direct motivator for athletes' training enthusiasm under a coach's leadership style, and the content, timing, and method of feedback all influence athletes'[8] motivation. Positive feedback typically involves praise and suggestions focused on specific actions or areas of improvement, recognizing athletes' efforts and progress while also highlighting areas needing development. This allows athletes to feel acknowledged while clearly understanding where they can improve, helping them maintain a positive training mindset. Transformational coaches tend to use personalized feedback, tailoring guidance to each athlete's skill level and psychological characteristics, making feedback more targeted and acceptable. Transactional coaches, on the other hand, often rely on conditional rewards-setting goals and providing incentives upon achievement-to encourage greater effort in training. However, if feedback primarily focuses on negative exception management, involving excessive criticism and blame, it may lead to feelings of frustration and avoidance among athletes, ultimately reducing their motivation[9] to train.

3.4 The Role of Social Support in Enhancing Training Willingness

Social support is a crucial external factor that enables the sustained influence of coaching leadership styles on athletes' training motivation. It encompasses not only technical guidance, emotional support, and value affirmation provided by coaches, but also understanding and encouragement from teammates, family members, and team administrators. During training, coaches offer emotional support through personalized care and positive reinforcement, helping athletes feel valued and accepted even under intense training conditions, thereby enhancing their stress resilience and motivation to persevere. Peer encouragement and cooperation are also vital forms of support; a positive team environment can alleviate fatigue from training and reduce anxiety associated with competition, encouraging athletes to actively engage in group activities and take personal responsibility. Family support, grounded in emotional understanding and practical life assurance, plays a key role[10] in enabling athletes to maintain long-term commitment to training. When various forms of social support work together synergistically, they significantly enhance the effectiveness of coaching leadership styles.

The role of social support is also evident in meeting athletes' fundamental psychological needs. When athletes feel supported by coaches, teammates, and family members during training, their sense of autonomy, competence, and belonging is better fulfilled, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and increasing their willingness to engage in training. However, if athletes do not receive adequate support-or are even neglected or rejected-during training, their motivation will gradually decline. Even with highly skilled coaching, technical instruction alone cannot ensure long-term commitment from athletes. Therefore, while adopting a particular leadership style, coaches should actively foster a supportive social environment where trust, communication, feedback, and support interact effectively to boost athletes'[11] training engagement.

4. STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE TRAINING WILLINGNESS BASED ON LEADERSHIP STYLE

4.1 Optimize Communication and Feedback Methods

In 2022, China's sports industry reached a total scale of 3.3 trillion yuan, with an added value of approximately 1.31 trillion yuan. The dual demands of competitive performance and public fitness have raised higher expectations for the quality of athletic training, and the foundation of such quality lies in athletes' willingness to train. Communication and feedback between coaches and athletes serve[14] as the direct vehicle for implementing leadership behaviors and represent the core pathway through which transformational leadership exerts its influence. When coaches demonstrate personalized care by understanding athletes' training goals, physical conditions, and emotional challenges, and use two-way channels-such as regular conversations, training log reviews, and post-match debriefings-to involve athletes in shaping their training plans rather than merely having them follow instructions passively, athletes are more likely to develop trust in their coaches and identify with training objectives. This process fulfills both their autonomy and relational needs. Feedback methods are equally important: specific, timely, and improvement-oriented feedback helps athletes clearly recognize their capabilities, thereby boosting confidence, whereas vague praise or frequent criticism tends to undermine motivation. The intellectual stimulation dimension of transformational leadership requires coaches to encourage athletes to ask questions and explore ideas, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities and reducing fear of failure. Transactional leadership's contingent reward and positive exception management principles call for prompt recognition when clear standards are met, linking rewards directly to effort and achievement. Emotional, informational, and evaluative support together form the social support system for athletes; coaches providing emotional comfort and technical guidance can alleviate psychological stress[15] caused by intense training. Therefore, to enhance communication and feedback effectiveness, interactions should be bidirectional, specific, and supportive.

4.2 Building a Supportive Training Environment

A supportive training environment refers to a setting in which athletes feel autonomous, safe, and accepted during training-a prerequisite for leadership styles to influence training motivation. With the advancement of policies promoting the integration of sports and education, the number of university and youth sports teams has been increasing steadily, and team compositions have become increasingly complex, making the development of a positive atmosphere more[16] important than ever. Research shows that when coaches adopt a democratic leadership style-granting athletes some choice and input regarding training plans, workload, and competition opportunities-their need for autonomy is met, intrinsic motivation increases, and training engagement improves. In contrast, overly authoritarian control-oriented leadership may yield short-term compliance but often leads to resistance and boredom. Permissive or laissez-faire leadership, lacking necessary guidance and feedback, leaves athletes confused, disoriented, and lacking a sense of responsibility, resulting in low

training motivation. To foster a supportive environment, coaches should minimize punitive responses to failure, viewing mistakes as normal parts of the learning process, thereby providing psychological safety that encourages athletes to attempt challenging skills and techniques. Additionally, interpersonal relationships within the team are integral to the overall atmosphere. Coaches can promote communication and cohesion among athletes through cooperative grouping, mentorship programs pairing experienced with new members, and collective debriefings, helping athletes develop a sense of belonging and team identity by feeling valued and needed[12,13]. Furthermore, training goals should be collaboratively discussed and agreed upon by both coaches and athletes, then broken down into specific, observable, and measurable objectives, enabling athletes to recognize their progress and build confidence in their abilities[17]. Thus, creating a supportive environment means replacing simple command-based directives with low power distance, clear goals, and genuine respect and trust.

5. CONCLUSION

This study argues that coaching leadership style is not merely a secondary variable affecting training outcomes, but rather a key factor influencing athletes' motivation through trust, communication, feedback, and social support. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes individual care and intellectual stimulation, best enhances motivation by recognizing individual differences and activating internal drive. Transactional leadership, based on clear goals and conditional rewards, maintains athlete motivation through predictable incentives; however, laissez-faire and contingent negative management-lacking necessary feedback and structure-tend to reduce motivation instead. In this process, trust serves as the foundation for effective leadership, while two-way communication is the primary pathway to building trust. Timely and specific feedback helps athletes understand their capabilities, and social support alleviates psychological stress caused by high-intensity training. Therefore, coaches can enhance athletes' motivation by reducing power distance, increasing personalized communication, establishing fair reward and feedback systems, and creating a supportive environment that fosters autonomy and safety. The findings offer practical insights for coaches to improve their leadership approaches and team management, particularly applicable to provincial and university-level teams. Future research could include longitudinal studies or intervention experiments to further validate the effects of different leadership styles.

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