

A composite image of five prominent football managers. From left to right: Jurgen Klopp in a Liverpool tracksuit and cap, Jose Mourinho in a black turtleneck, Pep Guardiola in a grey suit, Sir Alex Ferguson in a dark suit and glasses, and Sir Kenny Dalglish in a dark suit. They are all looking towards the right. The background is a blurred stadium scene.

Leadership Styles

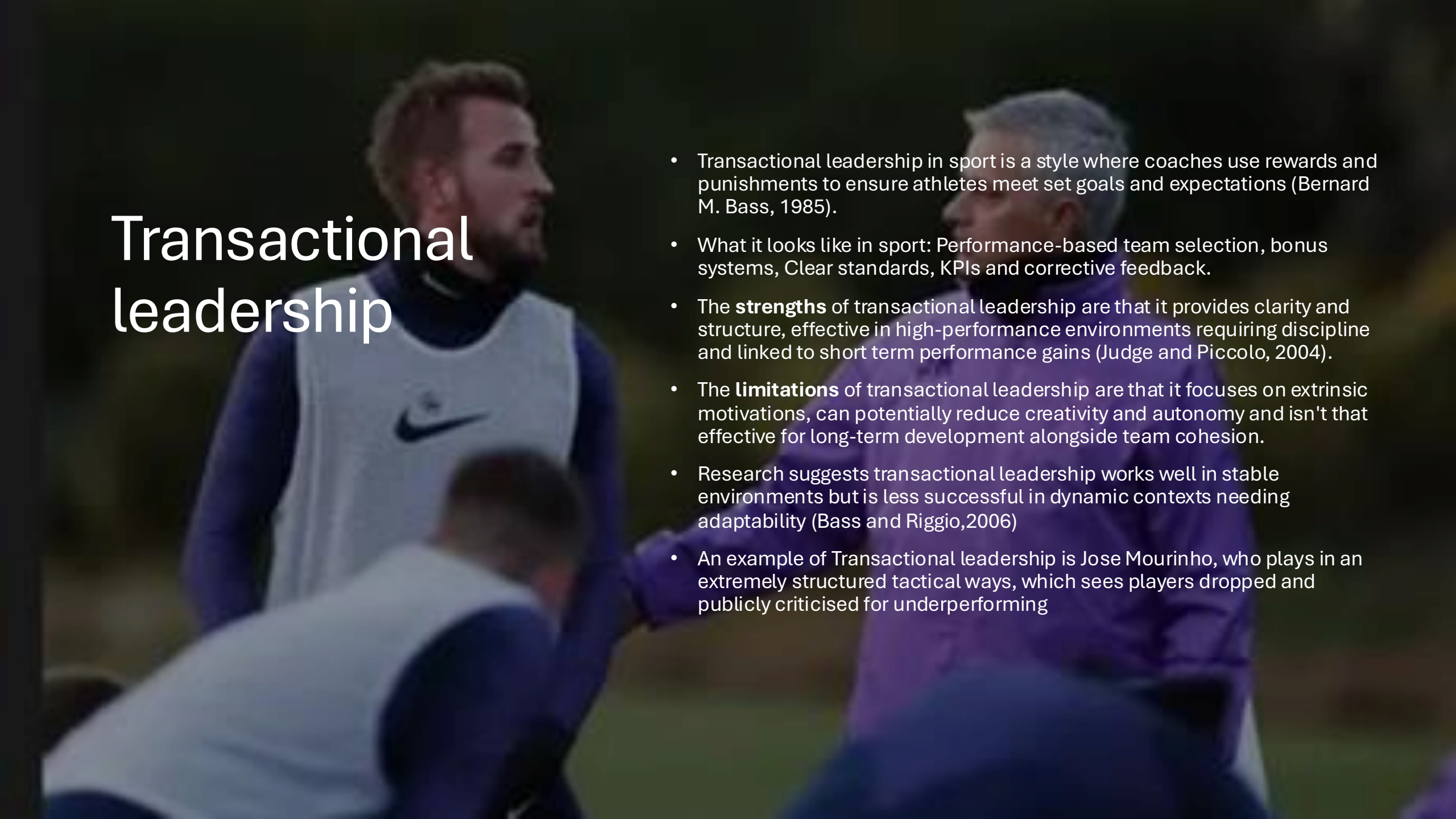
By Kai Robbins

Introduction

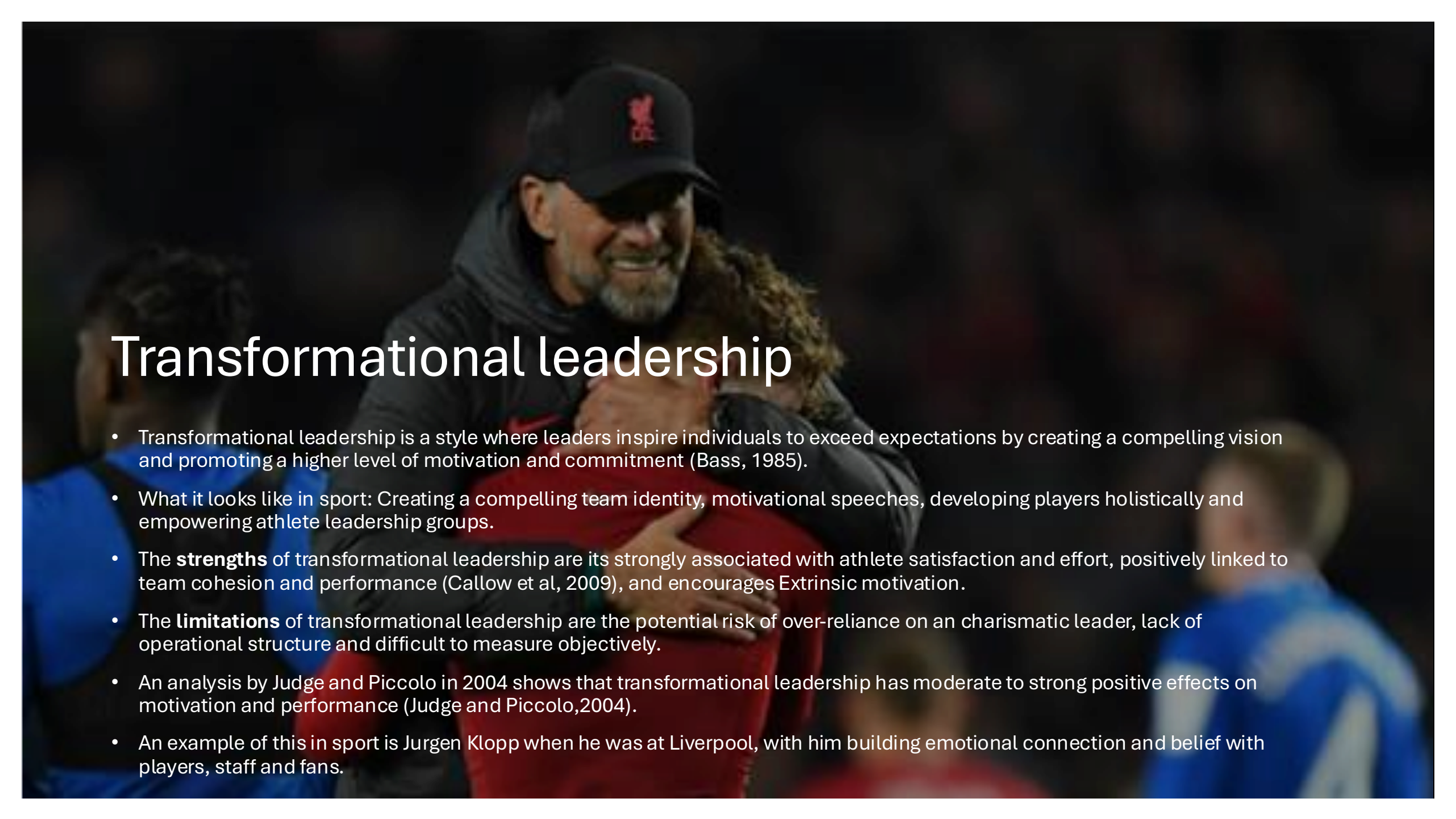
- Leadership is a big part to performance, culture and success in sport. Effective sport leaders influence motivation, cohesion and outcomes (Northouse, 2022). This presentation critically evaluates four established leadership theories:
- Transactional Leadership
- Transformational Leadership
- Situational Leadership
- Servant Leadership
- It then applies these theories to a contemporary sport challenge faced by Mikel Arteta integrating young players into his senior team



Transactional leadership



- Transactional leadership in sport is a style where coaches use rewards and punishments to ensure athletes meet set goals and expectations (Bernard M. Bass, 1985).
- What it looks like in sport: Performance-based team selection, bonus systems, Clear standards, KPIs and corrective feedback.
- The **strengths** of transactional leadership are that it provides clarity and structure, effective in high-performance environments requiring discipline and linked to short term performance gains (Judge and Piccolo, 2004).
- The **limitations** of transactional leadership are that it focuses on extrinsic motivations, can potentially reduce creativity and autonomy and isn't that effective for long-term development alongside team cohesion.
- Research suggests transactional leadership works well in stable environments but is less successful in dynamic contexts needing adaptability (Bass and Riggio, 2006)
- An example of Transactional leadership is Jose Mourinho, who plays in an extremely structured tactical ways, which sees players dropped and publicly criticised for underperforming

A background image showing Jürgen Klopp, the manager of Liverpool, wearing a black Liverpool cap and a grey hoodie, smiling and hugging a player in a red Liverpool jersey. The scene is set on a football pitch at night, with other players in blue and white kits visible in the background.

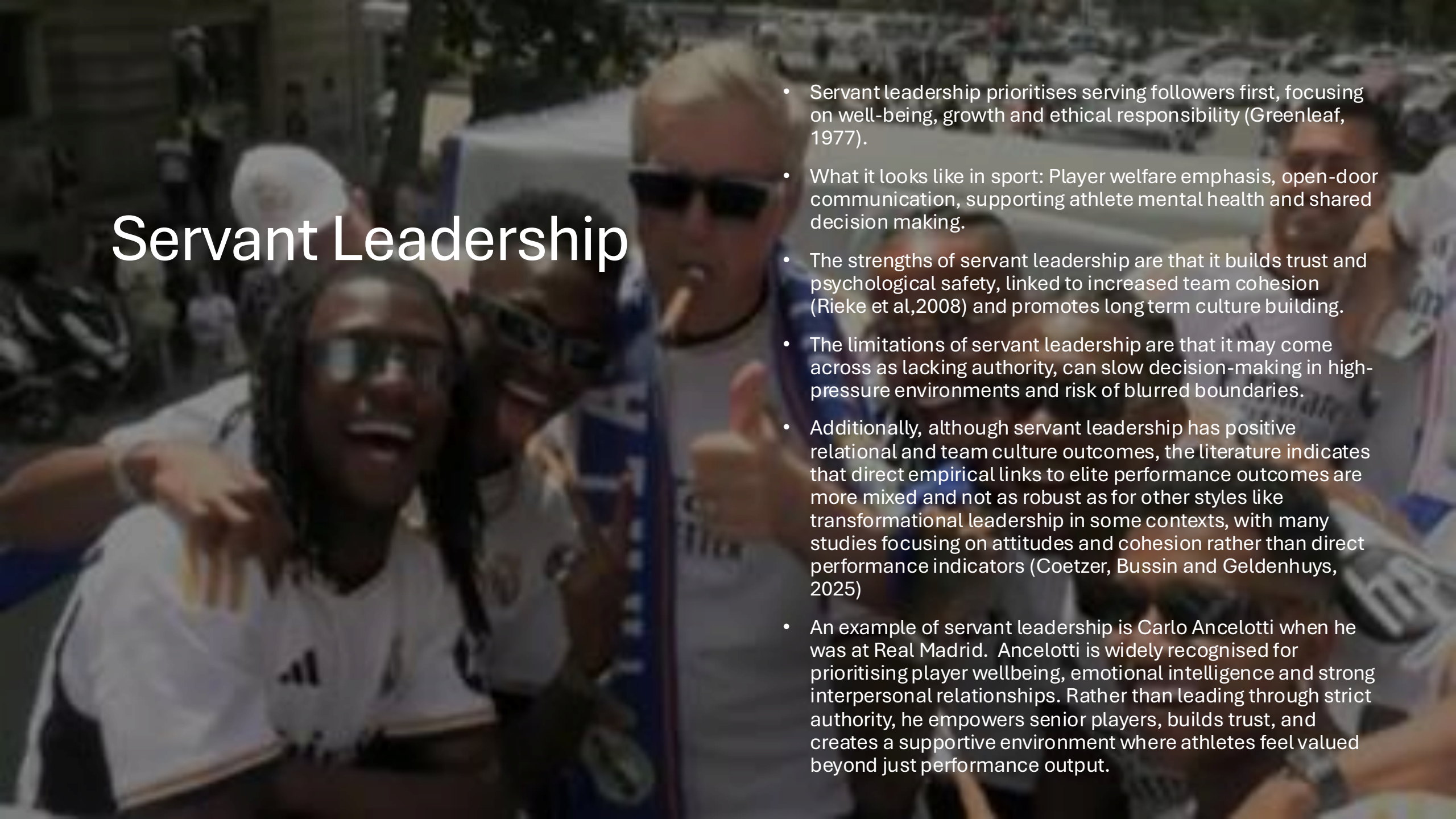
Transformational leadership

- Transformational leadership is a style where leaders inspire individuals to exceed expectations by creating a compelling vision and promoting a higher level of motivation and commitment (Bass, 1985).
- What it looks like in sport: Creating a compelling team identity, motivational speeches, developing players holistically and empowering athlete leadership groups.
- The **strengths** of transformational leadership are its strongly associated with athlete satisfaction and effort, positively linked to team cohesion and performance (Callow et al, 2009), and encourages Extrinsic motivation.
- The **limitations** of transformational leadership are the potential risk of over-reliance on an charismatic leader, lack of operational structure and difficult to measure objectively.
- An analysis by Judge and Piccolo in 2004 shows that transformational leadership has moderate to strong positive effects on motivation and performance (Judge and Piccolo, 2004).
- An example of this in sport is Jurgen Klopp when he was at Liverpool, with him building emotional connection and belief with players, staff and fans.

Situational leadership

- Situational leadership is a leadership theory which proposes that effective leaders adapt their style according to the competence and commitment level of their followers or players (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982)
- What it looks like in sport: Directive approach with youth players, delegative style with experienced professionals and adjusting communication based on confidence levels.
- The strengths of situational leadership are its flexibility and dynamism, recognises athlete development stages and is practical in dynamic sport environments.
- The limitations of situational leadership are limited empirical support, oversimplifying leadership behaviour and difficult to assess athlete's readiness.
- Research critiques suggest limited strong empirical validation compared to transformational theory (Northouse, 2022).
- An example of situational leadership is Mikel Arteta who demonstrates situational leadership by adapting his coaching style to player readiness; he provides clear, directive instruction to younger players who need structure, while giving experienced professionals greater autonomy and shared responsibility, reflecting Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) principle that leaders must adjust their approach based on competence and commitment levels.

Servant Leadership

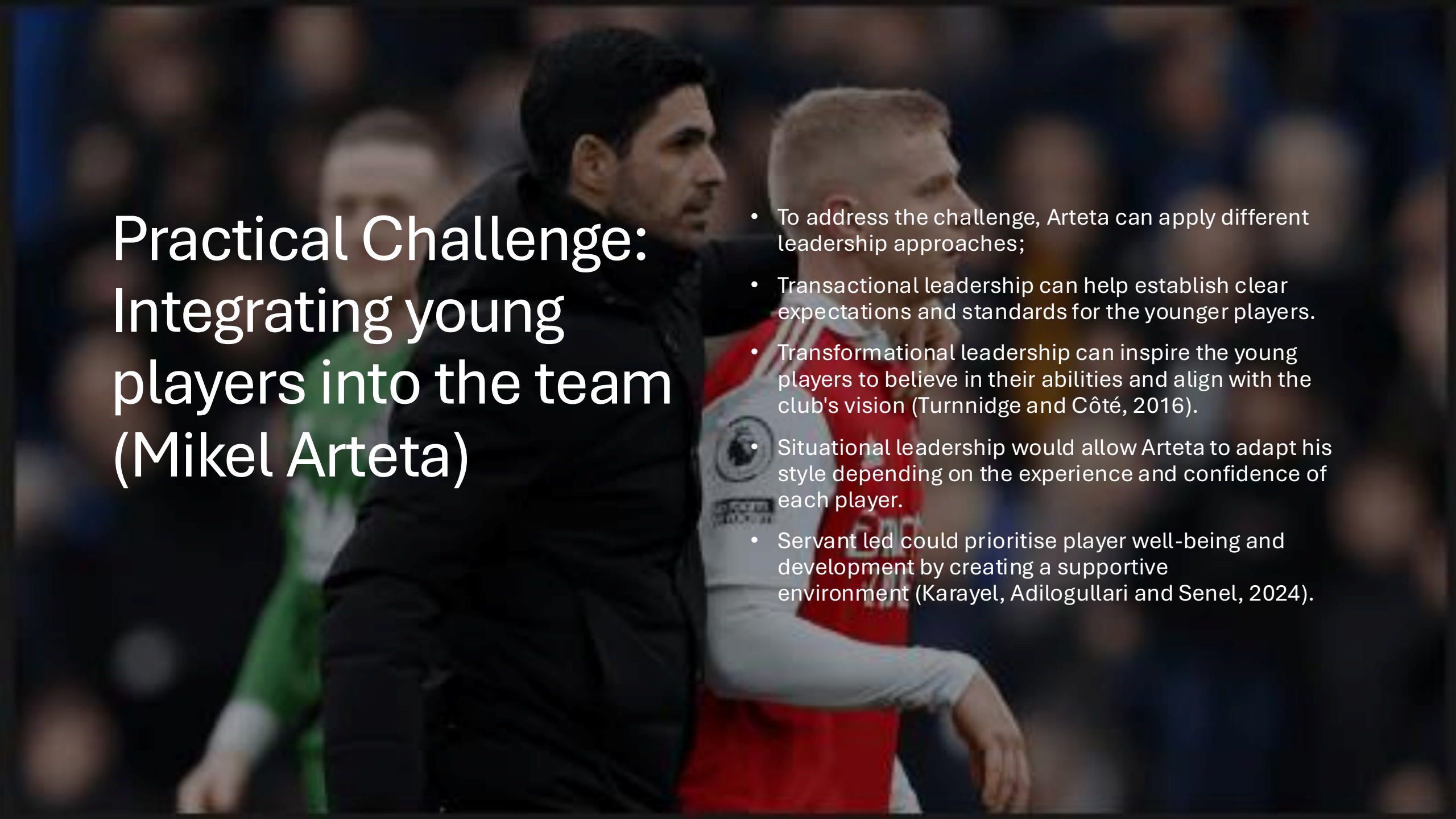
A background image showing a group of soccer players in white jerseys celebrating on a field. One player in the foreground is giving a thumbs up, and another is holding a cigar. The scene is filled with energy and team spirit.

- Servant leadership prioritises serving followers first, focusing on well-being, growth and ethical responsibility (Greenleaf, 1977).
- What it looks like in sport: Player welfare emphasis, open-door communication, supporting athlete mental health and shared decision making.
- The strengths of servant leadership are that it builds trust and psychological safety, linked to increased team cohesion (Rieke et al, 2008) and promotes long term culture building.
- The limitations of servant leadership are that it may come across as lacking authority, can slow decision-making in high-pressure environments and risk of blurred boundaries.
- Additionally, although servant leadership has positive relational and team culture outcomes, the literature indicates that direct empirical links to elite performance outcomes are more mixed and not as robust as for other styles like transformational leadership in some contexts, with many studies focusing on attitudes and cohesion rather than direct performance indicators (Coetzer, Bussin and Geldenhuys, 2025)
- An example of servant leadership is Carlo Ancelotti when he was at Real Madrid. Ancelotti is widely recognised for prioritising player wellbeing, emotional intelligence and strong interpersonal relationships. Rather than leading through strict authority, he empowers senior players, builds trust, and creates a supportive environment where athletes feel valued beyond just performance output.

Practical Challenge: Integrating young players into the team (Mikel Arteta)

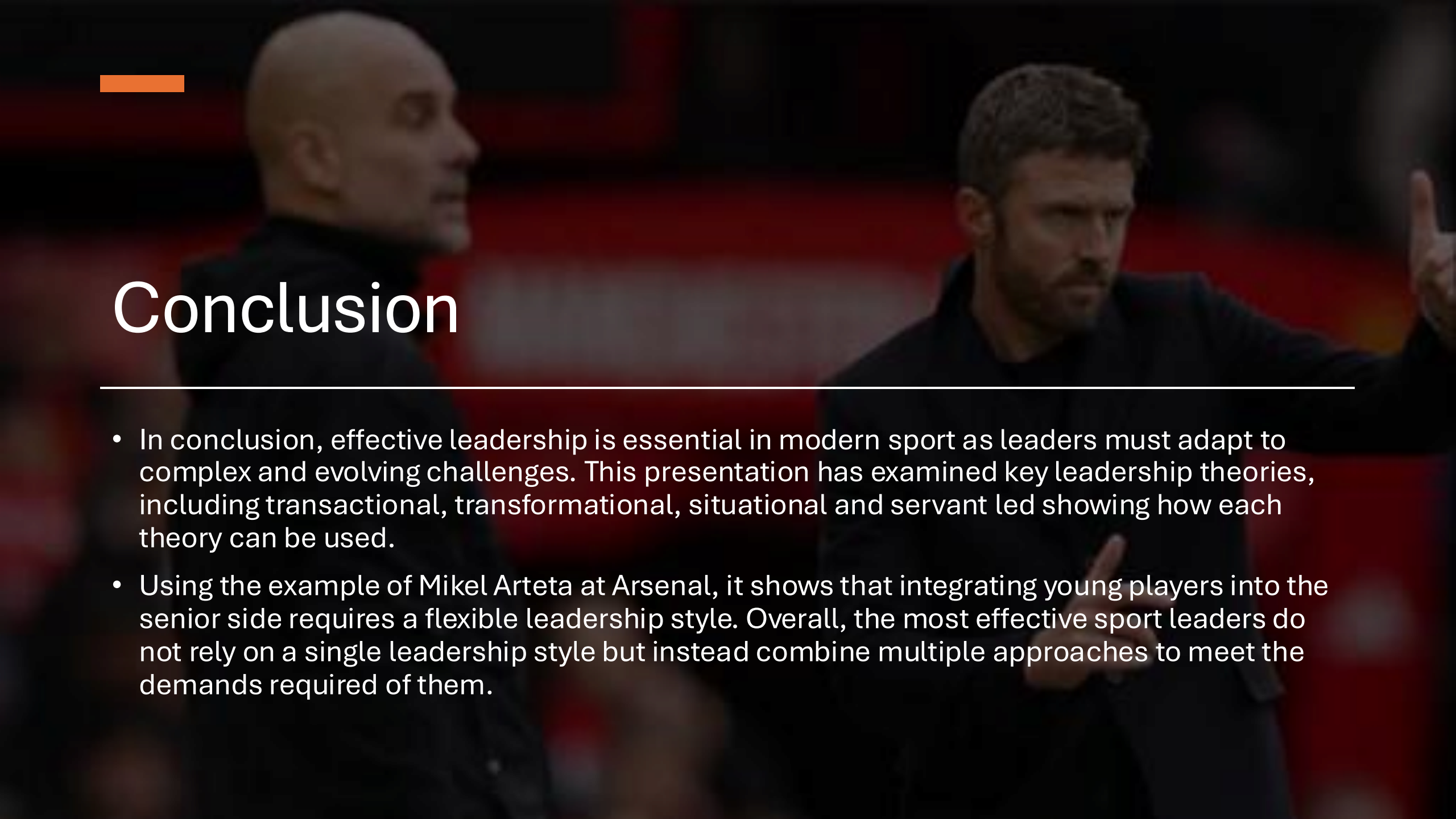
- A contemporary challenge for sports leaders is integrating young players into a senior team whilst still maintaining performance standards.
- For example, Mikel Arteta successfully promoted young players into the team, such as Bukayo Saka, Ethan Nwaneri and Myles Lewis-Skelly.
- Arteta says young players can bring energy and enthusiasm into the squad but have to be managed carefully alongside experienced players.
- An example of the dangers of this is in Arsenal's All or Nothing documentary, where 2 senior players break into a fight due to the actions of one of them on a young player in senior training (Prime, 2022)



A background image showing Mikel Arteta, Arsenal's manager, in a black jacket, and a young Arsenal player in a red and white kit, both looking towards the right. The image is slightly blurred and has a dark overlay to make the text stand out.

Practical Challenge: Integrating young players into the team (Mikel Arteta)

- To address the challenge, Arteta can apply different leadership approaches;
- Transactional leadership can help establish clear expectations and standards for the younger players.
- Transformational leadership can inspire the young players to believe in their abilities and align with the club's vision (Turnnidge and Côté, 2016).
- Situational leadership would allow Arteta to adapt his style depending on the experience and confidence of each player.
- Servant led could prioritise player well-being and development by creating a supportive environment (Karayel, Adilogullari and Senel, 2024).



Conclusion

- In conclusion, effective leadership is essential in modern sport as leaders must adapt to complex and evolving challenges. This presentation has examined key leadership theories, including transactional, transformational, situational and servant led showing how each theory can be used.
- Using the example of Mikel Arteta at Arsenal, it shows that integrating young players into the senior side requires a flexible leadership style. Overall, the most effective sport leaders do not rely on a single leadership style but instead combine multiple approaches to meet the demands required of them.

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