

Preferred Coach Leadership Behaviour in Elite Soccer in Relation to Success and Failure

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ABSTRACT

Multidimensional models of leadership in sport suggest that in order to maximize performance there should be congruence between the actual coaching behaviour and behaviours preferred by players. This study examined the preferred coaching leadership behaviours in prolonged periods of perceived success and failure in eighty-eight elite soccer players in Norway using the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS). The three preferred behaviours were Positive Feedback, Training & Instruction, and Democratic Behaviour in both scenarios. All preferred behaviours (except Autocratic Behaviour) were higher in the unsuccessful scenario ($p < .01$). Negative relationships existed between age/experience and Social Support, Democratic Behaviours and Positive Feedback in the successful scenario and between age/experience and Social Support and Democratic Behaviours in the unsuccessful scenario ($p < .05$). The findings therefore have implications for adapting coaching leadership behaviours when players of different ages and with different levels of experience encounter prolonged periods of success or failure.

Key words: Coaching Style, Leadership Scale for Sport, Situational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Leadership can be defined as: “a process which unifies a diverse group of people to work effectively as a team toward a common purpose under varied and often difficult conditions, through the elimination of scapegoating, the maximization of mediation, and the judicious use of power” [1]. Leadership is therefore a necessary group function with significant influences at both the individual and team level. Within the context of sports coaching, the theoretical multidimensional model of leadership behaviour developed by Chelladurai [2-6] suggested that actual coach behaviour is influenced not only by the characteristics of the coach (e.g., personality, experience, attitude), but also by the coaching behaviour (required and preferred) that is directly influenced by antecedent situational characteristics (e.g., team

sport, individual sport, home or away location, success and failure) and member characteristics (e.g., gender, achievement motivation, skill level of the athlete) [4]. The model therefore suggests that in order to maximize performance (and satisfaction) there should be congruence between the actual coaching behaviour and preferred and required behaviours.

In order to test the theoretical model, Chelladurai and Saleh [7] developed the 40-item Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) that identified five dimensions of leadership behaviour in sport: training and instruction, democratic behaviour, autocratic behaviour, social support, and positive feedback. Since its creation, the LSS has become the most commonly utilized scale for quantifying such leadership behaviours in sports coaches [8]. Research with the LSS has investigated the relationship between 'member characteristics' such as age, maturity, gender, level of competition, task type, motivation and 'preferred' leadership in athletes [9-13]; differences between 'preferred' and 'perceived' leadership behaviours [4, 14, 15]; the impact of leadership behaviour on satisfaction and performance [16-19], team dynamics such as cohesion and motivational climate [20, 21] and successful vs. unsuccessful teams [10, 12, 13, 22]. However, no studies have investigated, within the same team, the impact of different situations upon preferred behaviours. At the professional level, where the main objective is winning, it is reasonable to suggest that prolonged periods of success or failure may have a direct impact on the athletes' preferred coach behaviours within the same team.

The situational leadership models [2, 4, 23, 24] also support the examination of the importance of the situation on preferred leadership/coaching behaviour. In their models, Hersey and Blanchard [24] indicate that the level of maturity of the subordinates should influence leader behaviour in order to be effective, with 'maturity' defined as "the ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for directing their own behaviour" (p. 151). According to LeUnes and Nation [25], maturity may be viewed in terms of its level and its components. Level of maturity will vary with the situational demand of the task at hand and the components may be psychological and/or task related. For example, prolonged failure, while not impacting upon instantaneous fixed member characteristics such as experience and skill, may de-motivate the athlete and make them less secure in their own perceived ability, their own self efficacy and their collective team efficacy; and thus impact upon performance [26, 27].

Combining the models of Chelladurai [2] and Hersey and Blanchard [23], it is not unreasonable to purport that preferred leadership/coaching behaviours in the same athletes (thus demonstrating unchanged membership characteristics) may be different in different situations; e.g., periods of perceived and/or actual success or periods of perceived and/or actual failure. This would also appear congruent with research that has identified that there is no 'one best way' to coach and that coaches must adapt their style to the given situation in order to be most effective [28-30]. As organizational literature has identified that people look for someone who seems to be powerful and who can take responsibility, direct, and guide them through crises or difficult situations [31, 32], it is not unreasonable to suggest that this phenomenon may be evident in sport contexts. Increased preference for task-oriented, skill-development behaviours (such as positive feedback from the coach) that might enhance future likelihood of success can also be theoretically supported in such periods of failure. At the professional level particularly, the success and failure of sports teams is often seen as a direct reflection of the ability of the coach to maximize the potential of the team. Prolonged periods of poor performance and failure are perceived to be the result of ineffective coaching and leadership and the coach is ultimately to blame. There are few clearer or higher profile examples of this phenomenon than in professional soccer whereby coaches pay the price for

continued poor results. For example, in the Norwegian soccer premiership five out of fourteen head coaches were fired or removed during the 2006 season and four were fired or removed immediately following the season [33]. Research to develop awareness of the different coaching behaviours preferred by players in prolonged periods of success or failure is therefore warranted from a coaching perspective. Awareness of the potential differences may allow the coach to adjust their leadership behaviours to provide more effective synergy between the situation, the resultant preferred behaviours of the players and the actual leadership behaviours employed in order to enhance the likelihood of future successful performance and satisfaction.

The aim of the current study, therefore, was to identify the coaching leadership behaviours preferred by professional footballers in perceived successful and unsuccessful scenarios. It was hypothesized that during the period of prolonged failure, players would place greater preference on all coach leadership behaviours with particular emphasis placed upon positive feedback, training and instruction, and autocratic behaviour; and that preferred coach leadership behaviours and differences between these in the two scenarios would be influenced by player characteristics; e.g., age, playing experience and current starting status.

METHOD

Institutional ethics approval was obtained according to University of Agder institutional procedures. Full details of the data collection procedure were provided on the first page of the questionnaire and all subsequent participation was voluntary.

PARTICIPANTS

Eighty-eight footballers from five different teams in the Norwegian premier league ($n = 55$) and four different teams in the Norwegian first division ($n = 33$) took part in the study (10 goalkeepers, 28 defenders, 33 midfield players and 17 forwards). The sample included players from 6 different nationalities with a mean age of 25.18 ± 4.72 years (range 16 to 34); mean time played at their current level (which for all players was the highest level they had played) of 5.21 ± 4.22 years (range 1 month to 14.33 years) and mean length of time spent with their present club of 3.96 ± 3.36 years (range 1 month to 14 years). Sixty players (68%) identified themselves as normally in their team's starting eleven, with 28 (32%) identifying themselves as normally in the match squad of sixteen.

LEADERSHIP SCALE FOR SPORT

The Norwegian version [21] of the 40-item Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) [7] was used to assess the player's preferred coaching behaviour in two hypothetical scenarios. The LSS consists of five subscales measuring '*training & instruction behaviour*' (TI); e.g., behaviours that have the objective of improving performance (13 items); '*democratic behaviour*' (DB); e.g., behaviours that have the objective of allowing team member participation in decisions that relate to the team goals, practice etc. (9 items); '*autocratic behaviour*' (AB); e.g., behaviours that involve independent decision making and stressing authority (5 items); '*social support behaviour*' (SS); e.g., behaviours that characterize concern for the welfare of the team members (8 items); and '*positive feedback*' (PF); e.g., behaviours that reinforce the athlete by recognising and rewarding good performance (5 items). Responses to each item are recorded on a five-point Likert scale from '*never*' to '*always*' with categories of '*occasionally*', '*sometimes*' and '*often*' identified as representing approximately 25%, 50% and 75% of the time, respectively, according to Chelladurai and Saleh [7].

Reliability of the majority of the subscales was confirmed by acceptable levels of

Cronbach's alpha for the successful scenarios (TI $\alpha = .84$; DB, $\alpha = .77$; AB, $\alpha = .42$; SS, $\alpha = .56$; PF, $\alpha = .70$) and for the unsuccessful scenarios (TI, $\alpha = .81$; DB, $\alpha = .79$; AB, $\alpha = .45$; SS, $\alpha = .66$; PF, $\alpha = .73$). The alpha for the autocratic behaviour subscale was similar to those previously documented [6, 14] and the alpha for the social support subscale could not be improved through item pruning.

SCENARIOS

Due to the methodological difficulties in identifying and accessing teams with real prolonged periods of success and failure, two scenarios were developed to represent either a successful period for both the team and the individual or an unsuccessful period for both the team and the individual. According to Gammage et al. [34], there is a "long, rich tradition in cognitive psychology in the use of such scenario paradigms" (p. 9) and the use of such scenarios is valid as cognitions have been shown to be related to behaviour. While both scenarios created perceived relative success, neither identified an absolute level of success (i.e., top of the league) or an absolute level of failure (i.e., bottom of the league) in order to maximize the likelihood of identification with each of the scenarios by the players. The LSS was preceded by either the written successful or unsuccessful scenario of:

'Your team has won the first ten league games in a row, has played the best they have played since you have been at the club and are at the top end of the league. You as an individual have played your best also' with the item stem of 'In this successful scenario I prefer my coach to.....'

'Your team has lost the first ten league games in a row and has played the worst they have played since you have been at the club and are bottom end of the league. You as an individual have played your worst also' with the item stem of 'In this unsuccessful scenario I prefer my coach to.....'.

PROCEDURE

Data were collected in the pre-season period. The scenarios and LSS questionnaire were distributed to the players by the coach of the team. The coach informed the athletes about the purpose of the study and that participation was completely voluntary. The design was randomized with some players completing the successful scenario LSS first followed by the unsuccessful scenario LSS, and vice versa. Participants completed the questionnaire and left it in a sealed envelope that was returned to the researchers.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations and results of paired samples t-tests can be seen in Table 1. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

From Table 1, it can be seen that the order of the three preferred behaviours of PF, TI, and DB did not differ between the two scenarios. Means for the PF, TI, DB and SS were all significantly higher in the unsuccessful scenario. Independent samples t-tests found no significant differences between the group of players in the premiership and the group of players in the first division for any of the behaviours and oneway-ANOVA found no difference between playing positions.

Significant differences were observed between those players in the starting eleven and non-starters for PF in the successful and DB in the unsuccessful scenarios. The starting eleven had lower means for both preferred behaviours (PF successful $3.86 \pm .59$ vs. $4.18 \pm .52$,

t = -2.392, p < 0.05; DB unsuccessful 3.18±.53 vs. 3.46±.49, t = -2.301, p < 0.05). Significant correlations were observed between each of the respective subscales in the successful and unsuccessful scenarios (PF r = .71; TI r = .80; DB r = .71; SS r = .84; AB r = .70; p < 0.001)

Pearson correlation coefficients between the preferred leadership behaviour subscales and age and length of time played at their current playing level can be seen in Table 2. From the significant negative relationships in Table 2, it can be seen that in the successful scenario younger players preferred more SS, DB and PF than the older players and in the unsuccessful scenario they preferred more DB and SS. There were also significant negative relationships between behaviours and time spent playing at the current level with, in the successful scenario, players with less experience requiring more PF, DB and SS and in the unsuccessful scenario less experienced players requiring more SS and DB.

As there was a significant correlation between age and time played at the current level (r = .72, p < 0.001), partial correlations were performed between the preferred leadership behaviours and age, controlling for the effects of time played at the current level. The following significant relationships remained between age and the behaviour subscales: SS successful (r = -.29, p<0.05); DB unsuccessful (r = -.26, p < 0.05) and SS unsuccessful

Table 1. Differences in Preferred Coaching Behaviours in Successful and Unsuccessful Scenarios

	Successful Scenario (mean±SD)	Unsuccessful Scenario (mean±SD)	t	Eta squared
Positive Feedback (n=83)	3.96±0.59	4.14±0.60	-3.620***	0.14
Training & Instruction (n=84)	3.78±0.47	3.87±0.44	-2.816**	0.09
Democratic (n=83)	3.13±0.53	3.25±0.53	-2.765**	0.08
Social Support (n=83)	2.90±0.44	3.00±0.50	-3.427***	0.12
Autocratic (n=83)	2.92±0.51	2.88±0.52	0.857	-

p < .01; *p =.001

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Leadership Behaviours and Demographic Variables in the Successful and Unsuccessful Scenarios

	Age (yrs)	Time at Current Level (yrs)
Successful scenario:		
Positive Feedback	-.25*	-.24*
Training & Instruction	-.04	.02
Democratic	-.31**	-.23*
Social Support	-.36**	-.23*
Autocratic	.14	.11
Unsuccessful scenario:		
Positive Feedback	-.14	-.21
Training & Instruction	.01	.02
Democratic	-.37**	-.27*
Social Support	-.41**	-.30**
Autocratic	.18	.12

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

($r = -.30, p < 0.01$). Correlations between age and length of time played at the current level and change in any of the behaviour subscales between the two scenarios identified one significant relationship between age and the change between SS successful minus SS unsuccessful ($r = .27, p < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The overall objective for this study was to examine the influence of perceived successful and unsuccessful scenario conditions on the coach leadership behaviours preferred by elite male soccer players in Norway. The findings from the research are important in order to further appreciate the situational influences on preferred coach leadership behaviours. The study provides useful information for coaches so that they can regulate their own behaviour in order to potentially adapt their coaching style to the players' preferences in periods of continued success or failure and maturity level and theoretically enhance the effectiveness of the coaching process.

The results from this study highlight several findings. Positive feedback, instruction and training behaviour, and democratic behaviour were the most preferred behaviours independent of the situational conditions. This is congruent with previous research involving athletes from a range of interactive sports [12, 14, 35, 36]. As can be seen in Table 1, in the unsuccessful scenario the athletes preferred more instruction and training behaviour, positive feedback, democratic behaviour, and social support than in the successful scenario. This finding supports the situational leadership approach which indicates that the level of maturity of the athletes adapts to the situation and subsequently influences preferred leadership behaviours. In order to be most effective in each situation, therefore, the coach should adapt his/her behaviour accordingly. In accordance with Hersey and Blanchard's model [23, 24, 37], the unsuccessful scenario may have influenced the players' maturity, a style that is characterized by high levels of both task and relationship behaviour. More specifically, the players preferred that the coaches' behaviours in the period of failure should comprise more instruction and training. Such behaviours directly relate to task orientated skill-development, and would appear to have been identified by the elite players as essential coaching behaviours to enhance their performance and subsequent likelihood of success. This is not surprising at this level of performance and the most appropriate adaptation should be a greater emphasis on technical and tactical objectives in training sessions. Greater preference for positive feedback was also found in the unsuccessful scenario. Positive feedback behaviour, which encompasses expressions of appreciation such as complementing athletes on their contribution and performance [7], has several positive consequences. Specifically, positive feedback related to acknowledgement of effort and performance may enhance self- and collective efficacy [27], increase effort and reduce social loafing [7, 38] and may prevent role ambiguity [39]. Democratic behaviour was also greater in the unsuccessful scenario, but a theoretically supported associated reduction in autocratic behaviour was not apparent (possibly due to the low internal consistency of the autocratic subscale). In contrast to the organizational literature, the players in this study preferred more involvement through a democratic process as a consequence of a prolonged period of failure. In this scenario, players appeared to want to take more responsibility, have more influence and potentially participate more in the decision-making and leadership process. As the main objective for players at this level is winning, a prolonged period with little success may have negative consequences at individual, team and club level. For example, it may increase the possibility of an individual being left on the bench or recommended for transfer; it may affect the likelihood of the team playing in a particular league; or it may impact upon how the media

and fans support the club. Greater player involvement in the coaching process in attempting to enhance performance and ultimately improve their future career progression is therefore not unexpected. Preferences for social support behaviours were also greater in the unsuccessful scenario (Table 1). Previous studies have reported that perceived social support is positively related to satisfaction [18, 36, 40] and therefore that athletes in successful teams perceive more social support than athletes in unsuccessful teams [10, 22]. It is therefore not surprising to find that during periods of prolonged failure, the players wanted more social support from their coach. In line with this, Weiss and Friedrichs [18] reported that perceived social support from the coach was a negative predictor for performance. In a study among wrestlers, Turman [13] found that the preferences for social support were not significantly affected by success. The preferences for increased social support found in the current study may be natural consequences of the difficult and stressful situation that has occurred. In order to handle this stress and pressure, social support is important [41] and the coach may be especially important in order to help the players feel secure and gain confidence. Even though Riemer [42] stated that the preferences for social support increase with maturity, the results of this study indicated that young and inexperienced players preferred more social support in both scenarios (Table 2). In general, playing at this level is stressful and challenging, but especially for the rookies; and in a prolonged period of perceived failure, less experienced players had a greater need for more social support. This result may also be due to the fact they have not yet established a social network in the team, club or possibly their private lives. Older players with more experience may have more defined private networks, or they may use established relations with other staff members in the club such as the sport physician, medical personnel, or sport psychologist as their source of social support. It could also be suggested that experienced players are more familiar with such pressured situations and are therefore better equipped to handle those situations without the need for additional social support.

As can be seen in Table 2, there was a significant relationship between age and experience at the current level and preferred democratic behaviour in both scenarios. This could be due to young, less experienced players representing a 'new generation' of players who are socialized into a more democratic coaching tradition, or it could suggest that young players want to have more influence in a period of limited success due to a combination of factors such as impatience, high ambition and motivation for success. The least experienced/youngest players preferred more positive feedback in the successful situation only. Previous research has indicated that preferences for positive feedback seem to decrease with maturity [12, 15]. Greater preferences for positive feedback may be due to the less experienced/younger players' uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities in the team in general. Their need for more positive feedback is important for them to ensure that their role is established and more likely to be fulfilled effectively. Positive feedback behaviours towards younger/less experienced players should therefore be a priority for the coach in periods of failure. More experienced players may have a clearer understanding of their role and performance, and it is more likely that they have established a reference frame for their own performance and contribution to the team. As such, it could be suggested that they have a lower requirement for positive feedback due to demonstrating less role ambiguity [43]. In a prolonged period of failure, the relationship between greater preferred positive feedback and age and experience may not be evident due to the high mean level of preferred behaviour (4.14) across the age and experience range demonstrating that, in such unsuccessful periods, all players preferred more positive feedback.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have several implications for coaching elite performers. The data reinforce previous research findings identifying positive feedback, training and instruction, and democratic behaviour as the three most preferred coach leadership behaviours irrespective of the current level of perceived success. While no differences in preferences were observed between premiership and division-one players or between playing positions in either scenario, non-starting-eleven squad members were found to prefer more positive feedback in the successful scenario and more democratic behaviour in the unsuccessful scenario than the starting eleven. As such, the preference for the relative emphasis on the deployment of these behaviours by coaches appears to be homogenous among soccer players. Non-starters would appear, however, to require greater reinforcement of the positive impact they have within the team in periods of success and greater levels of involvement in decision making, in periods of failure. In successful periods, this may be due to them perceiving themselves as not contributing as much to the team's success as their starting peers, or possibly, and with even greater ramifications for coaching-behaviour differentiation, due to their perception that the coach may value their contribution less than the contribution of the starting players. In periods of failure, they may be vying for greater opportunity to enhance the team's performance through demonstration and deployment of their own ability.

Age and level of playing experience would appear to be related to coach leadership behaviour preferences. In periods of both perceived success and failure, it was found that younger, less experienced players preferred greater levels of democratic behaviour and social support than older, more experienced players. They also preferred greater levels of positive feedback in periods of success. Coach leadership behaviour differentiation should therefore be considered in relation to both the age and relative playing experience of players.

The results from this study also provide the basis for new research avenues. A main limitation with this study is that it is based on hypothetical scenarios. Further studies should therefore investigate how players respond to real situations, when they have direct experience with prolonged success or failure. In line with this, it would be interesting to investigate how prolonged failure or success at different times of the season; e.g. early, mid- and late season, may impact differently upon the players' preferences. Further studies should also be conducted with different types of sport, at different performance levels, with both genders and include players' perceptions of actual coach behaviour and their preferred coach behaviour as well as the coaches' perceptions of their own behaviours.

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