

THE RELEVANCE OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK IN LEADERSHIP STYLE

LA RILEVANZA DEL FEEDBACK POSITIVO NELLO STILE DI LEADERSHIP

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Double Blind Peer Review

Citazione

Zambetta P., De Robertis F. (2023) The rilevanza del feedback positivo in leadership style, Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva - Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics. Anno 7, V. 2. Supplemento Edizioni Universitarie Romane

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v7i2.902>

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gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-479-8

ABSTRACT

The work applies the Leadership Scale for Sport to volleyball and explores the different dimensions of leadership to assess the consistency between athletes' preferences and perceptions of coaching behaviour and coaches' self-perception. The results show that players prefer positive feedback to a greater extent than they perceive the coach to do. Also, the preference for positive feedback is more pronounced for younger players.

Il lavoro applica la Leadership Scale for Sport alla pallavolo ed esplora le diverse dimensioni della leadership per valutare la coerenza tra le preferenze e le percezioni degli atleti relative al comportamento dell'allenatore e l'auto-percezione degli allenatori. I risultati mostrano che i giocatori preferiscono i feedback positivi in misura maggiore rispetto a quanto percepiscono che allenatore faccia. Inoltre, la preferenza per il feedback positivo è più marcata per i giocatori più giovani.

KEYWORDS

leadership, coach, positive feedback, autocratic, democratic leadership, allenatore, feedback, autocratica, democratica

Received 27/06/2023

Accepted 19/09/ 2023

Published 26/09/2023

Introduction¹

In recent years, the vision of leadership has changed to adapt to the evolving environmental and social context. The concept of the leader as a person exercising authoritative control has been superseded by the concept of the leader as a facilitator, guide and mentor.

The concept of leadership concerns relationships. A leader exists if he is recognized and legitimized as such. This happens when the leader can influence the members of his group, persuading them of the relevance of his ideas, his approach and his vision. As emphasised by Murray and Chua (2015),

leadership is the application of power in a social context; moreover, the concepts of leading and directing are not necessarily interchangeable. Leadership, however, is not always completely positive, since some leaders may be harmful to the organization or the individuals within it.

According to Burns (1978), leadership is exercised when a person can mobilize institutional, political and psychological resources to stimulate, involve and motivate other subjects. A broader definition of the concept of leadership has been proposed by Bass (2008), according to which leadership consists of the interaction between two or more members of a group. This interaction involves the structuring (or restructuring) of members' perceptions and expectations. Leaders are change agents, able to influence other people more than others influence them. Therefore, leadership can be conceived as the ability to direct the attention of others towards certain objectives and towards the paths that allow people to achieve these objectives.

The fundamental principle of leadership is the leader's ability to exert an influence on others, the so-called social influence. Influence, however, is not necessarily a one-way process, from a leader to a subordinate, but can be a multi-directional process: leaders influence followers and followers can influence leaders. Nonetheless, the main feature of the leader remains the ability to influence others, as an application of social power.

¹ The work is the result of the collaboration between the authors; however, the introduction and concluding remarks can be attributed to Piero Zambetta, while sections 1, 2, 3 and 4 can be attributed to Francesco De Robertis.

As mentioned earlier, the issue of influencing others is the cardinal principle of leadership. Social influence involves a change in the behaviour of subordinates as a direct result of the leader's actions. In this regard, the social power of a leader concerns the strategies that the leader uses to exert his influence and how effective these strategies are in changing the behaviours of a follower.

The fundamental principle of leadership is given by the ability of the leader to exert an influence on others (i.e. social influence). Influence is not, however, a one-way process, from a leader to a subordinate. Influence can be a multi-directional process: leaders influence followers and followers can influence leaders. Nonetheless, the main feature of the leader remains the ability to influence others, as an application of social power.

As mentioned earlier, the issue of influencing others is the cardinal principle of leadership. Social influence involves a change in the behaviour of subordinates as a direct result of the leader's actions. In this regard, the social power of a leader concerns the strategies that the leader uses to influence and how effective these strategies are in changing the behaviours of a follower. The foundations of social power have been studied by Raven (2008), who identifies six sources of influence or social power that differ in the way social change is enforced and in the permanence of that change. The *reward power* is based on the leader's ability to give rewards to followers and depends on the leader's ability to offer positive feedback while limiting negative feedback. This power leads to changes in the behaviour and attitudes of the followers only if the leader offers positive feedback. With *coercive power*, the leader's actions determine changes in the behaviour and attitudes of the followers through the threat of punishment, and negative consequences, if indications are not met. While it is based on punishment rather than reward, the effectiveness of coercive power, like reward power, depends on the follower's perception of the leader's actual realization of the threat. It also requires that the leader monitors the behaviour of the followers. The *legitimate power* derives from the conception of the leader as an authority figure and as the one who has the right to impose change and influence behaviour. It is based on social norms that the follower is expected to conform to due to the perceived position of the leader. The *expert power* is based on the perception by the followers that the leader has knowledge of a particular area. Followers trust the leader's knowledge and therefore change their behaviour and attitudes. The distinctive component of expert power is that followers do not need to know or understand the reasoning behind the leader's decisions. The *referent power*: is based on the

identification of followers with their leader. The leader becomes the person upon whom the follower models their behaviour. Under referent power, followers can also develop a sense of belonging to their leader. This source of power is based on how strongly the follower identifies with their leader. The latter may not be aware of the strength of his power. Finally, the *informational power* is based on clear communication by the leader towards the follower on how a given task should be performed. It is a persuasive communication, relating to the most effective implementation of the task entrusted to the follower. This power is based on the strength of communication and information, although the followers want to understand the reasons of the leader behind the request for change.

From the discussion above, it emerges that the effectiveness of leadership action is essential to improve sports groups' performance and achieve the expected results. Based on these considerations, this work applies the *Leadership Scale for Sport* (LSS) to volleyball teams to explore the different dimensions of leadership and evaluate the coherence between athletes' preferences and perceptions regarding the coach's behaviour and the coaches' perceptions related to their behaviour (Chelladurai 1978). The application to volleyball teams is meaningful given the crucial role played by the coach in scheduling training sessions, planning and implementing tactics and strategies for competitions and managing the sports group dynamics.

The rest of the paper unfolds as follows. In the following section, we discuss the background literature. In Section 3 we discuss the LSS model and in Section 4 we describe the methodology and our application of LSS to volleyball teams. Finally, in Section 5 we show the results and provide some conclusions.

1. Background literature

As highlighted by Cruickshank and Collins (2015), there are several skills that the coach should possess for the multilevel planning approach to work: multidirectionality, emotional intelligence, socio-political awareness and micro-political literacy, manipulation of the context and, finally, a large behavioural repertoire.

Given the relevance of the context in the decision-making process, the multidirectional orientation is essential for the coaching action. The concept of coaching as a one-way process, based on the coach-athlete relationship, is

overcome by the need for a broader approach, given the presence of several actors alongside the coach, such as assistant coaches and medical staff, above the coach (such as head coach and team manager, and parallel to the coach, namely the families. The effectiveness of coaching is therefore influenced by those who are not the primary target of the technical knowledge of the coach, namely the athletes. The multidirectional perspective recognizes the influence of all stakeholders within the sports environment, which constrains the actions available to the coach.

Emotional intelligence allows effective management of challenging situations and is considered a specific skill of the coach. Specifically, it is defined as the ability to detect emotions and their meaning, and to use them as a basis for reasoning and problem-solving. Emotional intelligence revolves around perceiving, monitoring, and managing one's own and others' emotions. Without the ability to recognize and regulate their own emotions, coaches may find it difficult to identify the best option or style of communication with athletes, particularly during stressing phases.

Another key skill for effective sports coaching is the ability to interpret and respond to social and political conditions. Leading a team is a socially complex task at any level, therefore the ability to evaluate and implement actions considering broader objectives is crucial for planning and implementing the coaching activity.

Key coaching skills also involve proactively manipulating contexts in one's favour. The effectiveness of coaching is particularly linked to the ability to shape the context in which athletes operate rather than confronting or negotiating with them. Proactive manipulation of context can be achieved through the design and implementation of practices that promote the social encouragement of a player towards a certain role or set of behaviours.

Since effective coaching is based on the ability to interpret, manipulate and respond to the context, it follows that coaches cannot rely on just one leadership style, since a leadership style can adapt to a particular context and not to others.

In addition to socially desirable leadership behaviours, there are also so-called "dark" behaviours. There is a difference between dark-side behaviours and dark-side traits. Dark side traits fall somewhere between normal traits and pathological traits, and if present in a leader, they can also enhance the performance of athletes. Since coaching is an inherently complex activity, the use of dark side behaviours by coaches is not surprising. Examples are Machiavellian behaviour, which consists of manipulative and deceptive acts to achieve personal interests; sceptical behaviour, characterized by cynicism, mistrust and doubts about the true intentions of others;

social dominance behaviour, which concerns the preference for hierarchy and control, as well as the projection of oneself as a highly competent figure and, finally, the ruthless, performance-focused behaviour that does not accept compromises regarding the team's vision or values.

2. The multidimensional model and leadership scale for sports

Leadership studies are concerned with developing models that allow for the measurement of leadership through a psychometric approach. One of the main models is the multidimensional model of leadership proposed by Chelladurai (1993) which analyzes the performance of sports teams and the satisfaction of their members/players. This model incorporates three states of leader behaviour: the *required behaviour*, what the situation requires the leader to do; *actual behaviour*, what the leader actually does and, *preferred behaviour*, what group members would like the leader to do.

The *required behaviour* is influenced by situational characteristics, mainly defined by the objectives of the group, the type of task (for example, individual or team) and the social and cultural context of the group. The situational characteristics define the rules of behaviour that the leader should implement or avoid. As suggested by Chelladurai (2007), for example, the leader should be demanding and direct when coaching an adult team, while he should be kind and more accommodating when leading a youth sports team. The *preferred behaviour* refers to members' preferences for guidance, social support, and leader feedback. These preferences are largely determined by members' personal characteristics, such as personality (e.g. need for achievement and affiliation, and cognitive structure) and task-related abilities. Furthermore, group members' preferences for specific forms of the leader's behaviour are shaped by contingent situations. The *actual behaviour* is mainly determined by the characteristics of the leader, including personality, competence and experience.

The multidimensional model highlights that *actual behaviour* is also shaped by *required behaviour* and *preferred behaviour*. This means that the leader is aware of the prescriptions imposed by the contingent situation but, at the same time, tries to be in tune with the preferences of his group members. Overall, the three factors,

namely the personal characteristics of the leader, the contingent situations and the personal preferences of the group members, are the basis of *actual behaviour*.

According to the multidimensional model, the degree of congruence between the three states of leadership influences the performance and satisfaction of sports team members. The leader is required to be able to balance what is imposed by the contingent situation with the preferences of the group members.

This approach has been widely adopted in the literature (see, among the recent works, Keatlholetswe and Malete, 2019; Li et al., 2019; Mariani and Morsanuto, 2020; Coma-Bau et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS)

This research work applies the *LSS* to volleyball, a team sport characterized by the fundamental role played by the coach in scheduling training sessions, planning and implementing tactics and strategies for competitions and in managing the sports group and its dynamics. The volleyball coach is strongly required to have the ability to balance the demands imposed by the contingent situation with the preferences of the group members, as prescribed by the multidimensional model.

The *LSS* identifies five leadership behaviours, described by a total of forty elements (see Chelladurai and Saleh, 1980): *training and education* (13 elements), *democratic behaviour* (9 elements), *autocratic behaviour* (5 elements), *social support* (8 elements) and *positive feedback* (5 elements).

Training and education behaviour is aimed at improving the performance of athletes by emphasizing the hard and strenuous training, by educating athletes in sports skills, techniques and tactics, by explaining the relationships between team members, and by structuring and coordinating their activity. *Democratic behaviour* allows for greater athlete participation in decisions regarding group goals, training methods, and game tactics and strategies. *Autocratic behaviour*, on the other hand, relies on the coach's independence in decision-making and emphasizes his or her personal authority. *Social support* is characterized by the coach's attention to the well-being of individual athletes, to the positive atmosphere within the group and interpersonal relationships with members. Finally, *positive feedback* consists of

coaching behaviour that strengthens athletes by recognizing and rewarding good performance.

3.2 Application of LSS to volleyball teams

We administered the LSS questionnaire to athletes and coaches, by adapting the forty elements to volleyball and preparing three versions. To measure *athletes' preferences* for the behaviours of leaders, the first version of the questionnaire requires *athletes* to indicate how often *they would prefer* the coach to implement the behaviours described by the forty items (Chelladurai and Saleh, 1980). Each element is introduced by the following incipit "I wish my coach". To measure *athletes' perceptions* of their coach's behaviour, the second version of the questionnaire requires *athletes* to indicate how often *they observe* specific coaching behaviours. Each element is introduced by the following incipit "My coach". Finally, to measure the *coach's perception* of his behaviour, the third version of the questionnaire requires *coaches* to indicate how often *they perform* the behaviours described by the forty elements. The frequencies fall into five categories: 1) always, 2) often (75% of the time), 3) sometimes (50% of the time), 4) rarely (25% of the time), and 5) never. The frequencies are coded by attributing a value of 5 if the indicated frequency is "always", a value of 4 if the indicated frequency is "often", a value of 3 if the indicated frequency is "sometimes", a value of 2 if the frequency indicated is "rarely" and, finally, value 1 if the frequency indicated is "never".

The questionnaires were administered to the coaches and players of 15 national volleyball teams located in Apulia region, Italy. Specifically, the sample consists of 15 coaches and 173 players. Table 1 illustrates the list of teams with an indication of the category in which they play and the distribution of the athletes interviewed.

Category	Interviewed teams (number)	Interviewed athletes (number)
B1 series women	3	37
B2 series women	2	25

B series men	2	15
C Series women	7	85
C series men	1	11
TOT	15	173

Table 1 (The sample of interviewed teams and athletes)

The questionnaires were created and administered through *Google Forms*. The average administration time of the questionnaire was about 40 minutes. The questionnaire was administered anonymously to the players so that they could respond with confidence, having to express evaluations of their coach.

Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of the sample by gender. Among the interviewees, there is a prevalence of female athletes and male coaches.

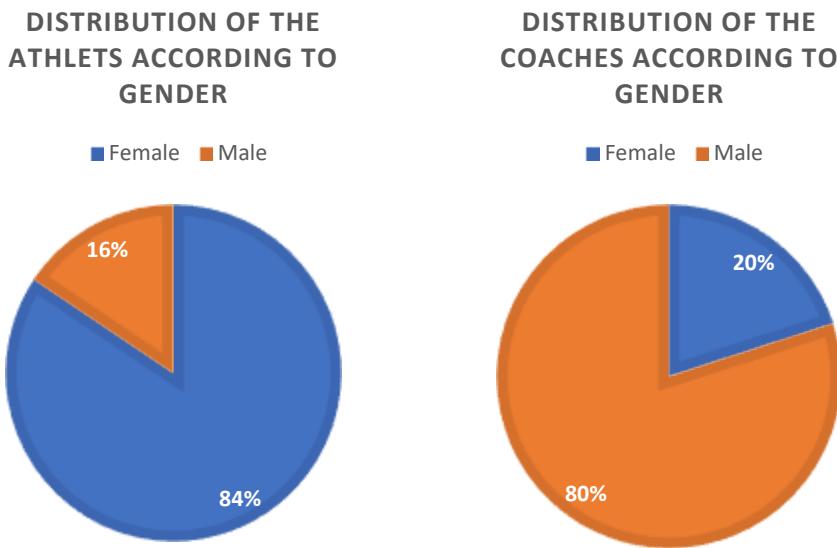


Figure 1 (Distribution of the sample according to gender)

Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of the sample by age group.

BREAKDOWN OF THE SAMPLE OF ATHLETES BY AGE GROUP

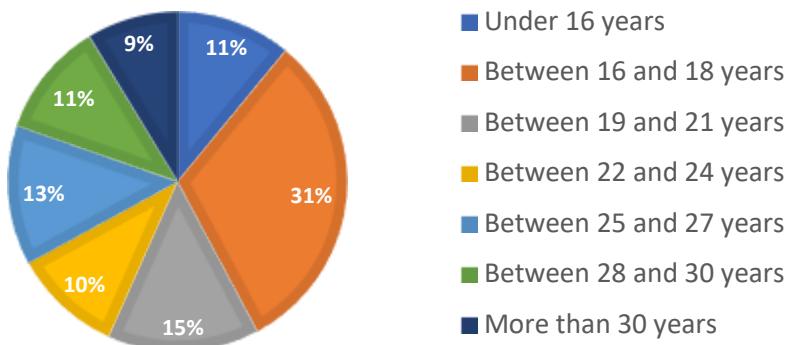


Figure 2 (Breakdown of the sample of athletes by age group)

Among the athletes interviewed, the age group present to a greater extent is "between 16 and 18 years" (31%), while the age group present to a lesser extent is "over 30 years" (9 %).

4. Results and conclusions

Table 2 reports the average frequency calculated for the perception of coaching behaviour by coaches and athletes, respectively, along with the difference between the two.

LSS dimension	Coach self-perceived	Coach perceived by athletes	Difference
Training and education	4.303	4.098	0.204
Democratic behaviour	2.889	2.814	0.075
Autocratic behaviour	2.560	2.510	0.050
Social support	2.850	2.723	0.127
Positive feedback	3.733	2.966	0.767

Table 2 (Perception of coaching behaviour by coaches and athletes)

Regarding *democratic behaviour* and *autocratic behaviour*, there is almost no difference between the coach's self-perceived behaviour and the behaviour perceived by athletes. Concerning *training and education* and *social support* there is a moderate difference, while the greatest difference regards *positive feedback*. This implies that coaches, on average, provide positive feedback with lower frequency compared to the frequency that athletes would prefer the coaches to do.

Table 3 reports the average frequency calculated for the perception and the preferred coaching behaviour by athletes along with the difference between the two.

LSS dimension	Preferred coach	Perceived coach	Differences
Training and education	4.453	4,098	0.355
Democratic behaviour	3.178	2,814	0.364
Autocratic behaviour	2.513	2,510	0.003
Social support	2.942	2,723	0.220
Positive feedback	3.535	2,966	0.569

Table 3 (Athletes' perception of the coach's preferred and perceived behaviour)

Concerning *autocratic behaviour*, there is almost no difference between the coach's behaviour preferred and perceived by athletes. Regarding *democratic behaviour*, *training and education* and *social support* there is a moderate difference. Again, the greatest difference regards *positive feedback*. This implies that, on average, players would prefer a coach that gives positive feedback more frequently than he is perceived to do.

Figure 5 offers a summary overview of the five dimensions of the LSS.

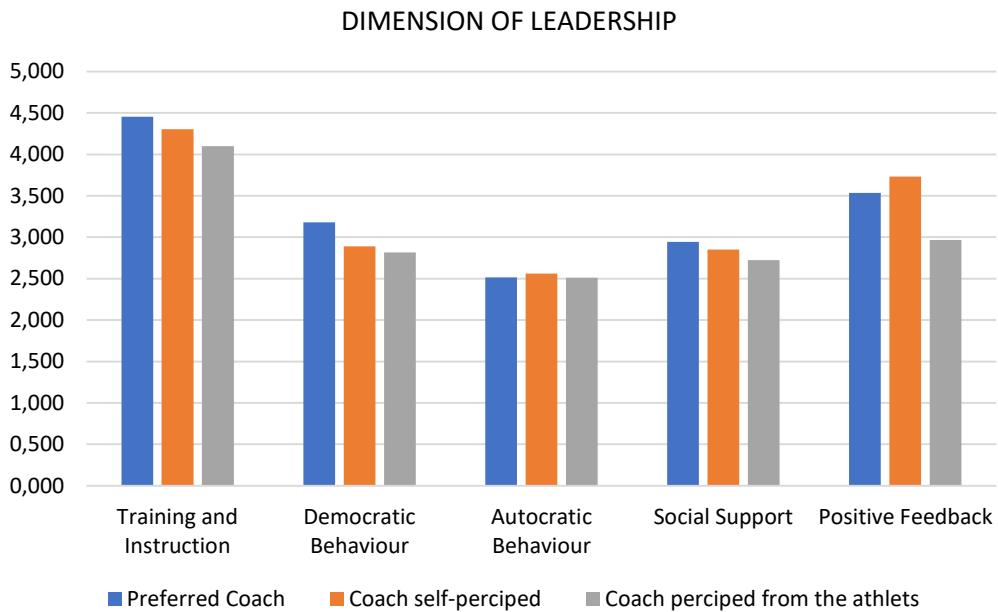


Figure 5 (The five dimensions of leadership)

Considering the results concerning *positive feedback*, we analyze this dimension in more detail, calculating the average frequencies by the age of the athletes interviewed, as shown in Figure 6.

Positive Feedback

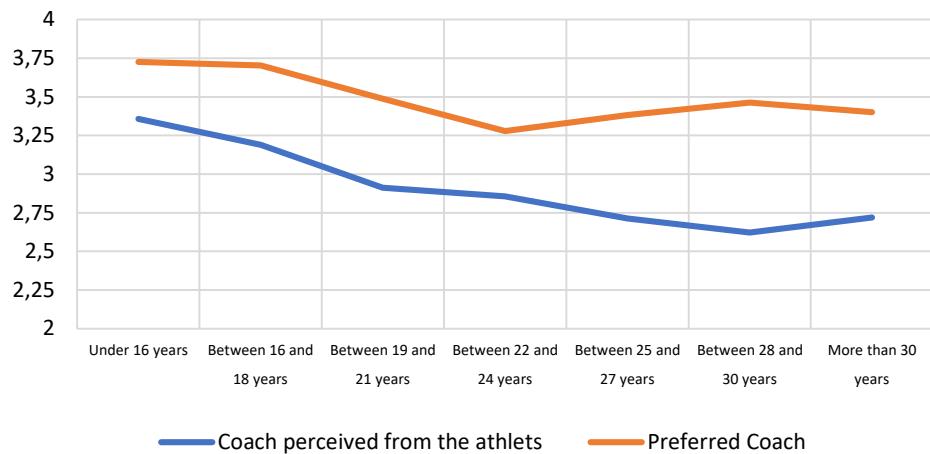


Figure 6 (Positive feedback based on the age of the athletes)

Mean frequencies decrease with increasing age, both when considering preferred coach behaviour and perceived behaviour. This reduction is more pronounced from the age group "less than 16 years" to the age group "between 22 and 24 years". This implies that younger players perceive and prefer to receive positive feedback with greater frequency from the coach.

In conclusion, our results provide some useful information for coaches that may be helpful for implementing coaching strategies aimed at improving the well-being and the level of satisfaction of the team members. There are some behavioural characteristics of coaches that players prefer to be implemented to a greater extent, both from a technical and relational point of view. In particular, there is a preference for more frequent positive feedback compared to the frequency that coaches believe they implement. This preference is more pronounced for younger players. Evidently, over the years, the technique is refined, and the player's knowledge and awareness increase, so there is less need to receive positive feedback from the coach.

One should bear in mind that each team consists of players with unique and personal individual characteristics. Therefore, the coach should develop the ability to understand the personalities and needs of each individual player to bring out the potential of each one.

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