

The Role of Trust for Leadership in Team Sports

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Abstract: Today's sport in many ways is like business. Numerous concepts as well as characteristics are adequate for both. The role of leaders in sports and business is invaluable when it comes to reaching goals or creating positive work environment. The aim of the paper is to identify the role of trust in relationships within a sport team, particularly between the leader and the rest of the group (trust in leader), and to highlight the impact of trust on the effectiveness of leaders' work and successes achieved by a team.

Keywords: leadership, leaders in sport, trust, trust within a team, trust in leader, competence, motivation.

1. Introduction

The world of sport is extremely competitive – very similar to today's business world. And just as in business, in team sports very much depends on a individual leader. Sport, aimed at the result and success by definition, means constant struggle. Every day athletes struggle with themselves, with adversities, with negative relationships and most of all with their opponents. Winners are characterized by the ability to maintain total control, discipline, and their activities are strictly directed at achieving the ultimate goal or a potential victory.

Regardless of a sports discipline, one of the factors that makes a team successful is a person of a leader, who displays above average sport skills but also has some other abilities and leadership qualities which enable the team to achieve success. These leadership skills consist mainly of the ability to adapt behaviour to a particular situation and people involved in it (Williams, 2013). These behaviours define leaders in the world of sport and business environment.

A number of authors have tackled the subject of leadership by attempting to identify universal leadership skills or a specific model of a leader. For example, Mary Parker Follet wrote that different situations required a different set of knowledge. Thus, an individual with that knowledge can act smoothly and efficiently in certain situations, becoming the leader at the given time and conditions (Cox, 1990). Stogdill expressed a similar view, saying that if the leader was operating smoothly and successfully in one area did not necessarily succeed in other situations (Stogdill, 1948). However, Behling and Shriesheim pointed out that leaders had fixed and variable characteristics and behaviours depending on the situation (Behling and Shriesheim, 1976).

Therefore, it is difficult to find a coherent set of personal qualities, characteristics for all leaders. However, although there is no comprehensive model representing a set of identical characteristics, we can distinguish certain common features describing positive leaders. This article draws the attention to the importance of trust in the process of creating leaders in sport. The aim of the paper is to identify the role of trust in relationships within the team, particularly between the leader and the rest of the group (trust in leader), and to highlight the impact of trust on the effectiveness of leaders' work and successes achieved by a team.

As mentioned by Józefowicz (2013), trust is one of the key areas of positive organisational potential (POP) and while POP is a combination of tangible and intangible resources that are considered as a foundation for positive culture and atmosphere in the organisation, the meaning of trust in any organisation is invaluable. Trust is an attitude that plays the role of a strategic resource, helping in gaining competitive advantage which enables an organisation to meet its targets (Covey and Merrill, 2006). Trust is one of those attributes that makes individuals and teams within the organisation act with the full engagement on behalf of a company to implement the variety of strategic objectives (Józefowicz, 2013, pp. 161–162).

The author's long-term experience in team sports supports the proposition that gaining trust by a person who is nominated as a leader, or has already become a leader is a key factor for success in team sports. However, to effectively interact with people, it is vital to keep a balance between demonstrating competence in the specific discipline and cordiality (Cuddy, Kohut and Neffinger, 2015). The author of the paper belongs to the group of supporters of the above thesis. In discussing the issue of leadership in sport, she bases on the research work of many authors, as well as her own observations and conversations with practitioners in team sports. Moreover, the author refers to the thoughts and experiences of her own, long-term international sports career.

The author of this article performed a comprehensive study of business literature as well as literature in the fields related to sport. The analysis of the literature was focused on publications in psychology and sports psychology (*Journal of Psychology*), and sports journals such as *Journal of Sport and Health Science*, *Sport Wyczynowy* and *Human Kinetics*.

Along with the analysis of literature, another research method used in this paper was participatory observation. As a typical qualitative data collection method, it allowed the author to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals, in this case members of different sports teams. Additionally, it allowed to acknowledge their practices towards each other through an intensive involvement with people in their direct environment. This data collection method included informal interviews, direct observation, collective discussion, and participation in the life of the group (during author's personal sports career) as well as self-analysis.

Traditional participatory observation is usually done over an extended period of time ranging from several months to many years, it has not been different in case of this research. Some observations date to 2007 and were not originally performed for the purpose of this article, however they became relevant over time. Many details acquired with the use of participatory observation method were organised and stored in a form of a diary. The long period of conducting observation gave the author an access to many detailed and accurate information (like some typical behaviours) about the individuals and sports environment under the study. Details were more easily observed and eventually interpreted over the extended period of time (approximately 10 years, however each year typically between months of September through May,

during the basketball/handball/etc. season). Because the research was done during the active sports career of the author, the sample selection was random and included teams met during their sports camps in the National Sport Centres as well as during international tournaments in locations inhabited by the author. Lastly, research was conducted in Poland, but also internationally in such countries like Spain, France, Italy and the USA.

2. The need for leadership in sport

Sport, as a sphere of human life which is dominated by the continuous competition, naturally creates and shapes leaders. According to the most frequently used definition of leadership in sport, formulated by Barrow (1977), it is a process of influencing the activities of individuals and organised groups to achieve specific goals (Weinberg and Gould, 2007). This definition is extremely useful as it highlights different aspects of leadership particularly characteristic for the world of sport such as: decision-making skills, ability to motivate group members, giving feedback, establishing interpersonal relationships and managing a group or a team. Each leader must become professionally reliable so as to have influence on his/her 'subordinates'. To achieve this, a leader must act in a coherent manner and follow basic principles. In addition, according to the author's observation, several important criteria must be fulfilled in the process of creating a leader for the actions of the leader to be well received by the members of a group, which he/ she has the lead of and the set of goals to be finally achieved.

The modern leader in sport is a member of a team, who in sports realities is both a captain and a player or a coach. An outstanding coach, Vince Lombardi, once said that the strength of the whole group largely depends on the strength of its leader¹. The bigger the team working with a leader is, the greater the likelihood of difficult situations. However, a good leader is the one who adheres to the rule: there are no problems, there are only tasks to be accomplished (Matusiak, 2001).

The primary task of a leader is to guide the members of the team, motivate them and lead them in accordance with the principles of ethics.

¹ <http://www.curatedquotes.com/leadership-quotes/sports/> (accessed on 13 May 2015).

In practice, this means the application of clear values and principles of work and approach to people and remaining faithful to these principles every day, especially in stressful situations and when the pressure to achieve results is dominant. The compatibility of words and deeds also plays an important part. Consistently developed personal authenticity and strong self-awareness have a positive impact on the team and reinforce the influence of a leader's strength of character and maintain and strengthen the leader's position.

As author's personal experience indicates that from the point of view of leadership the credibility of the leader, which significantly extends beyond the professional consistency and competence, is essential. The credibility flowing from compliance of words with deeds based on the absolute commitment of the leader to set an example and achieve measurable results, determines whether the leader will obtain the approval and will be able to exert influence over the group and thus succeed.

Beyond said strong goal orientation and the distinctive integrity of character, credibility of the leaders is determined by a full commitment to other team members, the 'push' and adequate communication skills. Author's experiences prove that these competencies form the exemplary leader attitude, but the key is also to create an atmosphere of mutual trust.

Confidence, as pointed out by many authors in the field of leadership, is linked to the efficient functioning of the organisation (Kramer and Cook, 2004). Moreover, it has a positive impact on the attitudes and behaviours of team members and on their own performance. Therefore, trust should be the starting point in most relationships inside and outside the team (organisational) as it seems to be a critical factor for success and creating the basis for the development of relationships and open communication.

In sports, especially during a competition or a match, there is a need to make quick decisions. The choices must be relevant and give measurable (positive) effects. With significantly limited time, the choices require a simplified method of reasoning. Leaders help to make decisions, and this is possible thanks to trust the team has in them (Gobillot, 2008). People are equipped with a tendency to hold on to faith, and so to trust others which favours leaders. Trust is the result of a rational judgment of team members, but before they decide to trust a candidate for the leader, they gather information on the leader's credibility and verify their existing opinions.

3. A coach as a leader

It is said that a coach is a formal leader of every team. By popular assumption, a coach is a specialist in a particular field and has the knowledge and experience in leading players and the team to develop their full potential and to achieve the best results (Wałach-Biśta, 2013). Moreover, players are developing, they make technical and tactical progress under the guidance of the coach. Due to the large amount of time spent together, the coach has the best knowledge about each player's capabilities as well as their strong and weak points (Herzing, 2002). With this knowledge, the coach knows best what type of work his/her players must do, to reach mastery in their discipline.

A good leader in sport is the coach who provides players with an appropriate technical preparation (Zhang and Chelladurai, 2012), offers support and boosts their motivation to realise the vision of victory every day. Due to such a significant impact of coaching attitudes and players' behaviours, the special role of trust in coach – player (superior – subordinate) relationship is worth emphasizing. This trust is built on the basis of the attributes which a coach (person endowed with trust) should be provided with. The most important of these are: kindness, honesty (reliability) and competence (Lewicka and Krot, 2014).

The friendly coach is the one who focuses on the needs and interests of players, supports them in their efforts and refrains from exercising his/her authority by the relationship of subordination. Honesty (reliability) of the coach is linked to obeying the rules and serves as a basis for the formation of beliefs about the coach's credibility. Derogation from the agreed rules should not take place and these principles should equally apply to all the players in a particular team. What is more, the consistency with which the coach will enforce the compliance with these rules of all members of the team is also important (Lewicka and Krot, 2014). The consistency in actions should be manifested in many ways, such as resolving conflicts, punishing and rewarding, especially when gaining the trust of the group.

In practice, the coach's competencies will be assessed on the basis of technical expertise and the ability to adjust them to the individual needs of players subordinated to the coach. Author's experience confirms that on the professional level, the arsenal of skills and knowledge of a coach is evaluated on the basis of the sole process of preparation (training), selection of the every-day training program, and on the basis

of behaviour and decisions taken during a competition or a match. If these give positive results as achieving team goals, the level of trust for a coach increases automatically.

The coach usually has a whole range of players in the team and each of them has a unique place and clearly defined roles in the team. Among them, there are players with enormous talent and there are also players who are less talented, but who can make up for their deficiencies by commitment and hard work. Years of author's experiences show that both groups of players need a leader – a coach who will be able to motivate talented individuals to constantly work on their skills, as this group of players has a tendency to depend solely on their talent. In sport at the highest level, talent is not everything. The coach knows how to motivate his players and how and when make best of their skills and talents.

Observing different specialists, a conclusion is drawn that the coach much easier gains trust of younger players who are at the beginning of their sports careers. The coach at this stage is a complete authority and a role model, especially if the coach's current position was preceded by a successful professional sports career. These young players are able to trust the coach boundlessly and carry out the instructions unquestionably. Through victories and achieving the goals, trust is strengthened and remains a strong value for many years.

Numerous world-famous coaches appreciate and emphasize the importance of the role of trust. Mike Krzyzewski, the coach of the basketball team at Duke University points out that in leadership, there are no words more important than trust and in any organisation, trust must be developed among every member of the team if success is going to be achieved.² Therefore, confidence is a key factor on the road to success.

A perfect Polish example is Bogdan Wenta – the coach of the Polish national handball team. At a time when he was the coach of the national handball team, Polish players achieved greatest international successes which resulted in a significant increase in the popularity of this sport discipline. Wenta is a man who has very good manners, who can communicate with his team in every situation. He had a good relationship with the players. In his team young talented individuals, whom he often gave the chance to play, played side by side with the stars playing in top European clubs.

² <http://coachk.com/> (accessed on 17 April 2015).

While working as a coach at such a position, there are several duties which have to be carried out, apart from leading a team. One of them is maintaining contact with the media and Wenta perfectly fulfilled this obligation. In his work he often risked, but all his actions were thought over. During the interviews his players stated that he did not avoid mistakes, but even if they occurred, he could publicly admit to a mistake while he always defended the team and his players. Thanks to this attitude, the players trusted him boundlessly, which could have been observed during the matches and was reflected in the team's results.

Referring to the author's own experience, the preparation of a national team for the most important events is a difficult period of time associated with the exhaustive workouts, plenty of matches and separation from families. It is a long time of hard work during which the coach and the players spend a lot of time together. In that period, some misunderstandings can occur, and they are usually caused by exhaustion. Luckily, the author was provided with the opportunity to meet Bogdan Wenta and his players during their preparations for the 2007 European Championships. The issue that was the most interesting for her, was their attitude towards one another. The atmosphere between the coach and players was very friendly. Wenta was very demanding every day in sport relations, but he also understood his players personal needs and was perfectly able to distinguish working time from their time to relax, even approving of common celebrations. Celebration of success is often unappreciated, but a very important element (Wałach-Biśta, 2013). If the leader does not notice and appreciate the achievements of the team, the leader risks that members will stop believing that they are on their right way to achieve success³.

In the author's opinion, Wenta's team appreciated this, so, as a result, their hard work and involvement was clearly seen. The author doubts if that would be possible if the group did not respect and trust the coach. When a subordinate (player) receives a signal that a supervisor (the coach) is not interested in the fulfilment of the needs, the subordinate loses confidence in the supervisor and the motivation to achieve the target.

³ The research proves that Polish sportsmen consider themselves are not properly rewarded and praised by the coaches for their good performance during competitions and practice sessions. What follows is a guideline for the coaches to appreciate good performance of their subordinates and praise their effort as it is expected by the sportsmen.

Sports environment knows many world-famous charismatic coaches, who are also great leaders, but there are also less known coaches who still create the right conditions for a change and development.

Certain attitudes and personal features are particularly important in sport leadership. But there is no ideal model corresponding to each situation and every group of people. In the words of Stogdill, the leader who acts efficiently and successfully in one situation, is not necessarily successful in others. In his research, however, he indicated 5 factors closely related with leading a team in an effective way: intelligence, motivation, achievement, responsibility, commitment and authority (Stogdill, 1948). Different situations require different types of knowledge. People with knowledge appropriate and necessary in certain situations, operate efficiently and effectively, becoming a leader in specific time and conditions.

Good leaders insist on the organisation and the results, keeping in mind good relations with their subordinates. These ones focused mainly on the work and the results, present a commanding style (authoritative), others are focused on good relationships and satisfaction of co-operation (democratic). Fiedler (1967), a recognized researcher in the area of management and business psychology, distinguished two extreme types of a leader's personality:

- focused on mutual relations,
- focused on the task.

There are people who believe that the most important thing in sports is a good relationship between the coach and players, good cooperation, nice atmosphere and mutual trust. For others, achieving good results in the competition is the top factor, while the atmosphere in the group and relations between team members are much less important (Fiedler, 1967). Through high expectations of their teams, coaches generally emphasize their strength and skills, which may cause the opposite effect.

The leader who wishes to give the impression of being strong and competent, prior to becoming trustworthy for his/her subordinates, risks that the players will become unwilling to cooperate. Fear can weaken the players' athletic potential, their ability to overcome difficult situations. As a result, the players may feel stuck and discouraged (Cuddy et al., 2015).

Numerous studies suggest that in order to be an effective leader, one ought to pay attention to positive relationships and kindness. Cordiality

expressed very often in simple everyday gestures can have an effect on others, making it easier for the leaders to build trust, communicate and solve difficult situations. Consequently, Richard Cox stated that “Leading and managing people is relatively easy, if they like the leader and have confidence in him, but it is not so easy when you do not have for him neither sympathy nor confidence” (Czajkowski, 2003). Prominent coaches are able to combine and apply in practice both of these approaches perfectly.

4. Position of a leader in a team

The leadership of a leader-coach is limited, so, in most situations there is a need to have a leader among the players. It happens so, because of the coach’s excessive concentration on the implementation of tasks. As a result, coaches cannot deal with the relationship with the players well. Such behaviours may result from imposing organisational requirements and high expectations, but there are also coaches who simply do not have natural leadership skills to unite the whole team effectively. When the coach is focused mainly on the task, an effort and the results, excluding human relations, he should seek help in the person of a player who would be a leader within the team.

Such a scheme is often implemented in team sports and generally proves to be effective. From the author’s observation, in such situations, the group leader at the beginning is informal and achieves a formal leadership position when other members of the group accept the leader. After all, such a leader, often boundlessly submits to the coach, who appointed him/her, and the coach uses him/her as a deputy.

If such a leader is a person designated by the coach, the team may not be able to fully accept this choice since it can be received as an unnatural situation and the team may not see a particular person as the leader. In the author’s opinion, a leadership that is determined and imposed from the top, does not give the team a true leader. In this situation, the group will follow such a leader, but only because it has to. The ideal solution is to allow team members to point a candidate for the leader. In practice, the group will choose a trustworthy person who is responsible and involved in the life of a team.

The leader of the team is not anyone more important than others, but rather the first among equals, trying to bring out the full potential

of those with whom he/she works and setting an example for the entire team (Adair, 2010). It is a member of the team that will lead not on the basis of a rank or a position assigned by the supervisor (the coach), but because of outstanding intelligence and strength of personality and by virtue of being the best in their discipline. The foundation of all leadership is confidence. In sport, the higher the fitness is, the greater the confidence. Any leader cannot act without a quiet self-confidence. The scientific research from 2012 confirms, that confidence helps to achieve a high status in the group, and this is possible because it makes people perceive the person as competent, even if in reality they are not (Anderson, Brion, Moore and Kennedy, 2012). In fact, without some amount of certainty, nobody can use their own talents. The leaders are not exceptional in this regard, but overconfidence, may result in misrepresentation of the leader, which in turn, can have the opposite effect in terms of trust, on which the leader works.

In the first place, however, a team leader demands from himself/herself, setting a standard, then requires from the other team members. Team leaders have knowledge of their teammates, especially in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. The leader is an outstanding person in comparison with other team members. The leader sets the group an example because he/she aims for continuous improvement. Also, he/she can inspire a sense of responsibility among team members, e.g. for the result, or for one another. The legend and icon of basketball, Larry Bird states that: "Leadership is getting players to believe in you. If you tell a teammate you're ready to play as tough as you're able to, you'd better go out there and do it. Players will see right through a phony. And they can tell when you're not giving it all you've got".⁴ Such a leader creates the conditions for team members to fully engage, and encourages them to work as a team. A leader in sport motivates the team in difficult moments and constantly encourages the team to give its best, but first he/she does his/her best, knowing that the team looks upon him/her. On the basis of these elements, he/she builds relationships of mutual trust and respect in the team he/she leads.

A model leader is constantly working on his/her position. As a consequence, a leader-player builds his/her confidence, not only on the

⁴ <http://www.curatedquotes.com/leadership-quotes/sports/> (accessed on 13 May 2015).

court but also off the court⁵. There are many innovative activities of daily living promoting the strengthening of ties and trust between team members, which should be performed by the leader. Besides these on the court, there are some widely understood integrating activities which can be organised outside the court, taking care of positive social relationships in the team and offering support in situations beyond sport, but also, a common help in the surrounding world (e.g. voluntary work). Such activities influence the positive relationships and atmosphere in the team and build a strong bond commonly known as “chemistry” (Decker, 2014).

One may ask, why so much importance is given to relations outside the court. Author’s own experience confirms that even with a slightly weaker sports team or a sudden lack of a player (injury, leaving the team during the season), it is possible to achieve more when there are strong team ties, based on trust, outside the court. The role of the leader of such a team is to precisely create these relationships, strengthen them and be able to transmit them on the professional ground. As a result, the team will be able to cooperate and achieve the best results, in accordance with the principle that if they can achieve something, it must be achieved together.

5. Conclusion

In practice, it is easier and more effective to lead people who like, respect and trust the leader. A good leader knows how important it is to determine which factors, situations or people have the greatest impact on the creation of trust in an organisation or in a sports team. The tasks which are clearly defined, make it much easier to manage a team and increase the leader’s impact on the group.

As far as it is possible, the coach, or other team leader to gain and maintain the confidence of the group, must treat all members of the group fairly and equally. Any signs of favouring individuals usually have a negative impact on the perception of such a person as a team leader. An example would be here favouritism and better treatment in many situations of the most outstanding athletes (best scorers or

⁵ This notion is extremely vital in American sports environment in the professional (NBA, NFL, NHL) and university (NCAA) sports leagues.

foreigners) or those who sympathize with a leader. Such leaders, as in the situation presented above, remain leaders only for those favoured individuals, and for the rest of team members they lose their authority, respect and trust.

The undisputed source of trust is the leader's liability. This is an important aspect of leadership, because if a leader behaves unfairly, subordinates lose confidence in the leader, additionally, all the relations in the team become broken.

The leader, as an extremely competent in their discipline individual, is a stereotypical example to follow. Leaders are never passive and their goals are clearly defined. They always strive to achieve them at any cost, motivating and encouraging activity of the rest of the team. They have professional skills, thanks to which, they are able to motivate the group to give its best, and therefore, not only the necessary minimum, but always a little bit more, which makes a group stand out from their opponents. Thus, the leader provokes subordinates to overcome their weaknesses and limitations and to become better due to hard work.

Being a leader, is a responsible job and it requires certain predispositions and proper preparation. It is much more difficult to achieve success without the leader's help. In sport, as in many other areas, people follow leaders who want to win at any cost. It can be already seen that without trust and faith in the true intentions of the leaders, their leadership success would not be possible. Furthermore, in the model of positive organisational potential, mentioned above, positive interpersonal relationships are defined as relationships between members of the organisation, based on positive attitudes and emotions such as kindness, sympathy, respect and confidence (Glińska-Neweś, 2013; Lis, Glińska-Neweś and Kalińska, 2014).

Trust, as pointed out by many authors, is related to the efficient functioning of the team. It has a positive impact on the attitudes and behaviours of group members and their own performance. Confidence seems to be a critical factor of success in most relationships outside and inside the organisation, an essential element of creating relationships and the foundation for the development of open communication and dialogue. Good communication comes along with empathy and affects the ability to understand members of the team (Herzig, 2002). This facilitates the identification and accomplishment of the team's tasks and positive thinking about the future strengthens the confidence in the success of the group.



Figure 1. Key areas crucial for the achievement of the team success

When leaders are responsible, competent and confident they also achieve an additional asset in the form of a high level of trust from their followers. It turns out to be a very valuable asset that is desired and somewhat invaluable allowing the whole team reach their highest capabilities in many key areas that are crucial for the team well-being (e.g. internal relationships, communication and motivation, as pictured in Figure 1). As a result, the team is able to achieve a team success which can have a very broad meaning for different members of a sports organisation that the team is a part of. The team success that can be a great sports result translating also into a very good economic result of the sports organisation.

To sum up, if the coach wants to be seen by the players as a trustworthy person, he/she has to take care of their good mood, be consistent, persevering, honest, consistent with the standards and effectively manage a team and achieve the goals of the whole group. The credibility flowing from compliance of words with deeds based on the absolute commitment of leaders to lead by example and achieve measurable results, decides whether the leader will obtain the approval and will be able to exert influence and eventually succeed.

Trust is one of the factors necessary for the formation of organisational commitment (employee commitment), good relationships

between team members, as well as the willingness to provide mutual assistance, to share knowledge and experiences. All this allows to overcome daily difficulties and facilitates the accomplishment of the purpose; hence, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of trust in leadership.

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