# EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION:
# A STUDY ON COACH-PLAYER COMMUNICATION
# IN YOUTH SOCCER

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**Abstract**

Open and honest communication between coaches and players is essential for successful cooperation and the achievement of expected sports results in all sports, including soccer, which is one of the most popular sports worldwide and attracts many young people who would like to become successful soccer players. And especially the development of young soccer talents requires a responsible approach based on professional communication from coaches. Using results of a questionnaire survey of 305 coaches with experience in youth soccer in the age category up to 15 years, the paper analysis coach-player communication, identifies the prevalent type of coaches, and proposes improvements in leadership communication applicable both in sports between coaches and players and in business between team leaders and team members. The findings showed that most surveyed coaches represent a "mentor" type of coach combining individual and collective approaches to players and applying clear expectations and open communication involving players in discussion and finding ways to continuously improve their performance.

**Keywords:** communication practices, leadership styles, soccer coaches, Czech Republic

**JEL Code:** M10, M12, M50

## Introduction

A natural role of any team leader, whether in business or sports, is to lead, which generally means to influence others toward the achievement of defined goals (Dong, Montero, & Possajennikov, 2018). Team leaders are mostly known as individuals who have natural rather than formal authority to inspire others to do their best to achieve desired results. To persuade others to follow them, they first need to connect others with their vision for future success and to achieve that, they need to be able to communicate effectively with others (Ertac & Mehmet, 2019). This is why effective leadership communication is essential to the success of any team leader responsible for the performance of their team members

(Jiang & Luo, 2018). Through effective leadership communication, team leaders communicate performance standards and measures to team members, manage their performance, and provide them with feedback to assess their actual performance and agree with them on corrective actions if needed (Rizvi & Popli, 2021). This approach to leadership communication builds trusts between team leaders and team members, which engages team members and improves their performance (Carasco-Saul, Kim, & Kim, 2015).

The mentioned fundamentals of leadership communication are applicable both in business between team leaders and team members and in sports between coaches and players (Cranmer & Myers, 2015). Effective coach-player communication is essential to the success of any coach responsible for the performance of their players in any individual or team sports. Sports coaches, as well as business leaders, must effectively communicate performance standards and measures to players, manage their actual performance, and provide them with feedback to achieve desired performance (Obœuf, Fernandes, Lecroisey, d'Arripe, Duployé, & Collard, 2016). Coaches communicate with players based on their abilities and previous experience (Abdul-Sattar & Al-Samarraie, 2021), which identification allows to define the different types of coaches to find the optimal way of coach-player communication according to the demands of the situation. The paper focuses on the communication practices of coaches with experience in youth soccer, in which a responsible approach based on professional communication from coaches is essential for the positive development of young soccer talents. The assumption is that the optimal communication style of these coaches could be an example of effective leadership communication for other sports coaches as well as business leaders.

# 1    Goal and method

The paper uses the results of a questionnaire survey of 305 coaches with experience in youth soccer in the age category up to 15 years to analyze coach-player communication practices, identify the prevalent type of coaches, and propose improvements in leadership communication applicable both in sports between coaches and players and in business between team leaders and team members. The questionnaire survey was carried out between March and April 2022 and the 305 coaches were characterized by gender (97% male and 3% female), age (34% 36-45 years, 23% 46-55 years, 18% 26-35 years, 12% 56 years and over, 10% 21-25 years, and 3% 20 years and under), and length of coaching experience (49% 9 years and over, 22% 6-8 years, 13%, 1-3 years, 12% 4-5 years, and 4% 1 year and under).

The online questionnaire form used originally contained thirteen questions focused on coaches' practice, however, for the paper, six questions related to coach-player communication were analyzed: (1) the level of individual communication with players, (2) the level of support for new players, (3) the level of creating a positive atmosphere in the team, (4) the level of providing players with constructive feedback, (5) the required level of meeting established rules of behavior by players, and (6) the required level of meeting established rules of performance standards by players. The defined levels of coach-player communication were assessed on a three-level scale – low, average, and high. Based on this assessment, the prevalent type of coaches was identified within four types of coaches – removed coach, buddy coach, controlling coach, and mentor coach – defined according to Pulver's (2021) typology of leaders (see Chapter 2). The characteristics of the particular types of coaches related to the assessed levels of coach-player communication are summarized in Table 1.

**Tab. 1: The four types of coaches**

| The level of… | The removed coach | The buddy coach | The controlling coach | The mentor coach |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Connection** | **Low** | **High** | **Low** | **High** |
| 1. Individual communication with players | Low | High | Low | High |
| 2. Support for new players | Low | High | Low | High |
| 3. Creating a positive atmosphere in the team | Low | High | Low | High |
| 4. Providing players with constructive feedback | Low | High | Low | High |
| **Expectations** | **Low** | **Low** | **High** | **High** |
| 5. Meeting established rules of behavior by players | Low | Low | High | High |
| 6. Meeting established rules of performance standards by players | Low | Low | High | High |
| **Results** | **The removed coach is emotionally removed from the team and does only what is needed to get by.** | **The buddy coach treats players well, but they often feel a lack of leadership and authority.** | **The controlling coach leads players through standards without much care for them as individuals.** | **The mentor coach helps players to do their best by providing them with favorable conditions and showing them an interest in their achievements.** |

Source: based on Pulver's (2021) typology of leaders

Within the assessment of levels of coach-player communication and the identification of the prevalent type of coaches, a hypothesis related to the individual communication with players was verified by performing the chi-square goodness of fit test:

H: The practice of individual communication with players
depends on the length of coaching experience.

## 2 Fundamentals of the coach-player communication in youth soccer

Soccer is one of the most popular sports worldwide, actively practiced by millions of professionals and amateurs of all ages and performance categories. A key role in any soccer team is played by the coach who leads the players to achieve the expected wins. The fundamental tool used by the coach to influence the players' performance is coach-player communication, which takes place more or less constantly during the training and match process (Cranmer & Myers, 2015). In team sports such as soccer, the coach leads several players with different abilities and needs, so the coach must get to know each player well to set up suitable conditions for all players in the team. The sports development and performance of individual players are mainly determined by physical and mental factors, but if the coach can meet the individual abilities and needs of the players, the coach can effectively improve their development and performance (Fuhre, Øygard, & Sæther, 2022). However, this is not possible without effective coach-player communication that builds and maintains the trust that players have toward their coach (Jiang & Luo, 2018).

The most challenging is communication in youth soccer. The key is to attract the attention of young players and engage them to achieve desired performance (O'Connor, Larkin, & Williams, 2018). Children and teenagers naturally communicate differently than adults, but there are also significant differences in communication in the individual age categories of child and teenage players. These differences must be respected to achieve the proper development of the personality and performance of young players. Children's players must mainly enjoy soccer, so the core of their training should be a natural game. As the players get older, it is possible to place more and more emphasis on individual and team performance. (Batista, Goncalves, Sampaio, Castro, Abade, & Travassos, 2019)

The way coaches communicate with players depends on their type conditioned by their abilities and previous experience (Abdul-Sattar & Al-Samarraie, 2021). In theory and practice, there are many typologies of business leaders applicable to sports coaches. One of

the classic typologies of leaders distinguishes transformational and transactional leaders (Crews, Brouwers, & Visagie, 2019). Transformational leaders use the force of personality to change the behaviors of team members to achieve desired results, while transactional leaders use the policy of rewards or punishments for work done to stimulate team members to achieve desired results. For effective leadership communication, it seems better to use the natural force of personality than a formal policy of rewards or punishments.

One of the newest typologies of leaders was defined by Clint Pulver (2021) based on longitudinal research of leadership across US companies. Pulver's typology distinguishes four types of leaders – removed, buddy, controlling, and mentor – depending on the two critical leadership factors of connection and expectations. Connection expresses the level of trust that exists between leaders and their people. Expectations are linked to standards that people must meet. Both the high level of leaders' connection to their people and the high level of leaders' expectations for their people are commonly linked to successful teams. The lowest levels of connection and expectations are common for "removed" leaders who are emotionally removed from the team and do only what is needed to get by. On the contrary, the highest levels of connection and expectations are common for "mentor" leaders who simply help people to do their best by providing them with favorable working conditions and showing them an interest in their work. Remaining "buddy" leaders show high connection, but low expectations, while "controlling" leaders show high expectations, but low connection. The "buddy" leaders treat their people well, but they often feel a lack of leadership and authority, while the "controlling" leaders lead their people through standards without much care for them as individuals. Based on Pulver's typology of leaders, the ideal type seems to be a "mentor" leader whose approach could be good practice for sports coaches.

Sports coaches, like "mentor" leaders, must show both high connection and high expectations towards their players. In the case of very young players, the coach could be a "buddy" rather than a "mentor" leader, but never a "controlling" or even a "removed" leader. Very young players need to treat sport more like a game to naturally develop the necessary habits, but as players get older more and more emphasis must be placed on meeting desired performance standards while maintaining trust in the coach's approach (Abdul-Sattar & Al-Samarraie, 2021). And this can be achieved thanks to effective leadership communication when the coach needs to communicate players' worth and potential so well that the players begin to see those things within themselves (Pulver, 2021). This seems to be the optimal way to lead players to the desired achievements and these fundamentals are demonstrated below in the communication practices of coaches with experience in youth soccer.

# 3    Authors' findings and discussion

Below are presented and discussed the responses of 305 coaches with experience in youth soccer to six questions regarding their communication with players. The purpose is to identify the prevalent type of coaches and propose improvements in leadership communication of sports coaches as well as business leaders.

The first question asked coaches how often they communicate with players individually and 54% of coaches stated "sometimes" (average level), 24% of coaches stated "rarely" (low level), and 22% of coaches stated "often" (high level). Soccer is a team sport and the coach communicates most of the information collectively, but knowing the individual abilities and needs of the players is important for setting up suitable conditions for the team (Fuhre, Øygard, & Sæther, 2022). To effectively improve the performance of the team and individuals, it is, therefore, necessary to efficiently apply both collective and individual communication with players. Performing the chi-square goodness of fit test, a hypothesis was verified that the practice of individual communication with players depends on the length of coaching experience (see Table 2). There was no significant difference in responses depending on the length of coaching experience ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis was tested that the practice of individual communication with players does not depend on the length of coaching experience. Since the chi-square statistic $[\chi^2]$ was lower than the critical chi-square value $[\chi^2_{0,05}(8)]$, the null hypothesis was not rejected. The hypothesis was not confirmed.

**Tab. 2: How often do you communicate with players individually?**

| The length of coaching experience | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | $\sum$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 year and under | 2 | 8 | 3 | **13** |
| 1-3 years | 10 | 24 | 6 | **40** |
| 4-5 years | 8 | 22 | 7 | **37** |
| 6-8 years | 13 | 40 | 14 | **67** |
| 9 years and over | 39 | 71 | 38 | **148** |
| $\sum$ | **72** | **165** | **68** | **305** |

$H_0$: The practice of individual communication with players does not depend on the length of coaching experience.

$H_A$: The practice of individual communication with players depends on the length of coaching experience.

Chi square statistic $\chi2 = 5.408$

Critical chi-square value $\chi^2_{0.05}(8) = 15.507$

The hypothesis was not confirmed. The practice of individual communication with players does not depend on the length of coaching experience.

Source: authors, 2022

The second question asked coaches how they support new players coming to the team and 46% of coaches stated "maximum" (high level), 43% of coaches stated "adequately" (average level), and 11% of coaches stated "minimum" (low level). Supporting new players as they integrate into the team is important for creating functional team relationships that have a positive effect on the team and individual performance (Crews, Brouwers, & Visagie, 2019).
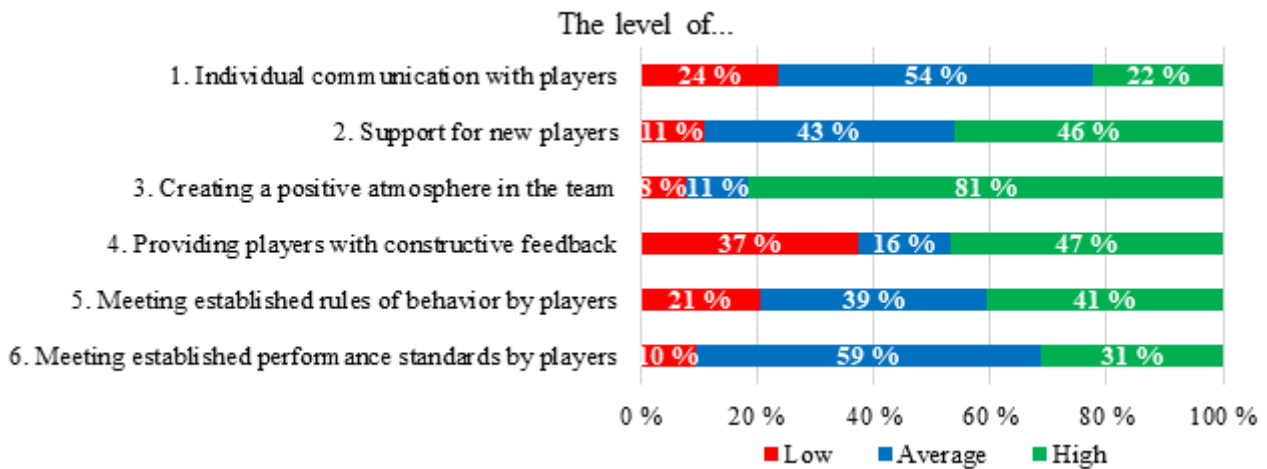
The third question asked coaches if they strive to create a positive atmosphere in the team and 81% of coaches stated "definitely" (high level), 11% of coaches stated "adequately" (average level), and 8% of coaches stated "do not care" (low level). A positive atmosphere is important in every team. It positively contributes to players' motivation and engagement. Motivated and engaged players are willing to train harder and achieve better results, and better results in turn increase their motivation and engagement. (Abdul-Sattar & Al-Samarraie, 2021)

The fourth question asked coaches if they provide players with constructive feedback including both positive and negative aspects of their behaviors and achievements and 47% of coaches stated "regularly" (high level), 37% of coaches stated "rarely" (low level), and 16% of coaches stated "sometimes" (average level). Providing players with regular feedback is important for achieving desired team and individual performance (Brandes & Elvers, 2017).

The fifth question asked coaches if they require players to meet established rules of behavior and 41% of coaches stated "yes with penalties set by the coach " (high level), 39% of coaches stated "yes with penalties agreed with players" (average level), and 21% of coaches stated, "yes without any penalties" (low level). In team sports, everyone should meet established rules of behavior that encourage proper behavior as well as respect for other teammates. If any player breaks the rules, the coach needs to intervene. The established rules require adequate penalties for their breaking. (Díaz-García, Pulido, Ponce-Bordón, Cano-Prado, López-Gajardo, & García-Calvo, 2021)

The sixth question asked coaches if they require players to meet established performance standards and 59% of coaches stated "yes, but I let players enjoy the game" (average level), 31% of coaches stated "yes and I encourage players to do their best" (high level), and 10% of coaches stated "yes, more or less, but it's more about the team than individual performance" (low level). Coaches' clear instructions related to desired performance decrease misunderstanding and increase both individual and team performance. So, encouraging players to meet reasonable performance standards is important. (Batista, Goncalves, Sampaio, Castro, Abade, & Travassos, 2019)

**Fig. 1: The assessed levels of the coach-player communication**

The level of...

| | Low | Average | High |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Individual communication with players | 24 % | 54 % | 22 % |
| 2. Support for new players | 11 % | 43 % | 46 % |
| 3. Creating a positive atmosphere in the team | 8 % / 11 % | | 81 % |
| 4. Providing players with constructive feedback | 37 % | 16 % | 47 % |
| 5. Meeting established rules of behavior by players | 21 % | 39 % | 41 % |
| 6. Meeting established performance standards by players | 10 % | 59 % | 31 % |

0 %  20 %  40 %  60 %  80 %  100 %

■ Low  ■ Average  ■ High

Source: authors, 2022

Figure 1 summarizes the assessment of levels of coach-player communication. The findings show that most surveyed coaches achieve high or average levels of leadership for their players. This indicates that the prevalent type of coach is getting closer to a "mentor" coach who is characterized by the highest levels of connection and expectations. A "mentor" coach combines an individual and collective approach to players and applies clear expectations and open communication involving players in discussion and finding ways to continuously improve their performance. This approach could be applied as a good practice for both sports coaches and business leaders.

Effective leadership communication of sports coaches, as well as business leaders, should be based on clearly established rules of behavior and performance standards and a positive atmosphere for meeting them. Sports coaches as well as business leaders should help players and team members to do their best by showing them an interest in their achievements. The players and team members need to feel that they achieve the desired performance out of their own will. Sports coaches, as well as business leaders, should lead by example and constructive feedback including both positive and negative aspects of individual and team behaviors and achievements should be fundamental to their leadership.

## Conclusion

The authors' findings on coach-player communication of 305 coaches with experience in youth soccer confirm the importance of effective communication for the proper development of the personality and performance of young players. The prevalent type of coach was identified as getting closer to a "mentor" coach who applies both a high level of connection to

players and a high level of expectations for players. The analysis did not confirm the assumption that the practice of individual communication with players depends on the length of coaching experience. This confirms that effective communication and leadership can be learned and that it only depends on the abilities and willingness of individual coaches. The findings apply to both sports coaches and business leaders and could be used in further research on leadership in sports or business.

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