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Reported Impacts of Coaches' Facework on Motivation and Credibility

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**Abstract**

Coaches' credibility and athletes' motivation were examined in the context of the coaches' facework skills. Young and older adults were surveyed with questionnaires that looked at facework, credibility, and motivation in order for them to reflect on their past experiences with coaches. Analysis revealed that the perceived credibility of the coaches by their athletes was significantly correlated with the coaches' reported facework during performance feedback. In contrast, facework showed no significant correlation with the athletes' reported levels of motivation. Together these findings show that the facework of coaches holds differing importance for different outcomes in the coaching process and can affect the potential of the athletes' growth in sport.

*Keywords:* facework, credibility, motivation, coach, athlete

### Reported Impacts of Coaches' Facework on Motivation and Credibility

The interactions and the interpersonal relationships between coaches and athletes are linked to the potential for positive learning outcomes (Turman, 2003). Research has shown that coaching performed by professional coaches increased resilience, the overall well-being of the working environment, and an increase in the achievement of set goals (Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009). On the contrary, interpersonal relationship between an incompatible coach and athlete had characteristics of being detached, withdrawn, and showed signs of isolated behavior from both the coach and the athlete (Turman, 2003). Coaching relationships ranked behind family relationships and teammate relationships of the athletes (Donohue, Miller, Crammer, Cross, & Covassin, 2007). In Donohue et al., (2007) research, athletes who were studied perceived family members were the greatest contributors in their sport performance. The link between the coaches' interactions and relationships with the athletes impacts the performance of the athlete. Proper coaching is required for the performance level of the athlete to increase. With the pressure of success and growth in the skills of the athlete being placed on the coach, coaches' fall into leadership roles because of the responsibilities they are given.

Leadership is a very important aspect of coaching. *Transformational leadership* is an effective teaching style as argued by Grant, Green, and Rynsaardt (2010). Transformational leadership focuses on the positive changes the leader has on others as a facilitator. There are four components within transformational leadership: inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985; Grant et al., 2010).

*Inspirational motivation* refers to the ability to motivate others and draw out commitment to a course of action or the achievement of goals; *idealized influence* incorporates the role modeling of desired behaviors and ultimately influencing the others to adopt those behaviors; *individual*

*consideration* looks at the leader's ability to respond to the individual needs of each follower; and *intellectual stimulation* is about encouraging and supporting originality, creativity, and intellectual activity (Bass & Avolio, 2000; Grant et al., 2010). This study will focus primarily on the inspirational motivation of athletes. These transformational leadership components expose the role of a coach as leader. Although the role of the coach can be defined as a leader, there are aspects to the coaches' communication that make a coach successful or not. This study focuses on the communication skills of feedback intervention and facework.

### **Feedback Intervention**

Research has shown that different sports' coaching requires different communication tactics (Turman, 2003). U.S athletes from modern games like football, basketball, and hockey have the strongest desire for the coaches to include them in the decision-making process for the team. In other words, those athletes wanted the coaches to communicate in a more democratic fashion. Athletes who saw themselves competing at higher levels and who were involved in sports like Judo and Karate preferred coaches to utilize more critical behaviors (Turman, 2003). The importance of communication, more specifically feedback is an important aspect to research.

With coaching and teaching, instructors frequently evaluate and provide feedback about the performance of the students or athletes. This relaying of messages is part of the learning process and in many cases the feedback is negative. The criticism teachers make on the academic work of the students may expose difficulties in these cooperative instructional relationships (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2011). This process of relaying information on the task performance of a student is more specifically known as *feedback intervention* (FI) (Kerssen-Griep, & Witt, 2011; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and is vital in the learning process. However, identity threats and emotional tensions are heightened by these FIs (Kerssen-Griep, 2001; Kerssen-Griep, & Witt,

2011; King, Schrodt, & Weisel, 2009; Värlander, 2008). Instructors usually attempt to balance what they view as a foreseeable trade-off between maintaining the relationship and improving the learning. More specifically in sports, the behaviors and feedback of coaches that are positively perceived by athletes influence self-esteem and sport enjoyment, as well as perceived effort and success (Donohue et al., 2007). High levels of criticism and low levels of positive reinforcement by coaches decrease perceived physical and psychological capabilities in athletes (Donohue et al., 2007) highlighting the possible connection between FI and athlete performance.

There is a significant preference for positive feedback from athletes with low performance expectations (Turman, 2003). This could be the result of a lack of confidence or the desire to play sports recreationally, rather than competitively. Communication climate can range on a scale of defensive to supportive in small group and organizational settings (Dannels, Housley Gaffney, & Martin, 2011; Gibb, 1961). The climate of the setting does have an influence on those involved in such settings. Differences in skill and desire to compete in sport can require different climates which ultimately encourages coaches to adjust their communication environment accordingly.

The tone of the feedback plays an important role in the effectiveness of the message as well. Ruggiero and Lattin (2008) researched verbally aggressive coaches and argued that coaches are central figures in the intercollegiate sport environment. Since the coach is the central figure, the information that they relay to athletes can be taken very personally, which ultimately agrees with the research gathered from Donohue et al. (2007). Research has shown that verbally aggressive communication can be a very destructive form of communication in coaching (Ruggiero & Lattin, 2008). Supportive communication has been shown to lower the feeling of ambiguity, complexity, and unpredictability, which are sources of uncertainty, and supply the

athlete with increased feelings of personal control (Ruggiero & Lattin, 2008). From this it can be argued that negative or verbally aggressive communication from coaches most commonly has the opposite effect and promotes uncertainty and insecurity in athletes. This leads to a loss of confidence, negative self-feeling, and unrealistic expectations (Ruggiero & Lattin, 2008).

Although there are some benefits from verbally aggressive communication and exceptions to every rule, overall it tends to have a negative effect on athletes' relationships with their coaches.

### **Facework**

In the communication between coaches' and athletes' there positive and negative messages being relayed. From these interactions there are instances of vulnerability and anxiety because, in this case specifically the athlete is being exposed. The facework that a coach applies can lessen or heighten the athlete's emotions. *Face* is a claimed sense of social self-worth that a person wants others to have of him or her (Goffman, 1967). There is self-face concern where one is worried about the way one will be perceived. Then there is other-face concern where one is focused on the self-perception of the other person in the situation. Instructional encounters naturally are face-threatening for participants because the students' work is being critiqued (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2011). Coaching in sport goes through the same process. *Facework* refers to the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors or actions that we engage in to prevent or restore face loss and to uphold and honor face gain (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2011). Facework can be looked at as the act of "smoothing over" the sharp edges of the face-threatening acts in order to make them less damaging to the face of the other participant (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011). Linguistic and nonverbal measures are used in order lower the anticipation of face-threat which again highlights the importance of F.I. Kerssen-Griep and Witt's (2011) research supports this statement by explaining how people use different types of nonverbal and linguistic skills to

negotiate two general face-wants. All people have negative face needs (to be free from constraints) and positive face needs (to be affirmed by valued others) (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2011; Brown & Levinson 1987). Athlete-coach relationships have encounters similar to instructional encounters in affecting both of these face needs regularly in ways that impact motivations.

### **Motivation**

Understanding motivation refers to recognizing forces that ultimately initiate, direct, and sustain people's behaviors (Iso-Ahola, 1999; Place & Beggs, 2011). *Intrinsic motivation* is most commonly found in sport and can be defined as the inherent pleasure and satisfaction derived from engaging in an activity (Adie & Jowett, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 1985). It has been shown through research to lead to improved performance, greater persistence, and enhanced well-being in the physical realm (Adie & Jowett, 2010). This is linked to the self-determination theory, SDT which looks at the degree to which people's behavior in an area is influenced by self-determined motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self determination can be a powerful motivator in sport.

Some psychological characteristics such as goal orientation and self-confidence make an important contribution to individuals' motivation to participate in sports activities (Çetinkalp & Turksoy, 2011). Zamboni, Crawford, and Carrico (2008) argued that motivation was primarily based on enjoyment and satisfaction of participation and slightly based on self-esteem, life satisfaction, mood states, and body esteem. Competency and mastery factors can influence motivation as well (Kanters & Forrester, 1997). Motivation appears to have many factors that influence it. Motivated athletes understand that changes must be made in order to see improvements in their performances. Although self motivation can lead to change, a coach is the

one who is responsible for change in most cases. However, a coach must be viewed as credible for the process of improvement to be accepted by the athlete.

### **Credibility**

A person can utilize and gain the power of authority by publicizing experience, expertise, and credentials (Sue-Chan & Latham 2004). People value the expertise of authorities. *Expertise* can be defined as the extent to which a person is perceived to be a source of valid statements especially with regard to the task that is being performed (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). The higher the credibility of the person relaying the message, the higher the likelihood there will be a change as a result of it (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Sue-Chan & Latham 2004). Research has shown that there is a positive relationship between the credibility of the source of delivery and information retention (Sue-Chan & Latham 2004; Zagona & Harter, 1966), feedback acceptance (Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel, & Houston, 1976; Sue-Chan & Latham 2004), feedback favorability (Albright & Levy, 1995; Sue-Chan & Latham 2004), and intention to use feedback (Bannister, 1986; Sue-Chan & Latham 2004) which show a connection between credibility and F.I. These factors are crucial for effective coaching, if a coach can find a way to improve the retention of feedback then there is need for a further look.

Haselwood et al. (2005) argued that the ability to communicate is one of the most critical skills in becoming a successful coach. Haselwood et al. (2005) examined the relationship between head coaches' and athletes' perceptions of the head coaches' communication ability. Coaches must be able to convey their goals and expectations for their team while taking into account the individual differences among athletes to be able to bring their team together to achieve their goals. In their research, Haselwood et al. (2005) found that Coaches had stronger perceptions, compared to the athletes, that their messages were clear, easy to understand, and that

they had a good command of the language. Coaches who were perceived as being easy to understand and able to clearly express themselves were also perceived as being attentive and good listeners by the athletes increasing their credibility with the athletes. Studies have shown that the status of and credibility of the coach makes little difference in the acceptance of a message if the message is positive; however, when the message being relayed is negative status and credibility do become an influential factor (Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel, & Houston, 1976). Ultimately the lower status coaches with less credibility are accepted less when delivering a negative message.

### **Rationale**

Little research has investigated the connection between a coach's facework and an athlete's motivation. Current research states that motivation is based primarily on the enjoyment and satisfaction of participating, and slightly less rooted in self-esteem, life satisfaction, mood states, and body esteem (Çetinkalp & Turksoy, 2011; Zamboni et al., 2008). Christophel's (1990) argument that the underlying implication of students motivation lies in the process of "how" students are taught, rather than "what" they are taught begins to make a connection between communication and motivation. Findings highlight that negative or verbally aggressive communication from coaches has been shown to promote uncertainty and insecurity in athletes. This leads to a loss of confidence, negative self-feeling, and unrealistic expectations (Ruggiero & Lattin, 2008). The connection that can be made is that poor mitigation of face threats in feedback will decrease these feeders of higher motivation. From this, the opposite effect can be questioned: does positive feedback and facework from a coach increase athletes' motivation? Hypothesis One is drawn from this question.

H1: Higher reported coaching facework scores will correlate positively with athletes' higher self-reported motivation.

A credible person has a higher probability of causing change in others compared to someone with less credibility (Hovland et al., 2004). Change and credibility are important aspects of coaching; a good coach must have the ability to make improvements to their athlete's skills in order to make progress in competition. With change comes feedback, the interpretation and delivery of the feedback is important. Many times in sport the feedback is a result of error in the athletes' execution, making it appear to be criticism. This highlights the importance of Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (2011) argument that facework is used in the act of "smoothing over" or mitigating the sharp edges of the face-threatening acts in order to make them less damaging to the face of the other participant (corrections in the athletes skills). Also, the feedback of coaches that are positively perceived by athletes influence perceived effort and success (Donohue et al., 2007). For coaches, better facework and higher credibility should help in their mission to improve the sport related skills of their athletes. This suggests that because both facework and credibility impact success, they should have an impact on each other:

H2: Higher reported coaching facework scores will correlate positively with coaches' credibility scores.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

There were 30 participants, 24 males and 6 females who responded to the link posted on Facebook by the researcher. The respondents had to be at the very least in high school in order to participate and must have competed in a sport with a coach for a minimum of one season.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32, with a mean age of 21.5 years. The number of sports seasons under the guidance of a coach of the participants ranged from two sports seasons all the way to 46 seasons, with a mean of 12.6 seasons spent under coaching guidance. Participants had experienced between one and 20 coaches from middle school onward, with a mean of 7.4 coaches during that span.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited via a Facebook post asking the qualified “friends” of the researcher to take the study. An online survey system was used to conduct the survey. The individuals who chose to respond to the post were instructed to click on the link included in the post so they could complete the survey at a convenient time and place. All respondents were unnamed and only asked their age and sex for the means of finding out the demographics of the participants. The survey questioned the participants about their own experiences with their most recent coach.

### **Measures**

This study's survey consisted of three separate questionnaires from past studies. Motivation was looked at first, followed by credibility, and finally facework. The survey was organized in this way in order to avoid influencing the scores decided by the participants. If the participants new that facework was being studied before they answered the motivation scale, results could have changed. At the end of the survey 5 demographic questions were asked.

**Motivation.** The athletes' motivation was operationalized from an adaptation of Christophel's (1990) Student Motivation Scale. The original scale was a 7 point scale with 12 questions that looked at the motivation of university students. Changes were made in the instructions; the changes came in the form of changing “teacher” to “coach” each time it

appeared. There were two changes made to the wording in the actual questions of the survey. First, on question 5 the students were asked whether or not they did want to train or if they did not want to train (Christophel, 1990). In order to make this study's survey sports-related, the scale's options were changed to "Don't want to train" and "Want to train." The second change came with the changing Christophel's (1990) eleventh question from "aroused" and "not aroused" to "provoked" and "not provoked." These options are more appropriate for this study because arousal is not an aspect that was researched in sport. Cronbach's Alpha reliability for the motivation scale was .89.

**Credibility.** In order to test the credibility of the coaches, the study used an adaptation of McCroskey and Young's (1981) questionnaire on teacher credibility. The only changes that were made were in the instructions; the changes came in the form of changing "teacher" to "coach" each time it appeared. This section of the survey was a 7 point scale with 12 questions asking the athlete to rate the credibility of their coach during the season. Cronbach's Alpha reliability for credibility was .95.

**Facework.** The coaches' facework was measured by using an adaptation of Kerssen-Griep, Hess, and Trees' (2003) Instructional Face Threat Mitigation Scale. Similar to the surveys used above, "teacher" and "instructor" were changed to "coach" each time they appeared. The participants used a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much) in regards to how they felt their coach's feedback messages supported certain facework needs. The scale had both questions indicating positive face threat mitigation and negative face threat mitigation. The items that indicated positive face threat mitigation included: "work to avoid making you look bad," "make sure that s/he doesn't cast you in a negative light," "show understanding," and "seem attentive to you as an individual." The items that indicated negative face threat mitigation were: "leave you

free to choose how to respond,” “make you feel like you can choose how to respond to feedback,” “make you feel pushed into agreeing with his/her suggestions,” and “make it hard for you to propose your own ideas in light of his/her feedback” (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003).

Cronbach's Alpha reliability for the facework scale was .78.

### **Results**

Hypothesis One posited that higher reported coaching facework scores would correlate positively with the athlete's reported motivation. Analysis showed an insignificant positive correlation between those two variables,  $r = .56$ ,  $p = .27$ . Hypothesis One was not supported.

Hypothesis Two predicted that higher reported coaching facework scores would correlate positively with a coach's reported credibility. Analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between those variables,  $r = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ . Findings support Hypothesis Two.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to find a correlation between a coach's facework towards an athlete and how it affected the athlete's motivation as well as the impact it had on the coach's perceived credibility. Hypothesis One posited that higher reported coaching facework scores would correlate positively with the athlete's reported motivation. Hypothesis Two predicted that higher reported coaching facework scores would correlate positively with a coach's reported credibility. Results showed that Hypothesis One was not supported and that Hypothesis Two was supported. This suggests that an athlete's motivations depend on more variables than simply their coach's facework ability during feedback. However, coach facework ability apparently does have a significant connection with athletes' assessments of the coach's credibility.

Although the facework and motivation scores were not significantly correlated, they trended in the predicted direction. This analysis therefore does not rule out that perhaps a coach's facework with an athlete is part of what is linked to the athlete's motivation. It is accepted wisdom that coaches' communication is an important player in motivating athletes, as in the motivational speech, for example. However, in some cases aggression can motivate athletes; Turman (2003) found that athletes in combative sports prefer coaches who utilize more critical behaviors. This may not be perceived as good facework from a conventional standpoint, but its effects still seem to serve a motivational purpose in some settings. This fact might help explain the current study's insignificant finding for just facework's correlation with motivation. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), for example, describes several variables that impact a person's intrinsic engagement in an activity, some of which take the role of the coach out of play.

From what research has discovered, this study's findings affirm that there appear to be several additional factors that influence an athlete's motivation. This confirms the research of Çetinkalp and Turksoy (2011), Kanters and Forrester (1997), and Zamboni et al. (2008) who discuss a variety of psychological characteristics ranging from goal orientation to self-esteem which all influence motivation. This study did not take into account the possibility of outside factors like issues at home, school, with health, and even relationships in general. These are factors that could very well affect the athlete's motivation, making the current study's non-significant result for coaches' facework less surprising.

However, findings did reveal a significant, strong positive correlation ( $r = .56$ ) between the athlete's perceptions of their coaches' facework skills and credibility. These findings show that athletes will give more credit to their coaches when they feel that the feedback they are

given is done in the “correct” manner. This conforms to Haselwood et al. (2005) findings that coaches who provided skilled facework that made the messages easier to “hear” were given more credibility. However the findings go deeper than that; because the coach is relaying messages that can be perceived as critical and negative, a coach must have credibility for that message to be accepted. Halperin et al. (1976) research supports the findings by arguing that when the message being relayed is negative, status and credibility do become an influential factor.

There are also more important benefits that extend from increased credibility, including more potential for change in the athletes after given feedback, a higher retention of information, feedback acceptance, feedback favorability, and the intention to use feedback (Sue-Chan & Latham 2004). This highlights the importance of credibility and facework for coaches; these results suggest coaching's influence will be limited if facework is ignored while giving advice and feedback. All of this information leads to the assumption that the performance/execution of the athletes will increase if the coaches do spend time working on facework. However this study did not examine athletes' performance, only their perceptions and motivations.

While there is a correlation between a coach's credibility and facework, this study did not look into increased credibility as a result of the coach being highly skilled at the sport he/she is teaching. In this research's adaptation from McCroskey and Young's (1981) questionnaire on teacher credibility the participants were asked if their coach was an “expert” or an “inexpert” during the season. Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) argued that a person can utilize and gain power of authority by publicizing experience, expertise, and credentials. These people may have the ability to pay less attention to facework; if their status exceeds the athletes by a large amount, messages will be taken positively either way. For example, if the best basketball player of all time came to coach a high school basketball team for a week and gave the athletes lots of negative feedback without

saving face for them, there probably is a higher probability that they would accept the message more willingly than if their normal coach gave the message.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although the research and findings show certain trends that allow the researcher to come to a conclusion, a larger sample size will be helpful in future research. A large portion of the research from the past has been done in the classroom between teachers and students; with a growth in the research of the coach/athlete relationship, more specific research and surveys should be conducted. While these fields are similar, there are differences that are large enough that could skew results.

Future research also could explore many areas branching from this one. Sex and age may affect the relationships among the variables tested here. The connection between a coach's credibility and their athletes' motivations also merits more investigation. These two variables were not tested against one another. It could be argued that a coach who is deemed as credible has a higher probability of helping an athlete master certain athletic skills, which is an important factor of motivation (Kanters & Forrester, 1997). Separately, motivation in itself is eligible for more research. At the very least, the present study affirms that coaches' skilled facework during performance feedback is connected with perceptions of their credibility and thus warrants attention and training.

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