

How a Coach's Reputation Influences Player Behaviour



Place one coach and 35 players in the same training session. Then tell different players different stories about how experienced (or inexperienced) the coach is. Finally, sit back and watch how players behave differently based on the stories they've been told.

New research from academics in the UK suggests that the old adage of 'first impressions count' is very much alive and kicking in sport. This article provides a summary of this research and concludes with a few ideas for how coaches can apply the research.

✓ KEY LEARNING POINTS

- ✓ Coach reputation has the potential to influence how an athlete responds to instruction.
- ✓ Positive expectancy effects are more powerful than negative ones.
- ✓ Expectancies formed by athletes can impact on the relationship they form with their coach.



The theory

The idea that athletes form opinions of their coach based on more than just coaching skill is not new. Previous research has found that players evaluate their coach based on reputation, gender and even the type of clothing they wear. The theory runs that if athletes form a positive opinion of their coach, they are more likely to pay attention to the instruction they are being given and will put more effort into applying what they've been taught.

What is unique about this latest study is that the researchers devised a fiendish experiment to test these theories in a real-life situation. This allowed them to test not only if reputation affected what athletes thought of their coach, but also if their behaviour changed in response to these beliefs. Two areas the researchers chose to examine were attention and effort.

Attention

Paying attention has obvious benefits for an athlete: before you can become good at something, you need to be shown what to do. If athletes believe their coach is good at what

they do, they are more likely to pay attention to instruction, and this will ultimately improve their performance. Research has also found that the reverse is true. In 2009, interviews conducted with international level athletes showed that if they had a negative opinion of a coach's ability, they would tend to pay less attention. As one interviewee stated: 'If I didn't think my coach was any good, I just wouldn't listen. I would just let it go over my head and go "Yeah, yeah, yeah!"'

Effort

The amount of effort an individual makes has also been shown to be influenced by their beliefs about the person in charge. For example, research with American college students in the 1970s showed that the reputation of a teacher played an important role in a student's choice of course. Similarly, piano students have shown a willingness to engage in extra practice when they believed their teacher was highly motivated. In other words, what people do, and how hard they choose to work at it, often depends on how they view the person in charge.



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One coach, three different stories

To test these theories, researchers recruited 35 footballers to take part in a one-off coaching session. Players were led to believe this was to help a coach fulfil requirements for their national coaching qualification, but in truth, a more clandestine operation had been planned. When the players arrived, they were divided into three groups, and during the warm-up, an accomplice of the researchers quietly fed each group a slightly different story about the coach.

- In one group, the players were told the coach had already completed a number of qualifications, had worked with semi-professional teams and was pretty experienced at running this type of session.
- The next group was told the coach was working towards his first coaching qualification and had not coached any teams before so he was pretty inexperienced at running this kind of session.
- The final group was given a neutral description that told the players nothing about the reputation or experience of the coach.

One coach, very different behaviours

Attention among players was measured by 'gaze behaviour', which previous research has shown to be a good measure of attention. In other words, the direction of a person's gaze and how long they spend fixed on a particular point are usually a good indication of what they are paying attention to. Therefore, the researchers recorded the number of players looking at the coach while he was coaching and the length of time they spent doing this.

The results showed that players who thought the coach was experienced spent significantly more time gazing at the coach. This showed that players are much more likely to pay attention to a coach if they believe they have a good reputation. Interestingly, there was no difference between the players who thought the coach was inexperienced and those who had no views on the reputation of the coach. This suggests that behaviour was influenced not by the perceived lack of experience, but rather by players wanting to listen to an experienced coach.

Effort was measured by a number of behaviours, including practising what they had been taught during breaks in play, standing still and retrieving the ball from out of play. The theory here is that those putting in the most effort would use all available time to practise and want to get the ball back in play as soon as possible to continue the good learning experience.

Again, the results showed that players who thought the coach was experienced put in the most effort. In particular, they completed significantly more drill-specific activities on their own, spent less time standing still and retrieved the ball quickly on significantly more occasions.



Warning: A good reputation can sometimes be bad

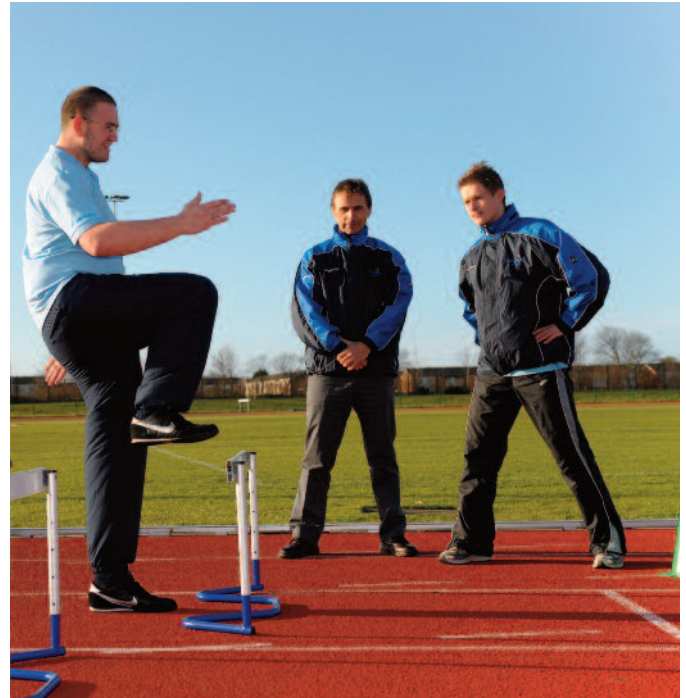
One area that suggested a strong reputation might lead to less positive changes in behaviour was around the willingness of players to volunteer for demonstrations. Here, players who believed they were working with an experienced coach showed no extra willingness to volunteer. The researchers suggest that players may be unwilling to volunteer for fear of humiliation as they are unable to meet the standard that the experienced coach would be used to.

Learning from the research

What is fascinating about this research is how 35 players attending the same session with the same coach will react differently based on their perception of the coach's reputation. However, for a coach, it may be most useful to focus on why players reacted the way they did, rather than worrying about whether you have a good reputation or not. Ultimately, the research shows that if people believe they will learn something new from an experience, they are much more likely to pay attention and put in the effort.

Based on this, how can coaches apply the research in their own coaching?

- Emphasise to players at the start of a session that they are going to be learning something new. Increasing their expectancy levels will increase attention and effort.
- Tell players what they should do, rather than focus on what they shouldn't. The research showed positive expectations are more powerful than negative ones.
- If you are coaching a different group than normal, think about how they compare to your regular players. Will this new group be put off by your level of expertise or perceived lack of it?
- Always be aware of the reputation you have and how it precedes you into a session (for good or bad). How much have you considered the role of your reputation in a coaching session?



References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, the core of this summary is based on the article below:

Manley, A., Greenlees, I., Smith, M. and Birch, P. (2013) 'The influence of coach reputation on the behavioural responses of male soccer players', *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*.

Other more general reading on this area includes:

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