

AN INTRODUCTIVE STUDY REGARDING THE COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP STYLE OF ROMANIAN SPORTS MANAGERS

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Abstract: Words have healing potential, but also the potential to inhibit others' behaviors, and sports managers, through their communication and leadership style can contribute to the creation of an organizational climate which facilitates employees' personal and professional development. The purpose of the study was to investigate the communication style and the leadership style preferred by managers working in sport and by future sports managers. Forty-two sports managers (current and future specialists) participated in the research. Communication style was assessed using the Self-Awareness Questionnaire for the Four Ways of Reacting (flight, attack/aggression, manipulation and assertiveness), adapted by Roco (2004), while the LPC (Least preferred co-worker) questionnaire developed by Fiedler was used to diagnose task-oriented (authoritarian) and relationship-oriented (democratic) leadership style. After applying the Mann-Whitney (U) test no significant differences between the two groups of sports managers (current and experienced managers, and future sports managers) were observed, in terms of communication styles. However, with respect to the leadership style, current sports managers reported a higher score in the case of the relationship-oriented leadership style, compared to future specialists. Experienced managers reported that they pay more attention to support and motivate employees, showing a reduced social distance from the subordinates. In the case of future sports managers, the results underline a leadership style that is relatively equally task- and relationship-oriented. Also, using the Pearson correlation, no significant associations were found between the four communication styles and the results for the leadership style, in the case of both investigated groups. Implications of the results were discussed.

Keywords: *relationship-oriented leadership style, task-oriented leadership style, communication style, sports managers.*

Introduction

Leadership is the process of directing the people by influencing how they feel, how they act and even how they think. A great leader inspires those around him to become the best version of themselves, and leads them in a particular direction (Peterson, 2020).

Leadership is a person's ability to set certain goals and persuade others to

achieve them, based on strong emotional involvement. Leadership should bring significant changes, increase the competence and motivation of all people involved (Zlate, 2004). The concept of what constitutes a good leader has evolved over time. Several typologies of leadership have emerged depending on the authors who have studied them. For example, the first one historically is the typology of

Kurt Lewin and collaborators – it is a one-dimensional typology – in this case what matters is who exactly makes the decision and how exactly the decision is made, highlighting three leadership styles: authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire (Hansen & Zenobia, 2011).

In the case of two-dimensional theories, the most well-known and widespread is the theory of Blake and Mouton (1964). The authors are discussing two essential dimensions in the leadership of organizations: the orientation of leaders towards people/ employees, and the orientation of leaders towards production. For example, the leader who shows a high interest in personnel and a low interest in production ensures a good climate in the organisation and wants employees to be satisfied (disadvantages: risks hindering the organisation's effectiveness, the leader seeks excuses for poor performance). On the other hand, the leader with low interest in human aspects and high interest in production is authoritarian, eliminates those who disagree with him/her, commands and controls, does not take into account the opinions of others, communicates little with employees (his effectiveness is measured in terms of production and profit). We underline, also, an intermediate position - leaders/ sports managers focused to maximise both satisfaction and profit (Vrooman, 2000). In the early 21st century, the focus has shifted to aspects such as creativity, innovation, personal integrity, leaders who fail to adapt being left behind (Kottler, 2018).

Among the most important roles of sports managers are: passing on information (disseminating), communicating, trading, solving problems, maintaining outside contacts, monitoring, planning, motivating subordinates, allocating facilities/ money and settling conflicts (Horch & Schütte, 2003). Also, managers should develop

"inclusive leadership behaviors to foster newcomer's socialization" (Dai & Fang, 2023), inclusive leadership being essential for supporting newcomers from various backgrounds to integrate easier into organizations. Not least, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, attention has been given to managers' experiences. Ipsen et al. (2022) emphasized that managers perceived work at distance more demanding and worked more hours, the support coming from manager peers and from their own employees – important aspects for managers (and not only) to be aware of when they have to work remotely. It seems that women are underrepresented in management positions (Koca & Öztürk, 2015), even if their number has increased over time (Ayman et al., 2009). One possible explanation is that mental toughness, competitiveness, and other management-related traits are perceived as being rather masculine features (Messner, 2002).

In terms of leadership style, in the current research we have addressed Blake and Mouton's two-dimensional typology, more specifically we have investigated the predominant orientation of sport managers towards people/ employees (relationship-oriented leadership), or towards productivity (task-oriented leadership).

According to Fiedler's contingency theory, the following variables are essential when talking about the appropriate leadership style in an organization (O'Connell & Cuthbertson, 2009): leader-employee relation (good or bad), task structure (structured or unstructured, vague) and position of power (the leader has a strong or a weak power over the employees, referring to bestow privileges, ability to promote or fire, etc). These three variables, taken together, highlight the *situational favourability*, which can be high, moderate or low (see Table 1).

Table 1. Recommended leadership style according to situational favourability – Fiedlers’s contingency theory (O’Connell & Cuthbertson, 2009)

Leader-employee relations	Task structure	Position of power	Situational favourability	Leadership style
Good	Structured	Strong	High	Task oriented
Good	Structured	Weak	High	Task oriented
Good	Unstructured	Strong	High	Task oriented
Good	Unstructured	Weak	Moderate	Relationship oriented
Bad	Structured	Strong	Moderate	
Bad	Structured	Weak	Moderate	Relationship oriented
Bad	Unstructured	Strong	Moderate	
Bad	Unstructured	Weak	Low	Task oriented

For the smooth running of a sport organisation, the way sport managers communicate is particularly important. Communication style refers to the significant and specific characteristics through which the uniqueness of personality is expressed. The style designates the ways of receiving and decoding the message, the ways of interpreting the message, the ways of expressing a response and sending feedback (Mitrache et al., 2018). Our communication style, which seems normal and clear to us, can be perceived by others as wrong or untrustworthy (Van Pelt, 2007). We assert the importance of knowing four types of communication styles as follows: non-assertive style, aggressive style, manipulative style and assertive style (see, for example, Mitrache et al., 2018; Pânișoară et al., 2019):

- The non-assertive style is represented by the attitude of flight/ avoidance. People who fall into this communication style hide from the problems they face, avoid confronting them, delay making decisions as long as possible. They often give up their right to vote, to make decisions, or give their opinion so as not to upset people around them.
- Aggressive style can also be considered as "attacking attitude". People who fit this typology often behave offensively towards other people. They are always ready to verbally attack and always want to have the last word. Because this style attracts dislike, the individual is prone to be even more aggressive in order to change the idea already formed, thus creating a chain

reaction. People with an aggressive communication style want to stand out at all costs, they crush the opinions of others, judge them, criticize them and force their close ones to adhere to their opinions (Nuță, 2004). Characteristics of the aggressive style: the tone of voice is often raised, the person uses accusations and reproaches against others, supports his/her ideas and conceptions as absolute truth, often interrupts the conversation to speak, condemns others for what they say and for what they believe, uses threats, gesticulates a lot and aggressively, he/she frequently crosses the arms, the look is angry, the posture is rather rigid and breathing is strong, heavy.

- The manipulative style defines people who stay in the shadows and follow the actions of others, while, at the same time, they want to influence them, having the ability to hide what they think. Known as cold persons, they have trouble maintaining honest relationships while also lacking harmony and understanding. They use various indirect methods to voice their thoughts and dissatisfactions. Characteristics of the manipulative style: denial of problems or conflicts, use of sarcasm and irony, use of monologue to express personal frustrations, facial expressions are fake, the gaze is prolonged and they use emotions such as guilt, fear, or pity to convince others of a certain thing (see Clark, 2022).
- Assertive style or constructive attitude - people belonging to this communication style have the ability to make their opinions known, they easily say what they

feel, want or believe. They have the advantage over aggressive persons that they can get what they want without offending others, by expressing themselves honestly, clearly and directly. Characteristics of assertive style: the person is calm and confident in voice, asks for ideas and advice from participants in the conversation, proposes finding solutions to problems encountered by the group, listens actively, speaks in plural, uses natural and sincere facial expressions while the attitude is relaxed and the eye contact is direct. Assertiveness requires internal flexibility, a good balance between abandonment and combativeness (Makarowski et al., 2021).

The communication of sports managers within their organisation is particularly important for the motivation and involvement of employees in the workplace. Criticism, if not used in a positive manner, can *fuel* a conflict. Thus, instead of achieving an improvement and a favourable resolution of the situation, the conflict escalates (Predoiu, 2016). The use of criticism should always be accompanied by a positive non-verbal message.

Pânișoară (2015) highlighted ways to use criticism in a positive way:

- *the place* - criticism should not be made in front of other people; blaming someone in front of peers generates shame and a rebellious attitude. Experts should not forget that words can have considerable and lasting effects.

- *the correct timing* - it is important that neither too little nor too much time elapses since the behavior is considered inappropriate; on the one hand, the employee may still be too emotionally charged and, on the other, if too much time passes, the issue may no longer be considered important.

- *the relationship* - it is essential that the sports managers argues everything they criticise; the aim is for the employee to understand and respect the behaviors which are presented.

The purpose of the research was to investigate the communication styles preferred by managers working in sport and future sports managers (those training for the profession) and the leadership styles used by the two categories of participants.

Objectives

- Identifying the communication styles and leadership styles used by sport managers;
- Determining the differences between current and future sport managers in terms of communication and leadership styles;
- Knowing the correlations between the results for communication and leadership styles, in the case of current sports managers and future specialists.

Hypotheses

H1: Investigating the communication style reveals significant differences between current managers of different sports structures (CSM) and future sports managers (FSM).

H2: There are statistically significant differences between CSM and FSM in terms of preferred leadership style.

H3: There are significant associations between the scores registered for communication and leadership style in the case of sports managers.

Materials and method

Participants

Forty-two people participated in the research:

- 21 managers of different sports structures; the current sports managers (CSM group) are directors, presidents, vicepresidents or managers of sports clubs or federations in Romania.
- 21 future sports managers (FSM group) – students specialising in Sport Management at National University of Physical Education and Sport, Bucharest (they are preparing for a career in sport management).

Their ages ranged from 20 to 60. The distribution of participants (according to age) can be seen in Figure 1 (for

example, there were 8 participants having 22 years old, 2 participants having 42 years, etc). There were 25 men and 17

women in the entire sample (a relatively equal number of men and women participants in each group investigated).

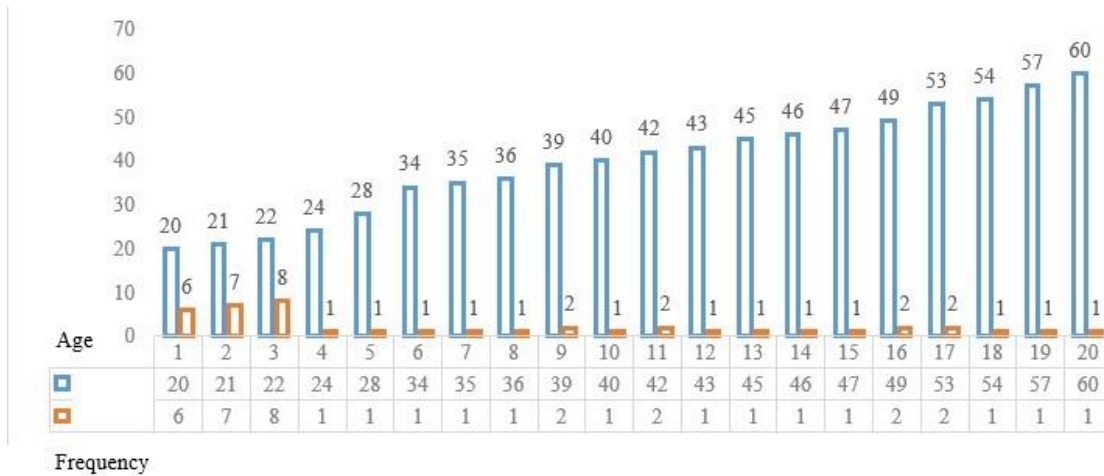


Figure 1. Age and frequency at group level (CSM and FSM)

Instruments

Communication style was investigated using the Self-Awareness Questionnaire for the Four Ways of Reacting (flight, attack, manipulation and assertiveness), adapted by Mihaela Roco (2004) after Chalvin. The questionnaire has 60 items, 15 items for each communication style. As response options: "More often true", respectively "More often false". Each item for which the participant answered "More often true" received one point. The total points indicate the tendency of people to use the respective communication styles. Example of items: "I often say yes when I would like to say no" (non-assertive style); "I am more likely to be an authoritative person" (aggressive style); "I prefer to hide what I think or feel if I don't know the person well" (manipulative communication style); "I defend my rights without violating others' rights" (assertive communication style).

The LPC (Least preferred co-worker) questionnaire, developed by Fiedler (1964) and presented by Zlate (2004) aims to diagnose task-oriented (authoritarian) and relationship-oriented (democratic) leadership style. The questionnaire includes Semantic

Differential Scales which comprise bipolar adjectives describing a personal activity, experience or situation. The seventeen scales used have opposite adjectives at the ends. Examples:

- liked by the employees 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 not liked by subordinates
- employee friendly 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 unfriendly to subordinates
- provides support to subordinates 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 hostile with employees

The final score is calculated by summing the values chosen by the participant for each item. High scores signify a leader focused on human relations/ employees, and low scores reveal a leader focused on task/ productivity (showing a greater social distance from the subordinates). In the present research we discuss self-diagnosis of leadership style (current sports managers evaluating themselves, and future sports managers assessing how they feel and think they will be, as specialists, in dealing with subordinates).

Procedure

The questionnaires were developed through the Google Forms platform and submitted to participants for online

completion. Participants completed the questionnaires in the year 2022.

Regarding the ethical principles of research – certain rules of conduct to be ensured by the researchers in the study, often before, during and even after the conclusion of the research (Denscombe, 2014) – they were assured all through the research process. Managers and prospective sport managers participated in the research on a voluntary basis without any constraints, all participants were informed that at any time and for any

reason they could decide to withdraw from the study without any penalty. Anonymity of participants and confidentiality of data were ensured, throughout the scientific research.

Results

We present, in the tables below, the main indicators of descriptive statistics for the results of the sport managers: arithmetic mean (m), median - mid-range value, standard deviation (S), standard error of the mean and the coefficient of variation (Cv).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics - results for CSM group - communication style

	Non-assertive	Agressive	Manipulative	Assertive
N	21	21	21	21
Mean	8	8.23	8.52	9.66
Median	8	8	8	9
S	2.66	2.11	2.65	2.51
Std. error	0.58	0.46	0.57	0.54
Cv	0.33	0.25	0.31	0.26

Table 3. Descriptive statistics - results for FSM group - communication style

	Non-assertive	Agressive	Manipulative	Assertive
N	21	21	21	21
Mean	7.85	8.33	9.47	9.90
Median	8	8	10	10
S	2.43	1.98	2.15	2.60
Std. error	0.53	0.43	0.47	0.56
Cv	0.30	0.23	0.22	0.26

We can observe that at group level (in both groups of sports managers: future and current), the highest value is registered for the assertive communication style, followed by the manipulative style, aggressive and, the last one, non-assertive communication style.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics - results for CSM and FSM groups - leadership style

	CSM	FSM
N	21	21
Mean	90.5	76.4
Median	90	64
S	16.8	31.5
Std. error	3.66	6.87

A higher score in the case of the human relations-oriented leadership style can be observed for CSM group (current sports managers), compared to future managers.

Using the Mann-Whitney (U) test significant differences between CSM and FSM were explored in terms of communication style (Table 5) and leadership style (Table 6).

Table 5. Current managers (CSM) vs. Future sports managers (FSM) – communication style

	Non-assertive	Agressive	Manipulative	Assertive
Mann-Whitney (U)	212.5	216.5	174	207
Z	-0.188	-0.088	-1.157	-0.327
p	0.84	0.92	0.24	0.74

In terms of communication styles, there are no significant differences between the two groups of sports managers ($p > 0.05$). The first research hypothesis was rejected.

Table 6. Current managers (CSM) vs. Future sports managers (FSM) – leadership style

	Task/ productivity-oriented or Human relations/ employees oriented
U	136
Z	2.11
p	0.035
r	0.32

The U test value for leadership style is 136 and $p = 0.035$. Therefore, the difference between the two groups of sports managers is significant. Current sports managers manifest, at a higher level, a relationship-oriented leadership style, compared to future specialists. The effect size index is $r = 0.32$, emphasizing a moderate difference (Predoiu, 2020) between the scores. The null hypothesis (in the case of the 2nd hypothesis) was rejected.

Next, the correlations between the results for communication and leadership style were explored, in the case of both groups of sports managers.

Table 7. Future sports managers (FSM) – communication and leadership style

		non-assertive	aggressive	manipulative	assertive	leadership style
non-assertive	Pearson's r	—				
	p-value	—				
aggressive	Pearson's r	-0.186	—			
	p-value	0.419	—			
manipulative	Pearson's r	-0.167	-0.074	—		
	p-value	0.469	0.750	—		
assertive	Pearson's r	-0.530	0.355	0.062	—	
	p-value	0.013	0.115	0.790	—	
leadership style	Pearson's r	-0.087	-0.104	-0.268	0.310	
	p-value	0.707	0.653	0.240	0.172	

Table 8. Current sports managers (CSM) – communication and leadership style

		non-assertive	aggressive	manipulative	assertive	leadership style
non-assertive	Pearson's r	—				
	p-value	—				
aggressive	Pearson's r	-0.336	—			
	p-value	0.136	—			
manipulative	Pearson's r	-0.353	0.208	—		
	p-value	0.116	0.367	—		
assertive	Pearson's r	-0.007	-0.200	-0.346	—	
	p-value	0.974	0.385	0.124	—	
leadership style	Pearson's r	0.271	-0.060	-0.159	0.150	—
	p-value	0.235	0.796	0.491	0.516	—

No significant correlations were found between the four communication styles and the results for the leadership style, in the case of both groups of sports managers (future and current specialists). The null hypothesis (in the case of the 3rd hypothesis) was accepted. It means that having a specific leadership style (more task/productivity-oriented or relationship-oriented) is not significantly linked to an aggressive, assertive or manipulative communication style.

Discussion and conclusions

The communication and leadership style of sports managers are particularly important for the existence of an organizational climate which facilitates employees' personal and professional development. The need to investigate leadership style derives from the particularly relevant effects that its practice can have on work productivity, on the socio-affective and relational climate within an organization (Zlate, 2004).

As a result of the current research, in terms of communication style, we emphasized that there are no significant differences between present managers and future sport managers. Both groups have more than half of the participants manifesting an

assertive communication style, characterized by the ability to express ideas and feelings in an open, honest and direct way (without offending others). Sport managers know to take responsibility without blaming peers or subordinates for the consequences of their actions, seeking a mutually satisfactory solution when there is conflict. The fact that there are no statistically significant differences between CSM and FSM groups shows that future specialists are well suited to the position of manager in sports organisations, at least in terms of the preferred communication style.

With respect to the leadership style, a significantly higher score was observed in the case of current (and more experienced) sports managers, compared to future specialists. Current managers group reported a significantly higher relationship-oriented leadership style, in contrast to future sports managers. The relationship-oriented leaders focus more on motivating, supporting and developing employees. These leaders promote collaboration and teamwork by encouraging communication and building positive relationships. Employee well-being is a priority for these leaders and

therefore they allocate time and effort to address the individual needs of the subordinates (Goethals et al., 2004). On the other hand, task/productivity-oriented leaders are predominantly autocratic and do not involve their team in decision making. These leaders are not concerned with building relationships with their employees and are more concerned with following their plan to achieve organizational goals (Ahmed et al., 2023). In the case of future sports managers, the results (according to the observed mean value of 4.49 per each item) reflect a leadership style that is relatively equally task- and relationship-oriented.

In a next phase of the research, the correlations between the results for communication and leadership style were explored, in the case of both groups of sports managers. No significant associations were found between the four communication styles and the result for the leadership style, in the case of future and current specialists. It means that having a specific leadership style (more task/productivity-oriented or more relationship-oriented) is not significantly linked to an aggressive, assertive or manipulative communication style. It seems that other psychological dimensions can be more important in this context (a subject for further research).

Recent studies on sports managers underlined that future specialists have good levels of emotional intelligence (EI), but the experienced managers have very good abilities to understand, and control emotions in the workplace and, in the same time, are more extravert than introvert (Predoiu et al., 2021). Also, experienced managers (in sports field) are significantly better at analytical and mathematical activities (compared to future sports managers), using more the upper left and the lower right quadrant of the brain (see Predoiu et al., 2023). The present research complements the literature related to the characteristics of experienced sports

managers, in terms of leadership and communication style.

The study is limited mainly by: the particularities of the investigated sample (regarding the following aspects – size, gender, age, professional experience and organisational performances), cultural differences and particularities of the social environment. All these aspects can be approached differently in other research in order to have an increasingly clear picture on sports managers' leadership and communication style.

Authors' Contribution

The fourth and fifth author have an equal contribution to the publication as the first author.

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