

'Authentic leaders' could inspire athletes to curb aggression: study

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Sports coaches who display 'authentic leadership' qualities could find their athletes are less likely to act aggressively towards competitors, a new study reveals.

Researchers found such leadership could also enhance sport enjoyment and commitment—both vital qualities in sport as they can influence athletes' continued participation, which tends to decline as sportspeople get older.

Publishing their findings today in *Sport Exercise and Performance Psychology*, experts from the Universities of Birmingham and Suffolk reveal that athletes training with coaches who display the attributes of an 'authentic leader', are less likely to act aggressively toward other players by committing intentional fouls and risking injuring their opponents.

Authentic leadership comprises four components:

- Self-awareness—showing an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses and being aware of one's impact on others;
- Relational transparency—expressing one's true thoughts and feelings, while minimizing the expression of inappropriate emotions;
- Balanced processing of information—considering objectively all [relevant information](#), including their followers' perspectives, before making a decision; and
- Internalized moral perspective—exhibiting behaviors that are in line with one's high moral standards, rather than being influenced by [external pressures](#), thereby behaving ethically in one's interactions with others.

Co-author Professor Maria Kavussanu, from the University of Birmingham, commented: "Coaches are vital in influencing athletes' development and must be encouraged to show high authentic leadership—being open with their athletes and including them in decision making, whilst behaving ethically, admitting to their mistakes, and speaking honestly.

"Our study demonstrates that if a coach displays the attributes of an authentic leader this could have a positive impact on their athletes—increasing athletes' trust, commitment, and enjoyment, and decreasing aggression.

"Sport enjoyment is particularly important for continued participation in sport, which tends to decline with age. As such, coaches who display authentic behaviors can increase their athletes' enjoyment, with significant positive implications for athletes' physical and mental well-being."

In the first study of its kind, a total of 129 participants (76 of which were women) took part. All were sport science students at a British University and [amateur athletes](#) competing at a regional level. Using an experimental vignette methodology, researchers examined the effects of authentic leadership on athletes' trust, enjoyment, commitment, and a range of morally relevant variables—aggression, cheating, and guilt for cheating and aggression.

Co-author Ella Malloy, from the University of Suffolk, commented: "When a coach demonstrates the attributes of an authentic leader, athletes are more likely to trust the coach and want to continue competing for them. In contrast, a [coach](#) displaying the behaviors of a non-authentic leader could diminish trust, enjoyment, and commitment among the [athletes](#) who train under them."

More information: 'The Effects of Authentic Leadership on Athlete Outcomes: An Experimental Study'—Ella Malloy, Maria Kavussanu, & Thomas Mackman is published in *Sport Exercise and Performance Psychology*.

Provided by University of Birmingham

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