

Moral support is a powerful performance enhancer, sports study shows

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Love and encouragement from others can make us feel our best. But can

it also help us perform our best? By taking advantage of a unique situation in the world of football, economist Patricio Dalton and colleagues were able to demonstrate that moral support affects performance in profound ways—even when high monetary incentives are at stake. Without their supporters, the researchers found that teams are 20% more likely to lose a match.

Whether it's a pep talk, a listening ear or simply someone's presence, moral [support](#) can make a difference in many areas of life. Although it's such an important part of daily interaction, there's little scientific proof of the effect moral support has on behavior. Together with Fabrizio Colella (University College London) and Giovanni Giusti (Pompeu Fabra), Tilburg University economist Patricio Dalton addresses this gap in a new research paper, revealing that moral support profoundly affects performance.

The paper, "[Moral Support and Performance](#)," is published in *Management Science*.

The researchers show that even in the football stadium—a competitive labor environment where [high performance](#) is rewarded with high pay—moral support matters. In fact, it can make the difference between winning or losing a match. "What's important about our research is that we show and quantify the causal effect of moral support on performance, even in settings in which high monetary incentives are at stake," Dalton says.

Natural experiment

Demonstrating a cause-and-effect relationship between moral support and behavior is difficult, Dalton explains, because moral support isn't easily controlled in an experiment. "The major empirical challenge resides in the fact that moral support is essentially endogenous. People

choose whether to supply or demand moral support, the extent of it, to whom to supply it and from whom to demand it. The paper addresses this challenge by taking advantage of an exogenous negative shock on moral support caused by an unexpected change of law in the Argentinean football league."

Following a tragic incident involving a football supporter's death, Argentina implemented a ban that prohibited visiting team supporters from attending first division games. This unprecedented scenario provided the perfect conditions for a natural experiment, allowing the researchers to examine the impact of moral support on behavior in a real-world setting.

More likely to lose without supporters

Analyzing data from 1,320 games played both before and after the ban, the researchers found that the probability of a visiting team losing a game increases by 20% without their supporters. The odds of the visiting team conceding more goals than the home team rise by 1.3 times under these circumstances.

Importantly, the researchers establish that the observed decline in performance is solely attributable to the absence of moral support. They rule out alternative explanations, such as referee bias or strategic changes by team managers. What's also striking is that smaller teams are disproportionately affected by the lack of moral support, whereas bigger teams experience diminished performance only when facing opponents with equivalent strength. This suggests that moral support compensates for the power imbalance between teams.

Unlocking human potential

In a world where support and motivation play essential roles in personal and professional achievements, the study unravels the profound influence of moral support and its significance in unlocking human potential.

If moral support can make such a big difference in the world of professional football, what could it do in regular workplaces? Dalton says, "We suspect that moral support will be even more consequential in settings with lower monetary incentives, but this is still an open question."

More information: Fabrizio Colella et al, Moral Support and Performance, *Management Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1287/mnsc.2021.02906](https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2021.02906)

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