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Perceptions of Coach's Response to Stress on Football Player's Quality of Experience

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Abstract

This research further explores the Cognitive Resource Theory (CRT; Fielder & Garcia, 1987), which is an approach to leadership in which effective leadership depends on a leader's intelligence and experience and how these factors affect a leader's ability to cope with stress. Extending CRT as a theoretical framework, the present research seeks to determine if players' perceptions of a coach's ability to handle stress and make good decisions has an impact on the quality of their football experience and their feelings of stress during stressful situations. It is hypothesized that players' stress levels during rivalry games (i.e., high stress situations) will be higher for players who have absolute trust in the head coach and perceive the coach as having relatively high (vs. low) levels of stress during a game. Participants were Division III football players who first responded to questions concerning the head coach, and then questions about their personal experience on a 6-point scale.

Keywords: leadership, stress, perceptions, cognitive resource theory, trust

Perceptions of Coach's Response to Stress on Football Player's Quality of Experience

Leaders possess an overarching role in the success of their team (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2012). With this, it is evident that being a leader is not an easy task. There will be many obstacles put in their way, and how they respond to these has an effect on their team members. The personal styles of leadership vary from person to person (Goleman, 1998). It is the leaders responsibility to oversee the actions of the team members, and to ensure progress is being made for the greater good of the team. Therefore, intelligence is needed from a leader to make a plan of action in all types of situations. Moreover, when looking through the lens of athletic teams, the leader can be seen as the head coach. It is evident that being the head coach of a sports team involves stressful decisions. For example, deciding which lineup to choose, what plays to run in the heat of the moment, what to say to the team after a loss, or how to discipline the team, etc. Most importantly, a head coach wants their players to have confidence and trust in the head coaches decisions, especially during a stressful situation. The importance of a coach-athlete relationship is built on mutual trust, commitment, and ability to communicate (Lafreniere et al., 2011).

A theory that discusses leadership has been conducted on the basis of the Cognitive Resource Theory (CRT; Fielder & Garcia, 1987). This research concludes that in relatively low stress situations (e.g., training camp), a leader's intelligence predicts group performance as the leader can rely on their fully functioning intellect. However, under high stress situations (e.g., games) experience is a better predictor of performance as experience allows the leader to reduce stress by organizing and simplifying the situation. Intelligence without experience may cause a leader to overthink the situation and even retreat inward. However, not many studies have been

conducted which focus on a sports team that involve the perceptions from the players on their leader (i.e., the head coach).

There tends to be theoretical support for the link between intelligence and leadership, as stated in the CRT. Part of being a leader involves solving complex problems, which takes intelligence. When looking at the best job performance predictors, intelligence falls in one of the top predictors (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). They also reported that this relationship between intelligence and job performance is greater for complex jobs. This relationship connects with the Cognitive Resource Theory, because when the head coach of an athletics team is under a great deal of stress, their attentional resources are instead placed on worrying and attempting not to fail. Therefore, it can be said that this strong relationship between intelligence and job performance can best be present when the leader is under low stressed situations (Fielder & Garcia, 1987). This is supported in meta-analysis research done by Judge, Colbert, and Ilies (2004) supporting the idea that intelligence is used when the stress levels of the leader are low.

When examining the level of experience in a leader, stress has probably played a role in gaining this experience. Examining Fiedler (1994), the relationship between experience and stressful situations is studied. For example, when asked in a job interview of a time in their life where they learned from experience, many times the responses will be relating to a time under high stress. This is due to the large role stress plays in either gaining or using experience. Fiedler describes the intelligence of a leader as having a pro-active role in solving a stressful situation, and the experience of a leader as having an automatic role in a stressful situation. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the experience of the head coach will be measured in order to determine the relationship between experience and stress for this leader. Past studies have used direct

measure (i.e., measure of experience), while this study uses indirect measure through players perception.

Although CRT has been studied a lot in the field of business, it can also be applied to sports teams (Fiedler, 1989). A study conducted on high school basketball teams explored the relationships between coaches and players, along with choosing team leaders/captains. As the years progress, the demands from the intellect of athletic players continues to increase due to increased athletic abilities and complexity of sports (Fiedler et al., 1989). In turn, this means that the leaders must possess great intelligence, because the outcome of the decisions made is their responsibility. The results of the study indicated that the leaders of the team with greater experience (the amount of years playing the sport), was correlated greatly to the performance of the team (percentage of games won), when the situational control was low. This supports the findings in the Cognitive Resource Theory that experience predicts performance in high stress situations, in this case when there was not control over the situation. There was also a correlation, but not significance, found between the leaders crystallized and fluid intelligence with team performance when the situational control was high.

A study conducted by Dirks (2000) suggests a mediating factor in leadership. Surveys done on men's college basketball teams examines how trust in their leader has a significant effect on the teams overall performance. Although the present research does not directly measure team performance, this study suggests that trust in a leader has a mediating role in the CRT. Therefore, it is important to consider the extent to which the players have absolute trust, versus some doubt in the decisions made by their head coach in stressful situations. Trust may impact the levels of stress the players feel during games, and other factors involving their quality of

experience playing college football. Dirks (2000) found the significance between trust in a leader and performance, whereas a study conducted with military officers who have experienced stressful leadership experiences looks at the importance of trust-building under severe stress. The common theme between the military officers in their responses was the importance of mutual trust with the leaders and followers (Larsson et al., 2001). This suggests that under stressful situations, trust in a leader is most important.

Moreover, the present research takes on the ideas from the Cognitive Resource Theory that leaders use their experience in high stress situations, and past research conducted on trust in leadership. The purpose of this study is to then extend the theory and look through the lens of the players perceptions by measuring the extent to which they trust the coach's decisions in high stress situations (i.e., rivalry games). Most of the past research conducted on leaders in stressful situations has been through the perspective of the leader, and measuring their stress levels in different situations. However, this research focuses on looking at the perceptions the players have on their leader, the head coach. The participants will be the team members, rather than leaders.

This will extend from the work done on the Cognitive Resource Theory by analyzing how the perceptions of the head coach's ability to handle stress (using his experience versus intelligence) has an effect on the individual players' attitudes towards the game and ability to handle stress themselves. Following the research supporting the CRT, it is hypothesized that players' stress levels during rivalry games (i.e., high stress situations) will be higher for players who have absolute trust in the head coach and perceive the coach as having relatively high (vs. low) levels of stress during a game. In other words, for players with absolute trust in the coach,

feelings of stress mirror their perceptions of the coach's stress. It is predicted that for players who have less than absolute trust in the coach, their levels of stress will not mirror their perceptions of the coach's level of stress.

Method

Participants

Participants included Division III football players ($N = 55$) at John Carroll University. Players ranged from first year players in college sports, to fifth year players in college sports. Permission was received from the head coach to conduct the present research on his team. The data was completed anonymously via Qualtrics from each player.

Procedure

Participants started by answering questions related to their athletic year and position (i.e., offense or defense). Then, participants responded to questions concerning the head coach (HC; who has given permission for this research to take place). Players were asked the extent (1 = *not at all*; 6 = *to a great extent*) to which they believe their head coach is (a) an experienced coach, (b) an experienced coach at the Division III level, (c) has football knowledge, (d) organized, (e) handles pressure situations, (f) handles pressure situations in rivalry games, (f) the extent to which they have trust in his decisions in general and (g) during big games. Using the same 6-point scale, participants rated their (a) confidence in winning prior a standard game, (b) a rivalry game, (c, d) enjoyment, frustration in playing football, (d) how stressed they feel in standard games, (e) rivalry games, and (e) prediction for wins/losses for next season (See Appendix A).

Results

A 2 (Coach's Stress: low, high) X 2 (Trust in Coach in Rivalry Games: some doubt, absolute trust) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on how stressed players feel during rivalry games. There was a significant interaction found between the players perception of how stressed the head coach is during games and their trust in the head coach's decisions during rivalry games in determining the player's stress levels during rivalry games. No main effects were found.

There was a significant interaction found, $F(1, 51) = 8.09$, $p < .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$. As the table shows, players who have absolute trust in the coach's decisions and perceive the coach as having relatively high stress in rivalry games report feeling more stress in rivalry games ($M = 4.29$) than those players who have absolute trust and perceive the coach as having low stress in rivalry games ($M = 3.06$). Players who have some doubt in the coach's decisions and perceive the coach as having relatively high stress in rivalry games report feeling less stress in rivalry games ($M = 2.50$) than those players who have some doubt and perceive the coach as having low stress in rivalry games ($M = 3.73$). The results support the initial hypothesis that players' stress levels during rivalry games will mirror their perception of the head coach's stress levels during a game for those players who have absolute trust in the head coach.

Discussion

The results from the current study suggests that even a small amount of lack of trust in the coaches decisions during big games results in a significant difference in stress felt by the players during rivalry games. Furthermore, anything less than absolute trust that the players felt

towards their head coach resulted in higher stress levels in rivalry games. For players who have absolute trust in the coach, their feelings of stress mirror their perceptions of the amount of stress that the coach exhibits during rivalry games. Players who have any doubt in the coach's decisions during rivalry games report more stress if they perceive the coach as having low stress, but report lower stress during rivalry games when they perceive the coach as having relatively high stress.

These findings contribute to CRT by demonstrating a possible mediating role of trust in leadership in subordinates' responses to stress exhibited by a leader. It was generalized that all players believe their head coach is an experienced and intelligent coach. However, there were significantly different levels of stress felt. This is where the possible mediating role of trust comes into importance in determining the players stress levels during high stress situations. In high stress situations, coach's tend to do better if they are experienced; however, the player's stress levels during high stress situations should also be taken into consideration. The findings from this study were able to examine the importance role that trust in the head coach plays in the player's feelings of stress. Furthermore, coach's should want their players to have low stress levels during rivalry games, so they need to ensure an absolute trusting relationship with their players while maintaining relatively low stress levels themselves.

In addition, the conclusions from this study may generalize to other regimented groups, such as the military. As with football teams, the military requires absolute trust in leadership. Baron and Scott (2010) discuss the importance of trust as a requirement of a leader in the sensemaking approach during dangerous situations. In this environment, those in the military are being placed in the most stressful and dangerous situations imaginable. This being said, it has

been discovered that trust is one of the more important factors to rely on in dangerous situations (Campbell, Hannah & Matthews, 2010). Military leaders want their members to stay as collected as possible in the situations they are placed in. From the findings of this study, leaders can do this by ensuring their members have absolute trust in their decisions, while keeping their stress levels down.

Limitations:

Possible limitations for this study include response bias, the time the questionnaire was administered, and a recently new head coach. First off, response bias is a possible limitation in most questionnaire studies. Some players might feel like they had to respond a certain way based on how they thought others would respond. So, players might not have answered truthfully to how they felt. It is hoped that all players answered truthfully, but this cannot be known for certain.

Additionally, a limitation could be the time that the questionnaire was administered. The football team had just lost their first playoff game two weeks prior to the questionnaire being sent to them. With this, players could have very negative feelings about the way their season had ended, and respond more negatively. However, it was necessary to administer the questions soon after the season ended, so their feelings towards their head coach and stress were still fresh in their mind. Results from the questionnaire could be different if it was given again at a much later date.

Two seasons ago, the John Carroll University football team hired a new head coach. Therefore, the juniors and seniors in my study had experienced a prior college head coach,

whereas the freshman and sophomores had only experienced one college head coach. This means that the players who have experienced more than one college head coach has someone to compare their current coach to. They could be more critical of the current coach because of past experiences, while the freshmen and sophomores will feel more obligated to abide by everything their coach says. Results could be different if this study were repeated in two years, when every player has only experienced one college coach.

Future Research:

Future research should examine the role of trust and perceived ability to handle stress in player-leaders (e.g., the quarterback). Since player-leaders are actively on the field, whereas a head coach is on the sidelines, future research could examine the importance of trust the player has in their captain and the perceived ability to handle stress by their captain. Performance might be another factor that determines players trust in fellow player-leaders. A team member wants their captains to perform with their best ability the entire practice or game. Future research could look at the performance outcomes of various teams and measure the players perceptions of their captain along with their personal stress levels.

Additionally, further research could examine the role that absolute trust versus mistrust plays in other fields such as employers or the military. In all aspects of business, employers stress is a major concern, and management positions should assist employees in coping with their stress (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998). The findings from this study suggest that managers could lower employers stress when they are in high stress situations if managers remain relatively low stressed and have an absolute trusting relationship with their employers.

The practical implications of this study could be useful to coach's and other leaders. Athletic coaches who want their players to remain calm in high stress situations should do their best to remain calm. In addition to coaches remaining calm, they also need to build an absolute trusting relationship with their players. Then, the players will mirror their perception of the coaches stress levels, which is why the coaches need to maintain a relatively low stress level. In final consideration, it is important to note the strong influence that a head coach's stress level and trust has on the players stress levels during high stress situations.

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Table

Amount of Player Stress in Rivalry Games as a Function of Players' Perceptions of Coach's Stress and Trust in Coach's Decisions

| | Player's Perception of Coach's Stress | | | |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| | <u>Relatively Low</u> | | <u>Relatively High</u> | |
| Trust in Coach | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Some Doubt | 3.73 | 1.58 | 2.50 | 1.37 |
| Absolute Trust | 3.06 | 1.71 | 4.29 | .95 |

Note: Experience of stress by players (1 = not at all; 6 = to a great extent)

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Each participant will be asked to rate the extent (1 = *not at all*; 6 = *to a great extent*) to which they believe the head coach:

- (a) is an experienced coach
- (b) is an experienced coach at the Division III college level
- (c) is experienced to coach a team to a National Championship
- (c) has football knowledge
- (d) is organized during practices
- (e) is stressed out during practices
- (f) is organized during games
- (g) is stressed out during games
- (h) in general handles pressure situations well
- (i) handles pressure situations in rivalry games well
- (j) in general, the extent to which you have trust in his decisions
- (k) the extent to which you have trust in his decisions during big games
- (l) the extent to which you could have called a better play during a standard game
- (m) the extent to which you could have called a better play during a rivalry game

Using the same 6-point scale, participants will rate their:

- (a) confidence in winning prior to a standard game (not a rival game)
- (b) confidence in winning a rivalry game (e.g. Mount Union, Baldwin Wallace)
- (c) enjoyment in going to practice every day
- (d) enjoyment in playing in games every Saturday
- (e) enjoyment in attending meetings/film
- (f) frustration in playing college football
- (g) how stressed you feel in standard games
- (h) how stressed you feel in rivalry games
- (i) confidence in having a winning record next season

(j) confidence in beating Mount Union next season

(k) confidence in winning the National Championship next season

(l) confidence in winning the OAC conference next season