

## THE COACH'S SOFT POWER: COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS A KEY TO DEVELOPING SPORTS TEAMS AND ATHLETES

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**Abstract:** *In the contemporary sports landscape, team success increasingly depends not only on technical and tactical preparation but also on the effectiveness of communication within the team. A coach's ability to communicate is now recognized as one of the key competencies, nearly as vital as professional sports expertise. Today's coaches must engage with a wide array of stakeholders—including athletes, coaching staff, media, fans, parents, and other relevant actors—requiring well-developed soft skills such as active listening, providing constructive feedback, and fostering teamwork. This paper highlights the necessity of continuous development of communication skills as an integral component of a coach's professional growth, with particular emphasis on the challenges posed by digital communication and the multicultural composition of sports teams. The quality of coach's communication should be regarded as a key factor influencing team dynamics, athlete motivation, and overall sport team success. Furthermore, assessing the effectiveness of a coach's communication should be established as a standard in contemporary sports systems.*

**Keywords:** *coaching communication, coach-athlete relations, team dynamics, athlete development*

### Introduction

The relationship between athletes and their coach plays a crucial role in shaping behavior, enforcing discipline, instilling values, and ultimately influencing the quality of training, performance in matches, and overall results (Davis et al., 2019). Traditionally, coaches focused primarily on developing technical and tactical sports knowledge, often overlooking the importance of soft skills. However, in recent years, there has been a growing awareness among coaches of the need to strengthen these interpersonal competencies. Of particular importance are communication skills, which have proven essential for building trust, fostering motivation, and enhancing team cohesion (Ishak, 2022; Mergenthaler, 2023). Soft skills encompass personal and interpersonal abilities that facilitate effective communication, collaboration, and relationship management. In contrast to technical or professional competencies—often referred to as hard skills—which involve specialized knowledge and expertise within a specific domain, soft skills are universally applicable across diverse contexts. Their adaptability makes them essential for fostering productive interactions and enhancing overall effectiveness in various professional and social environments (Laker & Powell, 2011). Soft skills play a crucial role in fostering strong interpersonal relationships, enhancing team collaboration, managing stress, and improving both personal and professional effectiveness. In sports, as in many other disciplines, these skills are just as essential as technical expertise. They enable coaches and athletes to communicate effectively, build

mutual understanding, and work cohesively toward shared objectives, ultimately contributing to overall performance and success.

This paper aims to underscore the significance of communication skills in sports team coaching, positioning them as an essential component of the modern coaching profile. Effective communication is not only fundamental to managing team dynamics but also serves as a key determinant of coaching efficiency and athletic performance. The importance of this paper lies in the fact that it emphasizes communication as a fundamental coaching skill, equally vital as technical and tactical expertise for team success. By highlighting the importance of soft skills, particularly in increasingly digital and multicultural team environments, it contributes to the evolving understanding of what constitutes effective coaching practice.

### **The critical role of communication in sports teams**

Communication is any behavior that results in the exchange of messages (Robbins et al., 2020). It represents the exchange of facts, ideas, opinions, attitudes and emotions between two or more people (Bisen & Priya, 2009). Effective and efficient teamwork in sports requires open, unrestricted, and two-way communication among team members. Communication should be grounded in fundamental principles of effective interaction, ensuring clarity, trust, and collaboration. Additionally, team members must possess well-developed communication skills to foster cohesion, enhance performance, and facilitate the smooth exchange of ideas within the team. Team communication is important for several reasons. These are (Lazarević & Lukić Nikolić, 2024):

- Improving interpersonal relationships between team members. Professional team communication that fosters mutual respect and appreciation of all team members leads to better interpersonal relationships.
- Increased satisfaction and engagement of team members. Effective team communication means that all members are aware of the goals they need to achieve and that team leaders provide them with constructive feedback and recognition.
- Improving the well-being of team members. Open communication and discussion of all problems and difficulties lead to the growth of team members' well-being and their mental health.
- Growth in the number of innovations due to different opinions, perspectives and cultural factors.
- Growth in transparency. All team members should be familiar with events in the team.
- Growth in the level of cooperation in the team. Cooperation allows to gather and exchange knowledge and experience between the team members themselves and to identify opportunities for improvement.
- Reduces harmful conflicts in the team. Effective communication leads to successful resolution of conflict situations in the team.

Numerous authors have tried to define the key activities and steps by which it is possible to improve communication skills and knowledge. In the sports field, five steps to improve communication skills, based on the Coaches Guide to Sport Psychology are (Martens, 1987):

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1. Recognize the need to improve communication skills.
2. Identify the specific behaviors that will improve communication skills.
3. Practice these behaviors regularly.
4. Get feedback on how well people are doing with communication.
5. Make improved communication skills a natural part of everyday interactions.

The effects of good communication are manifold. They are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Effects of good communication*

<b>Reduced</b>	<b>Improved</b>	<b>Increased</b>
Stress	Decision-making process	Degree of cooperation
Conflicts	Problem solving	Motivation
Gossip/rumors	Flow of work tasks	Productivity
Errors	Interpersonal relations	Sale
Misunderstanding	Professional reputation	Profit

Source: Adapted from Taylor & Lester, 2009

Oral verbal communication plays a crucial role in sports teams, with attentive and active listening standing out as a fundamental component. The skill of listening extends beyond merely hearing spoken words—it encompasses the ability to fully grasp the message, interpret situations, perspectives, attitudes, relationships, and emotions, retain key information, and respond appropriately (Lukić Nikolić, 2024). Effective listening fosters mutual understanding, strengthens team cohesion, and enhances overall communication efficiency. Table 2 presents the habits and behaviors of both effective and ineffective listeners within the communication process.

**Table 2.** *Habits and behaviors of good and bad listeners in the communication process*

<b>Good listeners</b>	<b>Bad listeners</b>
Active listening	Passive listening
Open and positive	Closed and often negative
Focused on the conversation	Unfocused, distracted
They make notes	They do not take notes or take them incorrectly
They maintain eye contact	They do not look at the interlocutor
They keep their emotions under control	They let emotions rule the conversation
They paraphrase key elements of the conversation and hold attention	They do not paraphrase and do not try to hold attention
They provide non-verbal feedback	They do not provide non-verbal feedback
They ask questions when the interlocutor finishes his conversation	They interrupt the interlocutor with questions and comments
They encourage the interlocutor to ask questions and to actively participate	They do not encourage the interlocutor to ask questions and actively participate in the conversation
They are focused on the message, not on the presentation style of the interlocutor	They condemn the presentation style of the interlocutor and often behave inappropriately and critically
They distinguish between key points and additional information	They do not know how to distinguish the key things from the extra information
They look for learning opportunities in conversation	They act like they know everything

Source: Adapted from Bovee & Thill, 2020

There are certain rules that are necessary for an efficient and effective team (Belbin & Brown, 2022; Maznevski & Chui, 2023):

- All team members understand and accept their tasks and goals
- Team members know what is expected of them and responsibly assume their roles and responsibilities
- Compatibility of different skills and knowledge of team members
- Informal, pleasant and relaxed atmosphere
- All team members actively participate in discussions
- Team members respect and trust each other
- There are certain disagreements, but the team members are aware of it and accept it
- Most decisions are made by consensus
- Systemic and critical thinking is encouraged
- Individuals are encouraged to express their opinions and ideas
- Mistakes are tolerated and team members learned from them
- The leader does not stand out excessively and does not put himself before other team members.

In addition to adhering to fundamental principles, the formation of a high-performance sports team requires several key conditions. These include clearly defined roles for team members, a shared purpose and well-articulated goals, an optimal team size, and task structures that necessitate collaborative effort. Effective communication between the coach and the athletes is essential to fulfilling each of these conditions, ensuring cohesion, strategic alignment, and overall team efficiency.

## **Methods**

The key research questions (RQ) imposed in this paper are:

RQ 1: What are the fundamental principles of effective communication in a high-performance sports team?

RQ2: What communication strategies are most effective for coaches in developing inclusive and high-functioning teams?

RQ 3: What are the effects of different types of feedback (person-focused, result-focused, process-focused) on athlete development and team performance?

RQ 4: What future trends are likely to shape the role of communication in sports coaching?

This study is theoretically based on a narrative review of relevant academic literature. Its primary aim is to explore and synthesize existing knowledge on the role of communication in sports teams, focusing on both intra-team interactions and coach-athlete relationships. The study draws from a variety of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and foundational theoretical texts in the fields of sports psychology, communication studies, and team dynamics.

## **Effective coaching communication: a key to building successful sports teams**

The coach serves as a leader in the structured process of developing athletes and guiding their training. Beyond technical instruction, the coach acts as an educator and mentor,

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playing a pivotal role in fostering conditions that support athletes' positive personal growth. Within a team environment, it is essential for coaches to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere where every member feels valued, welcomed, and supported in their development (Lachance & Ménard, 2022; Holden et al., 2025). Effective communication is a defining characteristic of successful sports teams. Many scholars emphasize that coaching is, at its core, a continuous process of communication—facilitating collaboration, fostering trust, and ensuring alignment between coaches and athletes (Cherubini, 2019). Through clear and strategic interactions, coaches shape team dynamics, enhance motivation, and contribute to overall performance and success (Bačanac et al., 2011). In addition to their responsibilities within the team, coaches must engage with a diverse range of stakeholders, including journalists, media representatives, athletes' parents, professional staff, referees, and fans. To be recognized among successful coaches, mastering effective communication skills is essential, enabling them to navigate these interactions with confidence, professionalism, and strategic clarity.

Effective communication is essential in various critical moments within sports, including coach-athlete interactions, discussions among teammates during high-pressure situations, pivotal moments that determine the outcome of a game, and post-game analysis of the opponent's performance. The coach, as a team leader, must implement a comprehensive communication strategy that conveys objectives, roles, and instructions clearly while fostering an environment of active listening, precise message delivery, and constructive feedback (Backman et al., 2024). Furthermore, successful coaching communication entails respecting athletes' perspectives, demonstrating empathy, building trust, and offering encouragement, all of which contribute to team cohesion and competitive success (Lazarević & Lukić Nikolić, 2024). These elements of communication play a pivotal role in guiding a team toward new victories.

Psychologist Yukelson suggests to coaches the following principles for communication with their team (Yukelson, 1993):

- Coaches must clearly outline rules, expectations, and work procedures while ensuring that team members understand the overarching goals. This includes articulating the team's mission, detailing strategic approaches, and providing comprehensive action plans that guide athletes toward achieving team objectives and fulfilling their roles effectively.
- Communicate with enthusiasm, ensuring honesty, directness, and sincerity in all interactions. Inspire athletes by fostering a sense of pride, dedication, and belief in their abilities while strengthening team spirit. Strive to create an environment where every team member feels valued, respected, and integral to the collective success of the team
- Offering athletes constructive feedback on their progress toward personal and team goals, highlighting their achievements and areas for growth. Encourage them to embrace new challenges, continuously refine their skills, and strive for further improvement in pursuit of excellence.
- Clearly explain team dynamics, expectations, and operational processes to ensure alignment and understanding among athletes. Communicate openly about the level of dedication required to achieve collective goals, emphasizing the importance of commitment and perseverance. Encourage athletes to take responsibility for their actions, maintain focus, and remain driven in pursuit of the team's objectives.

Developing strong soft skills enables a coach to go beyond simply imparting knowledge—it allows them to actively shape the character, attitudes, and behaviors of athletes. Over time, this influence not only enhances athletic performance but also fosters the growth of mature, resilient, and team-oriented individuals.

### **The impact of feedback communication in developing high-performance sports teams**

Feedback serves as an essential communication tool, providing insight into the outcomes of a specific goal, process, activity, task, event, or behavior in sports team (Otte et al., 2020). Fundamentally, feedback is the result of evaluation and can take two forms: positive—offering acknowledgment, encouragement, or praise for successfully completed work—and negative—providing constructive criticism, recommendations, and guidance for improvement in performance or behavior (Lazarević & Lukić Nikolić, 2024). Regardless of whether feedback is positive or negative, it should always be constructive and purposeful.

Effective feedback fosters teamwork, enhances performance, and supports a culture of continuous learning within the team. By providing clear guidance and encouragement, it can drive positive behavioral changes, strengthen collaboration, and contribute to overall team development (Paredes-Saavedra et al., 2024). Feedback plays a crucial role in motivating team members, fostering confidence, security, morale, and productivity. Positive feedback, in particular, fulfills fundamental psychological needs such as belonging, respect, and self-actualization. It reinforces a sense of value and inclusion within the team, helping individuals feel recognized and engaged in their personal and professional development (Mason et al., 2020).

In sports teams, feedback manifests in various forms, each serving a distinct function in enhancing performance and team cohesion (Lachance & Ménard, 2022):

1. **Feedback to person.** This type of feedback targets the individuals, focusing on their personality traits or behaviors. Coaches often give this kind of feedback when they are emotional, making impulsive comments without thinking about the impact of their words. It is important to be cautious when directing critical comments at a specific person, as athletes may take them personally, and it can harm their self-esteem.
2. **Feedback to result.** This type of feedback is focused on the outcome of a performance, usually pointing out poor execution. Commenting on results is fairly straightforward. The coach observes something happening and offers feedback based on what they see.
3. **Feedback to process.** This type of feedback focuses on the steps, procedures, and methods that lead to a performance outcome. Process-oriented feedback gives athletes a deeper understanding of why their behaviors led to a certain outcome.
4. **Feedback among athletes.** Athletes can have a powerful influence on one another, so it is important to introduce them to this concept. By equipping athletes with the skills to give constructive feedback, coaches may help improve team dynamics and effectiveness. Consequently, coaches not only need to be expert communicators by selecting the right type of feedback to give, but they must also teach athletes how to provide effective feedback to each other.

One of the most illustrative examples of effective coaching communication in professional sports can be found in the leadership approach of Gregg Popovich, head coach of

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the San Antonio Spurs. His communication style highlights how strategic dialogue, emotional intelligence, and adaptability can shape both team culture and performance. Gregg Popovich's communication style is widely recognized for its honesty, empathy, and strategic adaptability, distinguishing him as one of the most respected figures in professional sports leadership (Madu, 2018). Rather than relying solely on authority, Popovich builds trust through open, respectful dialogue with his players—demonstrated in moments such as personally explaining difficult decisions to veterans to avoid conflict and maintain cohesion. His approach reflects a deep awareness of both team dynamics and individual needs, enabling him to balance discipline with autonomy depending on the team's maturity and context (Helin, 2017).

Popovich communicates with clarity and purpose, fostering an environment where players not only understand their roles but also feel personally motivated to fulfill them. He emphasizes player empowerment by stepping back during critical moments, encouraging athletes to take ownership of their decisions and solve problems collaboratively—an approach he believes strengthens both confidence and competitive character (ESPN.com, 2014). By prioritizing mutual respect, self-awareness, and adaptability, Popovich has cultivated a team culture rooted in trust, accountability, and sustainable success.

### **The future of communication in sports coaching**

Every professional should be equipped to adapt to future career pathways and emerging job opportunities and requirements (Bîrlădeanu, 2024). Current trends increasingly recognize communication skills as one of the key competencies for sports coaches, on par with professional sport expertise. Effective communication serves as a powerful tool, enabling coaches to foster team cohesion, inspire motivation, and contribute to the long-term success of both individual athletes and the team as a whole. Without strong communication abilities, even the most advanced technical knowledge may remain underutilized. In response to this growing emphasis, many academic institutions in the fields of sports science, education, and physical culture are expanding their curricula to incorporate courses on communication skills. Universities are either introducing new subjects dedicated to communication or integrating relevant lessons into existing subjects, equipping students and future coaches with the necessary expertise to engage effectively with athletes and optimize coaching outcomes. Many coaching academies, specialized courses, and informal education providers are increasingly incorporating soft skills training into their programs. These competencies—such as communication, teamwork, and leadership—are now recognized as essential components of modern coaching. Additionally, as digital technologies become deeply embedded in both personal and professional life, coaches must develop proficiency in various digital communication tools. These include video analysis of recorded matches and training sessions, applications for tracking athletes' individual progress, and platforms for team communication. This need is particularly evident among coaches working with younger athletes, who have been immersed in digital technologies from an early age and rely on them as their primary mode of communication.

Furthermore, the multicultural nature of sports teams presents another challenge, requiring coaches to effectively communicate with athletes from diverse cultural backgrounds

and value systems. Navigating these complexities demands adaptability, cultural awareness, and refined communication strategies to foster a cohesive and inclusive team environment.

Just as performance evaluations play a crucial role in organizational settings, the assessment of coaching communication quality is expected to emerge as a key measure of coaching success in the future. Through structured evaluation processes, coaches will gain direct feedback on their communication effectiveness, enabling them to refine their skills and continuously enhance their professional competencies. Some of the areas that should be taken into consideration during the evaluation are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Key areas for evaluating coaching communication skills*

<b>Evaluation Category</b>	<b>Evaluators</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
Clarity and precision	Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does the coach clearly explain rules, expectations, and strategies?</li> <li>- How effectively does the coach convey instructions during training and competition?</li> <li>- Are messages concise and easy to understand?</li> </ul>
	Assistant coach	
	Support staff	
	The coach themselves	
	Parents (for youth teams)	
Active listening and feedback	Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does the coach encourage athletes to express their thoughts and concerns?</li> <li>- How effectively does the coach provide constructive feedback?</li> <li>- Does the coach actively listen and respond to athletes' questions and comments?</li> </ul>
	Assistant coach	
	Support staff	
	The coach themselves	
	Parents (for youth teams)	
Motivation and team morale	Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How well does the coach use communication to inspire and motivate athletes?</li> <li>- Does the coach create a supportive and encouraging environment through their words and actions?</li> <li>- How effectively does the coach reinforce the team's values and goals through communication?</li> </ul>
	Assistant coach	
	Support staff	
	The coach themselves	
	Parents (for youth teams)	
Adaptability and emotional intelligence	Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does the coach adjust their communication style based on individual athletes' needs?</li> <li>- How well does the coach manage conflicts and difficult conversations?</li> <li>- Does the coach show empathy and understanding when addressing athlete concerns?</li> </ul>
	Assistant coach	
	Support staff	
	The coach themselves	
	Parents (for youth teams)	
Use of digital communication	Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does the coach use digital communication to streamline logistics and team coordination?</li> <li>- How effectively does the coach use digital tools (videos, progress-tracking apps) for communication?</li> <li>- How well does the coach integrate digital tools into the overall coaching strategy?</li> </ul>
	Assistant coach	
	Support staff	
	The coach themselves	
	Parents (for youth teams)	
Use of nonverbal communication	Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does the coach use body language and nonverbal cues to reinforce their messages?</li> <li>- Does the coach's facial expressions, gestures, and posture effectively convey confidence, encouragement, and authority?</li> <li>- How consistent is the coach's verbal and nonverbal communication?</li> </ul>
	Assistant coach	
	Support staff	
	The coach themselves	
	Parents (for youth teams)	



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Interaction with external stakeholders	Parents	- Does the coach communicate professionally with parents, media, and officials?
	Media and public relation officers	- How well does the coach represent the team in public and media appearances?
	The coach themselves	- Does the coach foster positive relationships with all stakeholders through communication?

Source: Author

To ensure a comprehensive assessment of a coach's communication effectiveness, evaluation questions should be directed to a diverse range of individuals who engage with the coach regularly. Gathering feedback from multiple sources allows for a well-rounded evaluation, offering valuable insights into different aspects of the coach's communication style, impact, and areas for improvement.

### **Conclusions**

Contemporary sports science highlights that success is not solely determined by technical and tactical preparation but is also profoundly shaped by the quality of interpersonal relationships within a team. These relationships, largely influenced by the communication dynamics between coaches and athletes, play a critical role in fostering motivation, shaping behavior, instilling discipline, and enhancing overall engagement in training. As a result, the strength of the coach-athlete bond directly impacts both individual performance and the collective success of the team.

There is increasing recognition that effective communication skills are essential for coaches, enabling them to manage teams successfully, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and engage with a diverse range of stakeholders—including athletes, coaching staff, parents, media, and fans. These competencies should be regarded as a fundamental pillar of professional development, playing a crucial role in the overall functionality and success of sports teams. By delivering clear messages, providing constructive feedback, and fostering open dialogue, coaches cultivate a positive team culture that enhances performance and supports athlete development.

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature that recognizes communication as a critical, yet often underemphasized, factor in sports team performance. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and recent findings, it underscores the centrality of communication in shaping effective coach-athlete relationships, promoting team cohesion, and navigating the increasingly complex demands of modern sports environments.

As this paper is based solely on a review of existing literature, it does not include empirical data from coaches, athletes, or other stakeholders in sports teams. This limits the ability to draw causal conclusions or assess the real-world applicability of the theoretical insights discussed. The selection of literature, while purposeful and focused on relevance, may not encompass all available or emerging research. Additionally, due to the conceptual nature of the paper, specific contextual differences—such as sport type, competitive level, or cultural setting—were not explored in depth, which may affect the generalizability of the conclusions.

A promising direction for future research on this topic is to conduct empirical studies involving athletes as key participants, in order to gain direct insights into how they perceive and experience communication within their team. Such research could explore the relationship between the quality of coach-athlete communication and variables such as athlete motivation, trust, team cohesion, and performance outcomes. By using surveys, interviews, or focus groups, researchers can gather data that will help validate and expand upon the theoretical concepts presented in this paper.

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