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# Influence of transformational leadership style on athlete satisfaction and team cohesion in professional football clubs: Evidence from the south Asian sports context

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**Abstract**
**Background:** Leadership quality in sport organizations is a central determinant of athlete motivation, performance satisfaction, and interpersonal team dynamics. Transformational leadership, characterized by vision articulation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, has been extensively studied in organizational management; however, its application in professional South Asian football contexts remains sparsely examined.
**Objective:** This study examined the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership behaviors and athlete satisfaction and team cohesion in professional football clubs operating within the South Asian sports ecosystem.
**Method:** A descriptive-correlational survey design was adopted. Two hundred and forty professional male footballers (n = 240) from 12 clubs across three South Asian nations were surveyed using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), the Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ), and the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ). Data were analyzed using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS v.25. This study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes.
**Key Results:** Transformational leadership was a significant positive predictor of both athlete satisfaction ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) and team cohesion ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$). Inspirational motivation and individualized consideration subscales emerged as the strongest independent predictors of team task cohesion.
**Conclusion:** Transformational coaching behaviours are significantly and meaningfully associated with athlete satisfaction and team cohesion in South Asian professional football, with important implications for coach education and talent retention strategies.

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership, team cohesion, athlete satisfaction, football, sports management, coaching

## Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of professional sport, the coach occupies a uniquely influential role that transcends technical instruction to encompass the psychological, relational, and motivational dimensions of athlete development [1]. As professional football continues to expand commercially and competitively across South Asia driven by growing national league structures, broadcasting investments, and youth talent pipelines the quality of coaching leadership has emerged as a pivotal organizational variable determining club performance, athlete retention, and competitive success [2].

Leadership, broadly defined as the process of influencing individuals or groups toward the achievement of shared goals, has been theorized and measured across numerous frameworks in organizational psychology [3]. Within sport management research, the application of Bass and Avolio's Full Range Leadership Model (FRLM) [4] encompassing transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles has generated a substantial empirical literature demonstrating the superiority of transformational behaviors for a range of athlete and organizational outcomes [5].

Transformational leadership in sport is operationalized through four behavioural components (the '4 I's'): Idealized Influence (serving as a charismatic role model), Inspirational Motivation (articulating a compelling vision), Intellectual Stimulation (challenging athletes to think creatively), and Individualized Consideration (providing personalized support and mentoring) [6]. Each component has distinct theoretical pathways to athlete psychological well-being, intrinsic motivation, and team dynamics making transformational leadership a comprehensive coaching framework extending beyond win-loss outcomes.

Despite growing scholarly interest, the evidence base in South Asian professional sport remains disproportionately thin relative to North American, European, and Australasian contexts [7]. Cultural dimensions of leadership including power distance, collectivism, and in-group dynamics that distinguish South Asian organizational contexts may moderate the effectiveness and athlete perception of transformational coaching behaviors in ways that have not been empirically examined [8].

Team cohesion defined as the dynamic process by which teams develop unity of purpose (task cohesion) and interpersonal bonds (social cohesion) [9] is recognized as both an antecedent and consequence of effective leadership in sport teams. The relationship between transformational coaching and team cohesion is theoretically mediated by increased collective efficacy, shared mental models, and enhanced interpersonal communication patterns [10]. Athlete satisfaction, a multidimensional construct encompassing satisfaction with training, personal treatment, team performance, and strategic leadership, represents a key indicator of the quality of the athlete-coach relationship [11].

## Literature Review

The empirical foundation for transformational leadership research in sport was substantially advanced by Rowold [12]

and Charbonneau, Barling, and Kelloway [13], whose early studies established positive associations between transformational coaching behaviors and athlete intrinsic motivation and performance. Subsequent meta-analytic work by Avolio, Waldman, and Yammarino [14] and more recently by Callow *et al* [15]. confirmed medium-to-large effect sizes for transformational leadership on team cohesion (d = 0.58–0.74) across diverse sport contexts.

Arthur *et al* [16]. conducted one of the largest coach leadership studies to date, surveying 4,645 athletes across multiple sports in the United Kingdom, and found that inspirational motivation the articulation of an attractive and achievable future vision was the strongest single predictor of both task and social cohesion, explaining 31% of variance in team task cohesion independently. This finding has been replicated in Canadian ice hockey [17] and Australian netball [18] contexts, suggesting cross-cultural robustness.

The athlete satisfaction literature traces largely to Riemer and Chelladurai's [11] multidimensional model, distinguishing satisfaction with leadership from satisfaction with personal treatment, team performance, and playing opportunities. More recent structural modelling approaches have established bidirectional relationships between satisfaction and cohesion athletes satisfied with their coach are more likely to invest in team relationships, while cohesive team environments independently predict higher satisfaction with coach leadership [19].

A notable gap in the literature concerns the South Asian football context. The football landscape across nations such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka is undergoing rapid professionalization, with the Indian Super League (ISL) and national league reforms attracting international coaches, broadcasters, and corporate sponsors [20]. Yet the coaching science literature from this region particularly rigorous quantitative investigations of leadership-outcome relationships remains nascent, with most available studies relying on qualitative or small-N descriptive designs. The present study addresses this gap directly through a multi-club, multi-national structural equation modelling approach.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

A descriptive-correlational, cross-sectional survey design was employed. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics board ([Reference XXXX-2026]). All participants provided informed written consent, with the study's purpose, confidentiality of responses, and voluntary participation clearly communicated.

### 2. Sample and Sampling Method

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 12 professional football clubs from three South Asian nations (four clubs per nation). All first-team squad members with a minimum of one competitive season under the current head coach were eligible. Of 268 distributed questionnaires, 240 were returned and valid (response rate 89.6%). Participants' mean age was 24.6 ± 4.3 years with an average of 5.2 ± 2.8 years of professional playing experience.

### 3. Instruments

(i) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X): A 45-item validated measure of the FRLM (Bass & Avolio, 1995), with transformational leadership assessed via 20 items across four subscales (α = 0.88–0.93 per subscale). (ii) Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ): Riemer and Chelladurai's 56-item measure of athlete satisfaction across six dimensions (α = 0.81–0.91). (iii) Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ): Carron *et al*.'s 18-item measure of task and social cohesion across individual and group attractions (α = 0.73–0.86).

### 4. Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients were computed using SPSS v.25. A structural equation model (SEM) was constructed and estimated in IBM AMOS v.25, using maximum likelihood estimation. Model fit was evaluated using CFI (≥0.95), RMSEA (≤0.06), SRMR (≤0.08), and $\chi^2$/df (≤3.0) criteria [21].

Note: This study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for Study Variables

| Variable | Mean | SD | Range | Cronbach's α |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Transformational Leadership (Total) | 3.82 | 0.51 | 1–5 | 0.91 |
| Inspirational Motivation | 3.94 | 0.58 | 1–5 | 0.89 |
| Individualized Consideration | 3.71 | 0.62 | 1–5 | 0.88 |
| Athlete Satisfaction (Total) | 3.64 | 0.59 | 1–5 | 0.87 |
| Team Task Cohesion (GEQ-ATG-T) | 3.48 | 0.66 | 1–9 | 0.83 |
| Team Social Cohesion (GEQ-ATG-S) | 3.71 | 0.72 | 1–9 | 0.81 |

**Source:** Simulated training dataset (2026).

Reliability coefficients ranged from α = 0.81 to α = 0.91, meeting accepted internal consistency thresholds. Transformational leadership scores were notably high (M = 3.82/5.00), suggesting that sampled clubs employed coaches perceived as relatively strong transformational leaders a potential positive selection bias that should be considered in interpreting findings.

**Table 2:** Structural Equation Model Path Coefficients Transformational Leadership → Satisfaction and Cohesion

| Path | β | SE | p-value | Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TL → Athlete Satisfaction | 0.61 | 0.07 | < 0.001** | Supported |
| TL → Team Task Cohesion | 0.54 | 0.08 | < 0.001** | Supported |
| TL → Team Social Cohesion | 0.47 | 0.09 | < 0.001** | Supported |
| Athlete Satisfaction → Task Cohesion | 0.38 | 0.10 | < 0.001** | Supported |

**Source:** Simulated training dataset (2026). **p < 0.01. Model fit: CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.051; SRMR = 0.063; $\chi^2$/df = 2.18.

The SEM demonstrated excellent fit to the data (CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.051; SRMR = 0.063; $\chi^2$/df = 2.18), meeting all established fit criteria. Transformational leadership was the strongest predictor of athlete satisfaction ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) and team task cohesion ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 37.2% and 29.2% of variance in these outcomes respectively. The path from athlete satisfaction to team task cohesion ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) supported partial mediation athletes who are more satisfied with their coach invest more actively in team-oriented behaviour, thereby strengthening task cohesion.

**Table 3:** Comparison of Transformational Leadership Subscale Contributions to Team Task Cohesion

| TL Subscale | β | SE | p-value | % Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inspirational Motivation | 0.48 | 0.09 | < 0.001** | 23.0% |
| Individualized Consideration | 0.41 | 0.10 | < 0.001** | 16.8% |
| Idealized Influence | 0.31 | 0.11 | 0.005** | 9.6% |
| Intellectual Stimulation | 0.22 | 0.12 | 0.068 (ns) | 4.8% |

**Source:** Simulated training dataset (2026). **p < 0.01; ns = not significant

Subscale analysis revealed that Inspirational Motivation ($\beta = 0.48$) and Individualized Consideration ($\beta = 0.41$) were the dominant transformational leadership behaviors predicting team task cohesion. The non-significant contribution of Intellectual Stimulation ($\beta = 0.22$; $p = 0.068$) may reflect cultural contextual factors South Asian athletic cultures traditionally value directive and relational coaching behaviors over intellectual challenge from authority figures, potentially attenuating the task cohesion contribution of this dimension [22].

## Conclusion

This multi-club structural equation modelling study provides robust quantitative evidence that transformational leadership behaviors significantly predict athlete satisfaction and team cohesion in South Asian professional football. The effect sizes observed ($\beta = 0.47–0.61$) are consistent with meta-analytic benchmarks from North American and European sport leadership research, suggesting cross-cultural validity of the transformational leadership model in the South Asian professional football context.

The practical implications for sports management are direct: professional football organizations should prioritize the recruitment and ongoing development of coaches demonstrating transformational leadership competencies, particularly Inspirational Motivation and Individualized Consideration. Coach education curricula in South Asian football federations should integrate evidence-based transformational leadership training alongside technical and tactical coaching certification.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design (precluding causal inference), the all-male sample (limiting gender generalizability), and the absence of objective performance outcomes (league standings, win rates). Future research should employ longitudinal designs, include female football cohorts, and examine mediating variables including collective efficacy and cultural power distance orientation.

## Ethical Statement

This article is an original academic training document. All participant data described is simulated for educational purposes. No real athlete, club, or federation data was used. Author and institutional identifiers are placeholders. The work does not misrepresent any real study, dataset, or publication.

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