Captain Communication on College Sports Teams:

How Team Leaders' Communication Styles/Tactics Affect Freshmen

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CAPTAIN COMMUNICATION ON COLLEGE SPORTS TEAMS

INTRODUCTION

College sports teams split themselves down the middle between upperclassmen and underclassmen. Upperclassmen, or juniors and seniors, generally serve as team leaders and more formally as team captains. They set the standards for the team, and rightfully so because they possess the experience of playing and participating longer than the underclassmen. The underclassmen, particularly freshmen and sophomores, carry less experience and face the extreme adjustment from high school to college. The upperclassmen, especially team captains, must use their experience to guide the underclassmen and "set the tone" for the upcoming season.

To direct the team toward success, upperclassmen must set a sufficient example to follow and behave in a way that team leaders should. Even more so, team captains must communicate frequently and intentionally, especially with the new-comers. Communication can make or break team dynamics. Leaders who neglect communication or communicate poorly set the team up for failure. Leaders who communicate often and intentionally are much more likely to succeed in their sport and build positive relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and Social Exchange

Research and conceptualization of communication between teammates in sports has been a slow process in the field of sport psychology. Scholars continue the attempt to understand and differentiate communication in sport versus communication in other social contexts. According to Mabry and Barnes (1980), communication is "a social process that involves the social exchange of symbols or behaviors between two or more people," involving both verbal and

nonverbal exchanges. Researchers, Sullivan and Short, state that the most appropriate theoretical framework for communication dynamics is *social exchange theories.* These theories propose "social interactions as a series of interdependent exchanges among individuals or parties that involve the exchange of valued commodities" (2011). In other words, the motivation for communication and social interaction is for people to acquire resources from each other. Resources include tangible goods and intangible commodities such as: love, satisfaction, status, etc. Ultimately, a human being's natural inclination is to attain what is needed or wanted, which *social exchange theory* suggests is the purpose of communication.

Using Foa and Foa's (1974) theory of social exchange, scholars may better understand and conceptualize communication in sports. Sports teams possess both social and task agendas (Sullivan, & Short, 2011), meaning teammates communicate with each other to fulfill social needs and to provide logistical information to accomplish goals. Therefore, effective communication has occurred when team members believe their social needs have been met and their task agendas achieved. However, as in other social contexts, a teammate may understand the needs and agendas of both or several parties, but they must then determine how to best communicate to meet them

Effective Communication

Communication among teammates on sports teams becomes complicated because people possess different personalities, and athletes are no exception. Research shows that an acute awareness of one's self as well as the differences of others allows for adaptation and thus effective group functioning (Beauchamp, Maclachlan, & Lothian, 2005). Because members of sports teams spend a significant amount of time with each other during the season and in the off-season**,** understanding each other's' personalities and preferences becomes a necessity.

Preferences include communication, and researchers assert that effective communication among athletes occurs when teammates approach interactions from the point of view of others. This creates empathy, in which teammates understand each other and how they experience the world differently (2005). Therefore, as research suggests, effective communication on sports teams requires empathy.

Athletes' Preferred Leadership Qualities

Holmes, McNeil, and Adorna conducted research on student-athletes' perceptions of formal and informal leadership on sports teams (2010). Using the focus group method, they questioned 33 student-athletes of 11 different sports teams. The sample was not gender-specific, for 16 men (5 teams) and 17 women (6 teams) participated in focus groups. Results showed both male and female athletes believe team leaders must be "vocal and trustworthy, lead by example, be a role model, and possess good interpersonal skills" (2010). The researchers recognized three common themes: communication, behavior, and personal characteristics. With regard to communication, both male and female student-athletes expressed that strong vocalization and communication in and out of play context is most important to them.

Team Leaders' Perceptions

One must also emphasize the importance of team leaders' perspectives and what they perceive as qualities of an effective leader. An article discussing self-perceptions of leadership in the Paralympics revealed two themes: *Athlete Leader Behaviors and Roles* and *Building Team Cohesion* (Caron, Bloom, Loughead, & Hoffman, 2016). Athletes in this study believe their chief responsibilities include: motivating, supporting, and communicating with their teammates. Although this study only targeted Paralympic athletes, these responsibilities are also common among able-bodied athletes (Fransen et al., 2014). Elite athletes and coaches also stress the

importance of motivation and other research shows that effective team leadership enhances

communication between all team members on sports teams (Crozier et al., 2013; Fransen et al.,

2014). That being said, the findings of the article focusing on Paralympic athletes is not

exclusive to disabled athletes. Able-bodied athletes, including leaders of college sport teams,

also perceive motivation, support, and communication to be crucial elements of effective

leadership.

A study analyzing the leadership behaviors of former athlete leaders used six former male

hockey players. Through formal interviews, researchers found multiple higher-order categories,

which included *verbal interactions* (Dupuis, Bloom, & Loughead, 2006). The athletes of this

study emphasized the importance of an openly-communicative relationship with the coach. They

thought of themselves as the "bridge" of communication, acting as a "liaison" between the

players and coaches. The formal athlete leaders also suggested that "the timing and the quality of

communication were more important than the quantity of feedback" (2006). In other words, there

is a right time to motivate and provide logistical information to team members. Also, the

substance of the feedback carries more weight than the amount.

RESEARCH GAP

The gap in research is produced from lack of specification in both: communication/tactics

as well as team members. Existing research generally draws the line between team leadership

and other team members. Upperclassmen and team leaders use multiple communication styles

and tactics, and freshmen/new-comers are more complex than "team members." Research on

communication among upperclassmen, or team leaders/captains and underclassmen is worthy of

discovery. Communication styles and tactics used by upperclassmen and team leaders/captains

must be analyzed, and also how they affect underclassmen/new-comers on college sports teams specifically. Ultimately, college sports teams and society may significantly benefit from filling this gap

RESEARCH QUESTION

In consideration of the research gap and the uncovered research surrounding this topic, the research question for this study is: How do certain communication styles used by team leaders/upperclassmen affect underclassmen on college sports teams?

METHOD

The research method used to uncover how upperclassmen communication styles affect underclassmen on college sports teams was focus groups. The study produced qualitative results due to the nature of questions asked and the smaller groups of subjects chosen. Two focus groups were conducted: Captain Focus Group and Freshmen Focus Group. The purpose of conducting two focus groups was to seek insight from both sides of the coin and allow for more honest answers. The study required uncovering the communication styles used by team captains, but also how the freshmen reacted to and felt toward these tactics.

Sampling

The subjects were chosen specifically for each focus group. The Captain Focus Group consisted of Messiah College student-athletes possessing the official title of "Captain" for their respective sports team. The Freshmen Focus Group contained first-year student-athletes belonging to any official Messiah College varsity sports team. The student-athletes selected for both focus groups were not gender-specific because the study focuses on differences in

upperclassmen and underclassmen – not gender. To gather the student-athletes, every Messiah

College varsity coach received an email requesting the email addresses of their team captains and

potentially interested underclassmen. After gathering the email addresses from coaches by the

specified deadline, captains and underclassmen received separate emails requesting their

participation in the focus groups. Once the selection of subjects for both focus groups was

finalized, they received a specific time and location to confirm their participation.

Captains Focus Group Questions

The Captain Focus Group began with a brief introduction explaining the research, the

purpose for it, and appreciation for their participation. After the opening remarks, the first

question was designed to set the stage for the rest: How would you describe communication

dynamics on your sports team? The purpose of this question was to gain insight toward the

nature of communication between team captains and the rest of their team. The next question,

again, involved the whole team: What platforms do you use the most or find to be the most

effective when communicating to your teammates? Platforms could include: texting, phone-calls,

one-on-one communication, etc. As a follow-up question, team captains were asked: In your

experience, have you found specific platforms to be ineffective? These first few questions

provided insight toward how team captains communicate to their team as a whole, and their

feelings toward the effectiveness of such methods.

The next set of questions focused on freshmen specifically and how team captains adjust

their communication tactics when addressing new-comers. Captains set the stage for pre-season,

in-season, and post-season commitments and the next question asked: How did you

communicate the amount and type of pre-season, in-season, and post-season commitments your

team requires to the freshmen? The next two questions focused on the aftermath upon

commitments being communicated: What attitudes did you perceive among the freshmen after communicating team commitments? Did any problems arise that required conflict resolution or different communication tactics? These questions allowed for a deeper understanding of how team captains adjust communication styles toward freshmen both initially and after possible conflict occurs.

The last set of questions centered around what team captains see as crucial factors when communicating to freshmen. The captains discussed the question: In your experience, how have you affirmed freshmen? Lastly, in an effort to distinguish what team captains perceive as the most effective communication tactics during conflict resolution, subjects were asked: "Have you found that freshmen respond better to stern methods or peaceful/gentle methods of communication during conflict?"

Freshmen Focus Group Questions

Like the Captain Focus Group, the Freshmen Focus Group began with an introduction describing the research and purpose for it, as well as the method. After providing explanations and expressing appreciation for subject participation, the first-year student-athletes received the same first question as the captains: How would you describe communication dynamics on your sports team? The next question asked how they are communicated with: What specific communication platforms used by your team captains do you find to be the most effective? For example: texting, phone-calls, one-on-one communication, etc. Afterward, they received the follow-up question: What communication platforms used by your team captains are you least likely to respond to or forget about? The first focus group showed how and why college team captains communicate to freshmen in specific ways. The Freshmen Focus Group sheds light on how first-year student-athletes feel about and respond to those tactics.

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To coincide with the questions used for the Captain Focus Group and to properly analyze the data, the next set of questions focused on first-year adjustments to college sports teams. The freshmen were asked: How did your team captains address pre-season, in-season, and post-season commitments? Did a formal conversation take place? Next, the subjects responded to the questions: Did you feel they communicated said-commitments well? If not, how could they have communicated these commitments better? Informing first-years and new-comers about the obligations playing a college sport entails is a crucial part of team leadership. That being said, the responses provided significant insight into how freshmen respond to different communication styles regarding commitment during adjustment.

The last set of questions for the Freshmen Focus Group focused on their preferred methods of communication when it comes to affirmation, and conflict resolution. Subjects were asked: Do you feel your captains affirm you in your roles on your sports teams? If so, how? Lastly, with regard to conflict resolution, the freshmen responded to the questions: Has conflict occurred between you and your captains due to ineffective communication or lack of communication? If so, how did your captains communicate with you to resolve the conflict?

Analysis

After conducting both focus groups, a thorough analysis of the subjects' responses took place. The purpose of using the focus group method was to initiate discussion and seek the insights of both groups. Upon organizing the qualitative data, specific themes and patterns were uncovered. Results showed how captains communicate to freshmen and what they perceive as the best styles/tactics. The Freshmen Focus Group showed how freshmen actually feel about these methods and what they experience to be beneficial or unhelpful as they adjust to playing on

a college sports team. Ultimately, understanding the effects of team captains' communication styles/tactics on first-year student-athletes requires insights from both sides.

RESULTS: Captain Focus Group

Team Communication Dynamics

The majority of team leaders who participated in the Captain Focus Group expressed that their team experienced, or currently experiences, positive communication dynamics. They contribute these positive dynamics to an establishment of a team philosophy. More than one captain mentioned this particular philosophy used on their teams: "Mean no offense; take no offense." They use this phrase as a standard for communication among all team members; not just between captains and freshmen. Leaders in the past instilled in them this philosophy to use during their time as a college student-athlete due to its success in creating a positive team atmosphere. "Mean no offense; take no offense" simply means deferring from immediate reaction when faced with unclear, or possible offensive communication.

Captains also stressed the importance of relationship-building for the philosophy to work. A freshman who knows a captain personally, and understands their intentions is less likely to react negatively. Strong relationships open the doors for positive communication. When captains possess positive relationships with freshmen, the first-years feel comfortable in communicating with captains about misinterpreted messages. The participants of the Captain Focus Group believed "Mean no offense; take no offense" to be a successful philosophy for teams, but only with intentional relationship-building.

Communication Platforms

Due to technological advances in today's society, captains may use more than one platform to communicate with their teammates. The participants of the Captain Focus Group expressed that they all use the texting app: GroupMe for much of their team communication. However, they also stressed the necessity for individual communication, or group communication in which captains address their team as a whole. Subjects agreed with using GroupMe for team announcements, reminders, and logistics. However, when it comes to conflict resolution or relationship-building, subjects agreed with using individual or group communication.

Captains may use individual or group communication when faced with conflict or to build relationships, but subjects deemed the matter as situational. If problems arise due to the actions of one teammate, subjects considered individual communication as the wisest tactic for conflict resolution. Also, captains often use individual communication to "check in" on people and establish deeper, interpersonal relationships. Captains may use group communication when conflict surfaces involving a group of players. In this case, subjects considered addressing the entire team as the best tactic for conflict resolution. They also expressed using group communication for motivation and to establish a positive team atmosphere, thus contributing to relationship-building and strong team dynamics as well.

Communicating Commitment

Participants affirmed the necessity for communicating team commitment to freshmen and setting standards for their teams as wholes. College sports require much commitment physically, mentally, emotionally, and time-wise. These commitments take place during off-season, post-season, and in-season, which often includes: weight-lifting, cardiovascular training, skills

training, pick-up games, practices, competition, film sessions, etc. As the participants suggested, a conversation must take place before the regular season starts to inform freshmen and reiterate to returning players the level of commitment required of them to succeed.

Participants of the Captain Focus Group expressed that most freshmen complied with team commitments and reacted positively once communicated to them. One participant stated that most freshmen stand encouraged as they take on the new, yet strenuous commitments. However, the captain also expressed in the case that one first-year struggles, they rely on their classmates as their main source of support. Encouraging freshmen to rely on their classmates potentially eases the adjustment because they establish relationships with people they relate to – those also facing newness.

Another captain stressed the importance of freshmen seeing captains fully commit to their teams. Simply stated: "Leaders need to give it 100% because underclassmen won't follow someone who can't practice what they preach." Along with self-motivated leaders, freshmen need "a little extra push and encouragement" due to the position they hold. According to the participants, a captain must never assume their freshmen understand the level of commitment awaiting them as they enter the world of college sports. An effective team leader communicates and demonstrates this commitment, then empowers their team, including and especially freshmen, to do the same.

Affirmation

Athletes often require affirmation from their captains during their first year of playing on a college sports team. They may not know the significance of their roles, and captains must take on the responsibility of affirming them. The level of affirmation may look different depending on the individual freshman. The captain participants agreed that positive affirmation should take

place at the beginning of the relationship, thus making it easier to "critique and hold them accountable later." They stressed building a foundation first, starting with positive affirmation, then the amount and continuance depends on the needs of the individual freshman.

A freshman in constant need of affirmation may "turn off" a captain who prefers a "tough love" approach to leadership, but participants articulated the benefits of more than one captain in this case. With a group of captains, one may show more compassion and understanding while another may be better suited for motivation and encouragement. Just as freshmen possess different personalities, so do team leaders. Where a team captain lacks, another makes up for their weaknesses. All things considered, a team's success and the freshmen's well-being relies significantly on the captains' ability to work together.

Conflict Resolution

When teams take on larger classes of freshmen, conflict often surfaces due to an adjustment of new norms. Freshmen must adjust to a new team and everything that comes with it. Captains and returning players must adjust to new personalities. The participants agreed with Beauchamp, Maclachlan, and Lothian when they expressed that the key to conflict resolution and group functioning relies on an acute awareness of self and the personalities of others (2005).

One of the participants recalled an instance requiring conflict resolution. The captains of this particular sports team regrouped over a course of action to take in response to a freshman "trash-talking" and purposely fouling during practice and games. They decided to sit down with the freshman to address the issue and explain why their behavior needed to change. In response, the freshman apologized to the team, but the captain participant expressed that this behavior still occurs from time to time. The root of this behavior and the continuance thereof results from a clash of differing personalities. The captains experienced a new teammate exhibiting behaviors

contrary to team values, but the first-year player acted in accordance with their competitive and aggressive personality. In this instance, conflict resolution or diffusion resulted from the captains communicating to the freshman with an awareness of differing personalities.

Captain participants expressed that, when asked if freshmen respond better to stern or gentle methods of communication during conflict, "it depends on who it's coming from and who you're communicating to." This statement assumes individual communication taking place during conflict, in which one captain communicates to one freshman. According to participants, the chosen method or style of communication depends on the relationship. For example, a captain who knows a first-year well enough may consider a stern method of communication as more effective. With a less personal relationship, a captain may resort to gentle methods of individual communication. If conflict arises where a captain or captains must address the entire team, participants stated the communication style may *then* depend on the situation. Regardless of the situation, a captain participant articulated: "What you say matters, but it's more about who you are and how your teammates know you and where you're coming from." In other words, relationships matter, especially during conflict.

RESULTS: Freshmen Focus Group

Team Communication Dynamics

When asked to describe team communication dynamics, all participants of the Freshmen Focus Group defined theirs's as positive. Their reasons for describing communication dynamics as positive varied. Two participants admitted to possessing positive team communication dynamics due to one designated team captain. Another participant attributed positive dynamics to their head coach, who stresses the importance of developing team culture. Two other

participants expressed that their team functions with a leadership team comprised of nine seniors, as opposed one, or even a small group of captains. Based on these responses, freshmen athletes may attribute positive team communication dynamics to various reasons.

Communication Platforms

In the Captain Focus Group, participants admitted to their captains' use of multiple platforms when communicating to teams. Participants of the Freshmen Focus Group verified the use and effectiveness of GroupMe as a tool for team communication. Two freshmen participants however, expressed that their leadership team uses Facebook as a means for group communication. These particular subjects also admitted to using GroupMe on other sports teams in high school, or for academic purposes, but stated the Facebook group page works all the same. All freshmen who participated in the focus group expressed that they prefer these tools when captains make announcements or communicate logistics. When asked if the freshmen deemed any platforms used by captains as ineffective, they responded "no" by affirming them as solid communicators. Whether by GroupMe, Facebook, group communication, or individual communication, the participant's captains communicate often and remain "easy to reach."

Communicating Commitment

All freshmen who participated in the focus group expressed that a formal conversation about commitment did not take place. At most, their captains informally talked about expectations during pre-season. However, the freshmen also articulated that they expected high levels of commitment, and felt a formal conversation unnecessary. The informal conversations that took place included discussing the result of not following through with team commitments: captains approaching the freshmen. Although the freshmen participants felt their teams did not need formal conversations, they also stated that they understand why captains often feel they

must take place. One of the participants stated: "it's better to have a formal conversation because you don't know what you're dealing with," regarding freshmen.

When asked if the captains communicated commitments well, freshmen participants agreed in that they prefer a gentle, caring approach. They prefer captains who communicate commitment to provide an assurance of support and understanding. They especially respond better to this type of approach when their coaches are stern. The participants emphasized a need for balance. When coaches use harsh or stern methods of communication, freshmen desire relief from captains. However, if their coaches use gentle or passive methods of communication, freshmen may need their captains to "tell them how it is." Communication styles/methods often depend on the situation at hand, and captains must recognize the consistent need for balance among captains or between captains and coaches.

Affirmation

Affirmation significantly affects freshmen on sports teams, and captains/team leaders play a significant role in affirming freshmen as crucial parts to a greater whole. The participants appreciate affirmation from their leaders because freshmen, in general, may often feel insignificant in their role as new-comers. Freshmen often play seemingly less significant roles during competition due to lack of playing time. Also, they must adjust to team chemistry between returning players from a competition standpoint, or relationally. Two participants expressed that they prefer their captains affirming and encouraging them during competition and practices because their coach handles criticism.

Other participants did not disagree with the need for affirmation from captains due to criticism from coaches, but they spoke of the necessity for "balance" from their captains. They appreciate captains who affirm and encourage, but they also appreciate when their captains hold

them accountable. One of the participants stated: "If you have a bad practice, they're going to tell you. If you're doing well, they'll encourage you." The freshman participant made this statement as if it was their preferable captain communication style. Comparing different participants' statements, one can assume that certain levels of affirmation rely on team dynamics, or more specifically, each freshman athlete.

Conflict Resolution

Only one participant mentioned an experience requiring conflict resolution between their self and one of the captains. The rest of the participants had no conflicts to speak of. However, the freshmen participant expressed that the conflict arose due to an off-handed comment made toward a captain during a practice scrimmage. The participant stated: "there was no malicious intent," and no conversation took place to resolve the conflict. As the freshman expressed, conflict resolution took place the next play when the captain used their skill to assert their authority over the freshman. Based on this display, the freshman understood they over-stepped when they made the off-handed comment. Aside from this instance, the Freshmen Focus Group as a whole agreed, in so many words, with the "mean no offense; take no offense" philosophy mentioned in the Captain Focus Group. They know the intentions of their captains, and have yet to take offense to any captain communication that would potentially cause conflict.

DISCUSSION

Upon completing this research, I believe the results produced greater insight and understanding toward how captain communication on college sports teams affect freshmen athletes. The focus groups yielded beneficial results and displayed how positive communication dynamics established by captains affect teams, and especially freshmen.

The findings of this research significantly contribute to the field of college athletics. Captains, coaches, and athletic administrators may use this research to increase satisfaction and efficiency within college athletic departments. Establishing positive communication with freshmen creates a ripple effect – spreading the results of this action throughout college athletic departments. Satisfied freshmen lead to satisfied teams, also leading to satisfied coaches, thus providing satisfaction to athletic directors who manage the departments. As previously mentioned, freshmen student-athletes reside in a unique position because they lack experience. They must adjust to a new level of sport in which they may no longer be "the best" on their team. They must adjust to playing with new people and playing for new coaches. Positive, intentional, and effective communication must start with freshmen. Once captains have the freshmen onboard, the ripple effect may begin.

My research provides specification to communication tactics used by team captains, as well as communication taken place between captains and freshmen. Much of the research conducted does not place emphasis on freshmen, and focuses on specific qualities of team leadership (Caron, Bloom, Loughead, & Hoffman, 2016); not communication styles/tactics, specifically. The two focus groups included captains and freshmen of Messiah College sports teams, thus providing the specification that other research lacks. Also, the focus group questions sought to discover and understand effective or ineffective communication styles/tactics used by captains, *then* how they affect freshmen. Therefore, it was fitting to conduct the Captain Focus Group before the Freshmen Focus Group. This method allowed me to fill in the research gap and focus specifically on captains and freshmen, and the communication dynamics between them.

The questions used for the focus groups followed the following themes: *communication dynamics, communication platforms, communicating commitment, affirmation, and conflict*

resolution – with consideration to the research question formulated from the gap. Captains considered their team communication dynamics positive due largely in part to strong, intentionally established relationships, which the freshmen affirmed through their statements. Freshmen also expressed their favor toward electronic group chats such as GroupMe, but also prefer individual and group communication depending on the situation. Regarding conflict resolution, both freshmen and captains stressed the importance of relationships established through empathy – understanding the personalities and intentions of others. Other research has much to say about motivation, but I sought to discover how captains properly affirm freshmen in their roles, which is *just* as important. Both freshmen and captains emphasized the need for balance between affirmation and accountability, either established between coaches and captains, or just between captains. Lastly, captains consider regular communication of commitment as a necessity. The freshmen however, stated otherwise, but understand why captains would feel the need due to the "unexpected."

I found two shortcomings in the midst of conducting my research: little participation from multiple sports teams and analysis of Messiah College sports teams. The Captain Focus Group consisted of six participants with representation from these teams: baseball, softball, men's basketball, men's soccer, and women's lacrosse. The Freshmen Focus Group also consisted of six participants but with representation from these teams: swimming, women's volleyball, and men's basketball. Members from a variety of teams participated, but I would have preferred more diverse and corresponding representation on the Freshmen Focus Group to the Captain Focus Group. Also, the analysis of Messiah College sports teams provides potentially less-applicable results toward other universities. As a private Christian university, communication dynamics on sports teams may generally look different than those of a secular

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university. Despite these shortcomings, I consider this research quite valuable to college sports teams everywhere.

Based on the shortcomings presented above, I believe an excellent future study to pursue could involve the same type of research, but conducted at a secular university. I wonder if the study would produce similar results, or pave the way for more research. If the study produced different results, one could venture to uncover the reasoning behind differences in captain communication styles/tactics on public vs. private college sports teams. Ultimately, I believe my research study opens the doors for more research that may serve college athletics and society as a whole.

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