

Athletes don't benefit from relying on a coach for too long

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Athletes increasingly relying on a coach over the course of a season may be a sign that they aren't progressing in their development, according to new research from Binghamton University.

On the other hand, inspirational coaches will find that their athletes will become less reliant on them over time.

"Being increasingly needed by your athletes as time goes on is not a good sign," says Chou-Yu Tsai, assistant professor of management in Binghamton University's School of Management.

"If your athletes no longer need your leadership and guidance as time goes on, that should be seen as a positive sign that you've helped them in their development."

Tsai, who studies leadership in a number of contexts, including athletics, worked with a research team consisting of San-Fu Kao of National Tsing Hua University and Robert Schinke of Laurentian University. They set out to discover how a [coach's](#) leadership style affected athlete evaluations of their competency over time.

The researchers evaluated how nearly 250 Division I collegiate basketball players felt about their coaches at different points over the course of a season. They focused on a coach's ability to enact transformational leadership, or the ability to develop athletes to their full potential.

"Transformational coaches empower their players in ways beyond just playing a sport. They help players develop meaning and instill pride, and encourage them to go above and beyond for the good of the team," said Tsai.

They found that coaches who enacted high transformational leadership had a decrease in perceived coaching competency by their athletes over time. In other words, the more a coach inspired a player to achieve their full potential, the less the athlete relied on their coaching.

In contrast, they found that coaches with low transformational leadership skills had an increase in perceived coaching competency by their athletes over the course of the season. This means that players may rely more on their uninspiring coaches over time.

"If you're not gaining some sort of independence from your coach, you may feel like you need that coach even more," said Tsai. "This probably isn't a good sign."

Tsai said it's important for coaches to understand how their [leadership style](#) interacts with player perceptions of them.

"Coaches may incorrectly think they did something wrong if their athletes aren't as reliant on them anymore," said Tsai. "On the contrary, our research indicates that this kind of independence is a sign that you demonstrated good leadership behaviors."

As for how to become a transformational leader, Tsai recommends that coaches focus on the

personal development of their athletes.

"Transformational coaches don't want athletes to only become better players. They mentor their athletes and help them become better people as well," said Tsai.

More information: San-Fu Kao et al, Investigation of the interaction between coach transformational leadership and coaching competency change over time, *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching* (2020). DOI: [10.1177/1747954120953946](https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954120953946)

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