

# The Captain Advantage

## The Captain Advantage

Episode 5 | Season 2 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

### EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Do leaders actually influence sports performance? An integrated systematic review and meta-analyses
Author	Clare, C., Hardy, J., Roberts, R., Tod, D., & Benson, A
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### THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

#### Yes, But...Small

The core finding from the review is that leadership and performance are genuinely connected. Your leadership is important and stabilizes the whole group...yet there are other forces at play with leadership in groups, too.

#### The Captain Advantage

The team captain was the most influential leader, even over the coach. This begs the question, how do you choose, develop and deploy your leaders in your group.

#### The Authentic Edge.

Authentic leadership, which means leading in a way that is genuinely consistent with your values, is best correlated with performance. That is the type of leadership that athletes can trust and trust is the beginning of culture.

## SHOW NOTES

### TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

#### Have a conversation with your team captain

Your first action is to have a conversation with your team captain, or captains, about culture. Ask three questions: What do the other players talk to you about that they don't bring to me? What is the mood of the group right now, honestly (and please don't name names)? What is one thing the team needs from leadership that is not currently happening? You might want to tweak these questions based on the context in which you are coaching.

#### Think about the last three significant decisions you made as a coach

For each decision you've made recently, write down the value that drove it. If the values are inconsistent or not related to the values you think you live by, there is some work to do in your coaching foundation.

## RESEARCH REFERENCE

**Primary Source:** Clare, C., Hardy, J., Roberts, R., Tod, D., & Benson, A. (2025). Do leaders actually influence sports performance? An integrated systematic review and meta-analyses. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 47, 205-222.

## LINKS AND RESOURCES

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**Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.**

## SHOW NOTES

### FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

#### Cold Open

You put a lot into how you lead. How you speak before practice. How you respond after a loss. How you read the room. You lead because you believe it matters.

But here is a question almost nobody in sport has answered with data: does your leadership as a coach genuinely change the scoreboard?

In this episode, we'll look at the answer. Fifty studies. Seventeen thousand athletes. A group of researchers at Bangor University went looking deeply. And, the answer is YES. But they also found that the most influential leader on your team might NOT be you. And once you hear why, you might reframe how you understand the effect of your leadership.

#### The Paper

The paper is called, "Do Leaders Actually Influence Sports Performance? An Integrated Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses." It was published in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* in 2025. The lead author is Charlotte Clare, alongside James Hardy, Ross Roberts, David Tod, and Alex Benson.

What prompted this systematic review was a genuine gap. There were plenty of individual studies on leadership and sport performance, but nobody had pulled them all together into one rigorous picture. So, the research team did exactly that: they chose a systematic review process, which is the deepest dive into past research that can be done, using a technique called meta-analysis to find the overall signal on leadership and performance across years of information. Here's what they found.

#### Big Idea #1

The core finding from the review is that leadership and performance are genuinely connected. The relationship is real, consistent, AND it holds up across all fifty studies.

But here is where we need to name this big idea honestly. The effect is small. The statistical correlation is only just "significant." It's not zero. But modest.

Let's call this one "Yes, But...Small." Think of leadership as the underlay beneath a hardwood floor. Nobody visits a house, steps on the floor and says, "Wow, that underlay is top of the line!" But if it's missing, everything feels slightly off. A little bit unstable. That's leadership's contribution to performance. You, the coach, are not the sum total of the leadership. But the leadership doesn't quite work without you.

And knowing this might actually free you up a little, Coach. Because it also means the pressure of every single result being your fault is probably misplaced.

#### Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two. And this one genuinely surprised me. When the researchers looked at who was really doing the leading, the strongest relationship with team performance didn't come from the coach. Ready for this? It came from the team captain. Captain's leadership correlated with team

performance almost double that of the coach's leadership. That is a statistically significant difference.

The sticky label here is The Captain Advantage.

The reason? Proximity and credibility. A captain occupies a unique position: connected to the coaching staff, but embedded in the athlete group. They carry the coaching message in a voice teammates trust, because it belongs to someone who is also in the trenches with them. This finding should make every coach genuinely curious about how they develop and deploy their captains. The data says that for team performance specifically, your captain is simply MORE influential than you are.

Idea three is about HOW you lead. The paper compared several leadership models. Two frameworks stood out. Authentic leadership, which means leading in a way that is genuinely consistent with your values - being transparent, self-aware, and morally grounded - produced the strongest performance relationship of any style tested. Coaches who employ transformational leadership or the framework that inspires athletes to exceed their own expectations and to develop them into leaders, rather than simply viewing them as athletes, came in at slightly less in correlating leadership to performance.

Call this one "The Authentic Edge."

Being real, values-consistent, and someone your athletes can read as genuine rather than performing a role is most important. That is what the data connects most strongly to results. In contrast, the framework most widely taught in coaching education courses, the Multidimensional Model of Leadership, produced no significant relationship with performance in this review. More on that in the counterpoint.

### The Counterpoint

The paper itself points this out.

The most common leadership model in coach education wasn't highly related to team performance in this study, but is regularly used because it is easier to relate to for new leaders. And, the paper does say that individual studies show that the Multidimensional Model of Leadership - that covers using democratic behaviour, focussing on social support, and other ideas - has been linked to positive results. It simply doesn't hold up alongside authentic and transformational leadership approaches in connection to team performance.

### The Anecdote

A short story to illustrate this point. Five of my university players had exams immediately after an evening practice, and several days earlier they had each come to me asking whether they could miss the practice...but it was the last training session before our first playoff game. I told them no, I wanted them there, and I meant it, not as a rule, not as a policy, but as a shared understanding: you said you'd be here every day just like everyone else, and that matters. But when I counted heads at that practice warmup, I only counted four.

The fifth player wasn't there. She was our most solid performer in a very important position. Tomorrow was playoffs. It was one practice. I knew the argument. I looked at the four players already there who had chosen to show up, even though showing up cost them something that felt real. They had committed to the team. So, I decided: she would sit out the first half of the

## SHOW NOTES

game the next day. Not as punishment, but as a consequence. Consequence is about meaning. And meaning is integrally correlated with culture.

At the end of practice, I gathered the four and told them plainly what I had decided. I said I was proud of them not because they were better athletes, but because they had done what they said they would do, and that integrity was something I valued above outcomes, including the playoff outcome.

The next day, the game was tight, and the starters kicked off without her. She sat beside the others on the sideline, watching intently, and was ready to enter at halftime. We lost by a point... though by the end of that game, I wasn't sure the scoreboard was the point. What stayed with me was the realisation that when I lead from what I actually believe, deeply connected to my values, it feels right.

And, you know what? No one ever missed a practice after that...and our performance continued to improve.

## Two Actions

Your first action is to have a conversation with your team captain, or captains, about culture. Ask three questions: What do the other players talk to you about that they don't bring to me? What is the mood of the group right now, honestly (and please don't name names)? What is one thing the team needs from leadership that is not currently happening? You're not gathering intelligence or putting your captain in a corner. You are using them as a bridge, as their role should be between you and the team. Do it before your next session and help them navigate the needs of the team; you want to position them to leverage "The Captain Advantage."

A second action is to think about the last three significant decisions you made as a coach: in selection, in how you responded to a poor performance, in how you handled a difficult athlete. For each one, write down the value that drove it. Values like integrity, courage, joy, support, humility, accountability and so many others. If you can't name one, or if the values are inconsistent across those three decisions, you've now identified your development target. Authentic leadership is that which consistently uses core values to guide a coach's decisions and actions. Athletes can read inconsistency when those values aren't upheld or there is a values-based conflict. This one is a reflective habit worth building, not just a one-off exercise.

## Close and Invite

Here is what I want you to carry out of today. Leadership is real, and it matters. The effect is modest, not magical. The closest person to the group, the captain with the bridge position between you and the athletes, tends to matter most for team performance. And the most genuine version of you as a leader - actioning your values consistently and inspiring others - is what the data connects most strongly to performance.