

That's How We Do Things Around Here

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Episode 6 | Season 2 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Paper: "That's How We Do Things Here": An Investigation into Athlete Perceptions of Coach and Peer Leadership Behaviors, and Team Culture in Sport
Author	Zimmermann, J., Vealey, R.S., & Myers, N.D.
Published	Journal for Advancing Sport Psychology in Research, 2024
Episode Length	Just over 10 minutes
Tags	team culture, peer leadership, athlete captains, coach leadership, climate, morale, informal leaders, culture development, coaching research

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.

The Coach Lays the Foundation

Research shows that a head coach's leadership behaviour directly shapes the structural side of team culture: how information flows, how productive meetings are, and how involved athletes feel in decisions. Democratic coaching practices predict positive structural culture; autocratic approaches see those perceptions drop significantly.

The Leaders Hold the Climate

Peer leaders, not just named captains, but anyone athletes identify as influential, are the primary shapers of social and relational team culture: warmth, trust, morale, and athletes' sense that their voice matters. Crucially, these dimensions of culture were not predicted by the head coach at all, only by peer leaders.

The Two-Storey Building

When both coach and peer leader behaviour were modelled together, both mattered...but over 40% of the peer leaders athletes identified as most influential were not the named

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captain. Coaches who focus only on their appointed leaders may be missing the people who most shape team culture.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

Conversation with your captains and with the informal leaders on your team

Ask your captains and informal leaders one question: what does it feel like to be on this team right now...and then listen without redirecting. This gives you an accurate picture of the team climate that your own vantage point as coach cannot provide.

The 40% audit

Conduct a quiet audit: list the athletes others genuinely listen to, then compare that list against your named captains. Any gap identifies the informal leaders your culture development has been overlooking.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Counterpoint Source: McDougall, M., Ronkainen, N., Richardson, D., Littlewood, M., & Nesti, M. (2020). Three team and organisational culture myths and their consequences for sport psychology research and practice. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 13(1), 147-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2019.1638433>

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- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
- Show notes: thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes
- Subscribe and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your preferred platform

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

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FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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

Cold Open

You picked your captain carefully. You trust them. And somewhere in the back of your mind, you told yourself that having the right person in leadership means the culture is in good hands.

But here is the thing. New research suggests that your captain and you are building completely different parts of your team culture. And if you do not know which part belongs to whom, you might be waiting for something to happen that was never actually yours to create.

This episode is about what athletes say culture actually feels like, who shapes it, and the finding that should change how you think about your captains forever. Let's get into it.

The Paper

The paper is called "That's How We Do Things Here": An Investigation into Athlete Perceptions of Coach and Peer Leadership Behaviors, and Team Culture, published in the *Journal for Advancing Sport Psychology in Research* in 2024. The lead author, Corinne Zimmerman, from Michigan State University, and colleagues Robin Vealey and Nicholas Myers, surveyed 130 collegiate athletes across 17 NCAA teams in sports like volleyball, basketball, soccer, and field hockey.

Here is what makes this study unusual. Almost all of the existing research on team culture in sport has been done from the coach's perspective; how coaches experience culture, how they change it, how they build it. Zimmerman and colleagues decided to ask the athletes instead. And in doing so, they found something more specific and more useful than a general "culture is important" finding. They found that culture has two distinct layers, and different leaders are responsible for each one. Here's what they found.

Big Idea #1

The big idea could be called The Coach Lays the Foundation.

What the research found is that athlete perceptions of their head coach's leadership behaviour directly predicted the structural, organizational side of team culture. Specifically: how well information flows through the team, how productive team meetings are, how involved athletes feel in decisions, and critically, how athletes experience the interpersonal behaviours of the head coach.

When coaches were studied in their practice instruction, communication, support, and giving positive feedback, athletes rated those democratic structural dimensions of culture much more positively. When coaches leaned autocratic (meaning top-down, with little space for athlete input), positive perceptions of leadership dropped significantly.

You are not just running sessions. Every time you communicate information, give feedback, or shut down a conversation before it starts, you are laying the foundation that everything is built upon. Think about what the foundation looks like for your team right now.

Ideas #2 and #3

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Okay, idea two, and this one might reframe how you think about your captains entirely.

While the coach is laying the foundation, the peer leaders on your team are doing something completely different. They are setting the climate. The research found that peer leaders - and this is important, not just named captains, but anyone athletes themselves identified as influential - uniquely predicted the social and relational side of team culture. Specifically: the warmth and trust of the team environment, how much athletes felt their voice mattered, and the overall morale of the group.

Call this one "The Leaders Hold the Climate." Peer leaders who gave positive feedback predicted better climate and morale. Peer leaders who were democratic, meaning they created space for teammates to contribute, predicted stronger feelings of involvement. And crucially, the climate and morale finding was NOT predicted by the head coach at all. ONLY by peer leaders.

That means you can have excellent structure with great information flow, productive meetings, clear systems - and still have a flat, disconnected team environment. Because the social warmth of the team lives in a layer you do not directly control. It belongs to the athletes.

Idea three, here is where the two findings come together.

When the researchers modelled head coach behaviour and peer leader behaviour at the same time, both still mattered. But here is the twist: over 40 percent of the peer leaders identified in this study were not the named team captain. The athletes chose someone else as the most influential person on the team.

Call this one "The Two-Storey Building." You have a foundation -- that is yours to build through your own leadership. Above it is a second storey of belonging, trust, and social climate and it is being built by people who may not be wearing the title you gave out. If you are only developing your named captains, you may be missing the people who actually hold and influence the culture of your team.

The Counterpoint

Now, let me throw something else into the mix.

McDougall and colleagues, in a 2020 paper in the International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, argue that sport psychology has built a lot of its understanding of team culture on myths. One of those myths is that leadership and culture are as directly and cleanly linked as this study suggests. Their argument is that culture is far messier, more contextual, and more resistant to being shaped or understood through leadership behaviour surveys than we tend to assume. In other words: the link exists, but it may not be as tidy as a path model makes it look.

That is worth holding onto. The Zimmerman study gives us a useful and actionable map. BUT, the territory is always more complicated than the map. Use the findings as a starting point for your own observation, not as a formula.

The Anecdote

As an illustration of this, when Jamie, a pseudonym, was named captain, no one questioned it. He was organized, disciplined, and he had earned the role the way most people earn things: steadily, visibly, through years of doing the right thing at the right time. What the coaching staff perhaps hadn't fully accounted for was what the group would feel like without Marcus. Marcus had

graduated the previous spring, or so everyone thought, until late August when word spread that he had one more year remaining and was coming back. The team that had spent a quiet summer learning to function without him suddenly didn't have to.

Marcus never wore the armband. He was never the one to lead the warm-up or speak first before a game. But he was the one who remembered everyone's birthday, who stayed late to work with the youngest player on the roster, and who gave, in one of his teammates' opinions, the best hugs. Jamie ran the team. Marcus held it together. The two of them never spoke about this arrangement directly, but it worked. That season, the team performed well beyond expectations, driven in equal parts by Jamie's clarity and Marcus's warmth.

Then, deep in a final season tournament when pressure was highest, Marcus was injured in competition and ruled out for the rest of the tournament. Something went quiet in the spaces between the hard moments - the bench was more subdued, the huddles shorter, the laughter slightly more forced. Jamie led with everything he had. And, the lesson here is that leadership isn't one thing, and even the most capable captain can't always be both the compass and the fire.

Two Actions

This week, action one is to have a different kind of conversation with your captains and with the informal leaders on your team. Not about performance, not about upcoming competition. Ask them one question: what does it feel like to be on this team right now? Then listen. Do not fix or redirect. Just take in what they say. According to this research, you are building the foundation and they are living on the second storey. Find out what it actually feels like up there BEFORE you assume you know.

Action Two is called The 40% Audit. Here is your most practical action and the one you can start today. Quietly, on your own, write down the names of the athletes on your team who others genuinely listen to. Not the ones you appointed. The ones whose mood others read, whose opinion shapes the group, whose presence or absence changes the atmosphere. Now look at your list. How many of those people are your named captains? If there is a gap, you have just found the people your culture development work has been missing.

Close and Invite

The one thing I want you to carry from this episode: team culture is not a single-storey project, and the coach is not the only builder.

You lay the foundation through your communication, your instruction, your feedback, and the space you either create or close off for athlete input. That matters enormously. But above it, there is a second storey -- the social warmth, the trust between teammates, the feeling of belonging. That storey belongs to the athletes. And over 40 percent of the people building it right now may not be the ones YOU put in charge.

Knowing which storey you are building, and making sure someone is taking care of it, might be the most practical culture conversation you have this week.