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DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL COHESION AT “ALPHA SPORT
TEAM” BASKETBALL CLUB

Ioan Alexandru Hulpuş (a)*, Ioana Alexandra Hulpuş (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) “Lucian Blaga” University, 7 Ion Raţiu St., Sibiu, Romania
(b) “Lucian Blaga” University, 34 Calea Dumbăvii St., Sibiu, Romania

Abstract

Basketball is characterised by dynamism and complexity, relying on the strong interaction between the team members. Thus, achievement is closely linked to social cohesion, to the so-called “team spirit” in the absence of which individual performances cannot be valued. For these reasons, training must go beyond the physical and technical-tactical aspects and focus from early ages on developing the relationship between the team members, their orientation towards a common goal, understanding of each other, common knowledge and acceptance. At the same time, the specificity of the game relies on mutual trust in key moments, speed up reaction and good verbal and nonverbal communication between the team members. Encouraging leadership contributes to good communication and, implicitly, social cohesion within the team. Based on these considerations, the research aimed to identify determinants of the “team spirit” within the “Alpha Sport Team” Basketball Club Sibiu, in particular, and study the link between nonverbal communication, leadership and social cohesion. The results confirmed the hypotheses, demonstrating a very strong connection between these variables meaning that players who assumed leadership roles, thus demonstrating credibility, accountability, communication skills, were the most preferred by the teammates, being responsible for the group cohesion. We strongly believe that a study aimed to diagnose and optimise these variables can be a real support in achieving superior performance.

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Keywords: Social cohesion, team spirit, leadership, nonverbal communication.



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1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to understand the complexity of basketball game that develops, from a very early age, special communication skills, leadership and team spirit. All of these are in interdependence and represent not just a gain for those practicing this sport, but also essential factors of success that are required to be seriously considered by the members of the technical team.

1.1. Social cohesion

Group cohesion is described as the strength of bounds between group members, the unity of a group, the feeling of attraction between group members and the degree to which members concentrate their efforts to achieve group goals (Sopa & Pomohaci, 2015). Social cohesion based on players who assume leadership, being authentic, credible, good communicators – both verbally and nonverbally, definitely represents a competitive advantage. This aspect has been studied by the literature that treats about the relationship of reciprocity between cohesion and performance: having high group cohesion is considered to be important and would lead to a better performance (Sopa & Pomohaci, 2014).

1.2. Nonverbal communication

As the scientific literature states in a very significant way, the basketball game is characterised by speed, by each player's obligation to efficiently express themselves on any position, by the fantasy of their tactical and technical exercise, their team spirit and spirit of sacrifice, their intelligence, mental toughness and creativity (Predescu & Ghiţescu, 2001).

It is important to know the type of nonverbal communication and the level at which it is expressed in order to render game actions efficient, particularly when emotions, state roles are significant, but also in cases where verbal communication is unreliable, ambiguous (Preda, 2006).

When verbal communication is inefficient because of environmental factors or any other barriers of language, nonverbal competence is definitely beneficial for the interaction of players within the team and for achieving the proposed goal. In these circumstances, the scientific literature admits that nonverbal communication ability can represent a criterion for player assessment. A player with a high level of nonverbal competence, if put in a key-position, will succeed in mediating the entire communication process necessary to carry out the specific technical-tactical action. (Marinescu, Moanţă, Zamfir, & Ticală, 2014) This means that the leaders on the field must definitely prove high nonverbal communication abilities.

1.3. Leaders and leadership

Mainly, the leader's role should be seen as including the following:

- conveying a sense of belonging by identifying common objectives and standards;
- gently leading to enable and empower teammates, thus providing an environment in which everyone does their best, knowing that they are valued.

Synthesising, leaders have an overwhelming contribution to maintaining social cohesion, motivating and mobilising the team at key-moments, their credibility being essentially linked to their nonverbal

communication skills. These theoretical arguments come to substantiate our hypotheses as the starting point of the applicable part of the research.

2. Problem Statement

The starting point in choosing this theme was the belief that, in the professional athletic instructive activity specific to basketball, identifying and improving special skills, like leadership skills or communication skills, has important implications for the improvement of the training process, for increased social cohesion and implicitly high performance.

Under these circumstances, with no claim of having exhausted this vast theme, the research identifies and focuses on certain determinants of social cohesion in interdependence from our point of view, namely leadership and non-verbal communication. The study also aims at shaping a profile of the basketball leader, identifying specific attributes of leadership on the field, in order to provide solutions on how leaders can develop themselves to create an organizational climate appropriate to performance enhancement.

From birth, the human being is able to learn. As a cybernetic energy-informational system, the individual is “programmed” from the moment of birth for such information processing. Thus, learning and adaptive learning mechanisms are based on the acquisition of information and energy, on negative, positive, corrective and prospective feedback settings, being the basis of psychic structures. (Stoian, 2016)

As many authors claim, children can learn and develop many social skills generally by attending team sports and especially basketball, skills such as leadership, communication and socialisation skills, team-building skills that will be very helpful throughout their entire lives, in school, in their future jobs or in personal relationships (Sopa & Pomohaci, 2015).

3. Research Questions

From our point of view, basketball players need all of the qualities mentioned above at increased dimensions. In this context, we asked ourselves to what extent the coach and the entire technical team could contribute to the development of leadership skills and nonverbal communication abilities and, in the end, to increased social cohesion.

3.1. Objectives of the research

- Studying social cohesion by using the Moreno’s psycho-sociometric analysis;
- Demonstrating the importance of leadership. Studying formal and informal leaders as team catalysts;
- Highlighting possible common qualities of the players that inspire other team members, demonstrating the impetuous need for nonverbal communication.

3.2. Main assumptions

- Leadership positively correlates with the preferential status index of the team player;
- Among the qualities required of a leader in a given situation, credibility and the power to convey messages both verbally and mostly nonverbally, are the most valued;

- Leaders make an overwhelming contribution to creating and maintaining team spirit, being basically the spark that a well-trained team needs to create great things.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research is to improve and increase knowledge in the fields studied by applying the management and management psychology to the specifics of the basketball game, and, on the other hand, to find solutions to concrete problems.

5. Research Methods

The complexity of the issues studied determines the need to use a research methodology which incorporates a wide range of methods, techniques, tools and procedures such as: the study of the professional literature, observation, inquiry, the statistical-mathematical method and the graphical representation method, interdisciplinary methods linking sports, managerial, psychological and social concepts. The study combines quantitative methods with the use of qualitative methods, the semi-structured interview for in-depth analysis of leadership in the studied field, respectively in the studied age sector. Qualitative research methods are used to understand a phenomenon, analyse it in depth to capture all its subtleties. (Roux, Pras, & Evrard, 1993; Cătoi, 2009)

This scientific and pedagogical experiment was addressed to the members of the Alpha Basketball Team U12, specifically 16 players aged 11 years. Tests and interviews were conducted between January and March 2018, during the training sessions.

5.1. Moreno's psycho-sociometric analysis

Proposed for the first time in 1934 by the Romanian-born American psycho-sociologist Moreno, the sociometric method involves a set of procedures, experimental and mathematical techniques intended to show the patterns of how individuals associate with each other when acting as a group towards a specified goal (Moreno, 1951). Our research, based on Moreno's sociometric analysis, aimed to illustrate the team cohesion level and calculate the status indices as a result of the players' responses. The subjects were asked to name the teammates they preferred and those they did not prefer, ordered according to preferential intensity.

The sociometric matrix (Table 01) was drawn by synthesising the primary preferences under the form of elections (marked by the sign "+") and rejections (marked by the sign "-").

The next level of sociometric analysis is the interpersonal one, of the socio-affective relations created within the group. The sociogram was drawn to illustrate intuitively the momentary configuration of the socio-affective group structure, the extent of election or rejection. The balance of sociometric powers is schematised in Figure 01; positive elections (attractions) are represented by dotted red arrows, negative elections (rejections) are represented by dotted blue arrows, and mutual elections are represented by arrows with solid line, red for the attractions and blue for the rejections.

Table 01. Sociometric Matrix – Moreno

+	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
A	////	+2	+3		+1					-3	-1					-2
B	+3	////	+2		+1				-2		-3					-1
C	+3	+1	////	+2			-3			-1				-2		
D		-3	+1	////	-2		-1	+3					+2			
E			+1		////	+2	+3			-3				-1		-2
F	+3				+2	////	+1			-2				-1		-3
G	-3	+3	+2	+1		-2	////				-1					
H		-1	+2			-3	-2	////	+3	+1						
I					-1	-2	-3		////	+2	+3					+1
J	+3					-3		-2		////	+2				-1	+1
K	+3					-2	-3			+2	////				-1	+1
L	+3	+2	+1							-1	-3	////				-2
M	+3	+2	+1				-3				-2		////			-1
N	+3			+2			-3	+1		-1				////		-2
O	+1	+2			+3					-3	-1				////	-2
P			+1			-3	-2			+3	+2			-1		////
	22	8	14	3	4	-13	-16	2	1	-6	-3	0	2	-6	-2	-13

5.2. Leadership analyses

The second part of the research focused on studying the presence of leadership by identifying formal and informal leaders, as well as highlighting their specific qualities. This mostly qualitative part of the research consisted of a short semi-structured interview addressed to Alpha Basketball Mini 1 members. Two predetermined questions verified the extent to which the team members recognized and accepted the formal leader and the identification of the informal leader. At the same time, open questions attempted to retain specific qualities and even sketch a leader profile based on the athletes' expectations.

6. Findings

6.1. The sociogram

In the group assessed by us, there are several mutual relations, either of attraction or rejection, which shows that the group dynamics is very strong and the power of influence and interaction is high.

The results of the sociogram can base the coaches' decisions in building up reliable relationships during the game. In addition, the experiment has revealed that newcomers are not fully integrated, even if the training is carried out in good conditions and there are no significant differences between the children. Socialisation in club activities is also considered satisfying, so the main problem, in our opinion, is the credibility and reliability during competitions. Our conclusions were confirmed by the coaches, who considered that some of the players counting many rejections did not have the ability to control their emotions during official games and be trustful. On the other hand, within the experienced group, very low scores had sanctioned individualistic or too critical behaviour. As shown by the sociogram correlated with the analyses below, high scores were definitely relied to leadership abilities, credibility and good nonverbal communication within the field expressing encouragements.

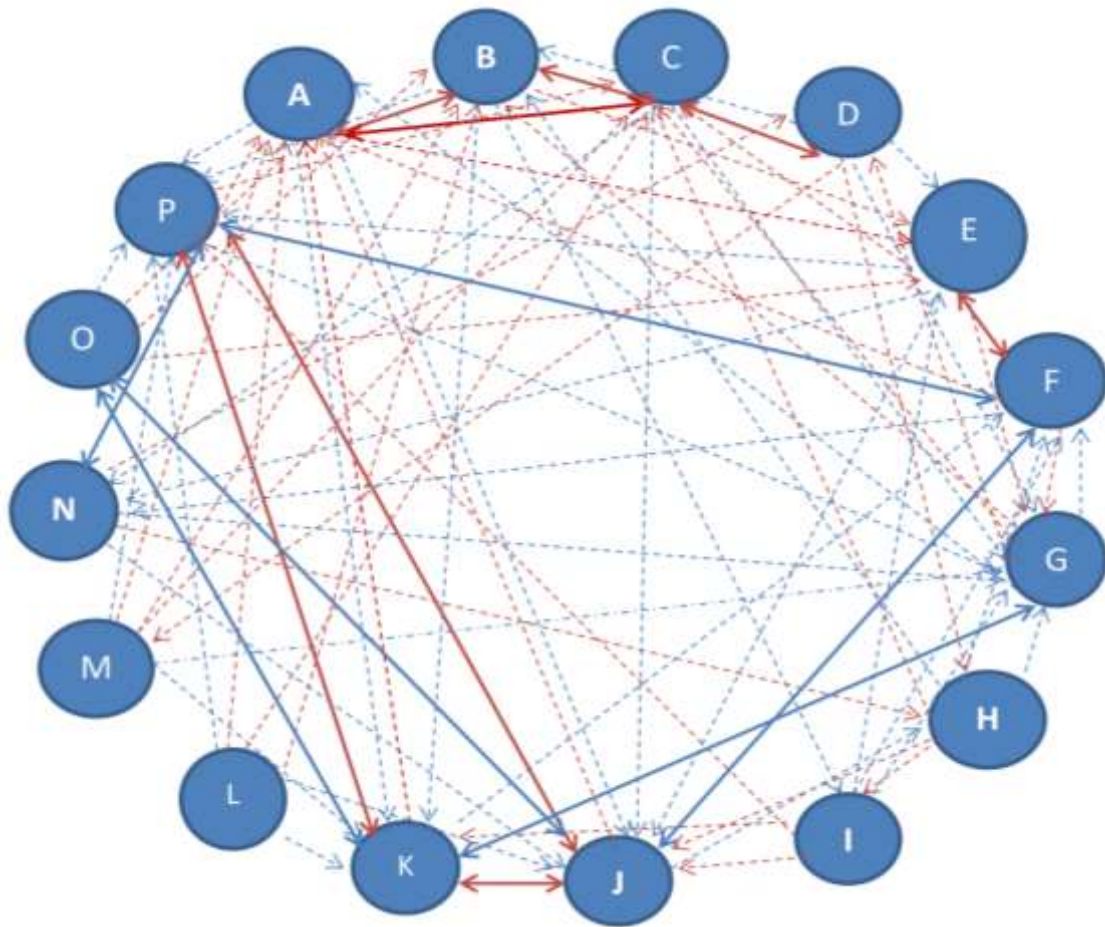


Figure 01. Sociogram

6.2. Results and interpretation of the leadership analyses

Being asked about who the coach might choose as team captain, 12 of the 16 players, representing a percentage of 82, 75% responded that player A, while 6.25% considered the formal leader to be the player C, respectively D or E (Figure 02). We should notice that, from the three different responses, 2 were self-proposed. The coach has confirmed that player A is likely to lead the team, although the notion of captain has not been mentioned before. The coach's choice is motivated by obvious leadership qualities, dominance, sociability, emotional stability.

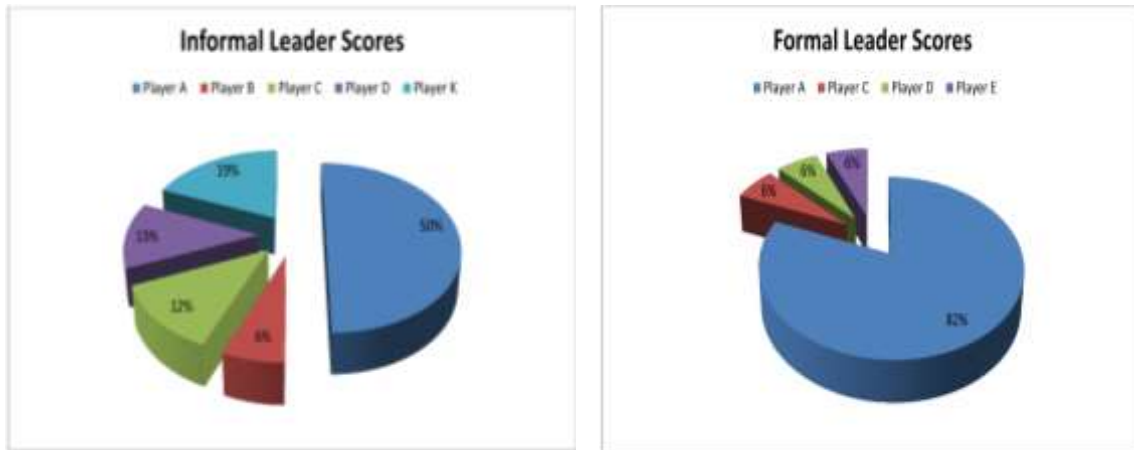


Figure 02. Leadership scores

The second question, namely who they would choose as captain, wanted to establish the informal leader/leaders, considering that it is important to identify other players with leadership potential. The results have shown that, for half of the team members, the informal leader coincides with the formal leader, and even though other teammates have been proposed, there was not any other player to be recognized by the majority as an informal leader. So, we face an ideal situation, where the formal leader is, to a great extent, the same with the informal leader. However, it is important for the technical team to take into consideration the nominations of the children. For example, player K should be encouraged, as a potential leader, to assume this role, to inspire and mobilise his supporters.

The open talks with each player revealed their appreciation of the leader's ability to encourage and unite the team, to convey confidence and approval both on the ground and from the technical bench.

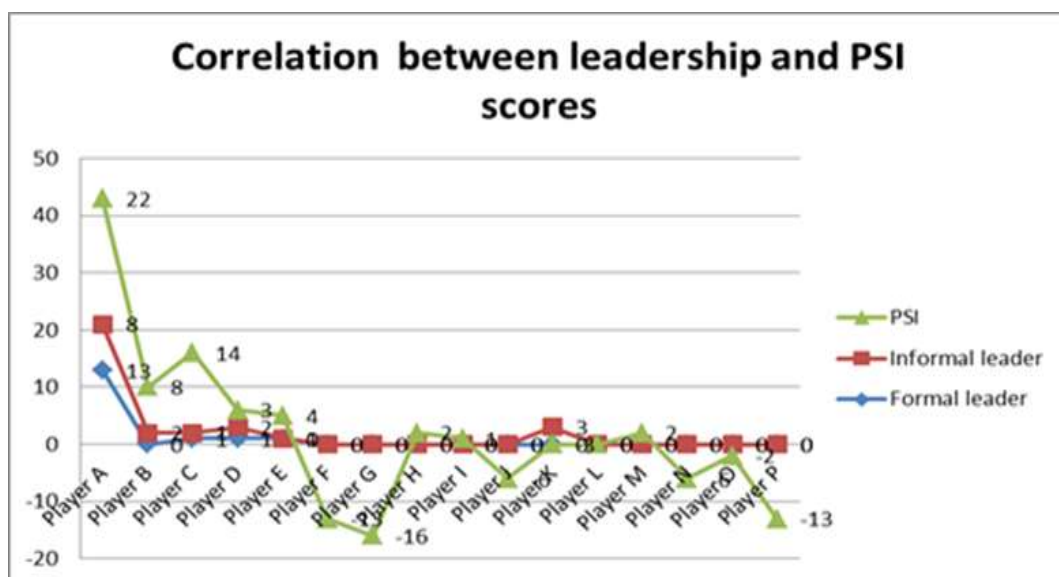


Figure 03. Correlation between leadership and Preferential Status Index

To analyse the relation between the scores obtained, namely leadership and preferential status index, we have constructed Figure 03, which shows the common tendency of the lines to change directions,

emphasising a strong connection. As we have presumed and demonstrated, there is a very strong connection between these variables, meaning that players who assumed leadership roles, thus demonstrating credibility, accountability, communication skills, were the most preferred by their teammates.

7. Conclusion

The research validates our assumptions and proves to be an important tool for coaches, a starting point for measures aimed to improve individual and team levels, as well as social cohesion. The sociometric studies enable us to measure, map and build relationships so that the invisible forces within the group are made visible and can be amplified. The sociometric status of players is another important instrument that can provide important information regarding the individual development process, as well as in that of integration into the team. The sociogram, highlighting mutual relations, either of attraction or rejection, is very relevant for the group dynamics and the power of influence and interaction. All these results of the sociometric studies can substantiate the coaches' decisions in building up reliable relationships during the game.

The sociometric experiment combined with the qualitative analysis on leadership has revealed that the most appreciated players are the ones who show leadership qualities. Taking into account the profile of the leader, based on the teammates' expectations, the coach can bring both individual and team upgrades through the following measures:

- Set communication goals. Even young players need to start understanding that they are constantly communicating with others, without even opening their mouths. Credibility is very important for teammates, therefore basketball players must be taught to have an awareness of what they communicate, so that they can transmit reliability, trust. The coach must give the players opportunities to demonstrate great body language, communication or enthusiasm, and then praise them for it each time they naturally do it on their own.

- Teach players to be selflessness and supportive. If the coach can train the players to stay focused on what the team needs, the results will be amazing for the group during tough training sessions and games. In order to achieve its goals, the group must be strongly kept together. The leader's task is to build and maintain the team spirit and morale.

- Create a vision. The leader is the one who inspires teammates, both on the field and outside of it, to a common goal, a good evolution of the team that finally leads, in the best case, to victory. There are situations where the goal and objectives of the team are not very well understood and accepted by all athletes. We are often confronted with situations where the team spirit lacks, even in groups that have been working for many years together. This is due to an accentuated individualism and a different perception of objectives, values and expectations. For some players, a well-played match necessarily means victory, while for some others the same aspect is related to the number of minutes played or the number of points scored. If a player admits that the team has been defeated, but is satisfied with his/her good evolution, this demonstrates a lack of vision and common goals. Without a common vision, the team cannot evolve, and we cannot speak about real group cohesion. The coach must formulate and clearly communicate the vision and objectives with the help of formal and informal leaders. We cannot speak of team spirit without a vision and common goals.

- Teach players to be self-disciplined, hard-working and pay attention to details, being a model for others. Great leaders must know that, in order to have an impact on others, they first need to lead themselves, to become an example, to practice what is preached. Great leaders ask their teams to bring more energy, to communicate more and give up selfishness.

- Act with credibility. Be accountable. Leaders must be action- and result-oriented, transparent, so that all their actions are predictable and credible. They must behave in a reliable manner, demonstrate ethical principles, determination and put their values into action.

To conclude, we must not forget that trying to get an athlete to assume a leadership role, to lead his/her team on the court and assess high group cohesion is not about dribbles and slam dunks. As the famous Dick DeVenzio (2006) claimed, leadership in basketball is about how to get the talented players fully use their talent, how to get big egos to tone down, how to get lazy players hustle, how to make selfish people to sacrifice for the good of the group, how to get careless players pay attention to detail, how to get angry people to calm down, distracted players to stay focused, how to turn disappointments into motivation, how to learn from mistakes, capitalise on weaknesses and maximise strengths.

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