

“Together, We Can Do This”: The Best Sport Teams Are Greater Than the Sum of Their Parts

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ABSTRACT

Once upon a time, it was believed that the sport team with the best individual star players would be most likely to win all the trophies. Then one day, athletes, coaches, and sport fans, together with scientists (including sport psychologists), noticed that this did not always happen—so people began to doubt the idea. This was a concern because, for coaches to create great sport teams that can reach their potentials, the key ingredients for team success must be understood. Over time, there has been a shift from looking at the talent of individual star players to looking at teamwork. In this article, you’ll discover how the feeling of connection and relationship between players—their sense of *togetherness*—is the key ingredient in sport-team success. You will also learn some ideas for how to develop togetherness.

Keywords: teamwork, coaching, leadership, groups, environment, connections.

“Just look at what we can do when we work together.”

Marcus Rashford

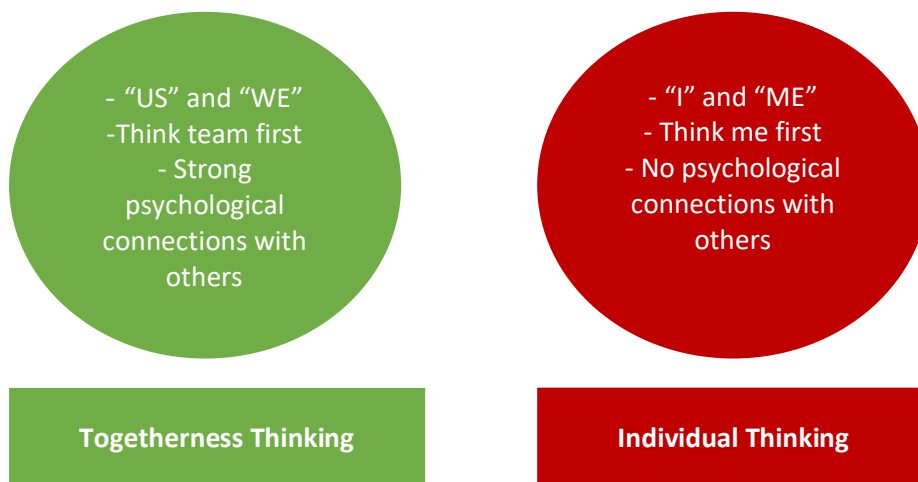
For a long time, professional sport teams brought the best individual players, in the hope that this would make the team successful. Eventually, athletes, coaches, and sport fans, together with researchers, noticed that individual talent alone was not enough. It became clear that the sport team with the best individual players did not always win the championship. Some athletes enjoyed being part of their teams but, unfortunately, some did not. This was a concern because sport psychologists wanted to create great sport teams that could reach their full potential. To create such teams requires an understanding of the key ingredients for sport-team success. Then, this knowledge must be put into practice to develop great sport teams.

A SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL STAR PLAYERS TO THE TEAM

The shift from a focus on individual star players to the team as a whole led researchers to discover a crucial concept for team success—**togetherness**. Togetherness reflects the strength of connections between players on a team and the extent to which individuals identify as part of a group. Togetherness is about much more than being listed on the same team sheet. Could it be the case that it's not the team with the most star players, but the team that feels the strongest connections with each other that is the most successful?

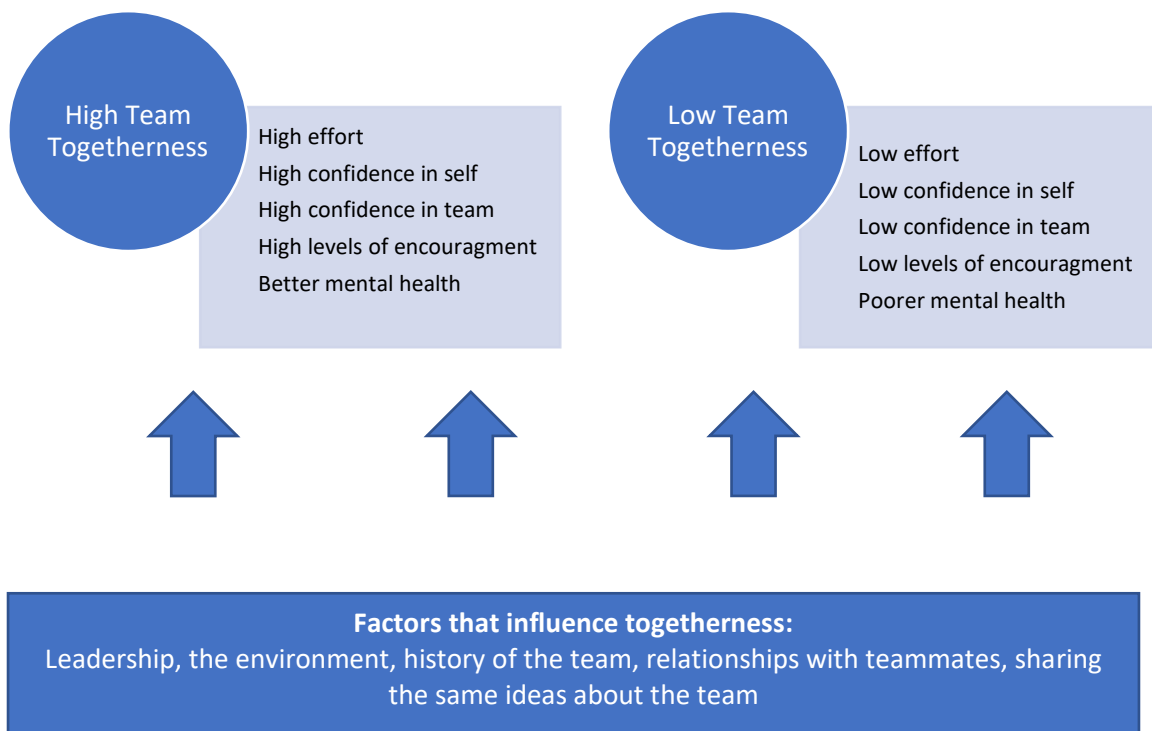
Dividing individuals into groups can quickly promote a group identity, even when there is no logical reason to put people on one team or the other. We observe this phenomenon on sport teams and in the behaviour of sport fans. For example, fans are more likely to start conversations with other fans of the same team, even when they do not know them. Our group is known as the **in-group**, and this group will have features and values that make it unique (1). Our competitors are known as **out-groups**, and they have different values to us. Most people have a range of group identities and may have many in-groups, even within sport (for example a school team and a local team).

Figure 1 – Togetherness thinking (“us” and “we”) versus individual thinking (“I” and “me”).



When in-groups form, the values of our in-group become boundaries within which we think and behave. We draw in and encourage our teammates. We favour our own group, believing our group is better than others (**Figure 1**). Researchers have also found that when athletes think and play for their teams instead of for themselves, they put in more effort, encourage teammates more, and believe more in themselves and their teams (2). Therefore, coaches should develop a unique group identity in which everyone feels a strong sense of togetherness (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2 – The positive and negative outcomes of teams with high versus low togetherness and the factors that influence levels of togetherness.



WHY IS TOGETHERNESS SO IMPORTANT?

One of the lessons learned by sports psychology researchers is that a strong feeling of togethermess within a sport team is the starting point for team success. When athletes feel connected to their teammates, they put in effort for, and on behalf of, their teams. This happens because an athlete's life as part of their sport team is a piece of their self-concept. In other words, the success or failure of the athlete's team is personal. It therefore makes sense that, when there is strong togethermess, athletes act for the team and behave in the team's best interest. This is the case even if the team's best interest is not necessarily the athlete's best interest. As former U.S. President John F. Kennedy once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."

LEADERS PLAY A KEY ROLE IN CREATING TOGETHERNESS

“This is the struggle every leader faces. How to get members of the team who are driven by the quest for individual glory to give themselves wholeheartedly to the group effort.”

Phil Jackson

Phil Jackson is a successful basketball coach, and this quote proposes that coaches should encourage their athletes to think about their sport teams first. Sometimes this may mean sitting on the bench so that a particular teammate can play, if it gives the team a better chance of winning. Sport psychologists thought that coaches might play an important role in developing togetherness in sport teams.

Coaches and leaders have been studied for a long time. It was once believed that the best coaches were born, not made. This was a problem because some people were born with the right ingredients (such as personality traits like being outgoing), but some were not. But some people who were born with the right ingredients were *not* successful leaders, and some people who were *not* born with the right ingredients *were* successful leaders. Thus, researchers learned there must be more to successful leadership than personality traits. They investigated a range of coaches and captains and found that the best leaders were not born that way. As well as being the key ingredient for the success of sport teams, togetherness was found to be important for the success of leaders, too.

LEADERS PUTTING THE TEAM FIRST

One research study used a survey to ask the athletes how often their coach displayed team-focused behaviours, such as making decisions for the best interest of the team rather than making decisions for their own self-promotion (3). The survey asked how connected the athletes felt with their teams, as well as how confident and supported they felt before their competitions. The athletes were more confident and felt more supported when they perceived their coach to be creating togetherness. Also, those athletes who felt their coach led with togetherness at the start of the season reported greater levels of confidence at the end of the season. In other words, one of the reasons why athletes believed themselves to be successful at the end of the season was due to their coaches displaying leadership that

brought their teams together earlier in the season. As Jurgen Klopp states, leadership that puts the sport team first is the best approach:

“Have empathy and give real support to the people around you, then everyone can act. That’s what leadership is, have strong people around you with a better knowledge in different departments than yourself.”

Researchers began to look at other ways athletes may benefit when coaches work to develop togetherness. People used to believe that the amount of stress an athlete felt was determined by that athlete’s personality. But athletes and sport psychologists eventually realised that other factors, such as the coach and the amount of teamwork in the sports environment, impacted athletes’ responses to stress. To test this idea in the lab, researchers measured psychological and cardiovascular (heart and lung) responses to stress in athletes who had either high or low levels of connection with a leader. They found that, when there was a low connection between coaches and athletes, the athletes did not manage stress as well. In other words, a lack of teamwork between coaches and athletes led to a negative stress response in the athletes. Also, participants in one experiment performed 37% better on a concentration-related task when they had a strong connection with the leader. This is important because, in competition, athletes are often required to perform under pressure. This research taught us that togetherness between coaches and athletes can help athletes respond better to stress (4).

HOW TO DEVELOP TOGETHERNESS

How can coaches bring athletes together so that they are connected and feel a strong sense of belonging? One way to achieve this is through the 3Rs intervention. The 3Rs focus on three stages of enhancing togetherness: reflecting, representing, and realising. In the reflecting stage, each team member completes an identity map - that demonstrates the network of groups that they are part of - and shares previously unknown stories with other teammates, to promote understanding of each other. In the representing stage, the team agrees on a shared set of values that embodies what is unique about the team. For example, maybe the team has a vision to be supportive to each other, or to be innovative and

creative in the way they play their sport xxxx. Finally, in the realising phase, the team achieves or at least makes progress toward their shared vision, while organising events that help the team to live out their values.

Researchers have found that the 3Rs are beneficial for promoting a stronger sense of togetherness, along with increased effort both during and away from formal training. The influence of the 3Rs on sport *performance* is not as well understood. There are few studies in this area, and none of them investigated performance in terms of goals scored or any other measurable indicator of success.

SUMMARY

In this article, we reviewed the theories and research evidence supporting the idea that the best sport teams and leaders are created based on togetherness. The 3Rs are one method that can be used to create togetherness in sport teams. It is togetherness—not the number of star athletes on a team—that makes a sport team greater than the sum of its parts!

Glossary

In-group - A group that we are part (e.g., our sport team)

Out-group - Other relevant groups within a specific context (e.g., other sports that are our competitors)

Togetherness - A strong sense of shared belonging and connection within a sport team

3Rs – An intervention to develop togetherness

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Contribution statement

Many famous athletes and coaches talk about the importance of teamwork. Yet there is often a focus on the sport teams with the individual star players, or the ones with the best talent when we discuss who will be successful. This article brings to life the importance of

teamwork and leadership for sport teams. We focus on the latest science of teamwork and leadership. We share how thinking in sport psychology has transformed from a focus on individual star players to a time now where togetherness has been discovered in contemporary research as the key ingredient to sport team success. As well as the latest science of teamwork and leadership, we talk about the original theory that helps us to explain how and why togetherness is so important for team performance. Here, we draw on the role of coaches and explore their role in creating togetherness, as well as the impact leaders can have on athletes' health more generally. As Marcus Rashford put it so well: "Just look at what we can do when we work together."