



Applying Group Norms in Sport: Practical Considerations for Coaches

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ABSTRACT

Coaches strive to create a cohesive group structure that promotes athletic and team performance. One way to accomplish this is by establishing group norms as they have been shown to facilitate group member interactions and improve team performance. Despite evidence indicating that norms play an important role in shaping team dynamics and outcomes (e.g., team culture, cohesion, communication), there is a lack of resources for applied practitioners, particularly coaches. The purpose of this article is to synthesize literature on group norms and present practical considerations for coaches to better apply group norms in sport.

KEYWORDS

Coaching;
normative behaviors;
team dynamics

Group norms contribute to group structure as they represent a set of “generalized expectations that are applied to and shared by all group members” (Eys et al., 2019, p. 43). Group norms simplify expectations for behavior, allowing group members to identify distinctive aspects of the group’s identity and anticipate one another’s behaviors to respond quickly (Feldman, 1984). For instance, a team that identifies as gritty may have a poor game and expect each team member to play more aggressively in the next game. In doing so, group norms work to promote cohesion, group development, and the continuity of the group (Kerr, 2013; Paradis & Martin, 2012).

Norms can be generated either informally or formally. *Informal norms* are not explicitly stated or agreed upon and they arise as group members learn what behaviors make their group more effective (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Feldman, 1984). Informal norms tend to originate from the first behaviors observed when the group is initially formed (e.g., team members fist bump each other after the first practice and continue to do so throughout the season), critical events in the group’s history that establish important precedents (e.g., a team who has eaten at a particular restaurant before winning a big game goes back to the same restaurant), and expectations that group members hold before joining the group (e.g., a team member