Motivational climate is a topic of increasingly frequent discussion within coaching literature.

But one aspect of motivational climate research yet to receive the same level of attention is the role of personality. For example, what impact would a narcissistic personality have on different motivational climates, and what could a coach learn to help them manage such situations?

These questions are examined in this research summary, based on a new journal article written by academics at Bangor University.
If you’re unsure whether any of your players are narcissists, the researchers cite existing research to provide some useful pointers to look out for.

Narcissists consider themselves superior to others, enjoy competitive environments, and thrive in difficult and stressful situations when other players may ‘choke’.

They also respond better to coaches who treat players as individuals, rather than those who try to foster a collective sense of ‘team’. The academics hypothesise that these traits may mean narcissists are more motivated by performance climates, given the opportunities these bring for competition and personal glory.

In contrast, they suggest narcissists may exert less effort in a mastery climate as there is less opportunity for them to demonstrate their superiority and achieve personal success.

They also suggest individuals with low levels of narcissism will be more motivated by mastery climates, given these are far less competitive and anxiety-provoking.

But how do we know whether these conclusions are accurate? The team designed a clever research project to test their hypotheses with a sample of amateur female club-level rugby players.

The theory - what is motivational climate?

Motivational climate in a sport setting is the perception athletes have of the environment around them and how the structures and cues within that environment impact on their motivation to perform.

Coaches are often recognised as the engineers of motivational climates. Take the training session for example. A coach can shape their interpersonal style with the players, reinforce the values they expect the team to adhere to, and alter their coaching behaviour to elicit effort and specific responses from the team.

The academics behind this new research paper chose two commonly studied coach-created motivational climates – mastery and performance climates.

A mastery climate rewards effort more than ability. In it, coaches recognise success in players when they improve and develop their skills. They encourage players to learn via trial and error, and self-evaluate their progress.

Performance climates are somewhat different. In these settings, coaches stress the importance of outperforming others. The measure of success is interpersonal comparison between players. Mistakes are labelled failure, and learning is only seen as a means to an end.

Motivational climate literature has consistently found that mastery climates lead to more desirable outcomes than performance climates, including greater effort, enjoyment and satisfaction, and lower levels of anxiety.

However, researchers at Bangor University found a gap in existing research, namely whether personality types can influence the impact of motivational climates. They identified narcissism as a personality trait particularly worthy of further attention.

How to spot a narcissist

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In a word, yes. The researchers used complex moderated regression analysis to consider the players’ results and assess how they aligned to their original hypotheses. Their analysis showed a number of interesting findings.

In performance climates, those with high levels of narcissism showed extra effort in terms of LIEE. So, when a coach develops a performance climate, narcissists will put more effort into their training.

In contrast, the researchers found those with low levels of narcissism showed no change in their effort in a performance climate. They concluded that performance climates are either beneficial for narcissists or have no impact for low narcissists.

Perhaps even more interesting are the results for mastery climates. They were shown to mirror the results for performance climates. So narcissists will put in more effort in mastery climates, but those with low levels of narcissism will not change their work rate.

This is interesting as mastery climates do not offer narcissists the same opportunity for personal glory or competition so why do they put in more effort? The researchers explain this is down to attention, or rather the attention of the coach.

A key trait of narcissists is to crave the attention of others. Therefore, a mastery climate develops an environment where they will try harder if they think their extra effort will result in more attention from the coach.

The results also provide some other key learning points for coaches.

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**Measuring the effect of narcissism**

After identifying performance and mastery climates and narcissism as the key variables to consider, the team also needed to find a measure of player effort in order to investigate possible links between the motivation players showed, the climate they played in and the impact of narcissistic personality.

The measure of effort they used was leader-inspired extra effort (LIEE). LIEE is based on the idea that effective leaders can inspire their players to put extra effort into their work.

Crucially, motivational climates, narcissism and LIEE are all measurable through the use of various standard point scales.

Having secured a sample of 126 female rugby players, the team conducted surveys with them to measure LIEE, their perceptions of motivational climate and their level of narcissism.

Examples of the types of questions asked to measure these variables include:

**Narcissism (choose one answer)**

A: I will be a success.
B: I am not too concerned about success.

**Motivational climate (five-point scale from 1: not at all to 5: all the time)**

On this team, the coach wants us to try new skills (mastery climate).
On this team, players are encouraged to outplay the other players (performance climate).

**LIEE (scored from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree)**

My coach motivates me to work hard.

**Does narcissism have an impact on the effect of motivational climates?**

Example of the types of questions asked to measure these variables include:

**Motivational climate (five-point scale from 1: not at all to 5: all the time)**

On this team, the coach wants us to try new skills (mastery climate).
On this team, players are encouraged to outplay the other players (performance climate).

**LIEE (scored from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree)**

My coach motivates me to work hard.
Learning from the research

1. The results of this project show that, for coaches, choosing between creating a mastery or performance climate is a more difficult decision than previous research may have led us to believe. Perhaps most strikingly, it shows that performance climates can be positive and can help coaches improve their players’ training.

To try this for yourself, an example could be to increase the amount of competition in your training sessions and see whether this helps your players’ ability to deal with pressure when it comes to game situations.

2. Of course, this all depends on the types of players you have in your team, and this is another key learning point from this study. It’s crucial that you understand your players’ personalities before deciding what type of climate to promote. It may be that you need to create a climate that mixes both mastery and performance elements.

3. The findings for low narcissists show that motivational climates may not be the best way for coaches to elicit extra effort from these types of players. Instead, try changing your coaching behaviours to see if these are more important than the environment these players play in.

4. And, despite the surprising results, remember; this research doesn’t mean narcissism is a good thing for your team! Narcissists and low narcissists both have roles to play, the key is to realise that you need to manage and coach them differently.

References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:


Other more general reading includes:


Information and documents from two talent workshops on Motivational Climate for Elite Performance run by renowned sports professor Dr Ken Hodge and hosted by sports coach UK in partnership with York St John University can be downloaded here:

www.sportscoachuk.org/resource/motivational-climate-elite-performance-event