



mind. Only when you are comfortable with your strategies should you start to use them in competitions. Remember to give it time, as improvements take time to show through.

Emotions are an essential part of sport and competition, but if you don't gain control of them before competing they might control you and hinder your performance. While it is true that some people are more emotionally sensitive than others, taking mental charge by implementing psychological plans and routines can help all athletes to a more optimal state of readiness for performance.

Lee Crust

TEAM SPORTS

Team cohesion and success: is there really a demonstrable link?

Many of you will consider this a question with a boringly obvious answer: surely there must be a link between team cohesion and competition success? Anyone who has played in a team where everyone gets on well and communication is good feels this has a lot to do with how well the team plays.

However, this assumption is based on feelings and perceptions which may not be borne out in reality. Just because you enjoy the team atmosphere does not necessarily mean you are definitely going to win more games. The key research question for sport psychology is to prove that teams with greater cohesion are more successful. And this is a question that various researchers have been grappling with for around 30 years.

Famously, a German researcher called Hans Lenk⁽¹⁾ disproved the notion that only cohesive groups could win by showing data collected from the notoriously dysfunctional German rowing eight that was successful in the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games. Anecdotal, Olympic rowing provides another famous example of how low cohesion and success can mix, as 1988 GB gold medallists Holmes and Redgrave were supposedly not the best of pals! In subsequent Games (1992 and 1996), however, winners Redgrave and Pinsent were highly cohesive (from an outsider's viewpoint at least).

These examples cast doubt on the assumption that the greater the cohesion the greater the team success, although a reasonable amount of research carried out in the 1970s and 1980s supported this assumption⁽²⁾. But if the relationship between cohesion and success is not

cut and dried, this raises more questions:

- If winning is possible without cohesion, how important is cohesion to the winning formula?
- Are there specific aspects of cohesion that are crucial for team success and others that are less important?

To provide reliable answers to these questions, psychology researchers need to be able to analyse and measure team cohesion with validity. In science, the term validity refers to how well your measuring tool actually assesses what you are aiming to measure. In physical terms a ruler is obviously a highly valid measure of length; but in the realms of psychology, in which variations in individual perceptions are involved, validity is not so easy to establish. A research team led by Albert Carron⁽³⁾ concluded that much of the early research on cohesion was limited by the less-than-rigorous Sport Cohesiveness Questionnaire in use at this time. He and his colleagues set about developing a sounder tool, known as the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ).

These researchers aimed to base this new tool on a sound concept of what cohesion actually involved for sports teams. They argued that previous research had over simplified the concept of cohesion by measuring one particular aspect, such as the perceived attraction of the group members to each other. There is clearly more to the dynamics of the formation and workings of groups than how much the individual members like each other.

Carron *et al's* model of cohesion identified four key contributing factors that interact to facilitate social or task cohesion: environmental, personal, team and leadership.

The model measures the following categories of cohesion:

1. Individuals' perception of the 'group integration social';
2. Individuals' personal attraction to 'group social';
3. Individuals' perception of group task ('group integration task');
4. Individuals' personal attraction to group task.

The GEQ comprises four or five questions under each category. And the researchers' belief that it can effectively measure cohesion by analysing its different components has been endorsed by other research teams.

Interestingly, research into cohesion using the GEQ suggests that 'task' cohesion is more important for team success than 'social' cohesion. And this could explain the equivocal results of earlier cohesion studies, and why it is sometimes possible for successful team mates to actively dislike each other and still win. Most coaches and athletes prefer team mates to like each other, but it appears that as long as they are completely focused on their common task and share the

‘Task cohesion is more important for team success than social cohesion’



References

1. *Top Performance Despite Internal Conflict*. In *Sport, Culture and Society: A reader on the Sociology of Sport*, Collier-Macmillan, 1969
2. *Psychological Bulletin* 115, pp210-227
3. *Journal of Sport Psychology* 7, pp244-266
4. *Journal of Sports Sciences* 20, pp119-126.
5. Sven Goran Eriksson on Football, Carlton Books, 2000

same goals and beliefs success is possible even without social cohesion. Another example of this principle at work is the Chicago Bulls team, which dominated the NBA in the 1990s: the team members allegedly didn't speak to each other off court, but practised and competed together with 100% professionalism and commitment.

With this example in mind, Carron *et al* recently set up a new study to examine the relationship between task cohesion and team success in elite basketball and football teams⁽⁴⁾, measuring just the group integration task and group attraction to task categories of cohesion from the GEQ. Each member of the 18 basketball and nine football teams involved tackled the following questions after the end of their regular season, ranking each answer from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 9 ('strongly agree'). Questions 1-4, 7 and 9 were reverse scored (ie 9 = 1).

1. I am not happy with the amount of influence I have.
2. I'm unhappy with my team's level of desire to win.
3. This team does not give enough opportunities to improve my personal performance.
4. I do not like the technical strategy of this team.
5. Our team is united in trying to reach its goals for performance.
6. We all take responsibility for any loss or poor performance.
7. Our team members have conflicting aspirations for the team's performance.
8. If a team member has a problem, everyone wants to help him.
9. Our team members do not communicate freely about each player's responsibilities during competition and practice.

The key findings were as follows:

- The mean team cohesion scores for basketball teams were 6.05 for group integration task and 6.11 for attraction to group task. For football teams the mean scores were 6.33 and 7.04 respectively;
- Scores in both these categories were highly correlated with team success for both sports, success being defined as match results over the season, excluding play-offs. The teams with the highest 'team cohesion' scores had the best season win:loss percentage records.

This study offers clear evidence that real-world sports teams benefit from high levels of task cohesion. The strength of the relationship between cohesion, as measured by the task categories of the GEQ, and team success as measured by the win:loss record was higher than in previous research; and the researchers believe that this is because they focused on task cohesion using the GEQ, integrated individual scores to

produce a team cohesion score, then related these scores to an indisputable measure of team success. All things considered, this unique study goes further than any before it to examine the importance of cohesion for success in team sports.

The implication of these findings is that coaches and sport psychologists would be well advised to assess team cohesion and develop team-building strategies to improve task cohesion. Specifically, coaches could work on making sure that team members are clear about and happy with team goals and the level of shared commitment. They could also work on developing team communication and shared responsibility – developing the 'we' mentality.

In his book on football psychology, Sven-Goran Eriksson talks a great deal about how the 'we' mentality can raise the performance of all the players in a team and help reduce the pressure associated with big matches⁽⁵⁾. He describes eight key attributes of an effective team, and I invite you to note that all are task-oriented and have nothing to do with social relationships. The 'good team', according to the England Manager, has:

1. a common vision
2. clear and definite goals which go hand-in-hand with this vision
3. members who share their understanding of strategy and tactics
4. great inner discipline (meaning they act professionally together)
5. players with characteristics which complement each other
6. a good division of roles among the players, with all members treated equally
7. players who put the common good before their own interests
8. players who take responsibility for the whole team, with everyone accepting mistakes as long as people do their best.

Raphael Brandon

THOUGHT CONTROL

When it comes to doing your best, it's the thoughts that count

When it comes to running – or any other endurance sport – your mind can be your biggest asset or your worst enemy. Enjoying your training and achieving your best performances is not simply down to physical conditioning: your mental state and, particularly, the thoughts that run through your mind can affect the way you feel during exercise. It is normal for athletes to