



Motivating athletes in a positive training climate: A coach's guide

This document provides information aimed at:

- 1) Defining motivational climate,
- 2) Debunking myths on motivation,
- 3) Providing effective coaching strategies to motivate athletes in a healthy climate.



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UNIVERSITÉ
LAVAL

November 2024

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TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT :

Gillard, A., Lemelin, E., Belley-Ranger, E., Radziszewski, S., Ohlert, J., & Parent, S. (2024).

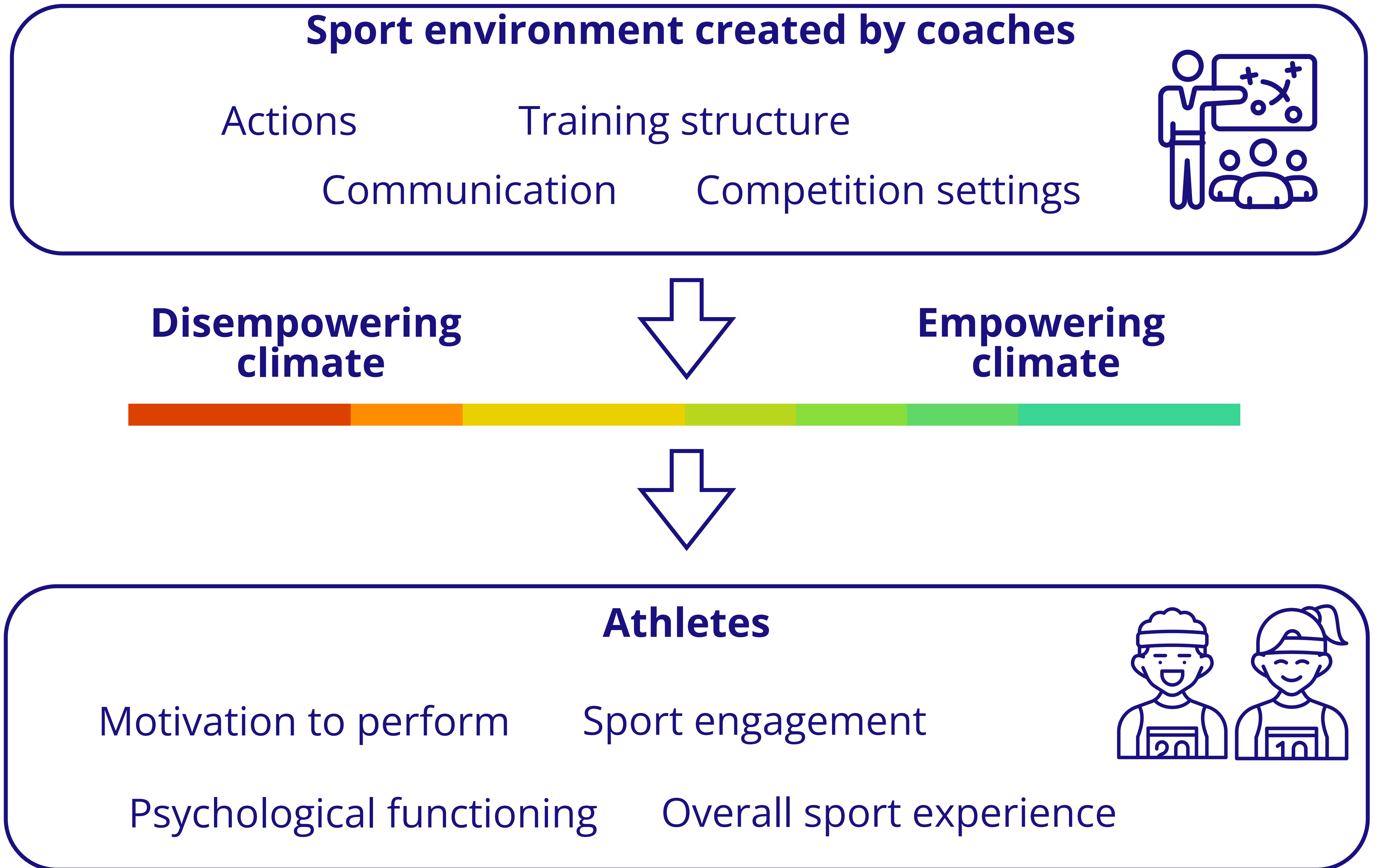
Motivating athletes in a positive training climate: A coach's guide. Research Chair in Safety and Integrity in Sport, Université Laval and German Sport University Cologne.

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What is a motivational climate?

A **motivational climate** in sport refers to the environment created by significant others such as coaches through their actions, communication, and the way they structure training and competition settings. This climate significantly influences athletes' motivation to perform, psychological functioning, engagement, and overall experience in sport. The motivational climate can be more or less empowering and disempowering for athletes.



Empowering and disempowering climate: definition and key features

An **empowering climate** in sport is characterized by a task-oriented approach (i.e., a motivational climate focusing on athletes' personal progress and effort) where athletes' autonomy and social support are actively promoted.

Key features of an empowering climate include:

- Athletes are actively involved in decision-making processes
- Athletes' perspectives are taken into consideration
- Personal improvements are acknowledged and valued by coaches
- Hard work and effort are valued independently of performance levels or competition results
- Coaches take into account athletes' emotions or feelings.

In contrast, a **disempowering climate** is marked by an ego-oriented focus (i.e., a motivational climate focusing on athletes' performances and comparison), where the coaching style is controlling, authoritarian, and performance-only focused.

Key characteristics of a disempowering climate include:

- Coaches put great pressure on athletes to meet performance outcomes (e.g., normative results)
- Coaches intervene in athletes' personal lives, often overstepping boundaries
- Performance and results are prioritized over personal development or effort
- Coaches foster rivalry among athletes, creating a competitive atmosphere within the team
- Athletes are treated unequally, with favoritism shown based on ability
- Coaches punish mistakes (e.g., a coach punishes a poor performance by forcing additional intensive training until the athletes are exhausted)
- Using behaviours that can be interpreted as violence (e.g., criticizing an athlete excessively and hitting an athlete with a hard object).*

*For more examples of violent behaviours and their negative impacts on athletes refer to:

De Sousa, D., Parent, S., Belley-Ranger, E., Gillard, A. Lemelin, E., Boudreault, V. (2024). Challenging the concept of "Mental Toughness": A coach's guide to developing athletes' resilience and ability to navigate adversity. Chaire de recherche Sécurité et intégrité en milieu sportif, Université Laval et Université de Sherbrooke.

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Empowering and disempowering climates can coexist.



It is important to mention that **coaches are rarely entirely empowering or disempowering**. Coaches can display behaviours associated with both an empowering and a disempowering climate.

For example, a coach can put great pressure on athletes to meet performance outcomes while actively involving athletes in decision making.

However, we encourage coaches to focus on an empowering climate as it is associated with positive impacts on athletes motivation, well-being, and performance.

Coaching climates and motivation

There are **3 types of motivation** which are influenced by the motivational climate put in place by coaches. The motivational climate created by the coach has an impact on athletes's motivation, well-being, sport experience and enjoyment, engagement, and performance.

An empowering climate promotes autonomous motivation while disempowering climate promotes controlled motivation. Controlled motivation can lead to disengagement, reduced efforts, anxiety, and difficulty to cope with failure while autonomous motivation is associated with enjoyment, perseverance, and a desire to learn new skills.

Coaching climates	Disempowering climate		Empowering climate
Motivation type	Amotivation	Controlled motivation	Autonomous motivation
Reasons for sport participation	No motivation	External pressure (e.g., fear of consequences, reward) Internal pressure (e.g., to avoid guilt or shame)	Because of consistency with one's own values For pleasure and interest
Examples	"I don't know why I do sport"	"I do my sport for the prestige of being an athlete" "I do sport to please my parents"	"I do sport because I enjoy it" "I do sport because it's good for my physical and mental health"
Impacts of the motivational climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Athletes' antisocial behavior (e.g., cheating) ↑ Sport dropout ↑ Burnout Higher probability to observe or experience sexual violence in sport Higher probability to experience psychological violence 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Athletes' prosocial behaviors (e.g., respect of rules and officials) ↑ Athletes and coaches' well-being ↑ Athletes' sport enjoyment ↑ Athletes' sport engagement and effort Foster optimal performance

Debunking myths on motivation

Yelling or swearing at athletes will motivate them to do better.

Yelling and swearing at athletes have been used for a long time. However, it represents forms of psychological violence in sport which have been linked to athletes' negative outcomes on mental health and well-being.

The experience of interpersonal violence in sport has also been linked to a loss of motivation in athletes.

Offering external rewards fosters athletes' motivation (e.g., offering financial rewards for every goal scored).

When athletes do something to obtain an external reward or approbation from someone else (e.g., the coach or parents), they tend to:

- lose their autonomous motivation (i.e., doing sport for the joy and fun of it) and,
- have a more controlled motivation (i.e., driven by an external source than oneself) that is related to more drop-out.

The coach' control is necessary to achieve optimal performance (e.g., coach control athletes' diet and social lives).

A coaching style where athletes are given some responsibility and are included in decisions has been linked to better athletes' performance while a controlling climate harms athletes' optimal performance.

Exercise as a form of punishment is a strategy beneficial to athletes' motivation (e.g., requiring additional intense training to punish poor performance).

Punitive coaching practices are counter-productive and can have detrimental effects on athletes' motivation, how they see themselves, relationship with coach and teammates, and sport experience (e.g., lack of enjoyment, sport drop-out).

Giving athletes choices and autonomy is a "laissez-faire" coaching style.

A "laissez-faire" coaching style is one in which there is inaction, or a lack of involvement, guidance, and feedback from the coach. Athletes do not clearly understand what is expected from them and do whatever they want.

On the other hand, giving athletes choices and autonomy does not mean they can do whatever they want. It means that there is a clear, coherent, and consistent structure within which choices can be offered to athletes.

Setting up a clear and coherent structure means being controlling.

It is possible to set up a clear and coherent structure in an environment that still includes athletes in decision-making (at some points) and give them more and more responsibility over their own development and career.

A clear and coherent structure demonstrates that coaches are actively involved in athletes' development. It gives athletes the necessary information to progress toward their goals and supports athletes' engagement by keeping them on task. It gives athletes a sense of control and fosters their sense of competence. Finally, a clear and coherent structure can be securing for an athlete.

Motivation is inherent to the athletes' personality, meaning it can barely be changed.

Motivation is not innate, various factors may influence an athlete's motivation. For example, the motivational climate put in place by coaches impacts the athlete's motivation type (i.e., autonomous or controlled).

How to better promote athletes' motivation

Here are actions coaches can take to optimize athletes' motivation, functioning, sport enjoyment, perseverance and, performance:

Foster athletes' autonomy (make athletes feel that their actions are guided by their own choices and decisions)

1. Provide athletes with choices

- Allow athletes to try different positions, provide 2-3 options for a fun game to play at the end of practice, make the athletes decide the music playing during training.
- Let the athletes decide in which order they want to do the training exercises (and let them explain why).

2. Provide rationales for rules and instruction

- Explain the advantages or disadvantages of a particular skill or training session so that the athletes understand how and why decisions are made.
- When an athlete ask "why", respond by a clear rational such as "because warm-ups are a good way to prevent injury" instead of "because I said so".

3. Provide athletes with opportunities to take initiative

- Ask athletes to lead the warm-up or cool-down, have athletes engage in problem-solving within game scenarios, and ask athletes to explain how they felt their performance was.
- Let an athlete teach a skill to the others they are particularly good in.

Foster athletes' relatedness (make athletes feel they are valued and supported by people around them and, feel safe in an environment)

4. Distinguish and acknowledge athletes' feelings

- Ask athletes how they feel about practice, be caring, approachable and empathetic, show interest in communicating with athletes, actively listen to athletes, show interest in athletes' life outside of sport (e.g., ask athletes how they are doing in general).
- Hear both sides in a conflict within the team.

5. Plan activities that encourage teamwork and team building

- Organize practices where athletes must collaborate to solve problems such as simulating games in which there are no goalies.
- Organize social activities that promote team building such as a team dinner. Ask athletes which activities they would enjoy.

6. Show support to athletes

- Be available to athletes so they know they can count on you to care when needed.
- Do a one-on-one talk with every athlete on a regular basis (e.g. at the beginning and mid-season).

Foster athletes' sense of competence (make athletes feel competent and believe in their ability to bring about desired outcomes, face challenges and, master tasks/skills)

7. Provide feedback in an informal and constructive way

- Provide positive and encouraging feedback that is precise, constructive, and focused on progress/ improvement rather than criticism. Do not use controlling language such as "try this" or "do this".
- Example : "Good job, your placement on this set piece was perfect for the other player to reach you".
- When using change-oriented feedback (i.e., feedback on behavioural change needed to achieve the athlete's goal):
 - Provide a clear rationale on why the behaviour should be changed based on clear and attainable objectives
 - Be empathetic (e.g., take the athlete's perspective into account)
 - Offer a range of possible solutions
 - Avoid personal statement (e.g., you make no efforts)
 - Provide tips on how to achieve the desired outcome privately and in a supportive tone.
 - Example: "I've noticed that, during games, you tend to look at the ball when you dribble. As a result, you sometimes miss openings. To practice this, do you prefer to do dribbling drills with your eyes closed or do you prefer to use dribbling goggles during the practice games. Both will help you gain confidence in your ball control and better observe what's happening on the court".

8. Set up a clear and coherent structure

- Set up clear and coherent rules, expectations and guidelines (i.e., clearly communicate what is expected of athletes) and provide rationales for each.
- Provide directions to help athletes achieve desired outcomes while setting predictable (and logical) consequences for rule-breaking behaviours.
- Be consistent with the rules (i.e., they should apply to everyone). Explain necessary exceptions. Check compliance of the rules regularly.
- Example: Offer athletes choices within clear limits and rules such as choosing between two exercises to practice a specific skill.

Emphasize learning and personal development

9. Redefine success

- Success should not be measured by performances and medals. Instead, focus on athletes' learning process and personal improvement.
- Examples: "In the last game, you improved your defensive game, and I noticed that you always knew where your offensive player was on the field".

10. Prioritize the person over the athlete

- Treat all athletes equally, do not engage in direct comparisons between the athletes.
- Make sure every athlete feels valued.
- Examples: Give positive and constructive feedback to each athlete after a game/competition.

11. Set performance goals with athletes

- Help athletes to set individual short- and long-term goals based on their learning process or their own standard of excellence rather than on outcomes.
- Regularly check with the athletes how they perceive they are doing with regards to their goals.
- Examples: "What would you like to improve this season or for the next competition?"

Want to learn more?

Challenging the Beliefs Driving A Controlling Style in Coaching: What the Research Reveals

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Putting it into practice

We now invite you to apply the principles and ideas presented above to your own coaching practice. To do so, try the following exercise.

Describe a typical training session for your sport (e.g., practicing a specific technical or tactical skill).

How can you use an empowering coaching style during this training session? Please fill the table below with examples. If you are not sure how to do this, you can perhaps get ideas by going back to the explanations and examples on previous pages.

Using empowering coaching	Idea 1	Idea 2
Foster athletes' autonomy		
Foster athletes' relatedness		
Foster athletes' competency		
Emphasize learning and personal development		

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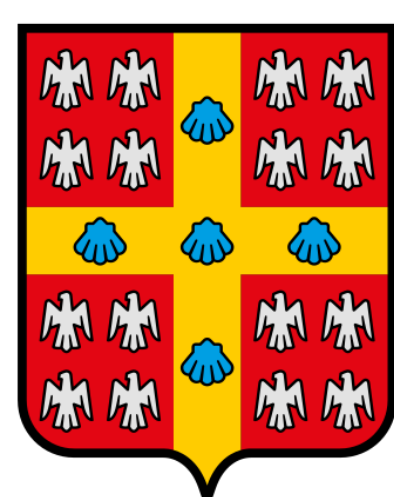
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