

Weighing the Confidence Factor

By Mark Earles and Melissa A. Chase

"We just have not been playing with confidence."

As a coach, you likely will have heard or used a statement referring to low self-confidence to explain a team's poor level of performance. You probably also have been able to identify certain games when your team has been playing with a lot of confidence, resulting in superior levels of performance. With this being the case, it is clear that the confidence of your team is an important psychological factor that can have a profound effect on performance levels. You also may find that when your team is playing with a high level of confidence there are more positive interactions and greater satisfaction among players.

This relationship between team confidence and performance in soccer has long been recognized by coaches, and, more recently, has been investigated by researchers in the field of sport psychology. Specifically, we know that teams which have a high level of confidence have a higher level of persistence, put forth more effort, and outperform those teams with lower levels of confidence.

What exactly is team confidence?

There have been numerous articles published about how to enhance an individual's level of confidence. It is important to recognize that there is a difference between individual or self-confidence and team confidence.

Self-confidence is an individual's belief that he or she can successfully perform a specific activity or task. For example, an individual may have a lot of self-confidence in his or her ability to dribble past an opponent in a one-on-one situation, but less confidence in his or her ability to make the right pass to a teammate to score.

Team confidence reflects the fact that teams often have collective beliefs about their ability as a team. This describes players' judgments about the team's performance capabilities, what challenges and goals they pursue as a team, how much effort they exert during practices and games and the team's willingness to persist when they are not playing well or failing to win games.

Team confidence is not a summation of all the players' self-confidence, because beliefs about your own ability and the ability of the team could be quite different. For example, you may have an all-star goalkeeper who is very confident in his or her own skills. However, his or her confidence in the rest of the team is low because he or she believes that the team does not have the ability to be successful.

Although coaches may think that a team's confidence would be enhanced by simply increasing the individual confidence levels of each team member, research has shown that strategies to enhance team confidence need to be more specific, as there are numerous interactions between players. If a team consists of a group of players who all are pursuing their own self-interests, they will not have the ability to work together, which also is required for success. This is why team confidence is an important concept and should not be overlooked by coaches.

What information sources influence team confidence?

The sources of information that players use to form team confidence can be grouped into four different categories:

- Past performance accomplishments
- Persuasive information
- Social comparisons
- Physiological information

Athletes may select one or two of these sources or use a combination of all four.

Past performance accomplishments refer to how well the team has played in previous games and training sessions or how much they have improved. If the team perceives successful experiences in games or practices, then team levels will be higher. These successful experiences are not solely determined by whether the team wins. Perceived failure experiences will lower team confidence levels. Again, these are not necessarily determined by losing a game.

These past performance accomplishments are believed to be the most influential source in raising confidence levels.

Persuasive information refers to the way in which team confidence is enhanced through comments by significant others. This includes encouragement, expectations and evaluative feedback from coaches. Other sources of persuasive information can come from spectators, the media and teammates. For example, teams that can see and hear the support of spectators are likely to have higher confidence and expectations for success than if they are playing in front of a hostile crowd.

Similarly, if performances constantly are criticized by the media, players may start to doubt their own abilities to be successful.

Social comparisons are sources of confidence that teams gain through comparing their ability with the ability of other teams. If a team is playing a weaker opponent, such as a team from a smaller conference, then team confidence is likely to be high. For example, confidence also would be expected to be high if the team had made favorable comparisons with an opponent about their ability to run their offense and score goals. In contrast, if a team is playing a stronger opponent, and they believe that their own ability is lower than the opponent's ability, then team confidence may be lower.

Modeling also is a form of social comparison that can influence team confidence. Watching another team perform a skill, then modeling your behavior after them can increase your team's confidence.

Physiological information also provides team confidence information to players. This is gained through judgments about the physical and mental states and well being of a team such as fitness level, fatigue, and levels of tension, anxiety, or fear with regard to an upcoming game against a particular opponent. Specifically, if a team has played numerous games in a short period of time, then team confidence may be lower than usual due to the effects of fatigue. Team confidence also will be lower if players are not mentally prepared when playing a certain team.

Guidelines for improving your team's confidence

Before trying to enhance your team's level of confidence, it would be beneficial to understand which sources of information your team uses the most to develop confidence beliefs. For example, it would be useful for you to know that your team relies mostly on persuasive information (in the form of comments from the coaches) to develop their level of confidence. If this is the case, then you, as the coach, must realize the impact your words have on the team's confidence.

One way you can gain understanding is to consider how your team responds in terms of their confidence after game/practice performances (past performance accomplishments), after you give them feedback in practices and games (persuasive information) and after playing other teams (social comparisons). These responses both are on physical and emotional (physiological state/condition) level. In trying to understand the interactions that influence team confidence, it also may be useful to ask some of the more experienced players what makes the team feel more confident about themselves.

As a coach, it also is important that you understand that your team's confidence may vary throughout the season. However, by considering these guidelines, you may be able to incorporate a number of these specific strategies that will enhance your team's confidence as the season progresses.

How to improve confidence

Team confidence is derived from any one or a combination of the sources we have described. Using these sources as a guideline, here are suggestions that may be used to enhance the confidence of your team.

- **Provide players with successful experiences in practice.** For most athletes, we believe that practice performance is a more important source of team confidence than game performance. There are two main reasons for this. First, practice performance and success can be determined by the players themselves, as opposed to potential uncontrollable game events. Second, teams have many more practice sessions than games over the course of a season, providing more opportunities from which to draw past performance information that helps form confidence levels. You should reward team effort, improvement and learning of, say, set plays or a particular style of play, and persistence. These variables are much more under your team's control. If your team is not successful in a practice, your response should be to work on specific aspects more rather than focusing on an unsuccessful outcome. Successful practice experiences are especially important prior to games. Instead of trying to improve team tactics immediately prior to a game or late in the week for an upcoming weekend game, you could have your team perform favorite drills and match-related exercises that are usually successful. This will leave them with a higher level of confidence entering games.
- **Reward and emphasize successful performances rather than winning.** Team confidence increases after perceived successes and decreases after perceived failures. By emphasizing and rewarding controllable factors within your team, such as effort, persistence and their own performances, it is possible for your team to still perceive some success and certainly improvement, even if they lose a game. For example, after losing, you could tell your team that you were very happy with the way in which they quickly supported each other and the amount of scoring opportunities they created. The outcome of a game often is uncontrollable because of factors such as weather, officials or opponent's plays. Emphasizing losing as only a failure will lower team confidence. If there is an aspect of play that your team needs to improve upon, then you could address this while not emphasizing the loss. For example, you could suggest that "although we did a good job of marking in our defensive third we need to do a better job of picking up runners from midfield."
- **Attribute success and failure in an appropriate way.** The reasons coaches and players provide to explain success and failure have a large impact upon future team confidence beliefs. After playing well during a game, most coaches acknowledge their team's performance in a group setting, which helps in raising team confidence. However, the explanations for success should focus on ability and effort attributes. Specifically, if your team

defeats a difficult opponent or plays well, emphasize that the result was due to the team's high level of effort and its overall ability. Avoid attributing success to luck in comments such as "we were lucky to win this one today" and "you did not deserve to win the game," as this will not increase future team confidence.

The reasons or excuses coaches provide after playing poorly or losing should be attributed to the team's lack of ability, and players should be encouraged to respond with increased effort in upcoming practices and games. Avoid attributing failure to lack of ability or performances that will never improve.

- **Encourage your team.** Team confidence can be enhanced by encouragement given by significant others. In pre-game team talks and practices, coaches should encourage the team with positive information, such as "I know you have the ability to play well today," "I'm really pleased with the way you are playing" or "Your effort in practice is going to really pay off in our upcoming games." If players are not playing well, they can be encouraged by using statements such as "We're not making enough diagonal runs in the attacking third of the field, which I know you can do because we have done this in practice." When talking to parents, ask them to support and encourage the team, so that they can help improve the team's confidence and performances. Encouragement between your players can also help in raising team confidence. This may include remarks in games such as "Come on, we can do it" and "well played."
- **Use yourself and more experienced players as a model for confidence.** Team confidence can be enhanced by seeing confident role models within the team. Showing the confidence you, as the coach, have in your team will increase their confidence. This can be achieved in your coaching behavior by understanding that you can influence the players' attitudes and skill level, demonstrating your belief in their abilities by what you say and how you carry yourself and by setting high but realistic goals for the team. Coaches also should explain to the experienced players and team captains the importance of these factors. The entire team then will be influenced by observing this, raising the level of team confidence.
- **Keep your team focused.** A team that lacks focus, is fatigued or is fearful of an upcoming opponent may have a decreased level of team confidence. To keep teams focused on the upcoming game, coaches should be calm when talking to the team and not try to over-arouse them. Also, emphasize the way in which you want them to play rather than who they are playing. To avoid fatigue, coaches should try to avoid scheduling a number of games in a short period of time. If this is unavoidable and you recognize that the team is tired, then you might give them a day off from practice or use the time for game analysis.
- **Make appropriate comparisons with other teams.** Team confidence can be enhanced by making appropriate comparisons of strengths and weaknesses with opponents. For example, you might make your team aware of the strengths of an opposing team's offensive skills, but you still are able to raise your team's confidence for the game by telling them that they have the defensive ability to be effective in minimizing this offensive threat. You also may point out any weak areas in your opponent's team, such as a goalkeeper who does not like to come off the goal line for high crossed balls or a dislike of being put under quick pressure.

By having an understanding of the team's level of confidence and using these suggestions to enhance their confidence, coaches should find that over time their team plays with a higher level of persistence and effort in adversity. Team performances should also be higher, and as a consequence, you will notice that there is more satisfaction among players. Coaches will then be more likely to say that "we have been playing with a lot of confidence and are really on top of our game."

Editor's note: Mark Earles earned his MA at Miami University and serves as the youth coach for Norwich City Football Club and Norfolk County Football Association in England. Melissa A. Chase is an assistant professor in the Department of Physical Education, Health and Sports Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.