

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SPORTS
MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

Over the past decades, scholars have concentrated on the transformational leadership style as a successful approach to working in various areas. The ability to inspire and motivate others is a key characteristic of a transformational leader. In many ways, people in transformational leadership organizations look up to their leaders as role models. Transformational leaders also empower employees by encouraging them to feel that they can go above and beyond their expectations. Organizational transformational leadership research is still in its early stages. However, the sports setting, which is characterized by connected, regular, and direct contacts, in which achievements and results are instantaneous and objectively noted, provides many prospects for coaches to have an impact both on individual and group-level results. In this regard, the paper presents a critical exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of transformational leadership in sports management, focusing on the leadership approach of Gregg Popovich, one of the coaching leaders in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

Strengths of Transformational Leadership

To understand the advantages of transformative leadership better, the selected figure with an exceptionally favorable leadership approach is Gregg Popovich, the incumbent San Antonio Spurs head coach. Considering his coaching tenure at the San Antonio Spurs and mentoring his assistants, Popovich has all the qualities of a transformative leader. Gregg Popovich is the individual whose leadership style deserves borrowing from, since his achievements in the past have significantly influenced the NBA fraternity in general (Dodd, 2025). Thus, reflecting on the strengths of transformational leadership through his strategies can show what it takes to be a good leader.

Transformational leadership promotes organizational mobilization, which can be termed 'group influence' in the sports context. Transformational leaders are commonly known to be charismatic individuals who exude appeal and elegance when around others, especially in leadership settings (Kasa-Jashari and Janeska-Iliev, 2024). Charisma is defined as a kind of social influence, meaning that transformative leaders gain recognition through their actions and personality instead of an official role, norms, or traditions. Popovich possesses the fundamental characteristics of a charismatic leader, which mirrors transformational leadership. These include vision, contextual awareness, sensitivity to individual and group needs, and readiness to take risks (Dodd, 2025). In addition, Popovich reinforces the necessity of communication with his staff and players to comprehend and understand the present circumstances completely. Furthermore, Popovich is renowned for his loud temperament, and players tend to emulate his mindset and demeanor. In turn, Popovich has built a culture of charm and grace at the San Antonio Spurs, which has a positive influence on the players.

In many ways, transformational leadership generates inspirational motivation among followers. The extent to which a leader clarifies a compelling vision that stimulates and encourages people to accomplish unique goals is referred to as inspirational motivation. Leaders who employ inspirational motivation maintain high expectations for their subordinates. They are enthusiastic about their followers' potential to accomplish the objectives, and they constantly offer their subordinates value by emphasizing the importance of fulfilling their responsibilities (Gupta, 2025). Such leaders can instill a clear sense of direction in their followers to propel them forward. This motivates subordinates to work tirelessly, be positive regarding the future, and believe in their capabilities.

Transformational leadership fosters an environment in which team members are

encouraged to think creatively. Popovich implements inspirational motivation throughout his associations with NBA professionals and players. For instance, when addressing his team in a timeout huddle, Popovich is renowned for motivating them by stepping back and hearing their perspective on the circumstances. Then, he encourages his players to provide suggestions on the optimum strategy to execute to succeed (Dodd, 2025). This helps San Antonio Spurs players be more creative in their thinking, which pushes them to excel since they feel that they contribute significantly to the development of the strategy.

The transformational leadership style also allows for the intellectual stimulation of followers. Intellectual stimulation is the degree to which leaders question established beliefs, take calculated risks, and request feedback from employees (Jun and Lee, 2023). Followers are rewarded with a constant flow of new ideas and engagement through intellectual stimulation. To cope with organizational problems in innovative and creative ways, the transformational leader encourages their subordinates and works together with them. These leaders motivate their subordinates to think for themselves and to become self-sufficient. Those who are intellectually stimulated are more likely to be creative due to an ideological transformation. In other words, such leadership transforms the character of the organization's members by making them increasingly focused on the team and its aims.

Popovich emphasizes commitment and selfless team effort, consistently placing team achievement above individual recognition. This approach is illustrated by his management of Manu Ginóbili, an accomplished NBA player who had earned All-Star recognition and multiple championships. Although Ginóbili was capable of starting, Popovich determined that the Spurs would benefit more from using him as a sixth man. Ginóbili accepted the change in role, and his willingness to sacrifice the status associated with starting contributed to the Spurs' team-oriented

culture (Wright, 2023). This example illustrates a key characteristic of transformational leadership: encouraging followers to subordinate individual interests to collective goals. With Popovich's thoughtful approach, rather than interpreting his reduced starting role as a personal setback, Ginóbili embraced the position because it could improve the team's overall performance.

Therefore, the transformational leadership style is crucial in sporting situations that require the maintenance of a winning culture. For example, while the San Antonio Spurs is already a popular NBA team in the U.S., Popovich aimed to bolster its reputation and return it to its former glory. Transformational leadership has been crucial to achieving this goal, as Popovich uses it to motivate, stimulate, and inspire his players. Furthermore, from a technical viewpoint, the transformational leadership style is useful in situations that require players to adapt to overcome specific challenges. Instances like relegation from a top league to a bottom league demonstrate the leader's ability to inspire players to work extra hard to reclaim their spot in the top league. The transformational leader may also introduce novel training techniques that push players to be tough.

Weaknesses of Transformational Leadership Style

A key observation regarding the transformational leadership style is that it focuses on the leader. Fundamentally, this contributes to one of the major weaknesses of the analyzed leadership style. The transformational leader should be a powerful, compelling figure who can guide others through difficult times and into a bright future. This overemphasis on the outstanding transformational leader's qualities and abilities tends to overlook the importance of followers in the leadership context. Examples can be drawn from the work of Popovich, whose tenure with the San Antonio Spurs has been praised a lot. While Popovich is considered one of

the most successful transformational leaders in the NBA, his players who have made this happen have largely been left out of the success story narratives. Ultimately, some players may start to feel that their efforts are not being recognized enough or that their coach is overshadowing them.

Transformational leaders like to be involved in their followers' activities. However, some people may not feel comfortable when their leaders constantly supervise their work. Such individuals may start feeling that they are being micromanaged. Staff morale, inventiveness, and job satisfaction may all be harmed by micromanagement, which is a common concern among many employees (Vu, 2025). Therefore, some employees may decide to depart if issues are not addressed. When no departure interview is conducted, the organization may be unaware that it is taking place. On the other hand, micromanaging will suffocate personnel who are able and willing to go above and beyond what is expected of them, be innovative, and bring fresh ideas.

Micromanagement can lead to autocracy, which destroys employee-manager trust and rapport. When trust is lost, two situations can arise: the loss of productivity and increased employee turnover. Hence, players may start looking for transfers to other teams with better management in sports settings. Another limitation of transformational leadership is that it is oversimplified and overly stagnant due to being based on relatively rigid norms and ideas. This simplifies the concept of transformational leadership, which, as many leaders may assume, is easy to apply. In reality, organizational dynamics tend to be complex and multifaceted, necessitating a flexible leadership approach. Teams in the NBA can overcome this challenge because they participate in a competition governed by clear rules and regulations. Moreover, the NBA is already a mature competition, so all players know what is required of them. This means that transformational leadership may not work in unorganized sports settings. Particularly, it may not be impactful in emerging sports competitions seeking to become popular.

Transformational leaders are also limited by cultural constraints in their implementation and performance. Thus, the cultural environment dictates whether or not the transformational model is applicable and successful. Furthermore, a coach cannot generalize motivation techniques in sports without considering individual factors. In addition, player motivation and inspiration can be affected by factors such as ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, and others. In addition, transformational leadership style can be risky and disruptive in team settings. While transformational leaders utilize their charm to create an example for their workforce and the rest of the organization, they can sometimes overdo things or take unrealistic chances, and the consequences may be harmful to the workgroup or team. For example, a coach may introduce exceptionally vigorous training techniques to help his players become tough. However, some players may find such techniques extreme and difficult to perform. The players may start to feel that they are being treated like prisoners, creating a negative atmosphere. Moreover, continuous changes may be distracting, and as a result, they are likely to have negative consequences if they occur frequently.

A transformative leadership style is only effective if a leader keeps open communication channels with team members to communicate the organizational vision and goals effectively. Strong, frequent communication, continual feedback, and group meetings are required to maintain engagement levels (Oh, 2023). This is demanding for management, but if staff perceive a lack of communication or feel left out, they may develop laxity or disinterest in carrying out their assigned responsibilities. Apart from players, sports teams involve numerous personnel, including technical staff. The coach must develop efficient ways of communicating with various professionals to ensure that everyone is on board. This can be overwhelming, and leaders may choose to communicate with selected staff, which is risky. Particularly, such an attitude can

create a feeling of isolation among some team members, eventually causing disunity.

Conclusion

Transformational leaders can catapult their organizations to new heights. However, there is also a possibility that events veer in the other direction. To encourage people and maintain their attention on a single objective, leaders must be persuasive in their job. If followers lose trust in their leader or do not believe in the idea that the leader is attempting to sell, this style of leadership will fail. Leaders in sports should be aware of the challenges associated with transformational leadership style as they are often ignored, yet their understanding can influence the success of organizations.

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