

Investigating the Relationship Between Leadership Style and Attitude Toward Change Among Football Coaches in Iraq

Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to examine the relationship between leadership style and attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq. It also considered moral intelligence as a relevant organizational and ethical construct in explaining coaches' readiness to respond to professional and organizational changes.

Methods: The study was applied in purpose and correlational in design, using a survey approach and structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, and members of the assembly of sports coaches in Iraq, totaling 336 individuals. Based on Morgan's table, 179 participants were selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using the Leadership Style Questionnaire developed by Hersey, Blanchard, and Neumeyer, Jung's Attitude Toward Change Questionnaire, and a moral intelligence measure. Validity and reliability were assessed through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, convergent validity, Bartlett's test of sphericity, and factor analysis. Data were analyzed using SPSS and Smart PLS. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirmed the normal distribution of the research variables.

Results: The results showed that leadership style had a positive and significant effect on attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq, with a path coefficient of 0.657 and a t-value of 9.453. These findings indicate that effective and context-appropriate leadership can strengthen coaches' cognitive and behavioral readiness for change.

Conclusion: The study concludes that leadership development programs for Iraqi football coaches should emphasize adaptive leadership, change management, effective communication, and ethical decision-making to improve acceptance of organizational and professional change within Iraq's evolving football environment and support sustainable team performance in future reforms.

Keywords: Leadership style; Attitude toward change; Moral intelligence; Football coaches; Change management; Iraq.

Introduction

In contemporary organizational environments, which are characterized by uncertainty and constant dynamism, organizations are required to respond to environmental changes with greater awareness and flexibility. This situation has made the continuous acceptance of change one of the fundamental requirements of organizational management. Under such conditions, one of the key indicators of organizational success is the effective participation of all organizational components in managerial and decision-making processes. In addition to financial and capital resources, human resources are regarded as one of the most valuable organizational assets and play a decisive role in achieving organizational goals. In the field of sport, particularly in professional structures such as football, coaches serve as team leaders and play a key role in guiding human resources and achieving performance-related objectives.

Leadership plays a fundamental role in the successful implementation of organizational programs and the achievement of predetermined goals. In today's competitive and changing environment, organizations constantly face major transformations. In such circumstances, human resources can become a source of competitive advantage only when they are managed effectively. Accordingly, leadership standards have gained particular importance, especially in service-oriented and human-centered sectors, because leadership directly affects organizational development and efficiency. In sport, the leadership style adopted by coaches can influence team management, interaction with players, and adaptation to new conditions. Therefore, attention to individuals' needs, understanding new circumstances, and the ability to adapt to environmental changes are among the essential features of effective leadership. Moreover, the use of different leadership styles should be consistent with temporal, contextual, and ethical considerations in order to meet organizational needs. In this regard, Chen (2018) and Roboli (2021) stated that an important part of organizational leadership is related to the factors affecting leadership practices and the management of human resources.

On the other hand, changeability and change management are recognized as important elements in organizational administration. They can contribute to improved organizational performance and prepare organizations to face new conditions. Organizational change enables organizations to better manage challenges arising from internal and external environments and is often considered a driving force behind successful organizations. In sport organizations, managerial, structural, and technical changes are continuously present, and football coaches, as team leaders, must be able to adapt to these changes. In fact, change is an inevitable phenomenon that organizations directly encounter, and its proper management requires informed decision-making, the development of appropriate strategies, and the implementation of operational guidelines within the framework of organizational management. In this process, certain issues and challenges may affect organizational capabilities and influential factors (Morshedi Tonekaboni & Taban, 2020).

Organizational change is often accompanied by varying degrees of resistance among members of an organization. From the perspective of organizational theory, change may affect the interests, roles, authority, and access to resources of individuals and groups. Therefore, when organizational

members perceive change as a threat to their position, security, professional identity, or established routines, resistance is likely to emerge. Such resistance may be cognitive, emotional, or behavioral and can weaken the successful implementation of change initiatives. In this regard, leadership style and the manner in which change is introduced, communicated, and managed play an important role in reducing resistance and strengthening acceptance of change.

Moral intelligence is another factor that can influence change management and the guidance of individual behavior in organizational settings. Moral intelligence refers to an individual's cognitive and behavioral capacity to recognize ethical issues, make responsible decisions, and act in accordance with moral principles in different situations. This form of intelligence helps leaders and organizational members evaluate situations not only from a technical or managerial perspective, but also from an ethical and human-centered viewpoint. Therefore, moral intelligence can support responsible behavior, strengthen ethical judgment, and improve the quality of decision-making during periods of organizational change.

In sport organizations, particularly in football teams, the role of moral intelligence is especially important because coaches are required to make continuous decisions that affect players, team relationships, performance outcomes, and the overall organizational climate. Coaches are not only responsible for technical and tactical guidance, but also for establishing norms, defining roles, managing conflicts, and creating conditions in which players and other team members can adapt to new demands. Through ethical sensitivity, sound judgment, and responsible decision-making, coaches can facilitate adaptation to change and reduce negative reactions to new organizational or professional conditions.

Previous studies have emphasized the relationship between moral intelligence and leadership effectiveness. Effective leaders frequently encounter ethical choices in their professional activities, and their decisions can influence trust, commitment, motivation, and cooperation among followers. The development of moral intelligence is therefore a continuous process that should be considered an important part of leadership development and organizational improvement (Beheshtifar et al., 2011). In this sense, ethics provides a framework for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate behavior and guides leaders in selecting actions that are fair, responsible, and respectful of individual differences.

The relationship between ethics and leadership indicates that the behavior, values, and identity of the leader play a decisive role in guiding followers toward shared goals. Leaders who act ethically and consider the needs, abilities, and differences of their followers are more capable of choosing appropriate leadership styles according to situational requirements. Such leadership can create a more positive attitude toward change by increasing trust, reducing uncertainty, and encouraging members to participate in the change process. Accordingly, in the context of football coaching, attention to moral intelligence can provide a foundation for developing effective leadership styles, strengthening positive attitudes toward change, and improving team management in dynamic sport environments.

Materials and Methods

Since the present study was designed to examine the relationship between leadership styles and attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq, the research method, in terms of implementation and strategy, was correlational and specifically based on structural equation modeling. This method was selected because it enables the analysis of relationships among variables in accordance with the objectives of the study. In terms of purpose, the research was applied. It also employed both library and field methods. The library method included reviewing the theoretical literature, examining previous studies, and developing the conceptual framework of the research. In the field phase, a survey method was used, and the required data were collected from the statistical sample through questionnaires and document review. Finally, the collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical software, including SPSS v₂₆ and Smart PLS v₃, in order to test the hypotheses developed on the basis of theoretical evidence and prior findings.

This study was also a survey-based investigation, as it sought to gather systematic information from respondents in order to understand and predict certain behavioral aspects of the target population. Survey research can provide data on attitudes, feelings, beliefs, past behaviors, recorded behaviors, and personal characteristics, and it requires sampling, questionnaire design, and data analysis (Blaxter et al., 1953).

Appropriate data collection instruments were used in accordance with the objectives of the study. These instruments included questionnaires, observation, and document review. In the theoretical section of the study, data were collected through library research, including the examination of organizational documents and secondary sources. In the empirical section, questionnaires were used to identify the relationships among the research variables. Accordingly, and depending on the requirements of different parts of the study, both library and field methods were employed. According to Brown (1999), these are among the most common methods of data collection in such studies.

The Leadership Style Questionnaire developed by Hersey, Blanchard, and Neumeyer (1999) was used to assess leadership style. This instrument is designed to determine managers' leadership styles, including directive, coaching, participative, and delegating styles. The questionnaire measures leadership style from the perspective of followers and consists of 12 items. Each item presents a hypothetical situation, followed by four response options. Each option reflects a specific behavioral response by the leader in that situation. Respondents select the option that most closely corresponds to the leader's behavior as they perceive it. Each response represents one of the four leadership styles proposed in situational leadership theory. In the most recent assessment conducted by Nouraei, the reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was reported to be 0.92. In the study by Norbakhsh et al. (2004), its content validity was confirmed by sport management experts, and its reliability was reported as 0.79 using Cronbach's alpha. In the present study, the composite reliability was 0.79,

Cronbach's alpha was 0.81, and convergent validity was higher than 0.50, indicating the acceptable reliability and validity of this measurement instrument.

The Attitude Toward Change Questionnaire developed by Jung (2004) was used to measure individuals' attitudes toward organizational change. In this questionnaire, respondents select the option that best reflects their feelings and views. The items indicate the extent to which individuals hold a particular attitude toward the implementation of change in an organization. This instrument is widely applicable in organizational and research settings. It consists of 18 items based on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The minimum score is 18 and the maximum score is 126. The questionnaire assesses attitude toward change in three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Saatchi et al., 2012). In Janfada's study (2002), the reliability of this questionnaire was reported as 0.87 using Cronbach's alpha. In the present study, the reliability coefficient for the attitude toward organizational change variable was 0.79, Cronbach's alpha was 0.80, and convergent validity was calculated to be higher than 0.50.

Given that the statistical population of the present study differed from those of previous studies, it was necessary to reassess the validity and reliability of the questionnaires. The purpose of this procedure was to ensure that respondents properly understood the items and that the instruments accurately measured the intended constructs in the target population. In factor analysis, a set of items may be grouped into several components, factors, clusters, or blocks based on their internal correlations, even when such groupings may not have a clear logical or conceptual relationship. Therefore, the function of factor analysis is to identify these components, factors, clusters, and blocks. According to Mary Janouroses, factor analysis can be conducted through two related procedures for measuring the main variables of a study: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of sampling adequacy, used as an exploratory factor analysis or data reduction method, and Bartlett's test of sphericity, used to determine whether the set of items in the correlation matrix is suitable for factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis may also be used as a data summarization technique.

The statistical population of this study consisted of presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, and members of the assembly of sports coaches in Iraq. According to statistics obtained from the Directorate General of Sport and Youth, the total population was 336 individuals. To determine the sample size, Morgan's table was used, according to which 179 participants were selected as the required sample. The participants were selected from the statistical population using simple random sampling.

The geographical scope of the study included football coaches in Iraq, who constituted the population under investigation. The temporal scope of the study was the winter of 1404 in the Iranian calendar, during which data collection and analysis were conducted. The subject scope of the research included leadership styles, attitude toward change, and moral intelligence, with the main aim of presenting a model of the relationships among these variables among football coaches in Iraq.

In the quantitative section of the study, and in accordance with the research questions, the data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. At the descriptive level, frequency and percentage were used for demographic variables such as gender, while mean and standard deviation were used for the main research variables. To test the hypotheses, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to examine the normality of the data. Correlation analysis was also used to assess the relationships among the variables. In the next stage of analysis, if the data followed a normal distribution, structural equation modeling was applied; if the data were non-normal, partial least squares structural equation modeling was used. The PLS method consists of two main stages (Henseler, 2001). Within this framework, the overall fit of the measurement models, the structural model, and the general model is examined in order to test the relationships among the constructs.

A review of studies published over the past decade shows that researchers have widely used this method for data analysis. Several reasons have been proposed for using PLS, the most important of which is its suitability for small sample sizes. Another reason is its applicability when data are non-normal, a situation frequently encountered in empirical research. A further reason is that the method can be used with formative measurement models (Henseler, 2001).

Convergent validity is another criterion used to evaluate the fit of measurement models in the PLS approach. The AVE index represents the average variance shared between each construct and its indicators. Fornell and Larcker introduced AVE as a criterion for assessing convergent validity and stated that the critical value for AVE is 0.50. Therefore, values higher than 0.50 indicate acceptable convergent validity.

In this study, six fundamental ethical principles were observed. However, depending on the nature of a research design, different ethical considerations may be relevant. Accordingly, the following points were taken into account in the present study: verbal consent was obtained from participants before the research process began; volunteer participants were informed about the subject and procedure of the study before participation; all private and personal information of the participants was protected; the results of the study would be explained to participants upon request; and if any difficulties or concerns arose during the process, the necessary guidance was provided to participants.

Results

The output of the statistical software, based on the examination of the normality of the distribution of the research variables, including leadership style and its components, attitude toward change and its components, and moral intelligence and its components among football coaches in Iraq, showed that at the 5% significance level, the null hypothesis of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was not rejected. Therefore, the data related to the research variables followed a normal distribution. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*

Variable / Component	Test Statistic	Significance Level
Leadership style	0.173	0.516
Directive leadership style	0.134	0.649
Coaching leadership style	0.167	0.388
Participative leadership style	0.359	0.951
Delegating leadership style	0.147	0.531
Attitude toward change	0.144	0.457
Affective attitude	0.149	0.467
Cognitive attitude	0.160	0.498
Behavioral attitude	0.119	0.736
Moral intelligence	0.123	0.162
Integrity	0.106	0.147
Responsibility	0.097	0.336
Compassion	0.078	0.200
Forgiveness	0.117	0.541

As shown in Table 1, the significance levels of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all research variables and components were greater than 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the data were normally distributed, and the use of parametric tests and structural equation modeling to analyze the relationships among the variables was appropriate.

In the next step, Cronbach's alpha coefficient and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to examine the reliability and validity of the research items. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the items, while Bartlett's test was applied to determine whether the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. The results of the factor analysis and the validity of the research items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Results of Factor Analysis and Validity of the Research Items*

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Bartlett's Test: Chi-square	df	Significance Level
Leadership style	0.708	95.468	66	0.016
Directive leadership style	0.841	398.600	3	0.046
Coaching leadership style	0.769	22.648	3	0.001
Participative leadership style	0.762	7.079	3	0.001
Delegating leadership style	0.743	0.103	3	0.001
Attitude toward change	0.864	1721.970	153	0.001
Affective attitude	0.867	481.068	15	0.001
Cognitive attitude	0.820	498.160	15	0.001
Behavioral attitude	0.769	439.190	155	0.001
Moral intelligence	0.879	3041.798	790	0.001
Integrity	0.849	457.879	45	0.001
Responsibility	0.768	538.800	45	0.001
Compassion	0.789	475.560	45	0.001
Forgiveness	0.678	426.670	45	0.001

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the main research variables and most of their components were within an acceptable range. Therefore, the measurement instruments had satisfactory internal consistency. In addition, the significance of Bartlett's test of sphericity at the 0.05 level for the research variables and components indicated that

the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. Accordingly, the research items had the required statistical validity to be included in the structural equation model.

The first criterion for evaluating the significance of relationships among variables in the structural equation model is the t-value. If the t-value is greater than 1.96, the relationship under investigation is considered significant at the 95% confidence level and can be confirmed. The results of the conceptual model in the t-value mode showed that the reported values for the model paths were greater than 1.96. Therefore, it can be concluded that, at the 95% confidence level, the items and paths of the structural equation model of the study, entitled “Presenting a Model of Leadership Style and Attitude Toward Change with the Mediating Role of Moral Intelligence among Football Coaches in Iraq,” were acceptable, and there was no need to remove any item from the model.

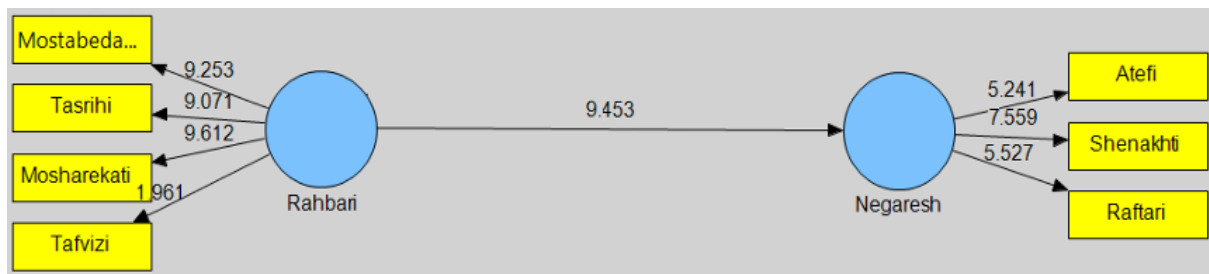


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model of the Study

To test this hypothesis, structural equation modeling was used, and the results are presented in Table 3. Based on Figure 1 and the path coefficient related to this relationship, it can be concluded that leadership style had an effect of 0.657 on attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq. In other words, if the leadership style variable increases by one unit, the attitude toward change variable is expected to increase by 0.657 units at the 95% confidence level. In addition, the factor loadings had an acceptable quality in explaining the relevant constructs, as their values were reported to be greater than 0.50. As shown in Figure 1, the t-value for the relationship between leadership style and attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq was 9.453 at the 95% confidence level, which is greater than 1.96. Therefore, this relationship is statistically significant.

Table 3. Path Analysis of the Structural Equation Modeling

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Factor Loading	t-value	Hypothesis Result
Leadership style	Attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq	0.657	9.453	Accepted

Discussion

The purpose of this section was to examine the effect of leadership style on attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq. The results of structural equation modeling showed that leadership style had a positive and significant effect on attitude toward change. Based on the obtained path coefficient, it can be stated that the more effective, appropriate, and context-based the coaches' leadership style is, the more positive their attitude toward accepting and implementing organizational and professional changes will be. This finding indicates that leadership style not only

affects the way coaches guide players or manage technical team activities, but also plays a decisive role in shaping their cognitive and behavioral readiness to deal with change.

This finding is important because football, particularly at the professional level, is constantly exposed to technical, managerial, structural, and environmental changes. Changes in training methods, game tactics, performance analysis technologies, players' expectations, club policies, and competition structures are part of the everyday reality of football. Under such conditions, coaches who adopt more appropriate leadership styles are usually better able to understand the necessity of change, reduce resistance to it, and guide team members toward adaptation to new conditions. Therefore, leadership style can act as a facilitating factor in the acceptance of change.

From a managerial perspective, sport leaders can create a positive attitude toward change when they are able to establish a balance between organizational goals, human needs, and environmental conditions. An appropriate leadership style helps coaches perceive change not as a threat, but as an opportunity to improve performance, enhance decision-making quality, and increase team effectiveness. In contrast, inappropriate, rigid, or inflexible leadership styles may increase resistance, reduce motivation, and weaken individuals' willingness to accept change. Accordingly, the findings of the present study indicate that, among football coaches in Iraq, the type of leadership practiced can shape their attitudes toward professional and organizational changes.

The findings of this study are consistent with the results of Hejrati et al. (2018). In their study on the relationship between managers' distributed leadership style and secondary school teachers' attitudes toward organizational change in Gonabad, they found a significant relationship between distributed leadership and attitude toward change. They also reported that the dimensions of distributed leadership could significantly explain attitudes toward organizational change. The consistency between the present findings and their results indicates that the role of leadership in shaping individuals' attitudes toward change is not limited to educational environments and can also be observed in sport settings.

The results of the present study are also in line with the findings of Talebi-Namvar and Hosseinpour-Sonboli (2015). In their study on the effect of leadership style on employees' attitudes toward organizational change in universities of Maragheh, they found that transformational and transactional leadership styles were significantly related to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of attitude toward organizational change. This consistency suggests that leadership style can influence individuals' cognitive understanding of the need for change, their emotional response to change, and their behavioral readiness to support change. The same logic applies to football, since coaches' acceptance of change is not limited to theoretical awareness, but also depends on trust, motivation, flexibility, and practical readiness to implement change.

The findings of the present study are also consistent with the results of Jung et al. (2021). They showed that empowering leadership had a positive relationship with employees' commitment to organizational change and that risk-taking behavior could mediate this relationship. This finding is comparable to the present study because both studies emphasize the active role of leadership style in creating readiness for change. In fact, leadership can facilitate change in an organization or team when it involves individuals in decision-making processes, increases their trust, and provides the conditions for accepting responsibility in response to new circumstances.

The results of this study are also consistent with the findings of Peyvasteh et al. (2020), Chen et al. (2019), and Karp (2021), as these studies also emphasized the importance of leadership style in change management and the direction of organizational behavior. Taken together, these studies show that effective leadership is one of the essential prerequisites for successful change processes. In Iraqi football, coaches with more appropriate leadership styles can demonstrate greater flexibility in facing structural, technical, and managerial changes and can develop a more positive attitude toward professional change.

However, the findings of the present study are not consistent with the results of Du et al. (2020). In their study conducted in China, they found that directive leadership style had a negative relationship with some other leadership styles. The difference between the results of the present study and those of Du et al. (2020) may be attributed to differences in culture, organizational structure, statistical population, and the nature of the research context. In some cultural or organizational settings, directive leadership may reduce autonomy, participation, and willingness to accept change. However, in some sport environments, especially where discipline, quick decision-making, and team cohesion are important, certain aspects of directive leadership may have a limited and situationally positive function.

Overall, the findings of this section indicate that leadership style is one of the important factors explaining football coaches' attitudes toward change. Since football coaches in Iraq operate in a dynamic, competitive, and changing environment, strengthening effective leadership styles can lead to better acceptance of change, reduced resistance, and improved individual and team performance. Therefore, attention to the training and development of leadership skills among football coaches can be considered an important strategy for improving change management in Iraqi football.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrated that leadership style has a positive and significant effect on attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq. This result indicates that the manner in which coaches lead, communicate, motivate, and guide team members can play a decisive role in shaping their readiness to accept organizational, technical, and professional changes. Coaches who adopt more appropriate, flexible, and context-sensitive leadership styles are more likely to develop a positive perception of change and respond to new demands in the sport environment with greater awareness, adaptability, and effectiveness.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that the development of football in Iraq should not be viewed only in terms of infrastructure, financial resources, or technical planning. Although these factors are important, sustainable progress also depends on the leadership capacity of coaches. As key actors in football teams, coaches influence the psychological climate of the team, the level of trust among players, the acceptance of new strategies, and the ability of team members to adapt to changing conditions. Therefore, effective leadership can reduce resistance to change, strengthen motivation, improve communication, and create a supportive environment for the successful implementation of new programs and reforms.

The findings also highlight the importance of preparing coaches not only as technical specialists, but also as leaders who are capable of managing human behavior in dynamic and uncertain conditions. In modern football, coaches are expected to respond to changes in training methods, tactical approaches, performance analysis, player expectations, club policies, and competitive structures. Accordingly, leadership development should be considered an essential component of coach education programs. Strengthening coaches' leadership skills can help them better understand the necessity of change, communicate change more effectively, and guide players and staff toward common goals.

In conclusion, effective leadership provides an important foundation for developing a positive attitude toward change among football coaches in Iraq. Such an attitude can facilitate the implementation of modern sport programs, improve team performance, enhance organizational effectiveness, and support the broader development of football management in the country. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the football federation, clubs, and relevant educational institutions design and implement systematic training programs focused on leadership styles, change management, effective communication, ethical decision-making, and adaptive team management. These programs can empower coaches to play a more active, constructive, and influential role in responding to future developments in Iraqi football.

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