

# Does Authoritarian Leadership Lead to Bad Outcomes? A Contingency Perspective

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Previous studies on the sports team have mainly focused on the common phenomenon that coaches take strict control to require players to work hard in training. Many researchers have explored this phenomenon from the theoretical perspective of authoritarian leadership. Although these studies have accumulated preliminary results, they are mostly limited to qualitative interviews, but not directly examine the relationship between coaches' authoritarian leadership style and players' effort. Therefore, whether the authoritarian leadership can really encourage the players to put more efforts in training is still a puzzle and an important research void. In order to fulfill this void, this study adapts the dual dimensional model of authoritarian leadership, dividing authoritarian leadership into dominance-focus authoritarian leadership and discipline-focus authoritarian leadership. Also, taking the perspective of leadership contingency theory, we propose that player's goal orientation is an important boundary condition. According to the data of 348 college players, discipline-focus authoritarian leadership enhances the player's hard work; and the impact becomes nonsignificant when the player has a high avoid performance goal orientation or a high prove performance goal orientation. On the other hand, dominance-focus authoritarian leadership has a negative impact on the player's hard work behavior only if the player has a low prove performance goal orientation. In this way, this study clarifies whether the strict control of the coach really encourages the players to work harder and fulfill the lack of research in the past for this important phenomenon.

**Keywords:** authoritarian leadership, contingency theory, effort, goal orientation, sport team

## Introduction

“An agreeable coach is not a good coach...A good coach has to build a cognition in players' minds that the only way to success is exerting more effort than others.”

Sadaharu Oh (as cited in Huang, 2009, “Wang zhen zhi”)

According to this quote from Sadaharu Oh, the head coach of team Samurai Japan in the 2009 World Baseball Classic, the only way to succeed is to put more effort than your rivals into your daily practice. For sports teams, the most important goal is to win the game, and daily practice is critical for players to improve skills and achieve high standards (Locke, 1968; Locke & Bryan,

1966; Mageu & Vallerand, 2003). Consequently, to ensure players put their maximum effort into their daily practice, coaches have to demonstrate unchallengeable authority and establish uncompromising standards, and reprimand those who fail to achieve goals. All in all, it is the disagreeable coach who can make players put their best effort into daily practice. In fact, similar to Sadaharu Oh, the legendary UCLA coach John Wooden was also known to be a strict leader. Wooden took a zero-tolerance policy toward minimized effort in daily practice, and demanded that players approach practice as an actual match, forcing them to put in their best effort (Jenkins, 2014). In relation to both Oh and Wooden, a strict leadership style had a positive effect on players' efforts and is a critical factor

for winning.

Previous studies have interpreted the phenomenon of leading by strictness as a controlling coaching style, considering that leading by strictness undermines players' autonomy and, in turn, decreases players' motivation and performance (Gucciardi, Stamatis, & Ntoumanis, 2017). However, referring to the cases of Oh and Wooden, a controlling coaching style is unable to explain the positive relationship between a coach's strictness and players' efforts. In sum, adopting a controlling coaching style is unsuitable in explaining the phenomenon of leading by strictness.

Contrary to the effects of a controlling coaching style, authoritarian leadership (AL) theory proposes that a coach's strict leadership behavior can promote players' effort. AL refers to a leader's assertion of absolute authority and control over and demand for unquestionable obedience from subordinates (Farh & Cheng, 2000). According to Chou, Cheng, and Lien (2014), the main focus of authoritarian leadership is the promotion of collective well-being by emphasizing the authority of the leader, thereby providing legitimacy for the coach to execute strict leadership behavior. Kang (2005) interviewed professional baseball players in Taiwan and found that a coach's authoritarian leadership behavior made the coach an unchallengeable figure, forcing players to comply with his commands. As a result, players were inclined to follow the coach's demands to put effort into their daily practice. AL also implies reprimanding and goal-setting behaviors that ensure players do not dare to minimize their effort during practice (Kang, 2005; Kao & Chen, 2006). Consequently, from the perspective of authoritarian leadership theory, a coach's strict leadership behavior has a positive effect on players' efforts.

To the best of our knowledge, previous studies have not empirically examined the effects of AL on players' effort. Nevertheless, studies on the effects of AL have obtained results that are contrary to the prediction of AL theory. In societies that emphasize the importance of equality and personal rights, such as the effect of a controlling coaching style, the reprimanding and insulting behaviors associated with AL have a negative effect on players' intrinsic motivation and intention to exert effort

(Kao & Chen, 2006), and are positively related to players' burnout (Chen, 2004). As a result of the inconsistency between the theory and empirical results, there is a lack of a clear answer on the effect of AL on players' effort.

Previous studies on the effects of AL in organizational contexts have also shown inconsistent results, prompting scholars to modify the AL concept. According to the revised theory, AL behaviors that fit with modern values have positive effects on players' effectiveness and those that do not fit with such values have negative effects on players' attitudes and effectiveness (Chou, Chou, Cheng, & Jen, 2010; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Chou et al. (2010) categorized AL behaviors into dominance-focused AL and discipline-focused AL. Dominance-focused AL aims at maintaining tight control by triggering subordinates' shame and guilt, through behaviors such as criticizing subordinates, withholding information, and ignoring subordinates' contributions, while discipline-focused AL emphasizes strict discipline and work rules in an organization to achieve the collective goal and promote subordinates' interests. Chou et al. (2010) further proposed that dominance-focused AL is so harmful to subordinates' self-esteem that it is not only unsuitable for societies with modern values but also has negative effects on subordinates' work-related outcomes. In contrast, discipline-focused AL is harmless to subordinates' self-esteem and interests and thus has positive effects on subordinates' work-related outcomes.

Following the perspective of Chou et al. (2010), when faced with coaches who demonstrate dominance-focused AL behaviors, including verbal abuse, criticism, and information manipulation, players tend to feel oppressed and their intrinsic motivation is undermined (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2008; Chou et al., 2010). Previous studies have identified that when coaches' behavior is similar to AL behavior, players' self-efficacy decreases, which is positively related to effort, and anxiety increases, which is negatively related to effort (Baker, Côté, & Hawes, 2000; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Coaches' dominance-focused AL behavior is negatively related to players' effort.

Discipline-focused AL emphasizes the use of discipline to monitor tasks, demand high performance, and build norms. Therefore, discipline-focused AL is harmless to players' self-esteem. In fact, Chou et al. (2010) identified that discipline-focused AL has positive effects on subordinates' self-efficacy, which is a sub-dimension of psychological empowerment (Sprietzer, 1996). Coaches with a high degree of discipline-focused AL use clearly delivered discipline to guide players' behavior, which gives them greater certainty about what to do. Coaches with a high degree of discipline-focused AL also tend to set high standards and goals for players, which means they perceive practice as being meaningful (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and feel confirmed. (Cranmer, Brann, & Weber, 2018). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Coaches' discipline-focused AL behavior is positively related to players' effort.

### The moderating effects of goal orientation

In addition to the main effects, we want to explore the boundary conditions. According to contingency theory, whether coaches' leadership behavior influences players' effectiveness depends on situational factors or subordinates' personalities. Previous studies have identified that players' personalities are influential to their perceptions and interpretations of social clues. In other words, the effectiveness of coaches' leadership behavior may be moderated by players' personalities. We adopt goal orientation as a boundary condition because a player's goal orientation is significantly related to effort, and it is an important variable in studies of sports teams (Asghar, Wang, Linde, & Alfermann, 2013; Duda, 2005; Duda & Hall, 2001; Roberts, 2001; Roberts, Treasure, & Kavussanu, 1997).

Goal orientation refers to an individual's preferred goal content in an achievement situation (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1992). Although some scholars claim that goal orientation varies across situations, most agree that it is stable over time and therefore consider it a personality trait (Duda & Whitehead, 1998; Roberts, Treasures, & Balague, 1998). Dweck (1986) proposed that goal

orientation can be divided into two types: learning goal orientation (LGO) and performance goal orientation (PGO). The main difference lies in individuals' assumptions about their ability and definition of success. Individuals with a high LGO assume that ability is incremental and tend to define success as mastering one's ability, while individuals with a high PGO assume that ability is concrete and tend to define success as outperforming others (Dewck, 1986; Nicholls, 1989). Other scholars have proposed different categorizations. For example, Butler (1992) divided goal orientation into mastery goal orientation and ability goal orientation. Despite the different categorizations, the core definitions of the construct are similar.

VandeWalle (1997) further divided performance goal orientation into prove-performance goal orientation (PPGO) and avoidance-performance goal orientation (APGO). In an achievement situation, individuals with a high degree of PPGO tend to define success as outperforming others, while those with a high degree of APGO tend to define it as avoiding negative outcomes, such as losing to others. VandeWalle further proposed that individuals with different performance goal orientations adapt different strategies when facing difficult tasks or challenges. Specifically, individuals with a high degree of PPGO tend to outperform others by overcoming challenges, while individuals with a high degree of APGO tend to withdraw from difficult tasks that may cause them to fail.

Based on the above categorization, scholars have proposed that goal orientation may influence one's definition of success in achievement situations and, in turn, moderate the relationship between coaches' AL behavior and players' effort. According to Jaakkola, Ntoumanis, and Liukkonen (2015), players with a high degree of LGO tend to define success as mastering one's skill or ability and perceive coaches' strictness as a challenge but not a hurdle. Van-Yperen and Duda (1999) indicated that soccer players with a high degree of LGO have confidence in their ability to overcome challenges and tend to put more effort in when facing challenges. Consequently, when facing either coaches' dominance-focused or discipline-focused AL, players with a high

degree of LGO tend to interpret coaches' behavior as a challenge that can be overcome by putting in more effort (Duda & White, 1992; Roberts & Ommundsen, 1996). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3<sub>a</sub>: Players' LGO has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between coaches' dominance-focused AL behavior and players' effort.

H3<sub>b</sub>: Players' LGO has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between coaches' discipline-focused AL behavior and players' effort.

Players with a high degree of APGO define success as avoiding failure. Consequently, they become anxious when coaches demonstrate either dominance-focused AL or discipline-focused AL. Specifically, when coaches demonstrate dominance-focused AL such as withholding information and ignoring players' contributions, players with a high degree of APGO tend to think they are inferior to other players and are inclined to withdraw from the difficult situation, resulting in an increased tendency to withdraw from the task and decrease their effort (Gråstén, Forsman, & Watt, 2018). Similarly, players with a high degree of APGO become anxious when coaches execute discipline-focused AL because they perceive a risk of failure due to the high standards and strict discipline. Therefore, players tend to decrease their efforts to prevent themselves from experiencing failure. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4<sub>a</sub>: Players' APGO has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between coaches' dominance-focused AL behavior and players' effort.

H4<sub>b</sub>: Players' APGO has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between coaches' discipline-focused AL behavior and players' effort.

Last, players with a high degree of PPGO define success as outperforming others, and thus tend to interpret coaches' behavior with reference to others. Therefore, when facing a coach's dominance-focused AL behavior, which includes reprimanding and criticizing,

players tend to perceive such behavior as a signal that they are inferior to others. Due to this interpretation, players with a high degree of PPGO tend to put more effort in to regaining their superiority over others (Gjesdal et al., 2018; Trenz & Zusho, 2011). In contrast, discipline-focused AL behavior involves the use of norms and discipline to regulate players' behaviors without undermining their self-esteem or self-efficacy. As a result, players with a high degree of PPGO do not feel inferior to others, and thus may not be motivated to put in more effort. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5<sub>a</sub>: Players' PPGO has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between coaches' dominance-focused AL behavior and players' effort.

H5<sub>b</sub>: Players' PPGO has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between coaches' discipline-focused AL behavior and players' effort.

## Methods

### Participants

We collected questionnaire data from 16 college baseball teams from the amateur first tier and 4 teams from the second tier of the Taiwanese University Baseball League. We chose the 20 teams according to the advice of one of the authors, who coaches both the U18 Taiwanese team and one of the league teams. After eliminating unqualified questionnaires, we collected 348 surveys in total. The participants were all male college students aged 18-23. The average length of time they had been playing baseball was 9.88 years, indicating that all of them had received professional training since elementary school. The average length of time working with the coach was 1.64 years, indicating that all of the players were familiar with their coach's leadership style.

### Procedure

The study was conducted at two time points. At the first time point, we measured players' perceptions of their coach's AL, players' goal orientation, control variables, and demographic variables. After 3 months, we measured

players' effort. To match the two questionnaires, we asked the players to provide the same demographic information at both time points.

## Measures

*Authoritarian leadership.* We adopted the short version of the authoritarian leadership scale developed by Chou and Cheng (2014). The scale contains 14 items, including 6 dominance-focused AL items and 8 discipline-focused AL items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the two types of AL is .88 and .90, respectively.

*Effort.* We adapted the 10-item scale developed by Brown and Leigh (1996). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is .90.

*Goal orientation.* We adapted the scale developed by VandeWalle (1997) to measure players' goal orientation. The 13-item scale includes 5 LGO items, 4 PPGO items, and 4 APGO items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values for the three sub-dimensions are .87, .82, and .82, respectively.

*Control variables.* We included age, length of time playing baseball, and length of time working with the coach as control variables in our model.

## Results

Before examining our hypotheses, we checked the distinctiveness of our variables by performing confirmatory factor analysis (CFI) using LISREL 8.71.

The results of the CFA are presented in Table 1. The results for the six-factor model ( $\chi^2(174, N = 348) = 795.06, p < .00; CFI = .91; NNFI = .89; RMSEA = .10; SRMR = .08$ ) were much better than those for the one-factor model ( $\chi^2(183, N = 348) = 1749.10; p < .00; CFI = .77; NNFI = .74; RMSEA = .18; SRMR = .15$ ). In sum, we concluded that our variables were distinguishable from each other because the six-factor model provided the best fit to the data.

Table 2 presents the descriptive analysis and correlation analysis. The correlation between the two kinds of AL was not significant, which is contrary to the result of Chou et al. (2010), who found a weak but significant positive correlation between the two kinds of AL. A possible explanation is the rising influence of modernization. Specifically, we argue that due to the rise of modernization, the young generation can more clearly distinguish between the two kinds of AL than the older generation, making the relationship non-significant.

Because the players are nested in the baseball teams, we created a hierarchical model. First, we examined the assumption of the independence of the dependent variable. The ICC1 of effort was .05, which is smaller than .12 (Bliese, 2000), indicating that the dependent variable does not violate the assumption of independence. Therefore, we could adopt the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS to analyze our data and examine our hypotheses. The results of the hypotheses testing are

**Table 1. Results of CFA ( $N = 348$ )**

Model	$\chi^2$	$df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	NNFI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Six factors	800.44	174	--	--	.89	.91	.08	.10
Five factors (combined PPGO and APGO)	985.25	179	184.81*	5	.86	.88	.09	.12
Five factors (combined dominance-focused AL and discipline-focused AL)	1564.66	179	764.22*	5	.76	.80	.15	.17
Four factors (combined PPGO and APGO; dominance-focused AL and discipline-focused AL)	1749.01	183	1780.05*	9	.74	.77	.15	.17
Four factors(combined three goal orientations)	1181.48	183	381.04*	9	.83	.86	.10	.12
Three factors(combined PPGO and APGO; dominance-focused AL and discipline-focused AL)	1941.37	186	1140.93*	12	.71	.75	.16	.18
One factor	2680.59	189	1880.15*	15	.60	.64	.17	.21

\*  $p < .05$ .



**Table 2. Results of correlation analysis (N = 348)**

	Average	SD	Length of working with the coach	Length of playing baseball	Dominance- focused AL	Discipline- focused AL	Players' efforts	LGO	APGO	PPGO
<b>Control variable</b>										
Length of working with the coach	1.64	1.37	--							
Length of playing baseball	9.88	2.34	.33**	--						
<b>Variables</b>										
Dominance-focused AL	3.02	1.03	.07	.03	(.88)					
Discipline-focused AL	4.63	.83	.12*	.13*	.02	(.90)				
Players' efforts	4.37	.67	.06	.15*	-.03	.21**	(.90)			
LGO	4.94	.67	-.01	.13*	.00	.24**	.59**	(.87)		
APGO	4.13	.96	.09	.02	.07	.10	.21**	.17**	(.82)	
PPGO	4.75	.75	.03	.05	.07	.26**	.31**	.52**	.39**	(.82)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are internal consistency reliability.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

presented in Tables 3 and 4.

We used a block regression to test our hypotheses. In the first stage, we entered all of the control variables into the regression model ( $F = 4.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $R^2 = .03$ ; adjusted  $R^2 = .02$ ). In the second stage, we entered the two types of AL simultaneously ( $F = 6.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $R^2 = .07$ ; adjusted  $R^2 = .06$ ). Contrary to our prediction, dominance-focused AL had no effect on players' effort ( $\beta = -.02$ , n.s.), while discipline-focused AL had a significant effect on players' effort ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, H1 is not supported, but H2 is supported.

We used the PROCESS macro to examine our hypotheses regarding the mediating effect. Specifically, we adopted model 1 to examine the moderating effect using 5,000 bootstrapping sets with sampling and replacement. The results in Tables 3 and 4 do not support H3a and H3b because LGO has no moderating effect on either relationship. Next, APGO negatively moderated the relationship between discipline-focused AL and players' effort, but had no moderating effect on the relationship between dominance-focused AL and players' effort. Thus, H4a is not supported, but H4b is supported. Finally,

PPGO positively moderated the relationship between dominance-focused AL and players' effort and negatively moderated the relationship between discipline-focused AL and players' effort. Therefore, H5a and H5b are both supported. The significant moderating effects are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

## Discussion

This study examined whether a coach's strict leadership behavior can promote players' effort. We adopted the two-dimensional authoritarian leadership theory to deduce our hypotheses. The results show that dominance-focused AL had no effect on players' effort, while discipline-focused AL had a significant positive effect on it. With regard to the moderating effect, even though both hypotheses relating to PPGO were supported, we found no support for either of the LGO hypotheses and one of the APGO hypotheses. In sum, although some hypotheses were not supported, this study contributes to the literature on AL by applying the two-dimensional AL theory to the field of sports teams. In addition, we propose

**Table 3. PROCESS analysis result of Players' effort (N = 348)**

Dependent variable : Players' effort	M1		M2		M3		M4		M5		M6	
<b>Constant term</b>	1.93**	(.91)	.70	(1.4)	3.51**	(.85)	.24	(1.14)	4.01**	(.92)	-1.10	(1.37)
<b>Control variables</b>												
Length of working with the coach	.03	(.03)	.02	(.03)	-.01	(.03)	-.02	(.03)	.00	(.03)	-.01	(.03)
Length of playing baseball	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)	.03*	(.01)	.03*	(.01)	.03*	(.01)	.03*	(.01)
<b>Predict variables</b>												
Dominance-focused AL	-.17	(.21)			-.14	(.12)			-.51**	(.18)		
Discipline-focused AL			.12	(.25)			.60**	(.18)			.78**	(.24)
<b>Moderators</b>												
LGO	.50**	(.13)	.66**	(.24)								
APGO					.06	(.09)	.66**	(.21)				
PPGO									-.01	(.12)	.90**	(.24)
<b>Interaction effect</b>												
Dominance-focused AL X LGO	.03	(.04)										
Discipline-focused AL X LGO			-.01	(.05)								
Dominance-focused AL X APGO					.02	(.03)						
Discipline-focused AL X APGO							-.11*	(.04)				
Dominance-focused AL X PPGO									.10*	(.03)		
Discipline-focused AL X PPGO											-.14**	(.05)
<b>Overall R<sup>2</sup></b>	.37**		.36**		.07**		.11**		.14**		.14**	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .**Table 4. Results of moderator analysis (N = 348)**

Independent and dependent variables	Moderator					
	LGO		APGO		PPGO	
	$\beta$	Confidence interval	$\beta$	Confidence interval	$\beta$	Confidence interval
Dominance-focused AL (IV)- Players' efforts (DV)						
Moderate effect	.03	(-.05, .11)	.02	(-.03, .08)	.10*	(.02, .17)
High(+1SD)	--	--	--	--	.04	(-.04, .12)
Low(-1SD)	--	--	--	--	-.11*	(-.19, -.02)
Discipline-focused AL(IV)- Players' efforts(DV)						
Moderate effect	-.01	(-.11, .08)	-.11*	(-.19, -.02)	-.14**	(-.24, -.04)
High(+1SD)	--	--	.05	(-.05, .16)	.01	(-.12, .11)
Low(-1SD)	--	--	.25*	(.13, .36)	.20*	(.09, .31)

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

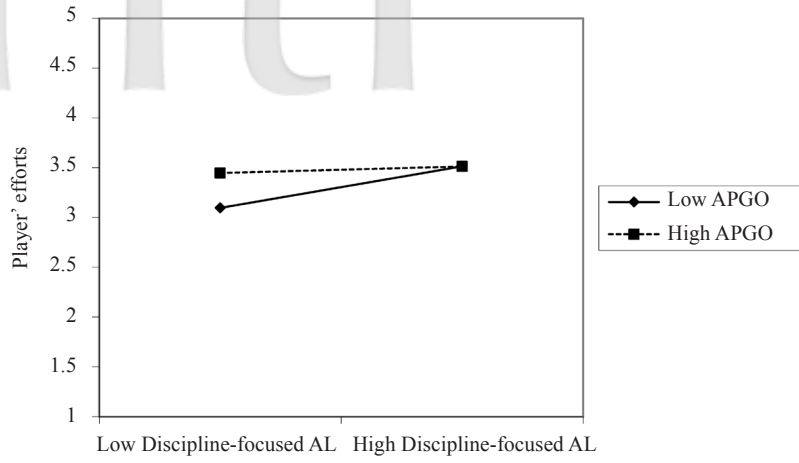


Figure 1. APGO moderates the relationship between discipline-focused AL and players' efforts

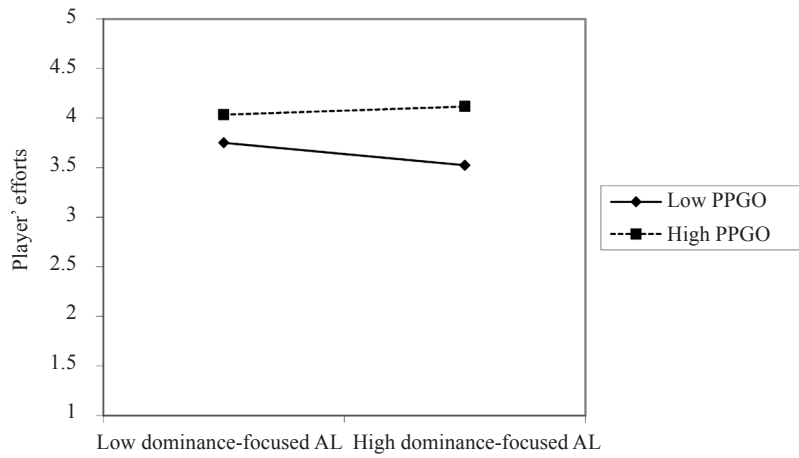


Figure 2. PPGO moderates the relationship between dominance-focused AL and players' efforts

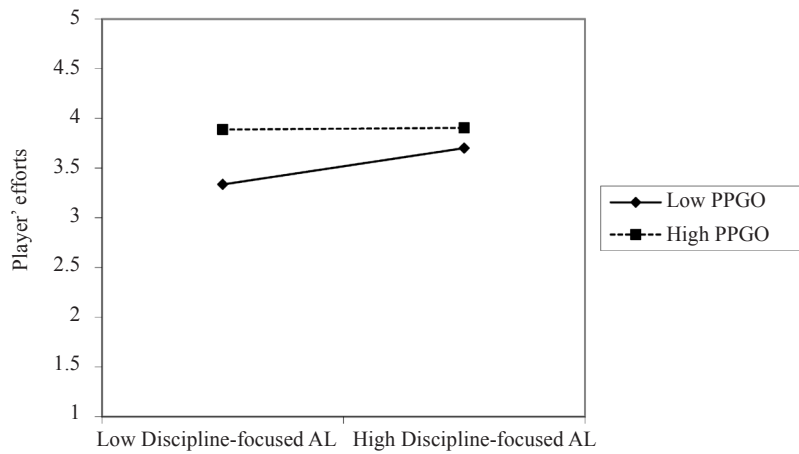


Figure 3. PPGO moderates the relationship between discipline-focused AL and players' efforts



goal orientation as a moderator, and thus cast light on the mechanism of the two-dimensional AL theory.

This study contributes to sports team research both practically and theoretical. From a theoretical perspective, it provides evidence that strict leadership behavior can lead to positive outcomes. Following the perspective of contingency theory, we also cast light on the boundary condition of coaching leadership style.

With regard to practice, this study provides a guideline for coaches to promote players' effort. Specifically, coaches should adapt the appropriate level of strict leadership behavior according to players' goal orientations.

Despite the abovementioned contributions, some of our results were contrary to our predictions. First, the main effect of dominance-focused AL was not significant. A possible explanation is that in a sports team, which is characterized as task-oriented, the coach can legitimately execute dominance-focused AL because players are more tolerant to such behavior. Second, the moderating effect of LGO was not significant. An explanation is the motivational climate of the teams. In fact, the first tier is very competitive, creating a PGO climate within the team. As a result, even though players were high in LGO, they were influenced by the PGO climate within the team and tended to interpret the coach's behavior from the perspective of PGO. Third, APGO had no significant effect on the relationship between dominance-focused

AL and players' efforts. A possible explanation is that other coaches may play an important role. Specifically, we only measured the leadership style of the head coach. Therefore, although the head coach's dominance-focused AL may have decreased players' effort, other coaches may have provided social support that buffered the negative effect of dominance-focused AL.

The study was, however, not without limitations. First, we chose baseball players as our participants. Thus, further studies are needed to examine whether our conclusions can be generalized to other sports teams. Second, all of our participants were male. Previous studies on AL have identified gender as an important factor influencing the effectiveness of AL (Lin & Cheng, 2007). Thus, whether our conclusions can be generalized to female players and coaches needs to be examined in future studies. Third, we collected all of the data from the same source, so common method variance may be a concern (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, as the CFA results showed that the hypothesized model was better than the one-factor model, we argue that common method variance did not affect the measurement validity. In addition, according to Chang, van Witteloostuijn, and Eden (2010), non-linear relationships are unlikely to be significant when the effect of common method variance is great enough. Because our moderated-mediation model was significant, it is reasonable to claim that common method variance was not a concern in our study.