Winning Formula, Man Management and the Inner Game: Commonalities of Success in the Ryder Cup and Super Bowl

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

As scientist-practitioners with a strong interest in elite team leadership/management, we were grateful for the opportunity to read Simon Jenkins' stimulus paper. As an early point of clarification, we do not see that leadership and management are distinct constructs; at least not in an operational sense. Instead, and as we and others have considered before [1, 2], we see that leaders manage and managers lead [3], with the major issue being that such stylistic and procedural differences are used appropriately rather than as a distinct and consistent style; in short, doing the right thing in the right way at the right time [cf. 4, 5]. As such, we are less concerned with what these individuals are called (by themselves or others) and more so on what they actually *do* and *when* – as set by their professional judgment and decision making (hereafter PJDM). Pairing this spirit with Jenkins' impetus for critical discussion, our contribution is consequently built on two parts: In the first, we outline some key considerations for knowledge transfer from other fields to elite sport in the context of 'day-to-day' leadership; in the second, we offer additional perspective on some actions that seemed to underpin Paul McGinley's success. In doing so, we hope to stimulate continued discussion and highlight some emerging consistencies within elite team leadership research and practice.

FROM BUSINESS TO SPORT: THE NEED FOR A CRITICAL EYE

While research and practice in sport has profited from business-based knowledge [6, 7], there are inevitably, of course, certain features that transfer should meet for *optimal* relevance and impact (whether between business, sport, or any other domain). We see that such transfer relies on two broad features: 1) thorough and critical evaluation of the evidence underpinning the external knowledge (i.e., is it theoretically sound and practically meaningful in its field of origin?); and 2) subsequent empirical research and refinement of this knowledge *for* sport to establish/exploit its specificity [8]. It is in this light that we are unsure on the precise merits of much of the business/other literature quoted in Jenkins' article (for sport *or* business).

Indeed, although motivational idioms and 'one line philosophies' are attractive due to their simplicity and positive connotations, their use for investigating and guiding *day-to-day* practice is highly questionable. Take, for example, the cited quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

"The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done; and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling while they do it." While defined by an undeniably influential figure, there is a real danger in elite team leaders taking such *general* themes from other contexts and uncritically basing their *specific* work on them. More specifically, elite team leaders have already reported that "meddling" with their staff and performers – at the right time, in the right way, with the right set up – is in fact a key success factor [4]. This difference continues when considering the presented views of Mitch McCrimmon, such as "the purpose of leadership is to promote a new direction". In this case, evidence also exists on the need for these figures to possess much more than transformational skills, with success also deemed to rely on leadership behaviours that protect the status quo; including those of a 'dark' nature [4]. Finally, and contradicting the quoted view of Ibarra that authenticity is "the gold standard for leadership", we also know that elite team leaders, at specific points, deliberately use behaviours that do *not* fit their values and beliefs to achieve ultimate goals [9].

In sum, while decisive advice from respected figures is appealing, it is not, as evidence suggests, sufficiently accurate or impactful: nor we suggest was it ever meant to be in the vast majority of cases (the growth of Twitter philosophy notwithstanding!). Unfortunately, however, a mix of assured individuals/bodies who are 'quick to tell' and audiences who are 'quick to listen/follow' mean that Hume's 'is-ought' problem is still highly relevant for elite sport (i.e., because that champion *is* doing that, I *ought* to as well [10]). Indeed, without appreciating *why* and *how* leaders assess, select, combine, and deliver actions against short, medium, and long term goals, then we will remain mired by the "great man"/reductionist paradigm where one approach/style/individual is judged (or chased) as *the* approach/style/individual. Consequently, consideration of leaders' PJDM is imperative. Against the backdrop of our first section, we now offer some additional perspectives on the stimulus paper that resonate with recent work in elite team leadership.

PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Firstly, it seems that McGinley's success *was* underpinned by effective PJDM [11-13]. For example, we see that McGinley undertook a detailed assessment of the challenge so that his subsequent work harnessed the established culture/'template' yet was modified for the present (and different!) situation; revolving around a focus on "attitude" as well as "passion". Indeed, intentions on what and how to enhance the 'system' seemed to be based on a careful triangulation of data; including the work of prior captains, views of informed stakeholders (i.e., players' caddies, coaches, and managers), insights of external experts (i.e., Sir Alex Ferguson et al.), and player personalities. In contrast to 'blanket mantras' and 'do it *this* way' philosophies, we thereby see evidence for the development of a bespoke solution for a bespoke task. In fact, McGinley's approach suggests that even uncritical transfer *within* the same sport and competition is inappropriate, let alone between different sports/competitions and from business to sport!

With a thorough appreciation of the team's needs, it also seems that McGinley's ensuing plan was nested in nature; another pillar of effective PJDM [14]. More specifically, McGinley's moment-to-moment decisions and actions appeared locked to his short, medium *and* long term intentions; subsequently supporting consistency and impact. The ostensibly advanced planning of intentions against hypothesized scenarios was perhaps best evidenced in McGinley's call to leave it "until Saturday night [ahead of the last day of play] to get Lee Westwood to deliver his speech, being the most experienced in the room among the players and even all the vice-captains". As a final feature of PJDM and expertise, McGinley also

alluded to 'fox-like' monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation [15, 16]; in doing so, embracing complexity, creating a strong declarative base for decisions, and 'rolling with the changes':

> When the morning session was on, I was planning the move for the afternoon . . . . Are we still on course for this plan, how is he doing, how is he playing, does he look good? If we don't, what are our options, what do we do?

Thus, we see further evidence that the reflection (and evaluation) of elite team leaders/managers is best done against their nested intentions and the theoretically/empirically grounded methodologies that they apply to achieve these [11].

POWER SHARING

Another empirically-supported aspect of McGinley's work was his sharing of power with core stakeholders [9, 17, 18]. Indeed, McGinley seemed acutely aware of stakeholders' power and motivations, including the need for consequent respect, consultation, and shared ownership. For instance, regular visits and phone calls to players, interaction with players' caddies, coaches, and managers, use of prior captains and current vice-captains, and setting up structures that allowed appropriate freedom and player leadership all seemingly worked to create a *managed* 'to and fro' of control [18]. Beyond enabling a collective approach, such two-way interaction can also help to limit possible frustration, disagreement and conflict. Perhaps conveying this point most clearly was McGinley's use of a 5th vice-captain (another 'tweak' to the 'template') to support the expectations and practice needs of the four players left out of the main session; a scenario where the management of player emotions and opinions would have been crucial for sustaining individual and group morale [19, 20].

INTERACTING WITH THE MEDIA

A final feature of McGinley's work that we highlight here was his interaction with the media. Given their potential to shape the functioning and success of elite teams, management of the media is viewed as an important feature of modern elite team leadership [9, 17]. In this sense, McGinley appeared to have played this 'game' well via the nature and coherence of his discourse. For example, modest, measured, politically sensitive and positive communication, which aligned to his actions, was invariably 'controversy-free' and widely bought into by the media (as shown by broad positive reporting). In this way, McGinley seemed to have a clear awareness of the media roles, agendas, and influence, as shown in this quote given before the Ryder Cup:

> I was very tempted to speak up [about my potential to be appointed captain] . . . . [but] I stepped back and watched the story grow legs . . . . The players were speaking for me . . . . and when I had that support I didn't need to speak. One thing I've learned is the power of Twitter. [21]

CONCLUSION

Although we have reservations on messages provided in Jenkins' lead article, on both conceptual and applied levels, this work has nonetheless given additional useful impetus in an evolving area. More specifically, we see that further weight has been added to the need for a critical approach to knowledge transfer as well as a focus on PJDM, power, and management of the media in elite team leadership theory and practice. We hope that scholars and practitioners continue on these lines and help the field to move beyond its historical focus on leader personality and 'bright and fluffy behaviours'.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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