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12 "Caught in the headlights": A reflective account of the challenges faced by a neophyte practitioner

13 working with a national squad

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Abstract

This article provides a neophyte practitioner's account of providing psychological support to a

national team for the first time. The practitioner felt "caught in the headlights" due to their lack of

preparation for the range of organizational issues they encountered. In this confessional tale,

experiential knowledge gained by the practitioner is shared through the presentation of self-

reflections from the 6-month period they supported the squad. While the practitioner's time with this

national squad was limited, it gave him a sense of the micropolitical landscape of the sporting

organization and illuminated some of the complexities and dilemmas that characterize applied sport

psychology practice. These reflections are offered to guide other aspiring professionals during their

initial training experiences.

Key words: training and development, micropolitical landscape, preparation, national team,

organizational stress.

40   **Context**

41   This case study presents an account of the sport psychology support delivered to a

42   national team over the course of six months. At the time, I (the First Author) was a neophyte

43   practitioner, a few months into my supervised practice following the British Psychological

44   Society (BPS) Stage 2 route to accreditation. While I had initial experiences working in

45   collegiate sport, this was my first exposure to a national-level squad. Throughout this

46   process, I was guided by BPS code of conduct and ethical standards and engaged with regular

47   individual and group supervision.

48   **Consulting Philosophy**

49   My consulting philosophy in the early stages of practice was heavily influenced by

50   my academic experience. During the completion of my Master's degree in Sport and Exercise

51   Psychology, I placed an emphasis on the importance of understanding and developing a

52   philosophical approach to being an effective practitioner. As outlined by Poczwardowski,

53   Sherman and Ravizza (2004), understanding personal and professional philosophy is among

54   the essential prerequisites to effective and ethical practice. Having gained applied experience

55   working in collegiate sport, I had begun to experience greater efficacy in adopting a role as

56   the sport psychologist whereby my focus was understanding, assisting, and supporting the

57   development of the whole person and not just the athlete (cf. Rogers, 1951). I centred my

58   approach on the relationship I could develop with my client(s) and aimed to provide a service

59   characterized by authenticity, demonstrating unconditional positive regard, and showing

60   empathy (see Rogers, 1951; Mearns et al., 2013). I deliberately focused on developing

61   relationships that were collaborative, accepting, genuine, and honoured the unique world in

62   which my client(s) lived (Ivey et al., 2013). With this, my consulting philosophy aligned

63   closely with person-centered principles, which had shifted from earlier in my training, when I

64   would experience a sense of competence and satisfaction from adopting a more direct

65   approach and felt anxious to provide client(s) with solutions to demonstrate my knowledge

66   and worth. At the time of this case, I found greater satisfaction in acting as a facilitator,

67   following the clients higher order directions, on a journey towards self-actualization. The

68   challenges faced as the practitioner in this case led me to question my person-centered

69   professional philosophy.

70   **The Case**

71   I was asked to provide psychology support to a national team in a relatively new

72   discipline within the sport. The coaches had recently formed a skeleton support team, which

73   they sought to expand to include "performance psychology" support in their hope of

74   "creating a more holistic coaching structure". I was initially very surprised to be given a

75   chance to lead the sport psychology support to national-level athletes given my lack of

76   experience in this setting, yet I was eager to develop and felt competent enough to work in

77   this setting under supervision. Moreover, the embryonic stage of development within the new

78   discipline of the sport meant the work was only appropriate for neophytes given the limited

79   funding available to the team. I met the coaches and athletes for the first time during a

80   selection weekend, where the head coach invited me to "get a feel" for the new discipline.

81   At the time of my first exposure to the squad, they were halfway through the season

82   and the athletes' collective aim was to "compete at an international level". The head coach

83   mentioned a few of the athletes had "struggled psychologically over the first half of the

84   season", hence his desire to "bring in a practitioner" to work with the squad. I was keen to

85   explore this further and asked the head coach to talk through what he expected from sport

86   psychology support. During this conversation, the coach named several psychological

87   concepts (e.g., resilience, confidence, managing pressure) he wanted me to "cover in some

88   workshops with the athletes". Psychological support was something that, from the

89   perspective of the head coach, occurred away from the training environment and was

90   independent of the coach's work. I foresaw this being a problem and raised the benefits of

91   working with and through coaches as an emersed member of the coaching team, but this was

92   dismissed immediately by the head coach. This dismissal from the coach took me by surprise.

93   I felt uneasy, unsure whether to challenge this view, as I worried doing so would jeopardise

94   my opportunity to work in elite sport before it had really begun. A further problem I

95   identified was the limited face-to-face contact time with the coaches and athletes. The head

96   coach explained the only opportunity to meet with support staff and athletes would be at

97   training camps which took place once every two months. I felt this delivery structure

98   presented a challenge to me building rapport and momentum with the staff and athletes. I

99   started to feel that the attitude toward sport psychology services may have been to provide a

100   "quick fix" reflected by "token" workshops and superficial athlete screening. I started to

101   question myself, my beliefs about "good practice", and doubted the impact I could have with

102   such limited integration and time with the squad. Despite these challenges, I was "caught in

103   the headlights" of opportunity and determined to make it work and provide a service that

104   could be built around a seemingly rigid programme. I hoped to expand the sport psychology

105   service, take the head coach on a journey, and embed "good psychology" after "getting my

106   foot in the door".

107   I spent a total of six months working with the squad, and in that time, I attended four

108   weekend training camps. To appease the wishes of the head coach, for these camps I would

109   deliver a one-to-one "check-in" session with each athlete followed by a team workshop at

110   each of the upcoming training camps. The remit for the workshops was that I was to cover

111   specific topics: coping with competition anxiety, performing under pressure, resilience, and

112   leadership. Emerging from a seemingly rigid and "token" view of psychological support, I

113   reflected on my poor "contracting", low contact time, organizational demands, as well as the

114   attraction of working with a national team that led to my collusion with a limited view of

115   psychological support.

Relationships, Rapport and Contracting

117   **Phase 1. Assessment.** I was invited to attend a training weekend mid-way through the

118   season. All 15 athletes in the squad and 4 support staff attended, which represented a great

119   chance to immerse myself within the culture of the team, undertake some observations, and

120   have some conversations to support a needs analysis that could span individual, team, and

121   organizational levels. Developing an extensive assessment process allows for the collection

122   and integration of a variety of data sources that enable a thorough analysis of the needs of

123   individuals, teams, and organizations (see Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020).

124   I arrived at the camp for my first day with some eagerness expecting to familiarize

125   myself with the environment. Yet on arrival the head coach informed me that he had arranged

126   one-to-one consultations with every athlete, each lasting 45 minutes. I was immediately

127   aware that I had not "contracted" effectively, feeling like I was not in control of the service I

128   was providing, and uncertain regarding what other surprises I might encounter. I was directed

129   by the head coach to a room where I would conduct athlete one-to-ones, which was a small

130   box room to the side of the training centre, where the athletes would "be sent" throughout the

131   day "to see me". I suggested to the head coach it would be useful for me to observe the

132   athletes in their training environment before having a session with them, but the coach was

133   sceptical about the value of me doing so. In line with person-centered principles (Mearns et

134   al., 2013), I approached the one-to-one athlete sessions with a "stripped down" aim to build

135   rapport and lay the foundations for open and honest conversations. To support the athlete in

136   exploring their own journey, I used McAdams's (1995) life story interview method to invite

137   each athlete to assume the role of storyteller of their life up to the present moment. By doing

138   so, we were able to explore life chapters, critical events, and life challenges, and how these

139   may have impacted the athlete (McAdams, 1995). The use of life interviews is well supported

140   in the sport psychology literature (Smith et al., 2016) and I felt this method sat well within

141   my emerging philosophy of practice.

142   Reflecting on the assessment phase, I felt I could have contracted more effectively

143   with the head coach on the importance of a thorough needs analysis. Not wanting to "rock the

144   boat", I went along with what the coach had planned and his vision for psychological support.

145   As I did not challenge the head coach, I experienced feelings of inauthenticity in our early

146   exchanges and felt discomforted trying to "fit" myself into their environment. I experienced

147   similar feelings to those reported by Wadsworth et al. (2021), where I experienced a sense of

148   wearing clothes that do not fit, that my work just does did not feel right, with these thoughts

149   being accompanied with symptoms of anxiety and frustration. At this time, I recalled

150   literature reporting trainee experiences of working in elite sport, and the many practitioner

151   accounts relating to knowing when and how to appropriately challenge others in sport

152   (McDougal et al., 2015; Champ et al., 2020). I share the reflections of Cruickshank et al.

153   (2013), where elite sport organizations can be asserted as ruthless, totalitarian, with unique

154   distributions of power, so practitioners must carefully consider when to challenge and when

155   to refrain. I felt frustrated with myself and I became hesitant to ask for support and I avoided

156   challenging the head coach. I did later raise this challenging relationship in supervision, but

157   on camp I felt I had to "crack on" and "get stuck in". Indeed, I was never able to establish a

158   good rapport with the head coach because our conversations were brief, formal, and task-

159   focused, and despite my attempts, the coach was not open to working collaboratively to build

160   a more meaningful working relationship. I was – and remained – an outsider.

161   Reflecting on the process of meeting athletes back-to-back, I was mentally and

162   emotionally fatigued, especially as I had no time in between meetings reflect on the previous

163   consultation and write up notes. Feeling drained, I questioned my own self-care and was later

164   disappointed that I prioritized the wellbeing of others before looking after myself. I felt the

165   quality of the sessions deteriorated as the day progressed, and by the last few, was simply

166   "getting through" them with my ability to actively engage in the session compromised and

167   resulting in a lack of individuality. I was frustrated with myself for allowing this to happen

168   and resolved to change approach. First, I attempted to observe the athletes in training, aiming

169   to further develop my nascent relationships and build an understanding of their individual

170   needs (Fifer et al., 2008). Second, I strove to engage in informal conversations with athletes

171   throughout the weekend. What I craved was to be meaningfully embedded within the system

172   I was supporting and the opportunity to establish credibility and effective relationships. Yet,

173   this may have been an unrealistic expectation given the lack of contact time with the squad,

174   my 'outsider' status, and the difficulties encountered when contracting with the head coach.

175   **Phase 2.** *Mutual Sharing with Athletes*. During our initial one to one conversations,

176   athletes raised with me concerns relating to the culture and the environment of the team.

177   Some athletes described feeling "disconnected" from the sport and experienced moral

178   disengagement due the behaviours of the staff (Guvendi & Isim, 2019). The athletes

179   continued to raise issues relating to the structure of sessions, which they perceived to be

180   wholly coach-led and "incompatible" with their own desires and beliefs (Jowett & Cockerill,

181   2002). I explored these themes with the coaches in a sensitive manner, seeking their

182   perspective and conscious of managing any countertransference given my own personal

183   uneasiness with the head coach. Contrary to the athletes' opinions, the coaches were adamant

184   that there were no issues with the team culture and no need to pay attention to these concerns.

185   Collectively, the coaching team insisted I should deliver the workshop on "coping with

186   competition anxiety" and as I felt I had not built a close rapport with coaches, and in a

187   position of subordination unable to challenge their position, I proceeded to deliver the

188   session.

189   At the start of my workshop on "coping with competition anxiety" with the athletes, I

190   perceived some unrest and palpable tension among the athletes, with one individual declaring

191   he was finding it hard to focus on the content when there was a "cloud hanging over the

192   group". The athlete continued, stating that he believed there had been a breakdown in

193   communication between the athletes and coaches over the last few months. These disputes

194   were not only caused by unmet expectations and disagreements about training content

195   (Kristiansen et al., 2012), but also by individual behaviours, such as coaches' rigid and

196   autocratic leadership (Gearity & Metzger, 2017). These views were shared by most of the

197   athlete group and they expressed collective difficulty in focusing on the topic of the session. I

198   felt ethically compelled to provide a space for the athletes to talk to the issues they disclosed.

199   From my philosophical stance, the client is a person first and athlete second, so I used the

200   session to listen to their concerns regarding the coaches, rather than delivering what I now

201   felt would be a superficial, misaligned, and ultimately incongruent workshop. While there is

202   evidence in the current literature to indicate that conflict is likely to occur at some point

203   within the context of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett, 2003), there is only little

204   evidence-based information available on how coaches and athletes practically approach

205   interpersonal disputes (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Exploring interpersonal strategies, I felt an

206   appropriate first step would be to create a space where the athletes could begin to self-

207   regulate by offering time and opportunity to vent their frustration (Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

208   Undertaking two-chair work; with one acting as the coach and the other the athlete, I asked

209   the athlete to pose concerns and questions to each other to help look at the challenges from

210   different perspectives. The aim of this task was to create a space where the athletes could

211   'feel heard', and gain perspective on the situation (Bell et al., 2020). Concerns where shared

212   in this task regarding transparency, trust, support, people management, organization,

213   feedback, and lack of positive reinforcement from the coaches.

214   Having facilitated an ad hoc team self-disclosure session (Holt & Dunn, 2006), and

215   not delivered anything on "coping with competition anxiety", my concern was what to do

216   with the information I had been given and my anxiety heightened with the thought that I had

217   potentially "fanned the flames" of discontent between the coaches and athletes. I did try to

218   anonymously share with the coaches a few of the points raised by the athletes, hoping that

219   this honesty and openness would resonate with them and they might experience greater

220   empathy with the athletes (Jowett et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the coaches were dismissive of

221   the athletes concerns and in response placed the blame for such sentiments on the athletes.

222   One of the technical coaches stated, "that's typical of them, they can't be trusted", with the

223   head coach adding in response, "if they took more control nothing would get done".

224   On reflection on this phase of the programme, I became increasingly frustrated with

225   the coaches' lack of receptivity to my challenges or ideas, and there were times when I

226   questioned whether they took me seriously. Specifically, I ruminated over whether my

227   "trainee" status meant they saw me exclusively as an inexperienced, novice practitioner who

228   they could dictate to. I started wondering if my presence was exclusively a symbolic attempt

229   to show care for the athletes. I felt in a difficult position, attempting to appease the head

230   coach who had provided me with the opportunity, while recognizing the ethical obligation

231   and duty of care to respect the athletes' concerns and advocating for them. There were times

232   when I questioned my worth and the impact I could have without greater traction with the

233   coaches. Throughout this process, I felt I was prioritizing the squad's needs and neglecting

234   my own self-care in this experience. At no point did I reflect on my own emotions and how

235   the situation was impacting my wellbeing. With the support of my supervisor, I reflected on

236   these events which led to some normalizing of my concerns and taking ownership of my self-

237   care. We debated whether I should continue with the opportunity, but I was determined to try

238   to make progress and remained drawn to the opportunity. I redesigned my next workshop for

239   the following training camp, which was intended to support athletes and coaches in

240   constructively sharing emotions (Evans et al., 2013).

241   **Phase 3.** *Team Reflections and Mutual Sharing with Coaches and Athletes*. Despite the

242   challenges faced during the first camp, I was optimistic that bringing the athletes and coaches

243   together for a session would be beneficial, to begin to clear the air rather than cover over the

244   emerging cracks. With athletes and staff sharing their concerns with me separately, I reflected

245   on the complexity of my role in the system and noted several areas such as the need to shape

246   interpersonal processes, enhancing communication skills, increasing coaching effectiveness,

247   promoting intra-team/-organization relationships via conflict management as possible areas to

248   explore (Langan et al., 2013). Regarding the most pressing concern of athlete-coach conflict,

249   I reflected on my role in the process, and considered the strengths of third-party interventions

250   to manage this conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2020). Guided by academic literature on managing

251   conflict, I sought to use my role as the practitioner in the system to enhance open channels of

252   communication and honesty, as well as providing support and offering assurance (Vealey,

253   2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2020). To enhance communication between athletes and staff, I

254   utilised a personal disclosure mutual sharing (PDMS) approach to enable athletes to have a

255   voice and share their thoughts and feelings (Holt & Dunn, 2006). When used judiciously, a

256   PDMS approach can enhance team closeness, understanding appreciation, and ultimately

257   foster increases in friendship identity (Dunn & Holt, 2004; Evans et al., 2013). Nevertheless,

258   adopting a PDMS approach with a group of individuals with strong views and limited trust

259   was a challenge. The athletes saw this session as an opportunity to vent, but the coaches

260   reacted to this and there was a battle for "airtime". This session evidenced some of the

261   micropolitical issues and social fractures present throughout the squad, with athletes and

262   coaches lacking congruence and empathy, and no sense of shared purpose or identity. What

263   surprised me was the lack of emphasis on enhancing self-awareness, ownership, and

264   responsibility, with the vision of the head coach focused on the "how", rather than the "what"

265   and 'why" (Conger & Kanungo, 1998).

266   Reflecting on my position and status as s a neophyte practitioner, I found it difficult to

267   manage so many different perspectives and opinions, and while the experience gave me a

268   sense of the micropolitical landscape of working in elite sport, I was overwhelmed. On

269   reflection, I perhaps should have foreseen how the disconnect between the athletes and

270   coaches would "play out" and might have undertaken the PDMS with smaller groups,

271   allowing one person to speak at a time. Towards the end of the session, I felt frustrated as the

272   session hadn't gone the way I had hoped. I started ruminating over the impact I could have

273   with a squad that was divided and questioned whether they needed someone with more

274   experience in elite sport. The period between this training weekend and the next camp was

275   challenging. On some days I wanted to call the head coach and say, "I'm sorry I'm going to

276   have to step away", and other days wanted to meet the challenge.

277   I took my experiences to my one-to-one and group supervision. The group helped put

278   the situation in perspective and while I felt permission to step away from the work, I decided

279   I would continue with the work, and that I would attempt to encourage the squad to reflect on

280   team values. I planned a session with the goal of developing a charter that both coaches and

281   athletes could refer to with general agreement on shared values, beliefs, and norms, while

282   acknowledging that subgroups existed (Wagstaff et al., 2017).

283   **Phase 4.** *Team Values, Identity, and "Crisis"*. On arrival to the next training

284   weekend, I was anxious about how the session would go. For this workshop, the aim was to

285   identify and build from a common ground between the athletes and coaches by exploring

286   their perceptions on team values. From the earlier needs analysis, many of the athletes didn't

287   feel "connected" to the squad and felt isolated at training weekends. Hence, there was a

288   collective support for the squad creating a team charter (Byrd & Luthy, 2010), identifying

289   what values the team might embrace, standards they would expect of each other, and what

290   behaviors needed to be shown to demonstrate these values. Considering a third-party

291   perspective on the system (Wachsmuth et al., 2020), I was conscious to facilitate without

292   imposing to ensure the charter emerged from the squad. Working together, athletes and

293   coaches identified numerous values, including respect, honesty, be the best you can, and have

294   fun. I felt they responded well to the session, and for the first time I left the weekend content

295   with the progress made and confident valuable changes could materialize. Unfortunately,

296   before I could attend another training camp, I was informed the team had been disbanded due

297   to a range of organizational and funding issues. During this abrupt ending I noted two

298   important reflections on this work: 1) the reality of working in elite sport is characterized by

299   high levels of intentional change due to stakeholder demands for sustained success (Fletcher

300   & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2015), and; 2) the precarious nature of sport psychology

301   work (Gilmore et al. 2018).

302   **Reflections on consulting philosophy and challenges faced**

303   **Challenge to congruence**

304   One of the main challenges I faced in this case was a dogmatic pursuit of, and

305   adherence to, my service philosophy. On meeting the squad, I was working from what I felt

306   was a coherent philosophy and adjusted my support according to norms and interactions with

307   coaches and athletes. Yet, at this stage of my development, perhaps it was more a matter of

308   having a theoretical philosophy that had not been challenged by the realities that were

309   presented in my practice environment. I felt that to work collaboratively and across varying

310   levels of the system would enable "good psychology" service delivery to occur, but in

311   retrospect, I did not contract effectively with the head coach or fully disclose these challenges

312   in supervision. Despite adhering to my core values and beliefs, it was not enough to be

313   effective with a squad in crisis (cf. Larsen, 2017). As I experienced these tensions, I became

314   frustrated with myself, wanting to try and work through problems while ensuring I adhered to

315   a professional philosophy, but not knowing how to do this. Whenever I reflected on the

316   experience of working with the squad, I started ruminating around the idea of not being good

317   enough, being a fraud, and needing to "know" more. My own group supervision supported

318   me throughout this time with a reflective space to share this experience, and my peers

319   supported me without judgement and pointed to the importance of self-care during this

320   difficult experience.

321   At times, my stubborn desire to show the squad I could rise to the challenge moved

322   me further away from my service philosophy, as I became anxious to find solutions. While

323   difficult to admit, my focus was more "internal" and concerned with proving my worth,

324   rather than "external" and on the needs of the squad (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995). With

325   this, it may have been an opportunity that came too soon for someone with little experience

326   of issues of organizational and team level challenges at a national level. I felt, and was,

327   "caught in the headlights", wanting to show my worth and excited by the prestige of working

328   with a squad at national level. On reflection, I may have been better placed approaching

329   difficult conversations with the head coach, trusting my instincts and, albeit to some degree

330   avoidantly, stepping away from the opportunity. As such, knowing my limits, looking after

331   myself, and help seeking are key learning points to take away from this experience.

332   **Micropolitical environment**

333   From the outset, it was evident that social fractures were present throughout the

334   squad. Athletes and coaches did not see "eye to eye", and I found it difficult to direct my

335   attention to several "logics" operating in the organization. The athletes mentioned a few

336   times that they felt a lack of control and would like more autonomy in planning sessions. The

337   senior athletes were more vocal on this and had asked for an athlete leadership group to

338   provide a greater athlete voice, yet this had been rejected on numerous occasions by the

339   coaches. I could begin to see the individuals in the group focused on their own interests and

340   desires, and this impacted the systems functioning when it came to collaboration and shared

341   vision (Gibson & Groom, 2018). If the coaches had transferred more responsibility to the

342   athletes, it may have helped empower them through ownership and accountability (Hodge et

343   al., 2014). Without this, the squad suffered from a "them" versus "us" outgroup approach and

344   lacked a sense of shared purpose and psychological safety. From a group dynamics

345   perspective (Martin et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2016), and particularly with regard to the social

346   environment, appropriate challenge may have been beneficial, but this was largely avoided

347   by most of the individuals in the environment in case conflict ensued.

348   Ultimately, there existed a lack of congruence between athletes and coaches and no

349   sense of shared purpose and identity. My hope that team values or a charter would provide

350   the foundation to develop a bond through the squad was misplaced without other fundamental

351   foundation stones and the team struggled to develop any continuity, meaning, distinctiveness

352   and sense of belonging (Thomas et al., 2017). Working in this system felt like a "dynamic

353   and fluid process of forging and re-forging alliances and working relationships" (Cassidy et

354   al., 2016, p. 60), and as a neophyte practitioner I found it difficult to read, initiate, and

355   respond to the inescapably political demands of the sporting workplace. Given the

356   requirements for sport psychologists to practice within such politicised contexts, it is perhaps

357   naïve to believe that they are somehow immune from the challenges and dilemmas that

358   accompany shared endeavours with others (Leftwhich & Leftwhich, 2005). This experience

359   has helped me reflect on the micro political components of power, conflict, and vulnerability

360   featured in day-to-day organizational life, and has advanced my understanding of some of the

361   more tacit and understated challenges that practitioners are likely to encounter working in

362   elite sport (Rowley et al., 2018).

363   **Final Thoughts**

364   While my time with this national squad was limited, it gave me a sense of the

365   micropolitical landscape of elite sporting organizations and enabled me to begin to

366   understand some of the complexities, nuances, and dilemmas of applied sport psychology

367   practice (Rowley et al., 2018). Before starting with the squad, I felt coherent in my service

368   philosophy, but by the end of this experience I recognized I was struggling to provide a

369   service I could be happy with. In some respect, at the start of this journey, I was putting too

370   much pressure on myself to label my practice and adhere to a "school" of psychology. While

371   having a theoretical framework to work from was important for my development, I felt I

372   needed to further reflect on my core beliefs and values and allow a philosophy and method to

373   emerge from that. Moreover, this experience reminded me of the importance of effective

374   contracting and having difficult conversations with key stakeholders, regardless of their

375   power or status.

376   My ambition when asked to provide support to this squad was to attempt to operate at

377   systemic or organizational level, with members of the whole organization rather than just

378   athletes, to attain and sustain successful outcomes (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Yet, in

379   hindsight this may have been an unrealistic expectation based on the challenges existing

380   throughout the squad and my preparedness for such work. On reflection, I may have ignored

381   some of the complexities associated with integrating myself into a high-performance

382   environment, and my eagerness to impress both parties clouded my judgement and drew me

383   away from the most pressing needs. As discussed by Larsen (2017), practitioners need to

384   integrate the notions of self-reflection and cultural sensitivity into their professional

385   philosophy when entering a professional sports organization, while keeping an eye on several

386   "logics" operating in the organization. With this, it is key neophytes do not expose

387   themselves to this type of context without clear contracting when entering a new service

388   delivery context and are clear in their approach to appropriately challenge individuals within

389 that system to avoid collusion. Moreover, it is important for practitioners to be aware of their

390 own limitations, engage in self-care, and show vulnerability in order to prioritize their own

391 wellbeing before helping others (Quartiroli et al., 2019).

392 **Key recommendations**

393 - For practitioners early in their development, it is important to reflect on what type of
394   practitioner they want to be, focusing on their core values and beliefs and allowing
395   their professional philosophy and method to emerge from such reflections.

396 - Contracting effectively with the key stakeholders should be prioritized when entering
397   a new service delivery context. It is important to establish clear reciprocal
398   expectations early on between the practitioner and stakeholders and return to such
399   issues repeatedly throughout one's practice.

400 - Rather than trying to 'solve' problems and offer solutions all at once, practitioners
401   should incrementally build momentum after careful formulation and an appreciation
402   of the complexity of the client or systemic needs.

403 - Sometimes it is just not the right "fit" or time in one's development. Practitioners
404   must reflect on the suitability of the practice context for their competence and
405   development. It is an important message to know that it is okay to show vulnerability
406   and admit to not having answers.

407 - Practitioners should prioritize self-care. Caring for clients' needs should not happen at
408   the cost of the practitioner's own wellbeing. Practitioners are strongly encouraged to
409   look after themselves first and foremost by adhering to self-care practices.

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