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Culture Change in a Professional Sports Team: Shaping Environmental Contexts and Regulating Power

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

I will build on Cruickshank et al. to highlight some coaches' challenges in attempting culture change in sport. Throughout, I offer most themes as possibilities, but I must begin with some disclosures. Leeds-Carnegie is my local team; it was, and still is, sponsored by my employer. The Dean of my faculty is on the Board of Directors and a previous Vice Chancellor had been Chairman. I watched them closely during 2008-2010, even writing match notes and attending coaches' briefings. As an experienced rugby coach, I was critical of the limited rugby they played and I made no secret of my view.

My experience concurs with the view that successful organisational change must attend to people's feelings [1]. This favours deploying a 'see-feel-change' approach, even where analysis and measurement are common. Others expand on 'feel', suggesting that sustainability follows an 'understand-believe-care-act' sequence [2]. Either way, Kotter and Cohen [1] remind us "...the central matter is never strategy, structure, culture or systems..." (p xii). In this commentary I will not directly discuss the key factor that supports change - meaningful progress [3]. However, this provides an inevitable backdrop; in sport, even one-off results can have peculiar resonance as indicators of progress. Allowing for all the shortcomings of retrospection, and of specific time cut-points, by May 2011 – just one season beyond the range of the paper - the club, having won just four Premiership games, was relegated back to the Championship and the coaches left.

WHY CHANGE?

For any initiative, it is always wise to begin by asking key questions. For example, was a culture change needed, possible or even likely to succeed? If change must happen, it makes sense that proponents formally articulate how new behaviours and practices will ensure better performance [4]. That is because evidence-based management suggests that effective change is rare [5] – most initiatives are 'fixes that fail' [6].

While a 70% failure rate is widely reported [7], this is a moveable feast; faced with exacting standards – like specific league standings (?) - most initiatives produce even poorer performance [5]. Worse, they bring potentially damaging, yet avoidable, consequences [8, 9]. Given the predictability of these consequences, it is wise that recruiters hold a deep understanding of what change entails and of the need to recruit coaches experienced in enacting effective change.

PRESENTING CHANGE

Coaches (I will also describe them as leaders) need to manage and reinforce the fragile, dynamic, (mis)understood, psychological concoction that culture represents. Existing literature [3, 7] proposes the need for a clear, functional and realisable perspective on the form and scale of change. Often the most realisable course is to first develop a clear view of what already works – and why - before moving to adaptation, rather than revolution. Of course, this implies adaptability on the part of the coach. Either way, employees need time to manage their emotional responses to the new order so they can see where they now fit [9], which explains - in part - the problems brought by overly hasty change.

Once employees sense their place in the new culture, coaches must help employees to develop new narratives – or ways of speaking - about the organisation. With the ‘up-down’ history of newly promoted clubs, it makes sense that coaches know how to move beyond the narrative of ‘survival-as-success’ as well as they might handle ‘second season syndrome’ or ‘sophomore syndrome’. Notwithstanding the primacy afforded to ‘survival’ of the (inanimate) club, employees’ need a vision that also proposes personal progress. Achieving only one part of this formula is problematic. Presenting a ‘bigger’ vision creates a sense of purpose, while personalising such a vision helps individuals to identify how their strengths complement it.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE LEADERS

The likelihood of successful change links to perceptions about the leaders themselves. There were many potential – and conflicting - perceptions about the new coaches at their appointment. Some noted rugby experience, others Premiership inexperience. Their records show long experience in an established, world-leading club, yet limited experience in emerging clubs. Others anticipated the coaches’ readiness for the Championship, while wondering if they could handle sequences of closely-spaced defeats and elusive ‘quick wins’ [7] that promotion to the Premiership might bring. Finally, perceptions change with results; beyond their capacity to bring self-doubt to players, results question or affirm any coaches’ repertoire, both in terms of how they can facilitate effective and creative match play while also handling complex man-management.

Leaders also have required, often overlooked, roles [10]. Their achievements reflect how well they manufacture an ‘in-group’ identity. In sport, this is ‘tested’ regularly in weekly team selection. With formidable forwards [11], and given that NB was an outstanding forward, the ‘in-group’ proposition seems relevant. It also underlines that coaches need to know how and when to re-induct people – or groups – who see themselves as becoming ‘outsiders’ [12].

In this regard, what ended in a two-season shortage of tries – especially among the backs - could have been an on-going cause of division. Competence is a central plank of identity and of confidence, so with 14 Premiership games before their first victory in 2009-2010, there were ample opportunities to question competence throughout the club. The rare selection of two of the most successful and experienced backs – Jason Strange and Henry Paul – created further doubt about the coaches’ openness to ideas other than their own.

These identity-affiliation issues may be even more complex, resulting in notions of ‘we’ and ‘they’, when ‘us’ is more desirable (Akerlof, cited in [10]). These notions may have facilitated opportunities for making unfavourable comparisons across the codes and within the union club. While the two rugby codes use the same facilities, each has distinctive expectations around recruitment, success, salaries and spectatorship. The coaches also said that the CEO – with an unrivalled record of success in rugby league and with Leeds Rhinos

- had 'total control', whereas he reported keeping his distance; unmanaged, this could raise questions about commitment and/or accountability. Further, given their shared club history the two new coaches may have been seen as cliquey. Employees – which includes other coaches - notice more about bosses than bosses notice about themselves [12].

COACH-PLAYER INTERACTIONS

The story proffered by a Specialist Coach - when players asked if they could drink after a match - illustrates doubts around what the new culture entailed. Given that almost two-thirds of 2009-2010 matches were lost, the coaches' questioning response created regular post-match opportunities to assess, and potentially add to doubt about, players' commitment. In the absence of such activities, rumination extends the poor psychological states that arise from setbacks on important projects [13].

Notwithstanding that no-one celebrates defeat, writers [3, 7] underline the singular importance of breaking the weariness and liminality that accompanies both the expectation and the reality of public setbacks/defeat. Following a win, the post-match will feel very different to losing, which helps to explain why early 'quick wins' are so important for reinforcing culture change [2]. Regardless of outcomes, post-match planning needs to be handled to: i) facilitate adaptive learning, ii) create roberance, and iii) reinforce the vision. Coaches also profit from this approach; it reminds them of the players' positive characteristics – seeing them being energised, excited, relaxed and humorous is important. Without this, the coaches' most recent view of the players may be of their losing countenance; slumped body postures makes it easy to conclude that poor conditioning is the root of losing. In this scenario problem-solving may focus on effort-based training, rather than strategic/tactical and skill-building approaches. The range of responses that coaches deploy in defeat can offer yet another yardstick of not only their technical repertoire, but also their understanding of athletes' needs.

Put together, this left me thinking about Benton's idea of the panopticon [14] - more often associated with Foucault [15] - where the many (prisoners) feel watched by the few (guards), even when it is not happening. Such watchfulness creates an environment of "continuous partial attention" [16, p. 36], even harming activities previously undertaken for intrinsically motivating reasons; another way to compromise the employees' inner working life' (IWL) [3]. In turn, IWL supports three essential behaviours: attention, engagement and intention to work hard. Identifying its profundity, the originators of this term note: "As inner working life goes, so goes the company" [3, p. 5].

The article prompted me to question how well any sports coaches appreciate the overwhelming power of negative emotions for behaviour in practice/training, capacity to learn skills or deploy decision-making. Amabile and Kramer [3, p. 20] recently reported how 28% of so-called 'small' negative events created 'big' harmful impacts – irrespective of the importance attached to the events - on the four components of IWL: creativity, productivity, work commitment and collegiality. Negative effects last for days, whereas positive effects are more short-lived.

Consistent with this, I noted that players offered only limited support to their most needy colleagues. Weakening the 'collegiality' of IWL further impedes creative, committed working [3]. Negative emotions also reduce capacity for proactivity [16], yet needy players were still required to be proactive by 'knocking on the door'. Worse, negative emotions impair verbal articulation, leaving potentially serious, yet avoidable, issues under-expressed. Further, intention aside, who knows what new, effective ideas this process left uncovered?

US General Colin Powell, cited in [9, p. 9], commented: "The day soldiers stop bringing

you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” Instead, Cruickshank et al. seem to suggest that the focus was more on environmental restructuring, leaving the austere social architecture unaddressed. This prevailed despite the recent evidence that high-performance work groups can be distinguished from low-performance groups not by their accoutrements, but by being surrounded by more people whose conversations create: i) positive energy, ii) engagement, and iii) exploration of ideas [17].

EXTERNAL FEEDBACK

External feedback on the emerging culture was also available. One report in a prominent national newspaper of a 5-point home defeat was: “... on a pitch that Leeds narrow by about five metres from the one used by their rugby league counterparts, a deliberate ploy aimed at cramping the style of visiting teams...” [11]. This hints at the possibility that the nascent rugby union team, as compared to the established and successful rugby league team (Leeds Rhinos), was being run cynically and not in the best interests of the game. Even a suggestion of cynicism, due to its lockstep relationship with trust [18], may be enough for employees and supporters to decathect.

Consistent with the proposition of lost community support, average home attendances fell to <6000 (stadium capacity @22K). This compares to the average Premiership attendance of >13,000 in 2009-10. Collectively, while a lack of tries provides one element of formative evaluation, diminishing attendance figures provides contextual evidence of the supporters’/customers’ summative evaluation [19] of any coaching culture. Losing spectator endorsement also means lost income; re-engaging lost supporters may be an important element of context shaping that coaches need to address. Not addressing this issue may become the hamartia of any culture change.

All this raises issues around trust and reliability. Trust/distrust results from three factors: competence (can they do the job?), benevolence (do they care about me?) and integrity (are they honest?), with integrity being the most important [20]. Collectively, these elements explain almost 80% of what makes employees’ trust their leaders [20]. In this context, I wondered how the overall combination of sub-optimal interpersonal factors (Table 1) further contributed to daily life in the club. The evidence proposes that this was an unhappy workplace for many, including the coaches.

CONCLUSION

This commentary has focused on factors that affect coaches attempting culture change. Their individual complexity - and their interactions - helps to show why most organisational change is unsuccessful. Coaches are well placed to enact change when they know what change will look like and how they might address ‘in group’ and ‘out-group’ issues. They also need to be able and willing to handle the inevitable setbacks that they, the team and individual players will experience. When coaches prioritise activities that generate positive emotions they provide relief from the gnawing, undermining fatigue of repeated losses. This helps all squad members to create, develop and deliver the energy, engagement and creativity needed to play better and, ultimately, win more games.

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