



# Driving and sustaining culture change in professional sport performance teams: A grounded theory



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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** As part of the recent upsurge of work on management and organizational factors in elite sports teams, researchers have focused on the team management-led creation and regulation of high performing cultures. The purpose of this study was to therefore add to a recently developed model of culture change best practice in Olympic sports teams, as led and perceived by incoming performance directors, and conceptualize culture change best practice in professional sports teams, as led and perceived by incoming team managers.

**Design and method:** A pragmatic research philosophy and corresponding grounded theory methodology were used to generate a practically-meaningful model of this culture change process from the perspective of UK-based professional team managers.

**Results:** Perceived best practice in team manager-led culture change was found to involve a finite phase of *initial evaluation, planning, and impact* adjoined to the enduring *management of a holistic, integrated, and dynamic social system*. With the former process acting as the catalyst for successful change, this model revealed that optimal change was felt to primarily rely on the constant acquisition, negotiation, and alignment of internal and external stakeholder perceptions.

**Conclusions:** Based on the model's principles, the optimization of professional team culture is defined by a manager's initial actions and never definitively achieved but rather constantly constructed and re-constructed in complex social and power dynamics. Beyond providing a conceptual backdrop for continued research in this area, the model is also a tool on which the practice of professional team managers and their supporting sport psychologists can be based.

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Sport psychologists have recently targeted knowledge development in management and organizational processes to extend our scope for impact in elite sports team environments (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Including research that has addressed the functioning of entire elite sport organizations, and thus incorporating administrative and top-management elements (Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012; Wagstaff, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2013), other inquiry has addressed the precise functioning of their performance departments (i.e., encompassing team management, support staff, and performers alone). More specifically still, an early focus of this

latter area has been on the team management-led generation of high performing cultures (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013a), with a first theory of this culture change process in Olympic sport organizations recently developed (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014). To help produce of a breadth and depth of knowledge in this area, as well as support context-specific practice in consulting sport psychologists, investigation of team manager-led culture change in professional sport is now merited.

While long acknowledged, the impetus for more structured and focused research on management and organizational factors in elite sport recently arrived through an influential review by Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009). By highlighting that the management of climatic and cultural factors had yet to be effectively investigated in sport psychology or sport management, research into these previously untapped areas has been subsequently triggered. More specifically,

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Fletcher and Wagstaff's review has informed inquiry into entire elite sport organizations, through which the significance of emotion-related abilities in all groups (i.e., performers, support staff, team management, administrators, board members) has been identified in particular (Wagstaff et al., 2012, 2013). These authors' appraisal has also provided context for different work on the precise functioning and leadership of elite sport organizations' performance departments, where attention has focused on those directly responsible for sporting performance; normally known as *team managers, head coaches, directors of sport, or performance directors* (e.g., Arnold, Fletcher, & Molyneux, 2012; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a; Cruickshank et al., 2013a, 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). As performers, coaches, and sports medicine/science staff are overseen by these specialist leaders, with the performance department often in an entirely separate location to administrative and top management groups, research in this area is bolstered by its applied relevance (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013b).

Treating culture as “the shared values, beliefs, expectations, and practices across the members and generations of a defined group” (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a, p.340), Cruickshank et al. (2014) recently contributed to this team management agenda by developing the first theory of culture change best practice in Olympic teams, as led and perceived by UK-based performance directors. Set in the context of leader succession (i.e., when a new leader is appointed to sustain, or more usually improve results), this investigation revealed that effective change consisted of two components. First was a period of initial evaluation, planning and impact, through which performance directors could establish themselves and the focus, content, and nature of their program. Specifically, this involved developing an understanding of cultural, political, and performance matters, working with experts, allies, and cultural architects, promoting shared perceptions and support from both internal and external stakeholders, dealing with the sport's most pressing needs, refraining from some actions that would not be appropriately received in early phases of change, and supporting optimal immediate results. Running together with these processes (before becoming the prime mode of management) was the integrated management of both internal and external stakeholder perceptions. More specifically, this approach promoted long-term acceptance and regulation of the desired culture by those on the inside (i.e., team management, support staff and performers) as well as protection and reinforcement from those on the outside (i.e., top-management, funders, external partners, the media, and other significant influences). To date, however, no research has explored how the equivalent culture change process is best led by incoming managers<sup>1</sup> of professional sports teams.

In prior linked work, Gilmore and Gilson (2007) presented a study on the response of Bolton Wanderers Football Club to changes in its competitive and financial surrounds (focusing on both performance and business elements). Effective regulation of the performance department was achieved by developing a high performing sport science support service, recruiting players and staff who were congruent with the targeted system and culture, and aligning the first team and academy. In other work, Sir Clive Woodward reflected on the need to facilitate performer knowledge, communication, and ownership, support their families, promote enjoyment, foster “no excuse” values, and sustain a consistent line on performance preparation (Lee, Shaw, & Chesterfield, 2009). Cruickshank et al. (2013a) have also reported that a culture change

program at rugby union side Leeds Carnegie was aided by the “on-field” management team developing clear objectives and plans, optimizing the holistic performance environment, using multiple feedback systems, reinforcing preferred perceptions and behaviors, and harnessing their leadership and interpersonal qualities. Success here was also facilitated by the shaping of contexts in which performers, support staff, and the CEO made performance-impacting choices, as well as enabling a “to and fro” of power with these groups. Although this body of work has therefore uncovered many themes, principles, and mechanisms from single cases, a specific theory of team manager-led change that represents perceived best practice from appointment has, however, yet to be developed.

Given that opening research on the functioning of entire elite sport organizations has gained from the transfer of business-based knowledge (e.g., Wagstaff et al., 2012), it follows that investigation of manager-led culture change in professional teams may also benefit from such application. Indeed, organizational researchers have undertaken much work on change and its management. Nonetheless, the foundation and orientation of many organizational change management models appear to limit their potential to inform culture change in professional sport performance teams. Specifically, organizational-based knowledge has been restricted by many non-empirical, atheoretical, esoteric, *n*-step, and self-promoting studies (as space precludes detailed discussion of these challenges here, please see reviews and arguments in Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a, 2012b; Cruickshank et al., 2013b; du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012; Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004; Wetzel & Van Gorp, 2014). As such, leading organizational scholars have called for a philosophically and methodologically refined approach to future study in the management of change (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012; Pettigrew, 2012; Van de Ven & Sun, 2011; Wetzel & Van Gorp, 2014). With the direct transfer of Cruickshank et al. (2014) model also limited by its grounding in Olympic sport data, it seems that developing a theory of incoming professional team manager-led culture change would benefit from an explorative approach.

Thus, to add to the recent Olympic sport-based work of Cruickshank et al. (2014), the purpose of this study was to create a first grounded theory of optimal incoming manager-led culture change in the performance department of professional sport organizations. In doing so, the research aimed to address the following initial research questions: What is the chronology and nature of incoming manager-led culture change best practice in professional sport performance teams, as perceived by those responsible for its delivery? To what extent are prior general insights on professional team culture change implicated within this specific process and how are they operationalized? And how do the culture change perceptions of professional sports team managers compare and contrast with those of Olympic sport performance directors? In addressing these questions, the resulting grounded theory model will provide a first conceptualization of culture change best practice from the view of professional sports team managers as well as a tool on which these individuals and supporting sport psychologists can base their practice. Such research appears timely on both a theoretical and applied level as change processes require contextually-specific rather than generalized treatment (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012) and professional team managers are now explicitly requesting culture change support (League Managers Association, 2012).

## Methodology

### Pragmatic research philosophy

Given the issues from an often descriptive and esoteric treatment of change, organizational researchers have recently called for

<sup>1</sup> From here onwards the term “manager” refers to the figure with direct responsibility for the functioning and performance of a professional sport organization's performance department (so covering the range of titles used for this role; e.g., manager, head coach, director of sport).

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