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**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.

*Keywords:* change management, elite sport, management, success cultures, succession

## **Driving and Sustaining Culture Change in Professional Sport Performance Teams: A Grounded Theory**

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, 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, 2012; 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.

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<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).

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 & 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.'s (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 a return to practically meaningful research (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012; Pettigrew, 2012). Heeding this advice, and mirroring the approach taken in Cruickshank et al. (2014), a pragmatic research philosophy was thereby chosen to frame this study. We consequently worked to our belief that sport psychology is a practical science, aimed to uncover how an applied process worked in a world of incessant contingencies rather than understand “reality” itself, and develop practical-level truths that “make a difference” to the participants we studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Giacobbi, Poczwardowski, & Hager, 2005). In this way, pragmatic research aims to unearth solutions to applied challenges with developed knowledge at all times provisional, specific to the context from which it was elicited, and reliant on constant refinement (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Giacobbi et al., 2005).

Rather than a primary concern with ontological and epistemological matters, pragmatism prioritizes research questions and methods that are practically meaningful and “more useful . . . within specific contexts (Giacobbi et al., 2005, p. 21). This philosophy still

shapes all elements of the research process, however, including: the goal of research (i.e., to develop practically-meaningful knowledge), the role of theories (i.e., tools that facilitate practically-meaningful discoveries), data interpretation (i.e., a focus on applied processes), and criteria for judging research quality (i.e., results that facilitate advances in practice and practice-relevant theory) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Giacobbi et al., 2005; Morgan, 2007).

Pragmatists also consider that the results of a study cannot be separated from the lens of “the knower”; unlike foundationalists, who consider that there is one “reality” which can be approached with a *tabula rasa*, objectively measured, and its “truths” revealed (Bryant, 2009; Giacobbi et al., 2005; Morgan, 2007). Indeed, pragmatists acknowledge that they possess a unique blend of biases and prejudices that can elicit novel and innovative insights; a process defined as *abduction* (Bryant, 2009, para. 49). To be clear, however, the co-construction of knowledge with participants does not reflect an extreme relativist position (where *no* findings can be considered more accurate than others). Instead, pragmatism embraces the existence of multiple realities but sustains that this co-constructed knowledge relates to meaningful applied artifacts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Grounded Theory Methodology**

Useful for practice-led disciplines that aim to uncover “new modes of interacting and organizing” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 641), grounded theory was developed to occupy a pragmatic center ground between extreme empiricism and relativism (Suddaby, 2006). Focusing on how social processes operate in specific contexts (Holt & Tamminen, 2010), and generating substantive rather than formal theory, different variants of this approach have been developed for different philosophical positions (for an overview, see Bryant, 2009). Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) latest version was chosen to meet the goals of this research given its pragmatic roots. As such, the intention of this study was not to generate a speculative or universal theory but one that was substantive, transient and a fallible tool that could support future investigation,

theoretical developments, and applied practice (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This selection also met Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron's (2001) assertion that theories of change must achieve scholarly quality *and* practical relevance.

As effective pragmatic and grounded theory research is facilitated by the researchers' experience, qualities, judgments, and commitment (cf. Bryant, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004; Suddaby, 2006), abduction and decision making processes were aided by the first author's previous use of Corbin and Strauss' method, immersion in the culture change topic as part of a long-term project (Suddaby, 2006), understanding of original texts and key discussions (e.g., Bryant, 2009; Holt & Tamminen, 2010; Suddaby, 2006), and prior experience as a player in a professional sports team (including being the target of newly appointed managers' programs of change). The second and third authors had also employed grounded theory methodology in prior work, and the second author had managed, supported, and participated in culture change programs in multiple elite sport environments.

### **Sampling and Participants**

As grounded theories must be the product of an iterative research process, where data collection and analysis recursively inform each other, theoretical sampling was used to recruit participants based on the developing results (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Supporting our goal to develop substantive theory, this sampling approach prioritized the quality rather than quantity of perceptions and focused (as per our access opportunities) on managers who had led teams at the top level in one of three high-profile professional sports in the UK: soccer (Premiership and Championship), rugby union (Premiership), and rugby league (Super League). Sampling across these sports was also supported by the need for grounded theorists to consider diverse perspectives but against a similar central challenge. In the case of this study, managers in all of the sampled sports need to interact with large squads of senior performers, multidiscipline support staff, demanding Boards, passionate fans, and notable media coverage.

Data collection occurred over three phases. Initially, one soccer and one rugby league manager were purposively sampled based on their experience of managing at multiple teams. To support the pertinence of perceptions, these managers were also recruited on the basis that they had managed a team in the past year and had experienced a mixture of success over their careers (as judged by factors such as role survival, league standings, progression in knock-out competitions, and honors won). From the analysis of this first data set – particularly the finding that opening activities were shaped by team traditions and external stakeholder perception – it was decided that the second sampling phase would target figures who had been appointed at more historically successful or publicly scrutinized teams (i.e., those with greater media coverage). Recruitment in this second phase was also weighted toward soccer team managers due to the “prototypical” nature and scale of the challenges faced by these individuals (as per the sport’s financial stakes and high media coverage). Ultimately, three participants in this second phase were from soccer, one was from rugby union, and one was from rugby league. Three individuals in this second phase had also only managed one team and therefore allowed us to gain a more detailed appreciation of the core challenges in culture change delivery (i.e., these managers could not rely on prior first-hand experience; although all had earlier worked as an assistant manager or coach and could still provide a contrast to their actions). Sampling on these grounds was also driven by our developing finding that internal, public, and media reputation were key factors in shaping a managers’ activities. Similar to the first sampling phase, participants were selected on the basis that they had managed a team in the past year.

As few novel insights were offered by the seventh participant, a third and final sample was a manager who also oversaw peer training programs. Beyond obtaining this figure’s views on the delivery of culture change at his managed teams, his awareness of what had worked (and hadn’t) for many of his peers offered a valuable chance to confirm and

consolidate the saturation of our results (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, similarities in all acquired perceptions also supported our decision to sample across the three identified sports.

The final sample included eight managers: four from soccer and four from rugby (two from rugby union and two from rugby league). All interviewees were male, aged between 37 and 57 ( $M = 47.50$  age,  $SD = 8.02$  years), and had held management roles (i.e., manager/head coach, assistant manager/coach, director/head of sport) for 79 years in total ( $M = 9.88$  years,  $SD = 4.80$  years). The shortest and longest tenures in the specific role of manager (i.e., with ultimate responsibility for a performance department) were 6 months and 5 years respectively, with average tenure across all managed teams 2.29 years ( $SD = 1.44$  years). Between them, this group had (as manager) led teams to 13 major honors. As well as managers who had achieved notable long-term success, this final sample included managers who had been sacked early into a contract and those who had experienced a mixture of early sackings and longer-term success. This diversity delivered a data set which contained views on previously effective approaches as well as key errors and lessons; therefore optimizing the credibility of the eventual “best practice” model (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Pettigrew, 2012). Four participants were employed as a manager at their time of interview, while four had left roles in the previous year. Moreover, all but the final participant returned to active managerial service at the top level of their sport after data collection. Institutional ethics approval was obtained for this sampling process.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected via one-shot, semi-structured interviews due to the elusive nature of the targeted participants. Prior to interviewing the main participant group, pilot interviews were undertaken with three elite sport performance team managers to assess and improve the focus, content, and clarity of the interview guide. For example, memos recorded during this process noted that perceptions and pressure from the Board played a major role in shaping the

manager's initial focus (e.g., instant results or long-term agendas) and approach (i.e., instant changes or prolonged planning). While the main questions of the guide were not adjusted by this pilot work, follow-up probes were amended to allow for full discussion on this challenge (as well as those for other apparently important factors: e.g., pre-appointment considerations).

Interviews centered on seven chronologically structured and open-ended questions for the main participants. These questions addressed: program goals, pre-change steps, processes and actions for initiating change, processes and actions for sustaining change, critical attributes and skills for carrying out change, evaluation processes and actions, and reflections on success and failures. While lines of thought were pursued as presented by participants, this guide provided a useful reference to ensure that the essentially open ended conversation did not fail to cover the topic in the allocated time. Interviewees were also asked to compare and contrast their experiences across different teams to enhance data quality (limited to three to ensure that findings were not diluted, that all questions could be asked, and that a critical level of specificity could be sustained in the acquired perceptions: du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012). Follow-up prompts and probes were also carefully reviewed and adjusted between each sampling phase to maintain an iterative process. As one example, follow-up probes were amended after analyzing data from the first sample to allow for more detailed investigation of the media's role in culture change delivery. Other notable probes developed via our ongoing analysis included the manager's initial interactions with socially powerful individuals and subgroups, the way in which undesirable changes were "sold" and introduced to performers and staff, and the nature of the relationship developed with key external stakeholders.

All interviews were conducted at locations chosen by participants and lasted between 100 and 200 minutes. Before beginning the focal discussion, the first author checked that the participant had understood the purposes of the research, assured confidentiality, and obtained informed consent. Since their interview, one manager has asked that their data not be quoted

in this paper due to changes in their employment circumstances (NB. this participant's data were still used in the analysis and for model development).

### **Data Analysis**

Led by the first author and using qualitative analysis software (QSR NVIVO 9), verbatim transcripts underwent open coding to develop concepts, with constant comparison used to create unique categories with distinct core properties and dimensions (enabled by comparisons of data to data, codes, concepts, and literature; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding was then employed to expand on these concepts and establish category and subcategory relationships. Paired with continual critical discussion and reflection with the other researchers, this process provided the impetus and direction for further sampling if additional development and saturation was required. In situations when comprehensive analysis could not be undertaken by the research team before the next interview, an iterative process was upheld through the first author's detailed note-taking (e.g., on new concepts), memo writing, listening to past interviews, focused critical discussion between the research team, and preparing initial results for conference presentations (Holt & Tamminen, 2010). Saturation was considered to have been achieved when participants offered little new data or explanations of incoming manager-led culture change best practice (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); a decision supported by our final interview with the manager involved in peer training.

To discover a central process and refine the theory, theoretical integration was applied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To this end, memos on evolving ideas and relationships between concepts and categories were used in our critical discussions to help us to "think theoretically", with the drawing of diagrams also applied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The developing concepts and categories were further compared, contrasted, and integrated with extant theories and constructs during the final phases of data collection and analysis; as supported by a delayed literature review by the first author (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the

“generation of new specialist knowledge . . . is inappropriate when used in isolation [i.e., without integration with ‘old’ knowledge]” (Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004, p. 1222), this inspection process established whether pre-existing labels could be applied (to ensure consistency with current knowledge) and confirm the uniqueness of other discovered concepts. In particular, a number of labels used by Cruickshank et al. (2014) were found to be pertinent and thus applied or used to guide the labeling process.

To ensure that findings were grounded in both the data and culture change practice, the first and second authors held a separate and final meeting with the eighth participant (i.e., the manager involved in peer training) to “tell the story” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 113), obtain his perceptions of a developed model, and refine the theory. Feedback from this individual focused on the model’s practicality and not its “truth” to ensure consistency with our pragmatic approach (NB. no changes were made to the model by this process). The final model and its underpinning principles were then packaged into a workshop resource for 20 current and aspirant managers on the English Rugby Football Union’s Elite Coach Development program (delivered by the first and second authors). Seeing the research come full circle (i.e., from identifying an applied challenge to offering advice on its delivery), as well as providing an additional source of feedback and marker of saturation, 100% of attendees reported (through independent review) that the model was useful for their current and future practice. Again, no changes were made to the model from this feedback.

## **Results**

To illuminate the process of culture change best practice within the performance department of professional sport organizations, as led and perceived by incoming team managers, we describe the activity’s core components first before explaining their conceptual links in the grounded theory model (see Figure 1). As shown in the model, successful change was perceived to involve the fulfillment of two roles that we co-initiated and co-dependent

yet conceptually distinct. Specifically, and akin to Cruickshank et al. (2014), perceived best practice involved a finite phase of *initial evaluation, planning, and impact* that was paired with the enduring *management of a holistic, integrated, and dynamic social system*. We now describe the former process and its constituent subthemes first. Supporting quotes throughout the results section have been kept concise for purposes of parsimony in light of the study's scale. Soccer manager quotes are denoted by (S), rugby union by (RU), and rugby league by (RL).

### **Initial Evaluation, Planning, and Impact**

Providing the catalyst for optimally efficient and effective change, managers revealed the need to instantly establish both themselves and their programs when attempting to deliver culture change. Although broadly similar to an opening culture change aim of Olympic sport performance directors (Cruickshank et al., 2014), this initial evaluation, planning, and impact phase reflected particular features of the professional sport environment and revolved around a manager's acquisition of necessary knowledge, credibility, and support. More specifically, best practice centered on six component actions, each of which will now be described.

**Evaluating fit with the club and Board.** Given the scale of the culture change task and need to deliver instant results, a detailed assessment of the manager's perceived fit with a club and its Board prior to appointment was reported as necessary. Primarily assessing the extent to which the manager and their prospective Board shared views on the required changes, participants also spoke of looking deeper and reflecting on the perceived fit between personal (e.g., management style, career goals, values) and team factors (e.g., history, traditions, profile, resources, competitive context). For example, analyzing one's fit with key Board members was deemed particularly important:

The first thing I did was . . . look at who the chairman was . . . what sort of business he is in, where has he got his money. Also other directors, you can try and find out

who they are . . . . *Then* I've looked at the playing staff . . . because you are going to have to work for [the Board] and they are non-[soccer] people mainly. (S3)

Similarly, interviewees also described the importance of examining their fit with the team's principal resource: its players. In the following example, a manager emphasized how failing to achieve this outcome ultimately contributed to the early termination of his contract:

I told the Chairman [my salary demands] and he said "we'll give you it" . . . You'll face it one time in life where you'll do something [for] the money . . . And that was a mistake. It might not have been a mistake if I'd done my proper homework on the players. It's only a mistake now. (S2)

**Evaluating the performance department.** On appointment, managers reported that an opening evaluation should best continue with an intense phase of multi-source information gathering on the performance department. This mainly focused on the amalgamation of key stakeholder perceptions (including current and former players and support staff) as well as an assessment of player and support staff abilities and personalities, training facilities, current systems, structures, and processes, prevailing challenges and issues, and the social milieu. The speed of this evaluation was shaped by the manager's time of arrival (e.g., mid-season) and the team's current contexts (e.g., league position). Additionally, the uncritical transfer of prior methods was deemed naïve given that each team's history, traditions, profile, and resources all worked to generate a unique challenge:

Clive Woodward's [autobiography] . . . shows the . . . the preparation of England winning the World Cup. It was absolutely bang on. Then I bought the DVD of the 2005 [British and Irish] Lions and he applies the same principles . . . with a different group and it didn't work . . . . You've got to be really clever analyzing the [team's] culture . . . and deciding where that culture needs to go. The culture I developed at [team] would be very different . . . if I was working at [team]. (RL1)

As indicated in the definition of this theme, and reflecting the emphasis of culture change on social functioning, participants also spoke on the particular importance of quickly assessing the loyalty of powerful players:

I asked [X], who had coached [influential player] at [team]: “What are this guy’s plus points and . . . negative points? Can he be trusted?” Harsh questions have got to be asked in order for you to come up with the correct needs analysis. (RL 1)

Swiftly understanding each individual’s man-management needs was also similarly emphasized:

We did [an exercise] . . . to see who were the more submissive players in the group . . . and who were the dominant ones . . . So we knew that some players were a little bit introverted and might struggle if they were given feedback in a certain way, whereas other people needed a kick up the arse in front of everyone. . . . You [also] wouldn’t treat the senior players . . . the same as you’d treat a first year rookie. (RL2)

Accordingly, rather than impose idealistic or imitative values, standards, and practices, this extensive assessment instead enabled the generation of cultural, performance, and outcome goals which were optimally grounded in the traits, contexts, and potential of the team and its individual members (particularly those who led or were the “glue” between different structural or social subgroups).

**Setting and aligning multi-stakeholder perceptions and expectations.** To enhance the transition from the prior manager’s program, instantly setting and aligning multi-stakeholder perceptions and expectations was described. This involved creating an early and shared understanding of the manager’s goals and plans for optimizing performance, and therefore the basis on which players and support staff would decide to embrace and/or engage with subsequent changes. Notably, this process was often supported by proactive upward influence tactics before appointment:

[At] our interview, we . . . said “we know what it is that needs to be changed . . . and if you can’t provide that [then] don’t employ us because we will be . . . coming to you and saying [that] we need to employ X, Y and Z straight away.” (RU1)

Beyond Board-specific action, managers also noted the need to instantly optimize the players and support staff’s opinion of (and confidence in) the manager and their impending program (or, in some cases, quell any initial uncertainty and resistance):

[On my first day] I had my suit on to give the perception of: “I’m in charge” . . . .

[But] I didn’t want to go in and say: “Right, I’m in charge, you will do this and you will do that” . . . . It was a case of: “Right, what are we good at?” I needed to see who wanted to talk, how to get the interaction . . . . The feedback [from the players and support staff] after the first meeting (*clicks fingers*): I have them in my hand. (S4)

Reflecting players’ primary interest in performance-based matters, the need to deliver instant impact in training and game contexts was also reported; most simply by addressing issues with the previous manager’s approach (e.g., delivering shorter and sharper training sessions). When new training approaches were needed but not inherently appealing to players (e.g., practices to promote greater physical effort), their introductions were explicitly justified in terms of their performance-relevance to avoid or minimize any early resistance:

Players have got to see the benefits [of new training methods] . . . . For example, with the GPS [monitors] it’s no good just saying: “Wear these [because] they’ll make you better players”. You’ve got to say: “The reason that we’ve got them is . . . [to] make training more specific [to your position] . . . and that will help you become a better player”. That’s the type of sell that you’ve got to do. (RL1)

Significantly, however, setting player expectations over some necessary new approaches and standards was not always based on positive interactions. For example, core standards and values could quickly be made “visible” to assert one’s position as ultimate authority on team

functioning. Managers noted that this could be done either overtly (e.g., in team meetings) or, to minimize any backlash from criticizing or disciplining highly powerful performers in public view, through more discreet methods:

[Player X] was a mess. First day at training . . . he smelled of alcohol and I said “have you been drinking?” “Just a couple of beers” . . . . “That’s two weeks wages you’re getting fined”. I never made a big song and dance about it . . . because players talk. And he’s went back to the [rest of the squad] and gone “what about this maniac?! He’s done me two weeks wages!” . . . You set standards then. (S2)

**Identifying, recruiting, and harnessing social allies and cultural architects.**

Working to identify, recruit, and harness social allies and *cultural architects* (Railo, 1986) was also consistently discussed by interviewees; again reflecting the social challenge of culture change. Akin to the results in Cruickshank et al. (2014), this involved gaining support from individuals and groups who could foster acceptance, fulfillment, and regulation of the desired team values, beliefs, perceptions, and practices from within. Importantly, this type of action had to be focused on a range of key actors; not just those with an immediate and overt willingness to “spread the word”:

I [started the process] by canvassing the senior players . . . . [Team captain]: no interest in [team culture]; he is purely a rugby tactician . . . . I had to explain to him as he is Captain: “I know this is not your bag but I need you to support it.” (RL2)

Beyond harnessing key individuals and groups already at the club, recruitment of influential performers or support staff was also identified as a core means of shaping new group norms:

We needed to bring people in . . . particularly somebody who understood how medicine and conditioning needed to work . . . [and] how science can influence behaviors . . . . That’s when we brought in [X] . . . . He wasn’t changing it for this

week or that week, he was changing it because it was going to be part of our [long-term] approach to developing athletes. (RU1)

**Withholding initial action in sub-optimal conditions.** While instantly setting and aligning stakeholder perceptions and expectations was vital for long-term success, managers also revealed that initial actions were often constrained by the prevailing social milieu and the abilities of the inherited players and staff. Participants therefore described the need to postpone, dilute, or phase in some of their initial actions until a more socially and politically appropriate time. Mirroring the approach taken by the performance directors in Cruickshank et al. (2014), one participant exemplified this approach with his use of “damage limitation” strategies to simply survive to the point when deeper changes could be made:

It was a case of get your crash helmets on . . . because we knew half the guys were not going to be there the next season and any significant changes [to training and game-based processes] would simply be a waste of time . . . . We had to just cajole and kid and try and get the best out of what we had got. (RL 2)

Indeed, rather than forcing new values, standards, and practices on unreceptive or incapable recipients, best practice during the early phase of one’s tenure was perceived to frequently involve the careful avoidance of conflict; even if it temporarily compromised the manager’s ideals and vision:

To help the process go forward sometimes you have to concede certain things that you might not have believed in . . . . As long as we were going in the right direction, let’s go to the halfway house . . . rather than make the big leap . . . . Because by doing the first step they realized it wasn’t . . . as painful as they first thought. (RU1)

**Delivering instant results.** While the above processes were all vital for establishing a manager and their program, interviewees ultimately recognized that the extent to which new

values, standards, and practices were accepted and internalized by their players and support staff was ultimately dictated by initial on-field results:

It's a results business. At the end of the day if you are not winning games you are out . . . . You can't lose six games on the spin . . . . It's about winning, you've *got* to win . . . you have *got* to find a way to win. You *have* to find a way to win. (S4)

With the interpretive lens of most players, support staff, Board members, fans, and the media shaped by performance outcome, balancing a program's initial focus on long-term plans and short-term results was therefore deemed a fundamental skill for the change process.

### **Management of a Holistic, Integrated, and Dynamic Social System**

The second major component of optimal incoming team manager-led culture change was found to be the management of a holistic, integrated, and dynamic social system; made up of the sub-concepts *managing multi-stakeholder perceptions and expectations* and *action-guiding multi-stakeholder perceptions and actions* (see Figure 1). More specifically, and mirroring the findings of Cruickshank et al. (2014), managers revealed that successful change relied on a two-way interaction and power-share process with both internal (i.e., support staff and players) and external stakeholders (i.e., the Board, fans, media, other significant influences). . We now describe this two-way process with each identified group.

**Two-way interaction and power flow with support staff.** As they jointly delivered and regulated the manager's culture change program, continuously acquiring and integrating support staff perception was vital. Given the diversity within and across support professions, as well as the plethora of opinions on any performance issue, sourcing and using inputs from all practitioners was a core theme of perceived best practice:

I want [the coaches] to coach . . . . I want [the strength and conditioners] to have a program in place that the coaches can follow and interact with. The medical staff, we

need to make sure that . . . a player is available to train and [play] . . . . “You’re in the [soccer] club, your department is valued, and so we are going to listen.” (S4)

Indeed, recognition that a strong team culture would be generated and regulated by the group rather than imposed by manager was evident across all; particularly in relation to close staff:

[The management team] have got to be singing from the same hymn sheet . . . and agree with what you are trying to achieve . . . . It’s not a one-man job; it’s a three, four, or five [person job]. It’s a united effort. (RL1)

**Two-way interaction and power flow with performers.** As opposed to purely top-down direction, the optimization of players’ values, standards, and behaviors also involved a two-way consultation and negotiation process. Indeed, accommodating such a to and fro of power was mandatory given the presence of high-status and often opinionated performers:

As soon as we told the squad [about travel plans] . . . you could see a couple of the senior players pulling their faces: “Why don’t we train at four . . . and then we’ll go straight to the hotel?” So within a couple of minutes . . . [we agreed] we would train at four . . . and then go straight to the hotel. Great, that’s all we wanted. (RL2)

Indeed, offering justification behind chosen actions as well as respecting and meeting player needs (where appropriate) were important features of effective change in modern elite sport:

The modern coach tends to be Generation X who is between 30 and 50, whose learning tends to be: show me how to do it and I’ll do it . . . . They respect their elders because they’ve been brought up showing respect for their elders . . . . A challenge is to coach a player who is . . . Generation Y because he is probably under 30 . . . who learns by: why do I need to do this? Explain to me why and I’ll do it; if not, no point . . . I’ll respect you if I think you deserve to be respected not just because you’re older . . . and I want feedback and I want it specific: Now! (RU2)

**Two-way interaction and power flow with the Board.** Maintaining support from the Board through similar to and fro interaction was also crucial given their ultimate control over the whole organization. With “managing up [being] just as important if not more important than being able to manage the players” (S3), another interviewee reflected on the difficulties faced after failing to establish a transparent and two-way relationship with top management:

We were encouraging our staff and players to report to us . . . I don't think we had that the other way [from the Board] . . . . If they had said [that the organization was facing financial hardship], we could have said: “right, if that's the case we need to take a different line” . . . . I still think we could have . . . managed expectations in a better way so that we didn't fall into the trap that actually happened. (RU1)

Beyond ensuring alignment with the organization's overall strategic course, managing one's employers could also create the freedom to deliver innovative changes, “buy time” for when inevitable mixed or poor results would be experienced, and even prevent sport performance-naïve chairmen and owners from making dramatic interjections:

We've got a very larger than life character [as Chairman]; runs the show from top to bottom . . . He needs to know what's going on. He needs to know I'm in control of everything . . . . He could sack somebody just like that . . . [so] I try and be proactive . . . I need to calm him down at times. (S4)

**Two-way interaction and power flow with the fans.** A two-way engagement with the team's fans was also reported given their role in generating crucial psycho-social and financial capital. As well as noting the “demand from the spectators for you to play [in a certain way” (RL1), a proactive approach was used to harness this group's influence; often via media interactions:

It was . . . about providing as much information as was necessary to . . . get people through the turnstile: what sort of game are we trying to play, what is the goal, where do we want to be in twelve months. Can we do it without you? No we can't. (RU1)

**Two-way interaction and power flow with the media.** Positive and two-way interactions with the media were also perceived as crucial due to their ubiquity in professional sport and ability to shape the perceptions of support staff, players, Board members, fans, and other stakeholders. While often turning managers' perceptions and team-related matters into "fabricated dramas" (S2), working to optimize this group's view could encourage positive coverage (or limit any negative coverage). Many participants accordingly spoke of the value of, where appropriate, working to meet the needs of the group:

There may be an odd time when a story comes up . . . and [press officer] asks: "can the press come down to training [i.e., before scheduled weekly press conference]?"

Something as small as refusing immediate access might get the press man's back up a bit so you are always mindful of giving them a little bit elsewhere: "I can't meet today I'm sorry, but if you give me a ring at six o'clock I'll be driving home and I'll have a few quiet minutes with you." So I always try to accommodate that way. (S3)

Beyond promoting respect from members of the media, and as shown in Figure 1, awareness of *who* the media spread information to (and how they could narrate the manager's program) meant that this group could also be used as a tool to further communicate with stakeholders:

[Manager X] talked about subliminal messages: I'm talking to the media but I know the players are listening or the Board is listening; or I'm going to say how wonderful the fans are and actually the players didn't play up to respecting the support we are having. So I am saying: "fans stick with us", or whatever. (RU2)

**Two-way interaction and power flow with other significant influences.** Based on each team's bespoke history, traditions, profile, and resources, a two-way interaction with a

number of other key external stakeholders was also identified. These included, amongst others, team icons (e.g., former players/managers), catering staff, the local community, and sponsors. While these individuals and groups were highly variable in terms of the scale and speed at which they could alter the dynamics of the performance department, all could play a significant role in constructing and reinforcing the team's culture. Emphasizing the need for two-way interactions and a flow of power with such stakeholders, one manager spoke of the need to "cement the right sort of relationships" with players' partners:

We helped some players' [partners] on nutrition because some . . . [had a] different background to good cooking and poor cooking . . . . We helped to sort of say: "your husband or partner is struggling before us, you are doing a fantastic job but some of the food you are providing actually isn't conducive to him losing weight." (RU1)

In another example, one manager spoke of a need to positively engage with a groundskeeper to ensure that training pitches were in a condition that allowed for changes to be made to the team's playing style. It is notable that this manager's approach was shaped by the secondary influence which this figure could exert; subsequently underlining the challenges of social complexity:

You are asking [the head groundskeeper] all of a sudden to get off his arse and not be lazy, yet he might have the ear of three or four of the directors . . . . That's where the politician in you has to really come out . . . . Don't go . . . and say: "this is wrong" . . . . Go in there and say "look, I think a little bit more work can be done, what do you think?" You are tip toeing around it, not to upset people. (S3)

### **A Grounded Theory: Incoming Manager-Led Culture Change Best Practice within the Performance Department of British Professional Sport Organizations**

The grounded theory of culture change best practice within the performance department of British professional sport organizations, as led and perceived by team

managers, is shown in Figure 1. After assessing fit with the club and Board, best practice was deemed to involve a concentrated and detailed phase of analysis and planning to ensure sensitivity to, and exploitation of a team's historical, psychosocial, and competitive contexts. Shaped by the expectancy for instant and consistent high performance, be it internal (i.e., players and support staff) or external (i.e., Board, fans, media) this initial period also involved: setting and aligning multiple stakeholder perceptions and expectations; identifying, recruiting, and harnessing social allies and cultural architects; withholding actions in sub-optimal conditions; and delivering immediate results. Undertaken to enhance respect and trust from the players and support staff – as well as to buy time, space, and support from key external stakeholders – this process was deemed crucial for creating the psychosocial momentum for effective and enduring change.

Regarding its main and enduring component (i.e., *management of a holistic, dynamic, and integrated social system*), the model also shows that culture change relied on generating and regulating shared values, standards, and practices in the performance department and also on protecting this “cultural bubble” (as shown by the circle surrounding manager and support staff/players) from outside influence. Moreover, this bubble was also reinforced by the more positive aspects of these external stakeholders' power and agency. Optimal culture change therefore involved the constant acquisition, negotiation, and integration of (a) the players and support staffs' oscillating perceptions and opinions, *and* (b) the perceptions and opinions of those who could indirectly reinforce and/or shape team culture (i.e., the Board, fans, media, other significant influences). Rather than a step-by-step or prescriptive process, best practice was therefore deemed to revolve around a set of guiding principles that worked to embrace and proactively manage (as opposed to ignore and react to) the socially complex and contested nature of culture change delivery.

### **General Discussion**

In this study we have developed a first grounded theory of culture change best practice within the performance departments of British professional sport organizations, as led and perceived by incoming team managers. While efficient and impactful change was based on an initial evaluation, planning, and impact phase, the presented model primarily conveys a holistic and integrated process. Mirroring the Olympic sport-based findings of Cruickshank et al. (2014), this approach revolved around the power, agency, and interaction of connected stakeholders within and outside the performance department. Working to constantly source, negotiate, and align the perceptions of these groups was therefore perceived to enable sensitivity to, and exploitation of a team's macro (e.g., Board strategy), meso (e.g., group-level perceptions), and micro (e.g., individual-level perceptions) contexts. The boundless and "multidirectional" nature of this model also echoes with Cruickshank et al. and is in further contrast to the many decontextualized, top-down, and *n*-step approaches generated within organizational change research (By, 2005; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012b; du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012). Indeed, rather than working to a final act of reinforcement (when a change process is "complete"), our model instead reveals that a team's culture is continually constructed and re-constructed within complex social and power dynamics (and not definitively achieved).

Extending current literature, some prior insights on professional team culture change have also been operationalized within a practically-meaningful and time-locked activity. More specifically, our results have revealed how incoming team managers created evidence-based objectives and plans (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013a; Gilmore & Gilson, 2007), recruited individuals who matched the desired culture (cf. Gilmore & Gilson, 2007), aided performers' understanding, ownership, feedback, and support in their home environment (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013a; Lee et al., 2009), promoted a to and fro with key stakeholders (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013a), sent messages through the media (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013a), and deployed

a coherent and consistent approach whereby all action was locked into longer-term goals (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013a; Lee et al., 2009). The broad principles of this model also notably parallel many of those in the performance director-focused work of Cruickshank et al. (2014). Specifically, culture change in professional teams was similarly based on the deployment of core principles (as detailed in the *initial evaluation, planning, and impact* concept) against an overarching two-way power share approach with implicated stakeholders. This parallel is perhaps unsurprising given that the leaders of professional and Olympic teams must both interact with powerful performer groups, diverse staff, outcome-focused Boards, selective and sensationalist media, demanding fans or public, as well other influential external stakeholders, t (cf. Collins & Cruickshank, 2014).

Notwithstanding these broad parallels, however, there are numerous points of divergence between both models. Heeding requests to avoid the reductionist pitfalls that have plagued much research on change, and therefore strive for a level of specificity and precision that supports practically meaningful insights (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012), these differences are also significant. Firstly, while the performance directors in Cruickshank et al. (2014) detailed the importance of *gaining an understanding of the cultural, political, and performance landscape*, the managers interviewed here described the need to *evaluate fit with the club and Board*. Reflecting lesser complexity within the top management structures of professional sport (i.e., rather than one Board, Olympic performance directors need to engage with multiple higher level management groups), this contrast raises an important point on the speed at which professional team managers can (and are expected to) deliver change, the depth of their programs (at least initially), and where greatest power initially resides. Indeed, individuals in the professional domain have the opportunity to be more selective in terms of agreeing to work with a particular organization, given the greater number and availability of team manager roles, and therefore possibly greater potential to gather and share immediate

power. Moreover, it also appears reasonable to assume that the focus of professional team managers on evaluating against “ideal types” – rather than gaining an understanding of the conditions that one needs to work within – reflects their potential to recruit or sell performers; an approach which is not available to Olympic performance directors and so modifies the nature of the challenge and potential routes for impact.

In further contrast to the performance directors in Cruickshank et al. (2014), participants in this study described *setting* rather than *facilitating* multi-stakeholder perceptions; a process which may reflect the need to lead teams from “the front/behind” instead of “above/through”. Presumably governed by their need to deliver results on a weekly basis and their greater responsibility to oversee day-to-day functioning (as opposed to performance directors who meta-manage national-level programs), this difference again raises questions on the way in which power is controlled and shared in a professional team setting where the pressure to perform is incessant. Questions on the mixture, weighting, and operationalization of various employed leadership behaviors across both professional and Olympic team manager roles are also raised. This pressure to deliver instant and visible change perhaps also accounts for professional managers’ efforts to *deliver* instant results; in contrast to performance directors who reported a need to *facilitate* optimal immediate results and “show” change by addressing a sport’s most pressing system-, structure-, and political-level needs (Cruickshank et al.). This variation in pressure (whether actual or manufactured), stakeholder expectations and interests, and the scale and regularity of personal and program judgment (i.e., weekly games mean weekly assessment!) once again render the culture change practices of professional team managers and Olympic performance directors similar but critically different. The final main point of divergence from Cruickshank et al. was the extent to which interviewees’ reported that the media were (or could be) used to shape and narrate the change process. Indeed, although the media were not a regular concern for the

performance directors of low profile Olympic teams (other than in the period surrounding a Games), all of the interviewees in this study emphasized the key role of this group and the critical nature of enacting change *through* them. A focus on how the media can be used to construct a change process therefore seems particularly relevant for continued inquiry and theory-development in the professional sport setting.

As facilitated by our pragmatic philosophy, the findings of this study are also applied implications in their own right. Processes detailed within the *initial, evaluation, and impact* period of the model should therefore be considered by incoming managers (and supporting sport psychologists) as they attempt to establish themselves and their programs. Specifically, managers should: assess their fit with a club and its Board (especially in terms of professional philosophies); devote significant time and energy into evaluating the performance department and its quirks (including its systems, structures, processes, social milieu, and politics); set and align multi-stakeholder perceptions and expectations (particularly those with greatest power); identify and harness social allies and cultural architects (using those with influence to support the acceptance and progression of the change program); withhold initial action in sub-optimal conditions (or “pick one’s battles”); and, as possibly the most critical maker of success, work to deliver immediate results. Additionally, managers are also advised to adopt a 360-degree approach to proactively and continually manage stakeholder perceptions in a coherent and consistent manner. This advice recognizes that all corners of a social setting can impact group functioning and performance (Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004); with particular attention required on those with greatest power (or potential power) at any given moment. To support this process, and deliver multiple “hits” to multiple targets simultaneously, managers are also advised to embrace and strategically use the media; in essence, making this group “work for you” more than “you work for them”.

Finally, and in line with prior research findings from professional sport (Cruickshank et al., 2013a), managers should also facilitate a constant flow of power between themselves and all key stakeholders (or at least a *perception* of a power flow). The social complexity that pervades the performance department can then be adapted to rather than absorbed (see Theodoridis & Bennison, 2009); thereby ensuring that programs are at all times sensitive to, and exploitative of macro, meso, and micro conditions. Such an approach recognizes that group members (i.e., support staff and performers) require ownership over group functioning if they are to constantly construct and regulate this in line with the manager's intentions. This "to-ing and fro-ing" may offer similar opportunities for influential groups and individuals on the outside of the performance department (i.e., Board, fans, media, significant other stakeholders) to "have their say" in a more controlled manner than might otherwise prevail. By embracing stakeholder opinions (or being *seen* to embrace these opinions), managers may then shape the environment in a way that increases the chance that (hopefully) well-measured and evidence-based alpha plans can be delivered. Although Van de Ven and Sun (2011) note that "instead of 'swimming upstream', skillful change agents reflect on a situation and revise their mental models in order to 'go with the flow'" (p. 70), our results thereby indicate that, in some cases, incoming managers *may* swim upstream if they source the combined support of influential allies and cultural architects. Moreover, the respect achieved by this power share process may also help managers to retain ultimate authority over performance matters and the potential to use less socially desirable actions when required (Cruickshank & Collins, 2014).

To facilitate judgments of research quality, it is important to assess the strengths and limits of this work. Regarding the former, and beyond generating the first model of incoming manager-led culture change best practice in professional sports teams, strengths of the work were our sensitivity to the philosophical requirements of culture change study and consequent

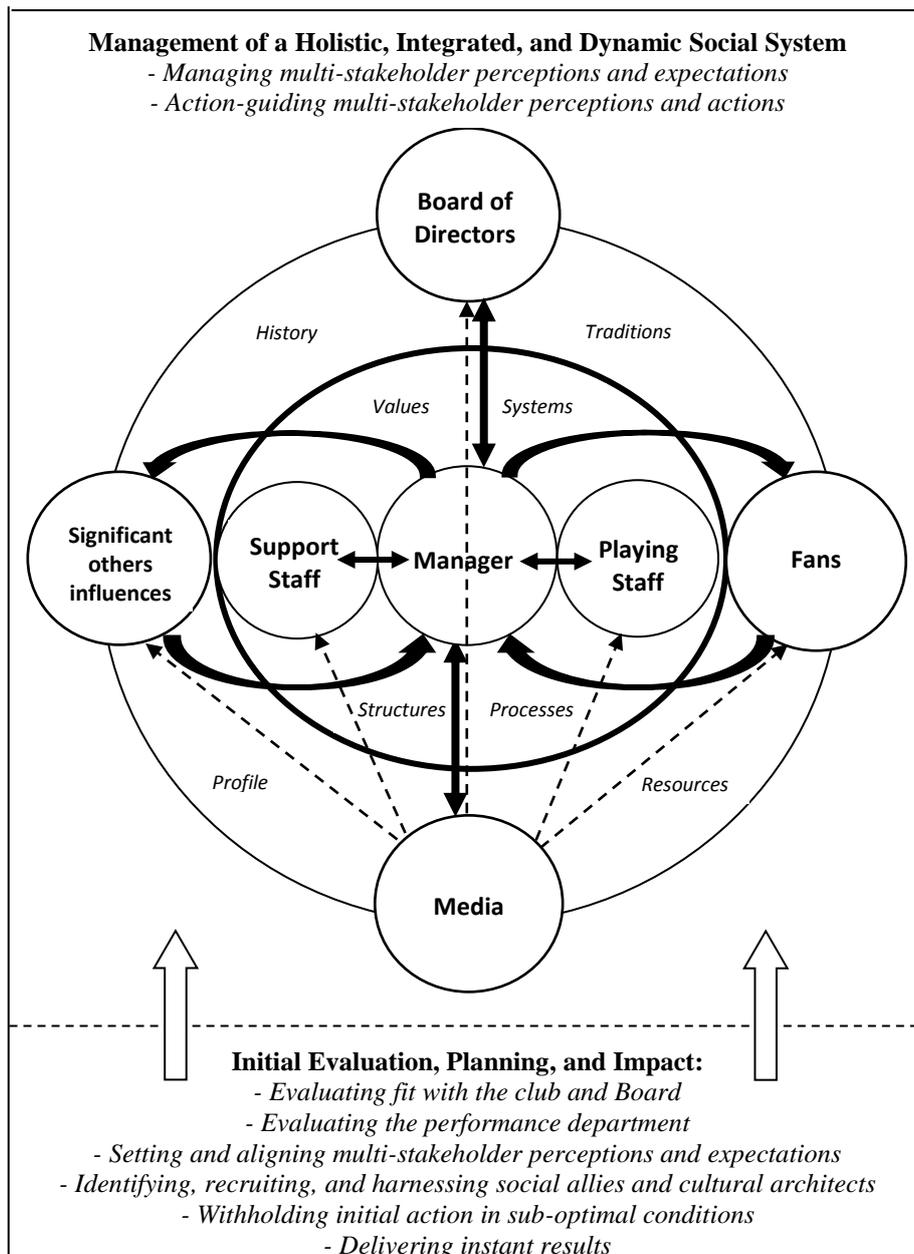
demonstration of *methodological coherence* (i.e., the congruence between our philosophical position, research question, participants, and methods: Holt & Tamminen, 2010; Suddaby, 2006). While the final sample size was comparatively small in comparison to other grounded theories, but comparable to the pool recruited by Cruickshank et al. (2014), another strength of this study was the significant access gained to high-level (and usually elusive) participants. Indeed, with a focus on the quality of perceptions and the development of substantive rather than generalizable theory, the mean interview length of over 2.5 hours allowed for saturation to be achieved through a depth of contextually-grounded perspectives (rather than a breadth of more superficial perceptions from a broader and diluted participant pool). This approach also met the calls for contextual-specificity to be considered as *the* condition for theoretically sound and practically meaningful research on change processes (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012).

To evaluate the quality of the findings, we ask the reader to apply the method-specific criteria of Corbin and Strauss (2008). More specifically, results can be gauged against their: *fit* (i.e., do they fit with the experience of managers and sport psychologists?); *applicability* (i.e., do they provide new insights and develop practice?); *concepts* (i.e., are they organized around concepts and themes which enable shared knowledge?) *contextualization of concepts* (i.e., are they contextualized against UK professional team challenges?); *logic* (i.e., do they “make sense” and have a rational flow?); *depth* (i.e., do descriptions add richness?); *variation* (i.e., do they contain negative cases and demonstrate complexity?); *creativity* (i.e., are they innovative?); and *sensitivity* (i.e., are they the product of a data and analysis-driven process?). As a final consideration, the reader may also wish to contemplate the “so what?” principle of pragmatic research (Bryant, 2009); in short, if our findings *do* correspond to tangible applied artifacts, what difference do they make to practice? In this sense, we have been reassured by the responses from those who attended the workshop detailed in the Data Analysis section.

In terms of shortcomings, the retrospective design may have mediated data credibility via inaccurate recall, hindsight bias, and self-preservation bias. The relevance and usefulness of the results for professional sports in other countries is further unknown given our UK focus; it is also possible that variations may exist between the sports sampled here and others. Additionally, by focusing specifically on managers' perceptions, the extent to which change-targets (i.e., players and support staff) and key external groups (i.e., the Board, fans, media) perceive the presented processes to be effective for optimizing the culture of the performance team needs to be explored. Real-time case studies that incorporate multiple stakeholder perceptions, as well as performance and outcome data to allow for triangulation, are therefore needed to provide valuable insights into the manner in which the presented model accounts for and facilitates optimal change (as well as lead to further refinement). Furthermore, inquiry which focuses on key elements of the model is also merited, particularly on the interaction between manager and the Board and media. Finally, action-research will also provide a useful means to assess and refine the presented model. Such work would also allow researchers to explore the declarative basis of managers' decisions, as taken against the model's principles, and how these relate to their short-, intermediate- and long-term goals.

In summary, this study has developed a first theory of culture change best practice in the performance department of professional sport organizations, as led and perceived by incoming team managers. In doing so, this work has shown that an effective approach is deemed to be based on an initial evaluation, planning, and impact phase that is enacted alongside the enduring acquisition, negotiation, and integration of internal and external stakeholder perceptions. These results also corroborate the need for researchers to continue to investigate how the social and political complexity of this process is best managed for (as well as through) the groups and individuals which it implicates. Against the ever-prevalent need for managers to deliver efficient and effective change, the elements and principles of the

developed model also provide incoming professional team leaders (and their supporting consultants) with some much needed, domain-specific, and evidence-based advice on which to ground their practice.



*Figure 1.* A grounded theory of incoming manager-led culture change best practice within the performance department of British professional sport organizations. Solid line arrows denote manager-based “to and fro” interactions. Broken-line arrows denote secondary interactions of the manager through the media.

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