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

A Response to Commentaries

**Andrew Cruickshank<sup>1</sup>, Dave Collins<sup>1, 2</sup> and Sue Minten<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Coaching and Performance, School of Sport, Tourism and the Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2HE, UK  
E-mail: ACruickshank@uclan.ac.uk; DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup>Grey Matters Performance Ltd, 181 Church Bank, Lower Binton, England, CV37 9TQ  
E-mail: Dave@GM4P.com

<sup>3</sup>School of Sport, Tourism and the Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire, UK  
E-mail: SMinten@uclan.ac.uk

## INTRODUCTION

As both researchers and consultants in the developing area of elite sport performance team culture change, we welcomed the commentaries on our investigation at Leeds Carnegie (hereafter ‘the leading article’) provided by Mark Bevir, Sarah Gilmore, Jonathan Grix, Jim McKenna, Steven Rynne, and Peter Schroeder. Providing insights from the full spectrum of perspectives implicated in our work (i.e., sport psychology, sports coaching, political science, and management and organisation studies), we believe there is significant merit in many reviewers’ contributions to: a) the evaluation of research quality; b) the development of sport-specific culture change knowledge through a ‘decentred lens’; and c) recommendations for future study. In particular, we hope that further culture change research can benefit from employing a 360-degree/multi-stakeholder perspective, applying decentred theory as a tool to explore the process’ contingent and contested nature, and, as summarised by Bevir, assessing “a form of coaching based on engaging and persuading performers” (p. 294). Concomitantly, contentious features of other reviews also raise some additional considerations which impact on continued study, knowledge development, and practice in elite team culture change. Most specifically, these are: the utility of adopting a performance department-level approach; the necessity for context specificity; and the need to retain an approach grounded in (and for the advancement of) applied practice. As such, to aid progress in this impactful yet understudied area, the purpose of this response is to offer critical discussion and constructive debate on each of these considerations before revisiting the leading article’s principal contributions.

## THE UTILITY OF ADOPTING A PERFORMANCE DEPARTMENT-LEVEL APPROACH

While rationale for investigating sports team-specific culture change free from the

constraints of organisational-based knowledge was presented in the leading article (for the limits of organisational work, see [1-4]), this first consideration is driven by Sarah Gilmore's critique of treating an elite sport organisation's performance department as a distinct entity. Arguing that "a more holistic frame of reference is needed in order to attempt to make sense of aspects of the more visible and accessible features of culture" (p. 305), Gilmore (partly) fixes this point to the assertion that:

[The on-field] team is part of a wider context which not only consists of the 'business' entity that exists alongside it and consistently interacts with it, but the organization as a club entity is caught up in and shaped by institutional logics operating both at the level of the institutional field and at the intraorganizational level. (p. 305)

In this regard, we agree entirely with Gilmore; performance teams clearly operate within (and are influenced by) wider organisational contexts (hence our recruitment of Leeds Carnegie's CEO to enable understanding of how this key figure's perceptions were managed). However, the worth of reviewing our study based on "what it should/could have been" (i.e., a study of a complete organisation's culture) versus "what it was" (i.e., a study of culture change within a theoretically and practically meaningful subunit [2, 5, 6]) is debatable; especially given the publishing journal's focus on sports performance (rather than management or business). Yet, respecting the logic and conviction of Gilmore's commentary, we want to respond fully to her point. Specifically, why is this delineation required between the performance department and the holistic organisation?

First, and beyond the key arguments already presented in the leading article (e.g., the unique and significant power held by performers in relation to management), the culture of the performance department is overseen by the on-field team's management (n.b., elite sports team managers' job descriptions explicitly detail this responsibility: personal communication with English Premiership Director of Rugby, 15 June 2011). Noticeably, such autonomy was found to be a critical success factor in both the leading article and in Gilmore's prior research into effective change management at Bolton Wanderers Football Club:

Bolton's always believed . . . that you don't interfere in the football. You let the manager manage – give him a budget and you try and work within that budget, but you don't interfere with the running of the football. And I've never seen any success come out of operating in another way (Vice Chairman, Brett Warburton). [7, p. 417]

Paired with the fact that performance team training centres are often now in entirely separate locations from the offices in which strategic and administrative staff operate, surely work on how the subculture of the performance department is optimised is theoretically appropriate if this division of responsibility is considered practically beneficial?

Second, managers of the performance department are afforded notably less time than their wider organisation equivalents (i.e., CEOs) to deliver change; particularly when success is not immediately forthcoming. Indeed, managers of English football teams can now expect to survive little more than 1.4 years in the role [8], with rugby union and rugby league team managers also regular victims of the results-based short-termism which pervades the on-field arm of professional sport organisations [e.g., 9, 10]. Given these figures' wide public profile, media scrutiny, and heightened accountability (top management rarely shoulder

responsibility for poor on-field results!), these bespoke conditions clearly warrant bespoke research if sports science and coaching are to develop optimally applicable knowledge.

In short, the fundamental question for researchers, reviewers, and readers of culture change to ask is: what is the study purpose? If a broad *organisational-level* understanding is sought (which is entirely appropriate if the purpose is to develop theoretical and practical understanding of *general* organisational functioning/performance), then a holistic approach is suitable. If a detailed *department-level* understanding is sought (with the purpose to develop theoretical and practical understanding of *specific* department functioning/performance), then a focused, contextually-tailored approach is more appropriate. Either way, and to aid both fair and effective development of future peer review knowledge, research should always be evaluated against the precise purposes of enquiry rather than strictly personal interests/beliefs [11]; as is evidently clear in the development-focused reviews of Bevir and Grix.

### **THE NEED TO WORK FROM AND TO CONTEXTUAL SPECIFICITY**

On discussing key differences between business and performance sport, alongside the practical relevance of optimising a performance team's culture, the second consideration for culture change scholars is the need to strike a meaningful balance between abstraction and specificity. Pertinently, du Gay and Vikkelsø [3] have recently presented a valuable critique of some current and major flaws in organisational change management knowledge, revealing how the field has, to its own undoing, "routinely introduced and analysed [cases of change] as examples of abstract theoretical or historical axioms, rather than as specific, concrete instances of reorganisation from situation A to situation B" [3, p. 122]. Built on the premise that change management is a practical science and should prioritise specification, detailed description, and applied impact, du Gay & Vikkelsø therefore encourage scholars to assume a more contextually-specific, practically meaningful approach to overcome prior faults. It is on this line that we consider McKenna's commentary interesting but fundamentally limited.

First, we must state that, where viable, gaining a critical 'insider' perspective will be an invaluable tool for illuminating culture change processes in future study; particularly that from a decentred approach which emphasises individuals' situated agency and the contingent patterns of rule which their interactions create [12]. Nonetheless, we are unsure to what extent alternative perspectives built on (in the words of McKenna) 'possibilities' and 'potential' can offer theoretically and practically useful contributions to the development of evidence-based culture change knowledge. Indeed, and triggering du Gay and Vikkelsø's stark warnings [3], this appears particularly pertinent for McKenna's conjectures given that this commentary was apparently influenced by contexts which played out well beyond the focus of the leading article (i.e., relegation and management team departure one season *after* data collection was completed). Alternatively, and from a scientific position, the implications of McKenna's review could also be that: a) our data is "wrong"; b) our data has been misinterpreted; c) our data is incomplete; or d) some combination of the above. We are reassured that McKenna does not allude to the first two of these connotations. As such, we can only assume that this commentator may have (or had) another data source to base his propositions; which, if the case, leaves us unable to comment (although we do find confidence in our own findings given our scientific analysis of critical interviews with a 360-degree range of stakeholders, including anonymity-protected players who had not been regular starters). Nevertheless, and returning to our main point, if culture change scholars are to deliver *optimally* significant insights, there is a need to avoid (or at least be wary of)

anecdotal accounts which also offer seemingly simple solutions. Indeed, with organisational change management still suffering from its failure to advance beyond subjective, generalised, and decontextualised approaches [3, 4] it would be remiss for sport-specific study not to heed these lessons at such an early and critical stage of its development.

### **“HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?” VERSUS “HOW WELL DOES IT RESEARCH?”**

Falling out from the commentaries and preceding considerations, our final discussion point centres on the extent to which scholars and practitioners must assume a philosophically pragmatic approach if culture change is to become a dependable, evidence-based skill of elite team managers and their supporting consultants. Specifically, a number of commentators on the leading article - most notably Peter Schroeder - raised concerns over our lack of concrete assessment of team culture and called for development of a comprehensive conceptualisation of the construct. Two points are important here: the first, and despite (explicit and implicit) suggestions to the contrary by some commentators, the purpose of the leading article was not to evaluate *what* the culture of Leeds Carnegie was. Nor was it a study of *organisational* culture (which would have required Gilmore’s holistic approach). Instead, our purpose was to consider management-led processes and mechanisms by which a high performing culture was established and maintained within the boundaries of the performance department (n.b., emphasis was on culture *change* rather than team culture *per se*). Of course, and leading on to our second point, a theoretically and practically sound conceptualisation of team culture will clearly be worthwhile for future research aiming to determine whether it has changed or not in a given study. However, the question we raise is how can this be developed in a way which captures the construct’s undoubted complexity yet protects its practical utility?

Certainly, organisational scholars with far longer histories in exploring group culture than ourselves have struggled to precisely pin down what the construct is and how it can be most accurately assessed. A pragmatic solution to this key challenge, and one alluded to in Schroeder’s commentary, would be to direct attention toward the *manifestations* of a group’s guiding assumptions and operationalise a construct which is “useful and understandable as a means to pursue . . . goals” [13, p. 848]. Evidently, it is far beyond the scope of this response to fully explore and examine the requirements of such a framework but we suggest that an optimal account must consider a variety of process, perception, and performance markers [cf. 2] which – specific to the focus performance level<sup>1</sup> and considered in combination – suggest that a group is perceiving and behaving in a *consistently* different way *and* which critically optimises objective success (i.e., the “meaningful progress” briefly alluded to by McKenna). In this manner, rather than a positivist-based approach of examining culture at *Time A* versus *Time B* (which would fly in the face of the socially complex and eternally evolving nature of group culture), a framework is required which (for culture *change* purposes) facilitates the triangulation of patterns of evidence (for comparison, consider the shortcomings of treating talent or personality as traits rather than dynamic processes [cf. 14, 15]). The implications: scholars should take responsibility for collecting data on a host of change markers (i.e., perceptions, processes, performances; as we attempted in the leading article) and presenting these patterns in a manner which allows the reader to judge the extent to which team culture may have changed.

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<sup>1</sup> While Schroeder has called for a comprehensive framework of team culture to be developed which can be applied to a range of sport settings, we would argue that optimal advances require models which are specific to the unique contexts of each distinct environment (i.e., professional sport versus university/college sport).

In the search for ‘practical-level truths’ [16], we therefore also encourage the culture change research community to assume a ‘glass half full’ approach and consider the pragmatic constraints which scholars face in advancing knowledge (provided enquiry is philosophically, theoretically, and methodologically sound). In this regard, Buchanan and Bryman [17] have provided a valuable portrayal of the practical influences on research method decisions (such as political and ethical properties) and asserted that study rarely adheres to a strict top-down process driven by philosophical concerns. With this in mind, and supplementing recognition of the practical nature of culture (i.e., “the way we do things around here” [18]) and the practical orientation of sport science/coaching fields, practical concerns should therefore lie at the epicentre of future theorising on team culture and how it may be optimised.

## CONCLUSION

In addressing the commentaries on our work, this response has: a) reemphasised and extended on arguments relating to the theoretical and practical significance of culture change study within elite sport performance departments; b) outlined the need for culture change to be treated as a context-specific rather than generic, universal activity; and c) illuminated the necessity for researchers to use perspectives which are sensitive to and supportive of culture change as it prevails in applied settings. As such, colleagues in this new and developing area (and those investigating other pragmatic, socially aggregate constructs) must carefully consider the key balance between abstraction and the level of specificity required to deliver findings which are conceptually sound *and* of significant applied value.

In closing, it is also important to recognise that many theoretical, methodological, and applied messages in the leading article were reinforced by reviewer commentaries. First, the relevance and benefits of characterising culture change as a highly political and problematic challenge have been emphasised; pointing to the need for approaches which illuminate social complexity. In this manner, we note that the leading article’s critical application of decentred theory – and the rationale on which this choice was based – was particularly well received due to its ability to sensitise the study to the contested and contingent features of change. Indeed, and countering Gilmore’s critique of our “inexplicable” (p. 306) omission of writing on organisational culture (even though sport-specific work has already identified the limits and issues of direct transfer [cf. 2, 5, 18, 19]), we reiterate the discerning comments of Grix:

Students and scholars of sports studies must not simply uncritically accept as ‘given’ all the assumptions underlying even the most established approaches, just because they come from specific ‘disciplines’. Adaptations to existing conceptual approaches ought to be encouraged, if they are logically compatible with the approach’s original meta-theoretical assumptions and can be shown to be effective. If this is the case, then such insight could feed back to the study of the original discipline itself. (p. 299)

It was in exactly this spirit that the leading article acknowledged, but did not directly transfer organisational change management and culture change understanding. Rather, it drew upon a theory which was congruent with the conceptual and practical underpinnings of elite sport performance team culture change. Based on the level and novelty of acquired findings, we encourage future researchers to utilise similarly underpinned approaches.

From an applied perspective, the commentaries have also reinforced the relevance and importance of managers delivering and sustaining change through the careful manipulation

of 'bottom-up' constructions. Indeed, rather than perpetuate a reliance on top-down direction or imposition, the reviews supported the value of managers creating conditions and engaging in dialogue which encourages performers to make their own (albeit framed) choices. Moreover, critical support has also been garnered for an approach in which managers actively facilitate a 'to and fro' of power (or at least perceptions of this) and embrace the multiple 'angles' from which an event or dialogue can be interpreted. Aligning more closely to the micropolitics of leading teams rather than traditional leadership theories [20], the astute and context-located use, dispersal, and sharing of power is therefore promoted. It is our hope that future research, underpinned by philosophically, methodologically, and theoretically coherent approaches, can continue to deliver important applied advances for what is an inherently applied topic.

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