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6 Response to Mills and Boardley: “Advancing leadership in sport: time to ‘actually’ take off  
7 the blinkers?”

8  
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1 Dear Editor

2 Reflecting the necessity of critical debate for advancing thought, we welcomed Mills and Boardley's letter [1] on  
3 our recent opinion article in *Sports Medicine* [2]. As expected from such contributions, the authors present a strong  
4 perspective; focused upon our "theoretical misconceptions of both dark and transformational leadership". Unfortunately,  
5 however, most of their comments are based on things that we have neither said nor intended to imply; in some cases, we  
6 have actually said or implied the opposite! On this basis, it appears that we might be agreeing on far more than Mills and  
7 Boardley have suggested; albeit some critical differences remain. Therefore, to further rationalise the advance that we called  
8 for in our original paper, our aim here is to: (a) clarify our perspective on the dark side of leadership and transformational  
9 leadership; (b) highlight areas of apparent accord with Mills and Boardley; and (c) delineate our apparent paths moving  
10 forward.

### 11 **1. The Dark Side of Leadership: What We Actually Said and Further Rationale**

12 Given the stigma associated with the dark side of leadership, it is crucial that authors clarify exactly to what  
13 aspects of the process they refer. In this respect, and contrary to the suggestions of Mills and Boardley, we were careful to  
14 convey that we had *not* focused on "dark leaders" (i.e. those who habitually act in dark ways) or any apparent subspecies  
15 (e.g. "hubristic leaders"). Indeed, we earlier affirmed that "when leaders possess high levels of these traits, it is also widely  
16 agreed that this hinders long term group performance, as well as their own longevity" [3]. As such, we have made a  
17 conscious effort to consistently refer to dark side *behaviours* rather than dark side *traits*:

18 "To be explicit, dark side traits reflect stable dispositions and tendencies in personality that lead individuals to  
19 behave in a relatively consistent and predictable manner across situations (i.e., so someone high in trait narcissism  
20 will frequently act in a narcissistic way). Dark side behaviors, on the other hand, only may be the live enactment  
21 of dark side traits (which may or may not be of high levels) but can also be selectively developed and deployed."  
22 [3]

23 On this basis, we therefore agree with many points in the second part of Mills and Boardley's letter [1]: those who lead in a  
24 consistently dark way are likely to deliver more, and more notable, negative outcomes. However, what we have also stated –  
25 based on evidence – is that socially undesirable *behaviours* that are used in an *intentional, intermittent, and appropriate*  
26 fashion *could* help to foster optimal outcomes [2, 3]. Notably, it seems that Mills and Boardley may potentially agree with  
27 our 'shades of grey' perspective on some level given their view that Machiavellianism *could* benefit the majority in some  
28 scenarios; although more on this later.

29 Beyond clarifying our focus on behaviours, we also never advised that leaders should act in an inauthentic way or  
30 use a "toolbox of disingenuous behaviours". Indeed, in contrast to the suggestions of Mills and Boardley [1], our view is *not*  
31 that leaders should "present the impression of multiple competencies" and apply "scripted behaviours". Rather, authentic  
32 leadership is guided (in part) by the possession of interlinked short, medium and long-term goals that the leader believes will  
33 deliver positive outcomes for the team (and of course the leader as well). As such, *appropriate* use of dark side behaviour in  
34 the present does not automatically mean that the leader is being inauthentic– whether this is defined as genuine *or* true. For

1 example, and while we do not agree with some specific parts of their message, recent empirical work by Sendjaya et al. [4]  
2 has led them to report:

3 “Just because a leader is perceived to be authentic, it does not necessarily mean that they will engage in moral  
4 action [i.e., bright intentions and behaviours in the authors’ view]—at least not consistently . . . . No leader can  
5 totally rid the tendency to employ every means necessary in preserving their interest in certain extraordinary  
6 circumstances, where the conflicting demands of teams, their organization, and society clash with the leader’s core  
7 beliefs and values . . . . Our finding confirmed our theory that, in the presence of the right stimuli, imposed or  
8 otherwise, one could score high on both authenticity and Machiavellianism.” [4]

9 As such, if a sport leader genuinely or truly believes that use of dark side behaviour in a specific moment will facilitate  
10 greatest long-term benefit for most (which *might* require self-serving work in the short term), then they are surely not  
11 “disingenuous” in an absolute sense? In short, using the dark side is not automatically appropriate but neither automatically  
12 an action of inauthentic leadership: it depends!

13 Somewhat confusingly given the early points in their letter, Mills and Boardley [1] do then later state that:

14 “Behaviours are, in the main, value neutral. As such, labelling them without context is futile. The characteristic  
15 and subsequent behaviour are arguably unimportant. What is important, however, is the individual and the motive  
16 behind the presentation of the behaviour.” [1]

17 In sum, Mills and Boardley [1] seem to be arguing with themselves: on one hand they suggest that dark side behaviours are  
18 inherently “spurious”, “disingenuous”, “harmful” and used by those working from a “distorted position”; yet on the other  
19 hand they assert that all behaviours are primarily value-free. To clarify our own views, we strongly disagree with the former  
20 and do not quite agree with the latter. Regarding the latter, all behaviours have *some* inherent value; we cannot escape our  
21 socialisation, via which certain behaviours have been instilled as “good or bad” or “right and wrong”. However, and in  
22 further contrast to Mills and Boardley’s points, we also do not see that socially undesirable actions are absolutely *validated*  
23 as “good or bad” or “right or wrong” by the leader’s motive or the outcome achieved (as such, the motive and outcome only  
24 *might* justify the means). Instead, we suggest that dark side behaviours are *qualified* by the leader’s motive; a view which is  
25 explicit in our prior work [2, 3].

26 To demonstrate our point, take again Mills and Boardley’s [1] example of a leader using Machiavellianism for the  
27 greater good: the correspondents state that this “should not be considered dark” given that the motive is bright; our simple  
28 question is, why not? Machiavellianism *is*, in most sporting environments of which we are aware, socially undesirable; a  
29 bright motive cannot absolutely *validate* the leader’s behaviour in this instance as either “good” or “right” (think about those  
30 who find out about the manipulation). Instead, the leader’s bright motive *qualifies* the use of Machiavellianism: in effect, it  
31 calls on those interpreting the behaviour to consider its *contextual appropriateness*. Importantly, the exact same principles  
32 should apply when interpreting the use of bright behaviours: these are not always good or right [5]!

33 In sum, and as previously stated, our position is that “leaders are not (and certainly do not have to be) ‘nice’ all of  
34 the time . . . the dark side of leadership behaviour is not inherently ‘wrong’” [2] and “great care is required [with application

1 of dark side behaviours] given the potential for negative implications if misused” [3]. As such, we do not, as apparently  
2 suggested by Mills and Boardley [1], “glorify” the dark side of leadership. However, they were right to note that evidence  
3 on the benefits of the dark side of leadership in sport is currently limited; albeit most if not all of the methodological  
4 limitations that they highlight also apply to studies that have qualitatively explored the bright side of leadership. As such,  
5 further work is needed to build on the initial findings of ourselves (which were not based on “*suspected* leaders who  
6 display[ed] dark leadership behaviours”) and our colleagues (we’re not just “preaching from the bleachers”!) [3]. In this  
7 vein, we recognise that our call to focus on the full spectrum of leader behaviour is a jump from the current socially desirable  
8 orthodoxy; however, as the bright and dark sides of leading are “often two sides of the same coin”, as Mills and Boardley [1]  
9 assert, then we feel that this is justified. Indeed, we would be shocked if dark side behaviour was now found to be entirely  
10 useless in the pursuit of positive, long-term, group goals; which is surely what would be required for scholars to abandon this  
11 area?

## 12 **2. Transformational Leadership: What We Actually Said and Further Rationale**

13 As well as misreporting many of our views on the dark side of leadership, Mills and Boardley [1] also misreport  
14 elements of our views on transformational leadership. Firstly, they recognise that we say that transformational leadership  
15 theory is “sub-optimal” for informing day-to-day practice; a point we uphold since sole adherence to any *one* style must be,  
16 by definition, sub-optimal at times. However, they then embellished our words suggesting that we said that this approach  
17 “cannot” inform day-to-day practice. As we wrote the former but certainly *not* the latter, many of Mills and Boardley’s  
18 related comments on our position are redundant. Indeed, we entirely recognise the positive impact that transformational  
19 behaviours can have on leadership outcomes and chose to focus on this theory in our original paper given its dominance in  
20 leadership research in sport (and the 3000-word limit of Current Opinion articles in *Sports Medicine*). We have also never  
21 called for this theory to be thrown out. Instead, we have stated that, fundamentally speaking, “its tenets are entirely  
22 appropriate for leadership in sport” [2] and that “dark pathways have not yet been sufficiently considered or accounted for”  
23 within it [3].

24 Beyond this misquoting, Mills and Boardley [1] also challenged our interpretation of Bass and Steidlmeier [6]. In  
25 this respect, Mills and Boardley [1] stated that there is “no such thing as a transformational leader, merely those who display  
26 transformational qualities”; a position that aligns with the views in our original paper. However, Mills and Boardley also  
27 assert that this is no different to the views of Bass and Steidlmeier [6]. To be clear, we agree that Bass and Steidlmeier [6]  
28 have reported that leaders do not rely on one behavioural approach and that “the transformational leader” does not exist.  
29 Problematically, or at least incoherently, however, these authors *do* still go on to use general terms throughout (e.g.  
30 “transformational leadership / leader”) and characterise leader types: “when we speak of authentic transformational leaders  
31 or authentic transactional leaders, we are *labelling* leaders who *generally* are more authentic than inauthentic” (emphasis  
32 added) [6]. Confusion within the theorising of Bass and Steidlmeier [6] is perhaps best shown in Mills and Boardley’s  
33 assertion that “although authentic or ‘true’ transformational leadership qualities are proposed to include integrity, moral and  
34 ethical principles and authenticity, these qualities are not requirements of transformational leadership” [1]: so “truly

1 transformational” and “transformational” leaders are different . . . but neither actually exist! As we have purposely refrained  
2 from using labels that suggest broad styles (e.g. “dark leader” / “dark leadership”), the suggestion that we use terms in the  
3 same way as Bass and Steidlmeier [6] is inaccurate. Instead, we re-emphasise that (a part of) our focus has consistently been  
4 on dark side *behaviours* that are appropriately deployed against explicit and nested intentions [2, 3].

### 5 **3. Moving Forwards: Areas of Agreement but Different Paths?**

6 On reflection, we hope that this response has firstly clarified our position on the dark side of leadership and  
7 transformational leadership. Indeed, although disappointed with much of the misreporting by Mills and Boardley, we hope  
8 that this exchange has helped others to reflect on their position and the future of leadership research in sport; a debate that  
9 has clearly been driven by our shared passion for this area. In the shared spirit of collegiality, we also hope to have shown  
10 that we may have more in common with Mills and Boardley than not!

11 Indeed, based on some of Mills and Boardley’s views [1], it appears that we both see that:(a) leaders are unlikely  
12 to deliver consistently positive outcomes, for most of their followers most of the time, if they behave in a consistently dark  
13 way; (b) broad labels are unhelpful in the sense that they mask the precise nature and spectrum of leadership behaviours as  
14 used in practice; (c) an optimally accurate evaluation of leader behaviour requires consideration of context and intention (or  
15 motive), and; (d) future work should include follower perspectives, ideally *with* leader perspectives through mixed or  
16 multiple methods and longitudinal designs. Beyond this accord, we were also encouraged to read that Mills and Boardley  
17 support the need for work on the cognitive aspects of leading. Indeed, we feel that the “it depends” and “shades of grey”  
18 nature of leadership should once again be prominent in discussion.

19 In terms of our next steps, however, it seems that Mills and Boardley [1] may be heading in a different direction to  
20 ourselves. For clarity, we still see that work on the full spectrum of leadership behaviour, including that of a socially  
21 undesirable nature, plus a consideration of the cognitive drivers of leadership behaviour, are *essential* routes forward if  
22 researchers are to make a significant stride in practically-meaningful knowledge; in short, *what leaders do*. On the basis of  
23 their calls to explore attitudes, character, morality and value congruence, it seems that Mills and Boardley are perhaps more  
24 focused on *who leaders are*. If we have taken their suggestions correctly, this work will offer an interesting perspective but  
25 one which is distinct from the expertise focus that we continue to pursue. Either way, we hope that this discussion has  
26 served to further all of our colleagues’ thoughts on some level. We thank Mills and Boardley [1] for the opportunity to  
27 engage.

28

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### 32 **Conflicts of Interest**

33 Andrew Cruickshank and Dave Collins declare that they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the content of this letter.

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3

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