Developing Leadership Skills in Sport: A Case Study of Elite Cricketers

Abstract

Effective leadership in sport at the elite level can make the difference between success and failure. However, while the importance of leadership is acknowledged there is little published evidence regarding how the required skills could or should be developed. The current case study reports the implementation of a leadership development program with elite professional cricketers. The intervention itself was focused at three levels: (1) captaincy development, (2) leadership skill development, (3) personal growth and leadership development. Program effectiveness was determined through the feedback provided by the individual players on the program, the reflections of the sport psychology consultant, and feedback from the professional staff. Evaluation and reflection of the program suggests that a formal development program can be both beneficial and impactful in enhancing the leadership capabilities of elite players.

Keywords:

Captaincy, athlete leadership, personal development

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Context

I am a qualified sport and exercise psychologist based in the United Kingdom, on the Health and Care Profession's Council (HCPC) register (government registration) as a practitioner sport and exercise psychologist. I am also a British Psychological Society (BPS) chartered Psychologist and a British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist. At the time of the intervention I had being working in the professional cricket environment for six years, and with the Cricket NGB for two years.

Consultancy Philosophy

My consultancy philosophy has evolved over the past 10 years from a cognitive-behavioral approach to being positive, cognitive, humanist. Positive because I firmly believe in the central tenant of positive psychology - to focus on optimal human functioning, and aiming to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and groups/teams to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This perspective underpins my focus on strengths-based approaches to practice (e.g., Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Indeed, in recent years strengths based approaches have featured increasingly frequently across a range of domains (Ludlam, Butt, Bawden, Lidsay, & Maynard, 2015). Specifically, practitioners adopting strengths-based approaches seek to identify and grow individual strengths rather than focus on individual deficiencies.

My approach is also cognitive because many of the interventions I apply seek to influence cognitions and beliefs (Beck, 2005). The cognitive approach is underpinned by at least three key principles (Dozois & Beck, 2011). First, the individual's cognition is assumed to affect both their emotions and their behaviors. Second, it is assumed that individuals can

learn to monitor and modify much of their cognitive activity. Third, by changing the individual's beliefs, one can achieve a desired change in the individual's behaviors and experiences. The cornerstone of the cognitive approach is the notion that if you can increase the clients' awareness of their cognitions and underpinning beliefs these maladaptive thoughts can be modified to be more constructive (Dozois & Beck, 2011, p. 30).

Finally, I view myself to be humanist as I fundamentally believe that each client is unique and they (the client) has the best insight into the presenting problem and the best solution (Rogers, 2003). These three fundamental principles (positive, cognitive, humanist) serve to underpin and inform my work with clients and the interventions I apply.

The Case

The client in this case was a UK-based National Governing Body. I worked as a sport psychology consultant as part of a sport specific elite development program that was designed to support the continued development of talented players and to ultimately aid their progression and transition into the national senior (international) squad. As part of the broader program players were given developmental programmes that built upon an initial profiling event that explored their physical, technical, nutritional, and psychological abilities and development needs. At the time of the intervention the NGB had highlighted a need to develop the leadership (and specifically captaincy) skills and experience of players on the program, though there was little specific detail regarding what this might look like.

The players in this case study were 16 male professional cricketers (M_{age} = 23.38 years, age range: 19 to 32 years; $M_{experience}$ = 5.2 years, range 2 to 12 years). All the players were deliberately selected by the NGB via a season-long rigorous talent identification program as being the most talented group of future players. Participants for the captaincy part of the development program (n = 7) were deliberately selected based on fulfilling at least two of the

following three specific selection criteria: (a) the player had prior experience as a captain; (b) the player expressed a strong desire to be a captain in the future; (c) the program director felt that the player had captaincy potential outside of points (a) and (b). This specific information regarding captaincy experience and aspirations was collected as part of a broader psychological profiling interview specifically undertaken, as part of an initial needs analysis part of the broader player development program (of which the leadership program was a specific component).

Intervention

At the time of writing there were very few examples in the literature of applied interventions at this level. As a result, I wanted to design an impactful intervention, and also collect feedback in a coherent, structured way to enhance the ability to disseminate the approach and its perceived impact. I adopted an "intrinsic case study" approach similar to that articulated by Stake (2000), and adopted by Voight (2012) in a case study of leadership development with two elite teams in volleyball. This particular approach seeks to develop a more in-depth understanding of the case, the specific intervention program, it's delivery and its perceived effectiveness (Holt & Hogg, 2002). Voight's (2012) program was designed to improve team functioning, assist in leading information sharing, and to facilitate the personal leadership development of the captains, assistant captains, and captain apprentices. Then, conducted interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

The program itself was designed to conform to two specific parameters outlined by the sports NGB in question. First, the program was required to focus at three previously identified "levels" of leadership: (a) captaincy development; (b) leadership skill development; and (c) personal growth and leadership development. These three levels had been earmarked as crucial in helping to develop leaders at an international level of performance. Crucially, these three

levels had been developed at an organizational level by an NGB expert panel, not by myself. My role was to develop strategies to develop each of these levels of leadership. Second, the NGB was keen for any development program to be underpinned by the organizations' six core values: teamwork, honesty, respect, excellence, enjoyment, and resilience. The specific definitions of each (as determined by the NGB) are presented as follows: *teamwork* - working together to make decisions and to perform; *honesty* - fostering an environment that promotes open reflection, communication, and feedback; *respect* – demonstrating due understanding and consideration for others and the game; *excellence* – driving relentlessly to be the world's best in everything you do; *enjoyment* – embrace the challenge of delivering a successful team and recognize individual and team successes; and *resilience* – thriving under pressure in order to deliver results.

An intervention plan was developed for the duration of the wider player development program that ran over a six-week period. The intervention plan built upon the recommendations outlined in number of previous studies including: offering the opportunity for developing leaders to experience leadership in meaningful situations (Blanton, Sturges, & Gould, 2014); to focus on developing player-management skills (Cotterill, 2014); to broaden the focus to enable the development of a shared approach to leadership in the team (Fransen Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014); to foster a broader approach to leadership in teams, focusing on both formal and informal leaders (Price & Weiss, 2011); and to seek to develop leadership programs at the highest level (Voight, 2012). In particular, the program built upon the existing athlete leadership literature that differentiates between formal (e.g., captains and vice-captain) and informal (e.g., on pitch motivator) roles (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Dupuis, Bloom, Loughead, 2006; Fransen, Coffee, Vanbeselaere, Slater, De Cuyper, & Boen, 2014; Loughhead, Hard, & Eys, 2006). This focus resulted in the development of separate formal (captaincy program) and

informal (leadership skill development and personal growth) components of the program. The informal part of the program was designed to develop (personal growth) the basic tenants that underpin good leadership, including effective communication, being positive, controlling emotions, and being respectful (Dupuis et al., 2006); and the deployment of these skills to influence the team (leadership skill development).

Captaincy development

The small, select group of individuals identified as having captaincy potential were given a specific program of development activities including: receiving a copy of a book on captaincy specific to cricket; captaincy/vice-captaincy opportunities (to get hands on experience captaining in practice games during the four-week overseas training camp); captaincy debriefs with the sport psychology consultant, performance director, and discipline-specific coaches; and a regularly timetabled "Leadership Development Group" (LDG). The book each of these player received was 'The Art of Captaincy' by Mike Brearley (2001). Brearley has been acknowledged by his contemporaries as a fine captain and the book outlines his experiences and challenges within the sport of cricket. This LDG group sought to explore key factors and challenges relating to captaincy in cricket.

Further details of the specific components of the leadership development program are provided in Table 1.0. The program was also underpinned by the Myer-Briggs Type indicator (MBTi) personality framework (Myers & Kirby, 1994). Briefly, this framework categorizes individuals as one of 16 different personality types. One type is not better than another, they are just different. The inherent value of the framework is that it provides a language to understand and explore individual differences, and crucially how different 'types' can work together effectively. Crucially, MBTi had been previously adopted by the NGB in question, which had resulted in coaches using it as part of the coach education /qualification program and players

being profiled using it at their professional clubs. The MBTi approach was used as a framework to understand how individuals differ, and to discuss how different individuals might respond in the same situations and how the captain can cope and adapt their approach.

Leadership skill development

This part of the program was designed for all 16 of the players in the development squad; and provided opportunities for players to act as leaders and to take on positions of responsibility. Each player was given the opportunity to lead specific activities as part of the wider training program. A central aspect of this was acting as a player representative as part of the program management meetings. The specific role required the player to act as the conduit between the players and the program staff as part of the program management group. As part of this player representative role, players undertook a 15-minute debrief from the management group meetings with the rest of the players (at the start of the day), which was observed by the sport psychologist. In these debriefs the selected players communicated important information from the management group to the players, and from the players back to the management group. This role was seen as a way to enhance group communication processes as advocated by Holt and Dunn (2006). I observed these short debrief sessions to then provide feedback to each of the player representatives on their communication performance in the role. Different players were also assigned specific leadership roles during the performance challenges in training, and informal leadership roles during the practice games.

Personal growth and leadership development

This part of the intervention program was built around an on-going schedule of experiences, self-discovery, and self-development in both cricket and non-cricket settings. At the start of the training program all of the players' were required to take part in a non-sport personal development task that sought to raise each players self-awareness and reflect on their

core personal characteristics, strengths, and personal areas to focus on and develop (Cotterill, 2012). This personal development program then continued throughout the training camp with players seeking to work on key personal development areas that emerged as part of the personal development program. A central component of the program focused on developing six core personal behaviors that were identified as being important to the NGB: teamwork, honesty, respect, excellence, enjoyment, and resilience. The importance of these six areas was highlighted and reinforced through a systematic induction program as part of the wider training camp. The first week of this induction program included a number of presentations from both current and retired international players within the sport who outlined what it meant to play for their national team, and how the six core personal behaviors underpinned their success. This was undertaken to provide a tangible link for the players between the values and success in their sport. In the second week of the program players had an explicit focus on developing their understanding of these six key behaviors in a context outside of cricket. Part of this week was designed to put the players under stress (e.g., engaging in white water rescue activities) and explore the degree to which each player embodied these highlighted core behaviors. The other half of the week explored how these behaviors existed in a different performance environment (e.g., the Fire Service in a large UK city). Throughout the week players were tasked with developing their understanding of what these core values were, developing their self-awareness for how well they reflected these course values, and to start the process of understanding how they could enhance the degree to which they each embodied these values and behaviors. This process then continued throughout the wider program.

Evaluation

At the end of the intervention players were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the program, and its effectiveness. The interviews were carried out by an independent

interviewer who was brought in to remove the potential awkwardness for players of the

consultant asking about the program that had been designed and implemented. This is similar to

the approach adopted by Dunn and Holt (2003) in evaluating the effectiveness of an applied

intervention program in ice hockey, and the approach adopted by Voight (2012) when also

evaluating a leadership development program. The data were analyzed using an inductive

method (Patton, 2002) in order to identify common themes that emerged from the evaluation of

the program. Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the data: positive

outcomes; impact; challenges in application; lessons learnt; and future evolution. Each of

which will be discussed in the following section.

Positive outcomes

The opportunity to focus on developing specific captaincy skills and abilities was seen

as a positive aspect of the intervention program. For example player five stated that: "It's good

to get the opportunity to talk about captaincy and stuff, good to see what others think . . . and to

look at communication and decision-making and stuff". This view was also supported by player

eleven who reflected that he had: "Not really had any 'training' to be a captain, just sort of just

had to do it, so nice to stop and think about what I should be doing and what things I should be

doing".

The players viewed this opportunity to develop their core skills as a positive aspect of the

program. Indeed, there was a view that while in the past there had been discussions about the

decisions the individual should make as a captain they had very little experience of looking at

the way the individual might captain; and about developing the way that works best for the

individual. Indeed, this reflects Chelladurai's (1990) Multidimensional Model of Leadership

and the importance of the leaders preferences, the team's preferences, and what the situation

requires. This perspective also reflects positive outcomes reported by both Blanton et al.

(2014), and Gould and Voelker (2010) in their leadership development programs at the high school level. The advantages of developing core skills was also highlighted by Dupuis et al. (2006) and Loughead et al. (2006).

Players also valued the opportunity to discuss their views about captaincy and their own personal captaincy experiences with other experienced professionals from within their sport. This included both current and previous international captains, as well as the program's performance director and the expert coaches for each of the specific sub-disciplines within the game of cricket (e.g., bowling, batting, wicket-keeping, & fielding). An example of this was player seven who reflected: "It was great to hear about the experiences of other captains, especially those with international experience you know . . . it was also good to talk to the coaches and, you know, get their input and ideas". This 'mutual' sharing approach has been strongly advocated in other aspects of sport psychology as an effective intervention (Holt & Dunn, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2008). Also, contemporary pedagogic research highlights this type of "peer-to-peer" reflection as a very effective form of personal development (Mann, Gordon, & Macleod, 2009). In this particular instance the invited ex-captains discussed their approach, the challenges they had faced, and the solutions adopted. They also led discussions about scenarios inviting the participants to hypothesize potential solutions.

There was also a view among the players that developing their understanding of the potential differences that can exist between players was a positive outcome of the program. It was particularly felt that the use of a specific framework (in this case MBTi) enabled the players to appreciate individual differences in greater detail, and to plan ways they could modify their particular approach to leadership. For example player two reflected:

It was good to learn more about the way we are all different, you know, to really be able

to work with lots of different people. I also thought it was good just to understand how I

do like to do things in a particular way, and that that might not be the best for everyone!

It is interesting to note that MBTi as a framework is used across the sport of cricket with a

basic understanding embedded in the sport's coach education system (Cotterill, 2012). As such,

many of the players had a degree of prior understanding at both a general and personal level.

This focus on individual differences also reinforces the view in cricket of the importance of

player management skills for captains (Cotterill & Barker, 2013). This approach to leadership,

and the importance of relationships, is also extensively supported in the business leadership

literature (Karp & Helgø, 2008).

Impact

All of the players on this program felt that the intervention had a positive impact upon

their peer and personal leadership abilities. This was particularly apparent with the captaincy

group, encapsulated by player three who stated that: "I really enjoyed the opportunity to talk

about my captaincy after the game . . . you know talking about the decisions I made, what

happened in the game, and getting a different perspective on what I did in the game". This view

probably reflects a more easily articulated link between the relevant skills and knowledge and

the requirements for their application (Voight, 2012). The development and application of

reflective practice skills was also well received. The ability to effectively reflect upon "the job

done" was something that for many players they had never really explored in a structured way.

These views also support the importance of reflective practice for leadership highlighted in the

broader leadership literature (Day, 2000; Roglio & Light, 2009). Player sixteen reflected that:

I had never really sat down and examined how it had gone before, you always think about what you did and whether it was right . . . or you know, you could have done something else, but never really sat down and thought about it in a structured way.

This view reinforces the fact that most of the players on the program, even though they had almost all come through the elite academy development system, had not really been exposed to a structured approach to leadership development. This is a potential development area for cricket and professional sport in general as the use of reflective approaches to enhance future leadership performance has been highlighted in a number of domains as crucially important (Pedler, 2011; Roglio & Light, 2009). The positive reflection by the players in the current study regarding the need to develop as leaders supports the finding of Voight (2012) where the players' view was that the program was "time well spent".

It was also felt by the players in the current study that the opportunity to apply leadership and captaincy skills at a higher level than normal was a distinct advantage of the program. This was reinforced by player twelve who stated that: "Getting the opportunity to captain at a higher level was great and, it was also good to get feedback on my performance as a captain, then having the opportunity put the lessons learnt into practice". This positive outcome reflected one of the core aims of the wider development program in seeking to develop and prepare this group of talented players for the next level, essentially for making the "step-up" to the full international team. In particular, a key aim of the program was to enhance the efficacy beliefs of the players for performing at the next level (Cotterill, 2014; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). This ability to lead in meaningful situations appears to be an important characteristic of leadership development programs across different levels (Blanton et al., 2014; Dupuis et al., 2006).

There was also a view among players that this program helped in optimizing the impact that the informal leaders could have on the game, and the ways in which these leaders could support the formal leaders. Supporting this view player ten stated that: "I think it has helped me to develop, to hopefully be a better leader on and off the pitch . . . it was also good to see that I can influence the game in what I do".

This point supported an explicit realization regarding the impact that informal leaders can have in the functioning of the team. This outcome also fostered a greater understanding that leadership is not, and possibly should not, just be the domain of the captain (Fransen & Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014). This in turn builds on previous studies highlighting the importance of informal leaders (Eys et al., 2007; Loughead et al., 2006; Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2011).

Challenges in application

The players in the current study emphasized a number of specific challenges in attempting to apply their leadership skills in the matches and performances challenges (evaluated performance-related scenario work) on the development program. This point was particularly highlighted in relation to all the expertise that was present in the coaching and support teams. While the players acknowledged that access to such a wealth of knowledge was a positive, trying not to become a "puppet" leader was a challenge. In this context puppet leaders are those who occupy the leadership position, but do not make decisions, instead they simply relay the views of the coach. All of the "experts" had specific views regarding how it [leadership] should be undertaken, and what the right decisions were. As a result, there was a tendency for the coaches to dictate rather than debrief. This view also reflected a conflict in the program between development and performance. In an ideal world the individuals gaining experience in leadership roles would have been given complete control to apply their skills and

engage in experiential learning. However, there was also a reputational demand for the NGB where it was still important for the national development squad to achieve good results against local opposition. This in turn led to greater guidance and influence by the coaches. The difficulty of achieving this balance between development and performance has been highlighted as a particular challenge in developing performers for elite competition (Martindale & Mortimer, 2011).

Lessons learnt

Two consistent "lessons" were highlighted by the players on the program. The first related to developing a greater understanding of the range of leadership roles in the game; and the second to each player's ability to understand themselves, their preferences, and how this may differ from other individuals. In particular, an explicit awareness of the impact that team members (who were not the captain or vice-captain) could have on the team. As with the performance roles in the team, role clarity regarding the various leadership roles (such as captain, vice captain, and informal leadership roles) was highlighted as an important factor in enhancing leadership performance (Fransen, Coffee, et al., 2014). This point is reinforced by literature highlighting the impact that role clarity can have upon performance (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2005).

Future evolution

Some modifications were suggested to the program by the players to enhance future delivery and effectiveness. Some of these recommendations related to logistical considerations including the duration, frequency, and location of the group sessions. However, the main suggestion for improvement related to the player representative role. It was felt that each player did not get enough time to undertake this role sufficiently to gain real experience and opportunities for personal development. This view was highlighted by player twelve who

reflected that: "I don't think the player rep stuff worked too well, you know, just not enough time to do the job before handing it over to someone else . . . maybe select a smaller number, you know, like for the captains group". Given this was the first time that the program was implemented, the players highlighted that trying to implement so much from scratch may have been too ambitious. A possible solution for the future would be adopting more of an incremental approach to implementation (Voight, 2012).

Reflections

The reflections in the current case study have been developed building upon Johns's (1994) model of reflection. This model is based on five specific stages that enable the practitioner to break down their experiences and reflect on the underpinning process and outcomes. The specific stages are: (1) Describe the experience and what were the significant factors; (2) What was the goal and what were the consequences; (3) What things like internal/external/knowledge affected my decision making; (4) What other choices did I have and what were those consequences; (5) What will change because of this experience, and how did I feel about the experience?

Describe the experience and what were the significant factors?

The intervention built upon existing literature relating to leadership development in sports settings. However, at the time of the intervention there was very little literature that focused on developing athlete leadership skills at an elite professional level. The implementation of the program itself was interesting as it spanned two countries and multiple contexts in its delivery. Also, often this program was in addition to the main program which resulted in an increased workload particularly when in the overseas element of the program. That said this was the first real structured approach to leadership development within the sport at this level. There were a number of constraints that existed as a result of the specific

context coming into the NGB to work, this in turn impacted upon the intervention program design. Also the development of this program was not a core part of the position when employed, but developed quite quickly in response to perceived leadership limitations at the highest level in the sport at that time. That said, working with a very supportive performance director was crucial. Having buy-in from the management and coaching staff is an important pre-requisite to the successful implementation of such a program.

What was the goal and what were the consequences?

At a broad level the goal of this intervention program was to positively impact upon the leadership abilities of the players in the group. More specifically the program was underpinned by three specific goals: (1) to develop captaincy proficiency; (2) to enhance the broader leadership skills of the squad; (3) to increase personal awareness and personal leadership.

The plan itself was ambitious in seeking to create impact across three different levels for the whole squad. This increased complexity could have impacted upon the implementation of the program and also the overall potential for the program to demonstrate successful outcomes. In isolation it is difficult to assess the degree to which this program developed the six core values. This is due to the embedding of these values across all aspects of player work on the development program, not just the leadership program.

What things like internal/external/knowledge affected my decision-making?

While seeking to apply an 'evidence-based practice' approach, I also needed to be sympathetic towards the specific needs of the NGB, and their perceptions of what an effective program would look like. In general terms, the intervention program, as represented by the views of the players, appears to have been a success. There was some initial teething problems highlighted, such as players not being able to logistically be in the right places at

the right time. This was, in part, due to the geographical separation between the training venue and the accommodation (around 20 minutes by bus) for this program. As a result, sometimes having all the players in the same location, particularly if the coaches made changes to the general training program (e.g., finishing early), proved problematic. Also, getting access to the right "space" for some of the sessions also proved problematic. This issue was particularly salient when the sessions required more privacy and were taking place back at the team's hotel.

What other choices did I have and what where those consequences?

There were a range of different options in terms of the structure of the program and whether to include all three aspects. There was also the option to not include the six performance behaviors outlined by the NGB. While this would have reduced the size of the program I also felt that it would have potentially reduced the 'buy-in' from the other support staff and the Performance Director more broadly.

What will change because of this experience and how did I feel about the experience?

Overall, based upon my own reflections and the feedback from the players and support staff I felt this first running of the program went very well. This supports the reflection by Voight (2012) on the delivery of a leadership development program in volleyball as time well spent. This evaluation also supports the positive outcomes reported by Blanton et al. (2014); Gould and Voelker (2010); and Voelker et al. (2011). The reflections of the players regarding the effectiveness of the program also supports Price and Weiss's (2011) recommendations for the development of leadership skills for all team members within the team. One aspect of the program that would need to be modified for the future would be the player representative roles. In trying to ensure that all members of the development squad got the opportunity to act as a player representative, each player only got to fulfill the role for a couple of days in total. It was

generally felt that this was too brief for individuals to come to terms with the role, and to really apply the feedback they received from the sport psychology consultant. Also, the players felt that the frequent change of personnel in the role was disruptive. The management team also echoed this view, that players would have been better represented if there had been great continuity of personnel in the player representative roles.

While the management team (performance director, all coaches, all support staff, as well as the designated player representatives) felt the player representative roles could have been executed more effectively, there was strong overall support for the leadership development program from the Performance Director and Coaches, particularly for the captaincy aspect. The structure of the program enabled expert coaches to explore leadership relating to their specific disciplines of the game of cricket through the role of the captain. This approach was seen as a way to further enhance the captain's ability to get the most out of the team in terms of tactical performance. The tactical context in cricket has been seen as a factor that has a significant impact upon the performances of individual players in the game (Cotterill, 2014). As a result, opportunities for future captains to develop this knowledge are crucial (Voight, 2012). Finally, designs of future programs in elite cricket could seek to further enhance the role of the players in the management process by developing a dual-management model approach as highlighted by Hodge, Henry, and Smith (2014) in his case study of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team.

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