Teamwork from the Golden-Age Pirates: Could this Strategy Work in Today's Contemporary Sports Setting?

Eric Street
Steve S. Chen

The focus of this paper encompasses the contemporary teamwork and coaching philosophy in today's sport setting. The authors compare and contrast the modern philosophy to the beliefs of Golden Age Pirates. Our effort is to determine whether the 17th century pirates' teamwork and leadership philosophy could still be successfully transitioned and utilized in modern sports today. Could this ancient system, developed in the 17th century, have any value in 21st century teamwork building and coaching? In this paper, the authors first reiterate the modern leadership principles and importance of the leadership role to the critical success of an organization and a sport team. Then, the authors provide the evidences on how ancient pirate crews executed teamwork and achieved efficiency by demonstrating leadership principles and practices of the modern era. To make this depiction more visible and relevant, the life of pirates at sea is illustrated. The authors explain how the code of conduct and philosophy abided by the pirate crews helped them become a highly organized operational unit in order to survive and succeed under harsh conditions. The role of captains and their leadership style are also closely examined. Evidently, the exemplary leadership of the captain was extremely critical to the safety and life of seamen in carrying out motivation, discipline, and reward and punishment. Discussion and analyses of this paper provides evidence to show the practices and principles of 17th century pirates can still help make and build successful sport coaches and leaders in the 21st century.

Modern Philosophy and Concepts in Leadership and Coaching

Summary of Leadership Philosophy

All organizations need proper leadership to guide and manage daily activities for accomplishing organizational success. Effective leadership can significantly boost morale and organizational commitment and creates a general positive attitude (Long, Yong, & Chuen, 2016). On the contrary, an organization with low level of member commitment would appear dysfunctional and has a low level of productivity. Both transactional and transformational leadership foster organizational commitment. Objective-oriented transactional leaders are quick to convey instruction and identify expectations. They monitor and reward performance whether actively following the guidelines or by exception. Relationship-oriented transformational leaders focus on the followers' motivation and

needs, thus they offer emotional support, delegate responsibilities, and collaborate with followers to garner trust. Therefore, transformational leaders are viewed as charismatic, inspirational, intellectual, inspiring and caring (Long et al., 2016). When those qualities are exemplified, members of the organization (followers or subordinates) will be drawn to the leaders by offering their loyalty and respect. Thus, affective organizational commitment is fostered (Pierro, Raven, Amato, & Belanger, 2013). When members of the organization are committed, they feel obligated and are emotionally attached to their organization with satisfaction for their rewards (or compensations). There is no need for harsh coercion and excessive position influence (Pierro et al., 2013).

Leaders' Influence on Team Success

Leadership is a determining factor that affects a team's performance. Leaders are individuals who guide a team to have a clear mission and high performance standards. They evaluate every available opportunity, source, and talent to allow teams to achieve their goals. They also allocate time to plan and organize for the optimal use of all resources. Furthermore, leaders train new members to become potential future leaders (Harper, 2012), as well as develop existing members to reach organizational objectives (Hughes, Gannett, & Curphy, 2015).

To build a successful organization or team, there should be ways to enhance good communication and minimize and resolve conflicts. Leaders are mainly responsible to use good communication to establish goals (Hughes et al., 2015; Weinberg & Gould, 2007). So, they often dispose their intelligence, assertiveness, independence, and self-confidence to further motivate subordinates and provide constructive feedback (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Finally, leaders need to have the courage to emerge from the difficult situation and learn to adapt and adjust to the environment, to make decisions, and provide guidance (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

Undoubtedly, coaches are the most important leadership figures within a sport team. Coaches are charged to deliver instruction, motivate players, build team cohesion, and evaluate performance. As described among all important leadership traits and style, they exert full effort to collaborate, inspire, care, and develop others. They also need to be flexible and knowledgeable to make decisions and solutions dealing with unexpected circumstances (i.e., occurrence of players' injuries and calling plays during timeouts). This means they need to demonstrate situational leadership in order to perform under pressure.

Preferred Leadership Styles and Traits in Contemporary Sports

Surujlal and Dhurup (2012) concluded that an autocratic leadership style was not conducive for athletes; therefore, coaches should not exhibit this type of behavior. Athletes and subordinates prefer a leadership style that promotes democratic behaviors, social support, cohesion building, positive feedback and constructive criticism. Legendary UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden was famous for spending a majority of his coaching time on positive verbal instruction and motivation (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). In the contemporary organizational and sport setting, this type of leadership coaching is considered as the best way to develop subordinates

and breed future leaders (Harper, 2012).

Evidently, coaches who can adapt to different situations and environments successfully are likely to increase their team's effectiveness and productivity, but also improve players' morale and loyalty to the team. Jerry Faust, the former head football coach at the University of Notre Dame and John Calipari, head coach of University of Kentucky men's basketball, were both credited for being creative in adapting to new situations and motivating players (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

Scholars suggested that an autonomy-supportive coaching style was associated with higher performance and prosocial behavior towards teammates (Chen, Wang, Ronkainen, & Huang, 2016; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Athletes and subordinates often prefer a leadership style that promotes democratic behaviors, social support, cohesion building, positive feedback and constructive criticism (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2012). Coaches who can adapt successfully not only will increase their team's effectiveness and productivity, but also will improve morale and loyalty to the team (organization). The use of systematic leadership coaching to train players could ensure affirmative changes and foster specific skills and personal growth (Harper, 2012). It is imperative that coaches select and demonstrate a leadership style according to the situation (or circumstance) to promote motivation and pro-social behavior towards teammates.

Philosophy and Articles of 17th Century Pirates

Life at sea for pirates has been falsely overdramatized by Hollywood in portrayals such as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. The contemporary depiction of pirates by Disney could easily make one believe that pirates were a band of ruthless, violent, uncivil, and unorganized mercenaries led by an absolute autocratic captain and his first mate. According to those fictional depictions, once an individual is aboard the ship, life was nothing short of abuses and violations of arbitrary rules. A seaman who breaks a rule, suffers immediate death by walking the plank or being locked away in the brig.

The reality is that none of these depictions are true. In fact, 17th century pirates were a highly functioning team with zero tolerance of incompetent leadership at any level. Hughes, Gannett, and Curphy (2015) closely examined the behaviors and practices of pirates and documented those unique practices. They found that a pirate team was most often not just a band of 10 to 20 scraggly men, but more like 160 highly trained and competent troopers. If a task was to overtake another ship to lay claim to the riches aboard, the crew would attack as a highly cohesive unit with speed, precision, and unity. Hughes et al. (2015) further illustrated that the pirates would not tolerate laziness, incompetence, disloyalty, or weakness, since those traits might endanger everyone aboard and the mission. There was a well-known tactic at the time that immediate surrender of a ship would result in the whole crew being spared. Any pirate who defied this edict suffered severe punishment. In order to maintain good credibility and reputation, the entire pirate crew had to be well-disciplined and act honorably by not hurting other innocent (surrendered) seamen.

Pirate crews were large (over 160 people in size) and highly

functioning, with sub-units charged with tasks. To utilize smaller slave ships to execute a fast maneuver, the crews were often broken down into small teams to tackle tasks effectively. Pirates would achieve their goals in a maximum efficiency that is rarely seen in today's business or sport organizations. Like the modern day player contract, each pirate had to sign "Articles" before one could join as a member of the crew. The Articles addressed the code of conduct and protected the crew. There was total transparency in operation of the crew (Hughes et al., 2015). In several excerpts from Articles of 1721, example of pirates' rights and responsibilities were documented by Bartholomew Roberts. Table 1 summarizes the main nine principles of those Articles that explain how order and fairness are preserved among the pirate crew.

Table 1

Principles and Contents of Articles Abided by the Pirates

Title	Description
Article I	Each man can cast an equal vote in determining the movement and relocation of the vessel
Article II	Each man gets a fair share, if one cheats other crew members, he should be marooned and left to die
Article III	Gambling was strictly prohibited
Article IV	Mind for others (Lights and candles should be put out at night)
Article V	Each man should be war ready at any time (Keep one's piece, cutlass and weapons operational and ready at a moment's notice)
Article VI	No fraternizing with the opposite sex (Violation of this rule shall result in death)
Article VII	Do not desert one post (Violation of this may suffer immediate marooning or death)
Article VIII	A duel on shore can be imposed to resolve conflict
Article IX	Any man who becomes a cripple or loses a limb shall be relieved of service and receive additional compensations

Although some of the rules and punishments may seem harsh and impractical today, many of them were vital for the survival and completion of group tasks. Those Articles express the essence (or principles) of democracy, responsibilities, fairness, compassion, and discipline. Each member of the pirate crews would abide by these principles to work with other colleagues and respect each other. The contents of aforementioned Articles clearly demonstrate that the pirate crews were highly conducive to performance and loyalty that mirrors a great resemblance of today's sport teams and organizations.

The Role and Acts of a Pirate Captain

It is easy for us to assume the captains of pirate crews were ruthless and brutal dictators who ruled according their own wills and pleasure. In fact, most of the Hollywood portrayals about the "infamous" pirate leaders are inaccurate and misguided. According to Hughes et al. (2015), leadership authority on a pirate ship was procured, when the captain and crew members all executed the rules based on the aforementioned Articles. Captain and first mate were elected positons aboard a pirate ship. The captain was responsible for issuing direct instructions and orders, and the first mate or quartermaster often led the crew into battle. However, other decisions that impacted the wellbeing and benefits of the crew were made by a majority vote. This procedure of voting was usually conducted by a show of hands. Decisions could also be overturned utilizing the same method. Most importantly, captains could be both elected to and removed from power by a majority of votes. A ship might go through as many as 13 different captains on a single voyage (Hughes et al., 2015). Incompetence and recklessness shown by leaders was simply not tolerated on a pirate ship, as lives of crews and the success of the mission were contingent on competent leadership.

Sullivan and Kent (2003) found that leadership behaviors are in large part a function of the leader's personal attributes. Pirate captains are often mischaracterized as evil individuals who abuse subordinates, pay nothing to compensate others, and have impossible demands and services. In fact, other than giving direct and quick instructions and orders under the rules of Articles, captains were effective in soft power to positive organizational atmospheres and obtained commitment from the crews (Pierro et al., 2013). Competent captains would earn the trust and loyalty from their crews and preserve a democratic-oriented subunit. In addition, unpredictable situational factors increased the stresses and danger associated with the pirate mission; therefore, the ability of captains to select and execute appropriate leadership style to guide and influence the crew members was critical.

Reward systems of the 17th century pirates were indeed much different than our 21st century modern organizations. Unlike the modern day leaders who may accumulate a great amount of wealth and compensation, the reward structure for distributing booty was set in a predetermined manner. The captain and first mate would receive no more than double the amount of a crew member (Hughes et al., 2015). Captains and their top assistants could not be greedy or selfish while trying to reward every crew member fairly. This practice is drastically different from today's corporate business in America. Corporate executives obtain astronomical salaries in comparison to their subordinates. The existence of unfairness and inequality would naturally create internal unrest. Animosity would develop in light of the huge pay difference and selfish acts by the captains.

Discussion and Conclusions

The essential traits and leadership behaviors for becoming a successful pirate captain in the 17th century and a modern day sport coach share many similarities.

As mentioned in the earlier section, pirate crews were highly functional teams that were guided with a democratic leadership style. In the piracy era, the captains often understood how to demonstrate appropriate leadership behaviors and practices to promote motivation and pro-social behavior towards crew members. Pirates' code of conduct depicted the idea of self-sacrifice for the greater good of the team. The success of each voyage relied on each pirate member's personal commitment to the collective objectives in order to effectively carry out one's duties on a daily basis. Strong commitment and self-sacrifice are two vital elements for nurturing teamwork. The authors believe that players and crew members alike both benefit and prefer a leadership style that focuses on the preferences of the subordinates.

Modern sport coaches frequently express a controlling style and a more authoritative approach with little regard for a player's feelings (Chen et al., 2016). This style is characterized by manipulation of tactics, guilt, and punitive measures for underperforming individuals. Furthermore, the controlling coaching style tends to create a negative environment, detrimentally impact the performance, and stir up anti-social behaviors among players (Chen et al., 2016). It would be ideal for the excessive controlling (or autocratic) coaches to learn the philosophy and tips from the 17th century pirate captains, so they could gain a new perspective on how to earn respect and trust.

Both pirate captains and sport coaches have group members that count on their guidance and wait for their instruction. They both need to rise to the occasion to make decisions and maximize the best outcome for the group under all types of challenging conditions. It is a disappointment that Hollywood studios persistently mischaracterize captains as being, incompetent, lazy, and ruthless, instead of showing the actual talent and charisma of the crews' competent leaders. In fact, research indicates that 17th century pirates had ethical and functional rules for them to achieve team cohesion. They also understood how to elect most qualified captains to motive, lead, and train others. It is highly evident that the crews' leaders often excel in building dynamic leader-follower relationships, fostering loyalty, and making best outcomes in critical situations. These exceptional captions' actions and traits make the authors think that true leadership qualities are ageless. Coaches in the 21st century may still examine early pirates' organizational principles and leadership styles to improve their coaching methodology.

References

Chen, Z., Wang, D., Ronkainen, N., & Huang, (2016). Effects of coaching style on prosocial and antisocial behavio. among Chinese athletes. *Social Behavior and Personality International Journal*, *44*(11), 1889-1900.

Harper. S., (2012). The leader coach: A model of multi-style leadership. *Journal of Practical Consulting*, *4*(1), 22-31.

Hodge, K., & Lonsdale, C. (2011). Prosocial and antisocial behavior in sport: The role of coaching style, autonomous vs. controlled motivation, and moral disengagement. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, *33*(1), 527-547.

Hughes, R. L., Gannett. R. C., & Curphy. G. J. (2015). *Leadership enhancing the lessons of experience*. New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Long, C., Yong, L., & Chuen, T. (2016) Analysis of the relationship between leadership styles and affective organizational commitment. *International Journal of Management*, *Accounting*, *and Economics*, *3*(10), 572-598.

Pierro, A., Bertram, R., Clara, A., & Belanger, J. (2013). Bases of social power, leadership styles, and organizational commitment. *International Journal of Psychology, 48*(6), 1122-1134.

Sullivan, P., & Kent, A. (2003). Coaching efficacy as a predictor of leadership style in intercollegiate athletics. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *15*(1), 1-11.

Surujlal, J. & Dhurup, M. (2012). Athlete preference of coach's leadership style. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance (AJPHERD), 18*(1), 111-121.

Weinberg, R., & Gould, D. (2007). *Foundations of sport and exercise psychology* (4th ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

ERIC STREET *holds the Master of Business Administration degree and is currently an instructor at Midway University in Kentucky and a doctoral student at the United States Sports Academy in Alabama.*

STEVEN S. CHEN *holds the Doctor of Sports Management degree and is currently a professor of Sport Management in the School of Business Administration at Morehead State University in Kentucky.*