Leading Elite Association Football Referees: Challenges in the Cross-Cultural Organization of a Geographically Dispersed Group

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Abstract

This study examines the organization of elite Association Football referees in the domestic, European and international game. Specifically, the cross-cultural working practices, training, preparation and performance of these elite referees are explored. 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with elite referees and ex-referees as well as individuals involved in leadership and training worldwide to explore the leadership of a geographically dispersed workforce. Results highlighted some positive aspects of training and leadership, but indicated that effective leadership, evolution and innovation are required in order to keep pace with globalized, technological developments in Association Football. The findings can be utilized by leaders in order to understand further the challenges faced in the organization of elite sports people and assist in the construction of appropriate strategies toward a more standardized approach to leadership within refereeing, Association Football and professional sport.

Keywords: Elite Sport; Information Communication Technology (ICT); Inspirational Leadership; Semi-Structured Interviews; Working Practices.

Theoretical Context

Elite football referees can be considered as a unique group of sportspeople. They do not train or prepare for matches as a 'team' for periods of the month, they do not work or train in the same place as others within the 'team' and they do the majority of their preparation remotely, or away from the other elite referees who also officiate in the top professional leagues in their domestic country. Given these aspects of their day-to-day working life, elite referees require effective leadership, clear objectives and also an effective support system around them to facilitate their training, preparation and performance.

The training, preparation and performance of these elite sportspeople is essential in the results-driven and highly financed world of Association Football. These referees, and the decisions they make during the course of competitions can affect the outcome of a given match, but also, potentially the course of a season for a player, coach or team. One decision in an important match, can be the difference between winning and losing, or promotion and relegation. Given the huge wealth that now exists within the English leagues as well as European and international competition, clearly the professional conditions that referees operate within are of critical importance in order to adequately prepare referees for the requirements of their role.

This paper locates elite referees as a unique group of sport performers and aims to understand and analyze the impact, importance and role of leaders within this professional context. Specifically, the role of leaders is explored in relation to geographically dispersed workforces and, when dealing with European and international competition, cross-cultural working practices.

Geographically Dispersed Teams (GDTs) and Information Communications Technology (ICT)

The leadership of geographically diverse groups of people is becoming more commonplace, especially with the growth of information communications technology (ICT) and the associated use and reliance on ICT systems within these geographically diverse groups (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; McDonough, Kahn, & Barczak, 2001). Geographically distributed teams (GDTs) can be defined as groups that are separated by time and/or distance and that have to deal with issues related to technology, team work and communication (Sessa *et al.*, 1999). This definition closely reflects the working conditions that elite referees operate under across domestic, European and international boundaries.

Originally, many GDTs were organised into temporary projects with little research conducted on the challenge for organisations when implementing GDTs, especially with relation to knowledge sharing and team cooperation across national and international boundaries (Hansen, Hope, & Moehler, 2012). GDT's present unique challenges to leaders often related to the performance of individuals and the 'group' more widely, as well as the interpersonal relationships that exist among the members of the GDT. Additionally, GDT members and their leaders must contend with issues such as interaction with technology, distance (both geographical and cultural) affecting teamwork, and communicating effectively within the group when geographically dispersed (Sessa et al., 1999).

ICT can address some of the potential issues regarding team communication associated with GDT. For instance, ICT might assist in maintaining task knowledge awareness, which may be more useful for teams with non-routine rather than routine tasks (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014), an aspect which can be applied to elite referees. Due to the geographical distances involved ICT use is essential for effective communication with referees from leaders. Further, research has identified that geographically distributed teams use ICT as a means of

commenting on non-routine activities (Malhotra et al., 2001) which can include reviewing complex ideas, analyzing posted data and evaluating expert judgments from all team members to determine the way forward (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014), such practices are also observable in elite refereeing. Despite the potential value of ICT for GDPs, the increased use of ICT has also been found to have negative effects on team performance. That is, a reliance on ICT has been positively associated with greater team vulnerability to conflict due to the reduced avenues for spontaneous communication (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005) and negatively correlated with reduced group coordination and performance (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Nevertheless, leaders should ensure that any technology adopted by their team has a sufficient range of functions that can be used to meet different situational awareness driven coordination needs (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014).

Despite the use of ICT, working over substantial distance can present a number of issues for leaders, most notably here trust, conflict, communication technology and culture (Gerhart, 2008; Hansen, Hope, & Moehler, 2012; Lee-Kelley & Sankey, 2008; Rosen, Furst, & Blackburn, 2007; Siebdrat, Hoegl, & Ernst, 2009). Leaders are also required to effectively coordinate the team that they command, which is a necessity for optimum team performance (Mathieu et al., 2000; Salas et al., 1995). In order to facilitate team coordination, organization of the inputs of team members for respective action is essential as is adjusting activities to meet their changing situational needs (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014).

In light of the research reviewed above, it would appear that many of the common leadership challenges facing GDPs are also typical of elite Association Football referees. To elaborate, referees who work within the elite level of European football are organized atypically within sport. That is, these groups of referees are organized and led domestically. The referees operate predominately in the top domestic leagues such as the Premier League in England, the Primera División in Spain and Serie A in Italy, yet in England and Spain they can also undertake

matches in the division below the top league as and when required. Those considered the 'best' domestic referees are nominated by their domestic football associations to be part of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA – responsible for pan-European competitions) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA – responsible for pan-world/international competitions) lists in addition to their domestic duties. This effective promotion for those considered the "top" referees requires an additional level of training and structure that they must negotiate and comprehend.

In addition to the increased training required for admittance to the highest echelon of this profession, as referees are promoted into European and international competition this, in turn, brings the leadership of these referees into focus across national and international boundaries. Another layer of complexity is added when the cultural leadership of these referees is considered. For example, international groups of referees that operate at FIFA level include referees from around the world and these referees bring with them inherent historical and cultural value systems that they have been exposed to throughout their life and refereeing career. Given leadership styles can differ between countries, arguably the need for effective leadership becomes even more salient when significant geographical distances are introduced in addition to the historical and cultural issues.

Cross-Cultural Leadership

Researchers have argued that there are national differences between individuals and countries when considering management and leadership (Brewster, 1999; Dowling, Festing, & Engle, Sr, 2008; Evans, Pucik, & Barsoux, 2002; Gerhart, 2008; Hofstede, 1980; Kostova, 1999). Cultural leadership theory addresses the differences between people from different countries and how this affects how they operate in a work setting. The operation of referees and players in England (Webb, 2014) and in different countries and different competitions

within Association Football has been analysed by Webb and Thelwell (2015) and this work might be considered in relation to the specific traits that can be applied to people from a certain country or region. For example, referees from the UK, or England demonstrate more hidden emotions and control of feelings and actions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

There are particular aspects of cultural theory such as 'power distance' and that are relevant to the present study. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of groups, organizations and institutions accept that power is distributed unequally, with Latin countries and cultures having been identified as having high scores on the Power Distance Index, whereas Anglo countries, for example, have a lower power distance. In terms of hierarchy, this means that certain groups of people may see authority differently and may react differently to directions and instructions (Hofstede, 1980; Ronen & Shankar, 1985). This creates issues when attempting to standardize refereeing training, preparation and performance across national and international boundaries, a principal aim of both UEFA and FIFA ('Refereeing missions and goals', n.d; UEFA, 2006).

Further complexities in the leadership of different cultures can be examined through the 'uncertainty avoidance' dimension (Hofstede, 2011; Triandis, 1994). Cultures classified as possessing high uncertainty avoidance demonstrate that individuals within that particular culture are more likely to be emotional. Strong uncertainty avoidance is evidenced through traits such as higher stress, emotionality, anxiety and neuroticism. There is also an emotional need for rules, even if these rules are not obeyed. Some referees from Spain and Italy have higher uncertainty avoidance and therefore, can be perceived as more likely than referees from Anglo countries, such as the UK, to potentially react irrationally on the pitch, challenge authority and behave anxiously and emotionally in certain situations, or when feeling particularly pressurized (Hofstede, 2011; Triandis, 1994). It should be noted here that scholars such as McSweeney (2002) and Gerhart (2008) have some reservations concerning perceived

limitations of solely using (mean) national culture scores, such as those identified by Hofstede, in cross cultural and leadership research. These concerns are acknowledged here, and therefore these cultural scores are not a central part of the narrative constructed within this article. Conversely, this paper considers elite Association Football referees and the organization of these geographically dispersed working groups in order to understand fully the aspects of training and leadership evident in order to keep pace with an increasingly globalized and technological game.

This paper considers the impact, importance and role of leaders in the current organizational structures employed in elite referee systems. The role of the leaders both domestically, and at pan-European level, is explored in relation to geographically dispersed workforces, specifically in the context of European and international competition and cross-cultural working practices.

Method

Participants and Sample

The individuals involved in the research were selected through the use of purposive sampling or a judgement sample, a non-probability sampling method involving the selection and involvement of a particular societal group or sample because of their unique position related to the research (Byrne, 2004; Marshall, 1996; Schutt, 2009). The research also utilized snowball sampling (or chain referral sampling), a form of purposive sampling often used to find and recruit 'hidden populations' or difficult to reach samples. The intended population group had to have particular professional knowledge and experience in order to respond accurately to the questions and themes raised. The potential participant population was a relatively small sample pool, but due to the nature of the research and the topics being

considered there were only certain respondents who could have been considered viable or qualified to take part and to give their views and opinions.

The respondents were assured of anonymity when they were contacted and also when they gave their consent for the interview process. It was decided that to maintain anonymity interview respondents should be arranged into specific categories. The quotations that the respondents gave were attributed to their category and subsequently to individuals within these categories through the use of pseudonyms. Information on individuals, such as length of time spent refereeing at elite level, length of time on the UEFA or FIFA list, or other comparable information, could provide details from which the identities of respondents might be deduced and so these facts were omitted. The categories developed were designed to give an appropriate representation of the level and quality of the respondents within the research process but equally and just as importantly, to maintain anonymity. Table 1 demonstrates the different categories of respondents that were devised for the purposes of this research.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1, Categorization of interview respondents

A total of 42 interviews were conducted. Three respondents were from the UEFA and FIFA categories; a total of six from the elite and ex-elite referee category in England, ten from the leadership, administration, technical and training category and two from the leagues and related organisations in England. It should be noted here that there are also six ex-elite referees that have been included in the leadership, administration, technical and training category due to their current roles within refereeing. There were ten interviews conducted in Italy, of which seven were elite referees and the remaining three were from the leadership, administration,

technical and training category. There were 11 interviews conducted in Spain, of which six were elite referees and the remaining five were from the leadership, administration, technical and training category. Finally, there were two interviews conducted with other FIFA and UEFA list referees from other European countries.

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were employed following initial pilot interviews and meetings with the County Football Associations in England. After the initial interview was conducted in England it was subsequently transcribed immediately, with interview structure sufficiently flexible in order to allow for unanticipated topics and themes to emerge (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Initial analysis involved the reading of the recorded interviews that had been previously transcribed in order to identify the most important aspects of the participants' responses (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). Following this analysis higher and lower order themes were identified as well as the general dimensions under which the raw data was organised and structured (Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1, Final general dimensions and higher and lower order themes after data organization

The higher order themes were generated from the inductive analysis of the data after a process of data reduction was undertaken. Data reduction was handled in a manner similar to that outlined by Biddle et al. (2001, p. 797) with content analysis utilised to ensure a coherent method of data presentation to colleagues for peer dissemination. In the case of this research, two other researchers were asked to perform roles in order to give triangular consensus in the

form of 'critical friends' (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999; Sparkes, 1995; Tracy, 2010). After the initial higher and lower order themes had been identified, the transcribed interview quotations were read and re-read by two other researchers. Each researcher then viewed the higher and lower order themes and independently identified and verified the phrases, quotations and themes that they had been asked to consider. These themes and quotations were independently grouped and compared to the initial themes that had been generated; these themes were then placed into general dimensions, above which no general meaning could be identified.

Mathieu et al. (2014) have recently argued that a direction for future research related to team composition could be to undertake in-depth qualitative interviews as an addition to the mostly quantitative research that already exists. Furthermore, Mathieu et al. (2014) argue that surprisingly little is really known about how teams balance human capital and therefore qualitative investigations would be valuable for exploring concepts related to dynamic team composition, a facet which this paper addresses.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to analyze the impact, importance and role of leaders in the current organizational structures employed in elite referee systems. Moreover the research considered the challenges faced in the organization of a geographically dispersed group across European and international boundaries. In order to consider the pertinent aspects of the leadership of these elite referees in the modern world of Association Football theories related to the inspirational leadership, ICT and cross-cultural leadership are discussed with specific reference to their application to the specific and tailored requirement demanded for elite referees. The application of the qualitative research to the theoretical concepts considered here gives a unique insight into the organization of this diverse workforce which has very specific challenges for those that are in leadership positions. The first major issue that any

leader within a national association, such as UEFA or FIFA must contend with is differences in the workforce. When these differences are applied across national boundaries the cross-cultural leadership of the individuals involved with all of their respective values, history and heritage becomes a significant consideration.

Cross-Cultural Leadership of Elite Referees

The interview process inductively highlighted a number of factors that elite referees and those in leadership, training and administration roles deemed as important. Both within the domestic country and in international settings the dispersion of the referees was considered a challenge when seeking to impart information or standardize training delivery as Brian explained:

> *'There is a physical challenge with the national and international*
>
> *guys because they're all disparate, you don't see them as often. So it is*
>
> *how you can cascade training information, performance analysis*
>
> *throughout the country in a cost-effective way. That is one of the main*
>
> *challenges there…we are constantly working together, providing*
>
> *support mechanisms, trying to improve performance'.*
>
> (Brian, leadership, administration and training category from England)

In fact the training that is being delivered, whilst accepted to be of a high standard by some elite referees, '*they (UEFA) have done a very good job in the last 10 years. So UEFA have been fantastic…all over Europe',* (Matthew, other FIFA/UEFA list elite referee category), is still some way from being uniform and standardized, principally due to the disparate nature of the referees from the varying countries that make up and contribute to UEFA and FIFA. For example Aaron identified specific issues that leaders can face in attempting to standardize information and training across geographical boundaries:

'We went to Slovenia and we looked at 20 video clips, and these were

the top referees, the elite and premier referees in Europe, top 40

referees, and we're all very experienced guys, all been on the scene

for a long, long time all been refereeing at the top level in their own

leagues and internationally as well. You have referees from the five

big nations but also from all the other footballing nations and there

were some clips where we were split 50/50 on incidents on the video.

So that is how an inexact a science it can be in terms of trying to gain

consistency, it is not all black and white'.

(Aaron, elite/ex-elite referee category from England)

Because of the issues related to the dissemination of training and information, as well as improving the leadership efficiency of the elite referees FIFA have developed *'a mentoring system where they utilise a lot of ex-international referees to mentor the younger FIFA referees who are seen to have the potential to progress…you would be allocated a mentor from a different country'* (Bill, leadership, administration and training category from England). Evidently FIFA recognize that there is a specific issue related to the integration and training of elite referees from different cultures and countries when they first enter the international group. In order to remove some of the barriers that exist FIFA have created a mentoring system which also attempts to remove cultural barriers and build relationships across national boundaries by attempting to place new referees with mentors from other countries. Arthur agreed with the approach to mentoring, believing that this also occurs domestically:

'There was a placing of the new younger referees coming through

with more senior experienced referees, and that happens

domestically and internationally. Somebody with more experience is

involved with one or more referees to try and assist them because

football refereeing is like all walks of life you cannot beat

experience'.

(Arthur, elite/ex-elite referee category from England)

Whilst the use of mentoring is something that can improve integration (Kopcha, 2010; Ross, Bruderle, & Meakim, 2015) it is also evident that unless these relationships are organized and led effectively, they can be harmful to less experienced participants (Eby & McManus, 2004; Turban & Lee, 2007). Moreover, there is a lack of empirical evidence designed to evaluate the effectiveness of mentoring as a development tool (McQuade, Davis, & Nash, 2015). Therefore, it is not only problematic to organize these mentoring programs, and place younger, less experienced referees with more experienced officials, it is difficult to evidence that such relationships actually enhance integration and development.

It is also evident that the level of dispersion represented within the elite referees at UEFA and FIFA level is beyond the control of those charged with leading these teams (Joshi, Lazarova, and Liao 2009). Whilst the domestic football associations nominate the referees, UEFA and FIFA cannot necessarily control where the best referees might come from. Because of this lack of control the cultural difference between referees and the consequences for those training and **organizing** the referees becomes even more difficult. Brian believed that once cultural difference is taken into account the problems for leaders become almost insurmountable:

'When the aspect of cultural difference between the countries and also

the leagues that referees operate within is taken into account, there is

a belief that finding a level of uniformity will be difficult to achieve

and therefore any training is difficult to deliver given that you can

never have total standardization because you have to allow for each

country's individualities and idiosyncrasies'.

(Brian leadership, administration and training category from England)

Once the impact of cultural differences are examined more closely it becomes clear that integration and working environments become more challenging when dealing with employees from different countries. For example, countries can be classified depending on their values, rituals and dimensions of culture (Hofstede, 1983; Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) as well as attitudinal dimensions (Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). In particular, when related to refereeing leaders should be aware that there are distinct differences between cultures, often historical and value led, which affect referee preparation, performance and training (Webb & Thelwell, 2015). Therefore, such differences will impact on relationships within the elite groups of referees. Furthermore, cultural differences should impact upon training composition and delivery in order to ensure that any differences are taken into account when any training is designed prior to implementation.

The referees that occupy the UEFA and FIFA groups are considered the best referees in European and world football. However, evidence demonstrates that, *'...there are no guarantees that having talented individual members will ensure team effectiveness'* (Mathieu et al., 2014). Referees are different to most groups that might include talented individual members. The UEFA and FIFA elite groups are selected from the best referees in each of the countries that are eligible to provide referees. These referees do not operate in a 'group' or 'team' environment for much of their working life. They are brought together for training events, fitness testing and technical seminars, but aside from this they are in contact through ICT provision and also operational in their domestic leagues on a weekly basis. Therefore, referees operate individually in much of their training, and also in smaller 'groups' or 'teams' on match days domestically and when travelling to European and international fixtures. The performance of colleagues in these smaller 'teams' or 'groups' can potentially affect the performance of referees both domestically and at international level with individuals'

competencies related positively to team performance (Offermann et al., 2004). Kevin, involved with the leadership, training and administration of referees in Italy, explained how this is organized:

> *'It is very important in modern refereeing that all the team, the 20 referees are the same... standardisation. You don't have to do the same thing but there is a sort of common philosophy, you say let's play, not whistle too much...refereeing is an individual sport, but if you want to be successful in the future you have to be people that help each other and also follow a common philosophy'.*

(Kevin, leadership, administration and training category from Italy)

Kevin commented on the fact that refereeing is individual, but that teamwork and a 'common philosophy' are important aspects related to how this team functions. There is still a common goal and a shared vision that this group of people is working towards. A further issue that referees faced, aside from their unique working environment and the structure that they operate within both domestically and at European and international level, is the method of promotion and demotion from the elite groups in their domestic leagues in particular. Evidence suggests that most organizations who move team members in and out of teams, fundamentally alter group dynamics and characteristics (Arrow, 1997; Arrow & McGrath, 1995; Tannenbaum et al., 2012), this is also true of refereeing. The changes to the group in refereeing are planned, season upon season in Spain and Italy although this is undertaken in a way that is somewhat different to that found in most businesses or organizations. For example, in Spain and Italy the lowest scoring referees in the top league are demoted every season with the highest scoring referees from the league below promoted in their place. Clearly, given previous literature, this would consistently alter group dynamics and characteristics, potentially creating imbalanced team and working relationships.

Hugh, involved in referee leadership, administration and training of referees, detailed the operational system in Spain, *'at the end of every season. In the first division two referees go down…and two referees in the second division go up, they are promoted'*. The Italian system also sees the mandatory promotion and demotion of referees at the culmination of the season, although the Italian system completely removes referees from active service in the professional game if they are demoted from Serie A, *'the risk is that by splitting we can lose a very young referee this way. Because when he goes away from here he goes home, because there is no relegation…. Serie A referees are very good but you have the group and maybe what comes up is not at the same level as those that have gone away, so you have a problem'* (Kevin, leadership, administration and training category from Italy). The Italian Referees Commission has introduced a system that involves referees only refereeing in Serie A or Serie B during a season. There is no movement between the two divisions during the course of a season once referees have been allocated to either of the divisions prior to the start of the season.

In effect referee organizations are routinely changing team composition of single members, but more often it is the case that multiple team members are replaced simultaneously, perhaps due to retirement or lack of performance, which would also involve the simultaneous distribution of team members within the group (Mathieu et al., 2013). This uncertainly for those referees that are towards the bottom of the merit table that is constructed after their match performances, training and assessments throughout the season constitutes a level of pressure and anxiety because of the arbitrary changes referees know will occur to the elite referee group at the end of the season. This makes the requirement for inspirational leadership a vital ingredient for the organization of referees at both domestic and also European and international level.

Inspirational Leadership as a Necessity in Elite Refereeing

Joshi et al discuss the importance of inspirational leaders to foster and develop team identification related outcomes, as well as trust and commitment, in dispersed settings. These skills and leadership values are also considered '…*an imperative in global and dispersed work settings*' (Joshi et al., 2009). The organization of GDT's involves a number of accepted boundaries that impact performance. Amongst those boundaries are aspects which include teams that consist of one or more members from different regions or time zones (Cummings, 2004; Cummings, Espinosa, & Pickering, 2009) and different countries of origin (or nationalities) (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Vlaar, Van Fenema, & Tiwari, 2008). These boundaries heighten the importance of the organizational structure that surrounds those from different countries and cultures, and in this context the referees that operate in different countries and in different organizations. Therefore, the effectiveness of the leader in question in providing employees with, a 'clear set of values [and] a means of expressing these values within the framework of collective action' (Howell & Shamir, 2005, p. 98; Maladzhi & Yan, 2014; Opoku, Cruickshank, & Ahmed, 2015) becomes even more important. Leaders can, by communicating a vision effectively, reinforce common goals, enhance the group's distinctiveness and prestige and also encourage more interpersonal interaction among team members (Joshi et al., 2009).

When considering the organization of elite referees, particularly across national boundaries and taking into account the dispersed geographical nature of this structure, the role of leadership was identified through the interview process as an area of importance. Having **role models** that can be followed is something that becomes even more pertinent with the understanding that the geographic dispersion of groups or teams weakens the possibility of facilitating a shared context and social ties between team members (Kiesler & Cummings, 2002). Kevin supported this assertion and explained that it is essential to create a sense of

shared identify within the group of referees, particularly due to the individuality of refereeing once match officials are on the pitch, *'...referees are very individual with their ability but I try to set up a team of referees that have a common plan…the future of refereeing means that we have to act as a team'* (Kevin, leadership, administration, technical and training category from Italy).

In highly dispersed settings, such as those found within elite Association Football refereeing at European and international level, a lack of physical proximity, shared context, and spontaneous communications with team members reduces team identity. It is in these settings that inspirational leaders can act as representatives for the group by providing a vision and mission for the team (Joshi et al., 2009). Moreover Joshi et al. (2009) found that in groups that are highly dispersed, leaders can be the critical 'missing link', facilitating commitment and trust amongst the group. Hence it would appear that the role of leader is highly salient for the effective functioning of dispersed work groups, although leaders must be adept at inspiring team building, fostering group identity and facilitating commitment, otherwise the performance of the referee group will diminish.

In both Spain and Italy there is a belief that there must be a collective approach to refereeing and the leadership of referees. Howard explained that the method applied in Spain should be the same across the world, '*all the referees must be the same because the players, the coach, the spectators and the different organizations have the right to know that the system works. I think that the world must follow the same way of working in refereeing*' (Howard, leadership, administration, technical and training category from Spain). Kevin also believed that it was impossible for referees at the elite level to be successful as a collection of individuals, they must all accept the philosophy that is in place in order for the group to achieve:

> '*They act as a group because they have to do their best in order to be*
>
> *successful because you can't win by yourself, you must act in a common*

philosophy. There is no individualism. The first principle is a referee's

performance. I don't need the best one [referee], I need the 20 best

referees'.

(Kevin, leadership, administration, technical and training category from Italy)

In terms of refereeing the nature of the delivery of training, and the dissemination of information means that organizations such as UEFA and FIFA are becoming increasingly reliant on technology to support and facilitate learning with these teams often difficult to facilitate (McDonough, Kahn, & Barczak, 2001). Distributed teams frequently suffer coordination problems, crises of trust and unhealthy subgroup dynamics (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). There is evidence that demonstrates aspects of conflict between dispersed groups and particular members of these groups when these team members struggle to come to terms with different perspectives, which can be more prevalent when considered from a cultural standpoint. Moreover, evidence suggests that it is nearly impossible to provide distributed teams with identical contexts and standardization of work processes, although a shared context can reduce the likelihood that misunderstandings and divergent approaches emerge (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). The importance of clear messages, standardized training and uniform information are therefore imperative in GDT's, ensuring that the individual/s that lead these teams **is/are** inspirational enough to encourage and foster these conditions. Elite refereeing is no different in this regard.

Alongside the dependence of GDT's, research suggests that performance can be helped through strong or inspirational leadership with a substantial body of research examining the influence of charismatic forms of leadership on employees' motivation, attitudes, and behaviors (Bass 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House 1971; House, Spangler, & Woycke 1991; Joshi et al., 2009; Podaskoff et al., 1990). This inspirational leadership also has to rely on infrequent and technology-mediated communications in order to motivate team members to achieve

collective team goals (Fiol & O'Connor 2005; Joshi et al., 2009; Katz & Te'eni 2007; Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007) with the role of inspirational leadership enhanced in geographically dispersed teams (Joshi et al., 2009).

Galvanising and fostering a collegiate working environment is something that a leader involved with elite referees must implement in order to effectively lead the group at either domestic or European and international level. The geographical dispersement of referees is a constant in both their domestic working country and also at European and international level, it is merely the number of miles or kilometres that differs. Therefore, the influence of leaders regarding the method that they employ to impart knowledge and training is vitally important. This can be partly circumnavigated by implementing the correct and appropriate structure, both for leaders and the referees they organize, "*you need to professionalise the structure, if you professionalise this they [leaders] can work full-time with the referees and be dedicated to improving refereeing.*" (Luke, UEFA/FIFA leadership, administration, technical and training category).

Referees identify the type and quality of the training that they receive as a critical component of their experiences due to the geographical constraints that are placed on their day-to-day operation. The training is a vital part of the organizational structure that surrounds elite referees, and the quality of this training and the individuals that deliver the training is essential in order to guarantee the quality of the referees and their match performances. Inspirational leadership can assist in supporting and encouraging both the training and performances of referees and given the essential role that the training plays in elite refereeing, especially at UEFA and FIFA level, the leadership of these sessions and the elite refereeing groups in general are an essential part of the structure.

The fact that geographical dispersion weakens the development of a shared context and reduces possibilities for spontaneous communications between team members (Kiesler &

Cummings 2002) ensures that the roles of leaders are essential. It is also recognized that boundaries of knowledge can affect GDT's performance by bringing divergent interpretations of training practices, routines, and in the case of referee's rule interpretation and analytic styles to both training and support networks (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Kwok-Kee, 2007; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004; Webb & Thelwell, 2015).

The nature and necessity of the structure of FIFA, for example, and the training that they administer to the elite referees means that in order to prepare the referees for tournaments such as the World Cup, FIFA must have a number of leaders, instructors and facilitators to deliver the training and information to the referees in training sessions and over remote platforms;

> 'World Cup referees have different instructors, because these
>
> instructors are full-time instructors, they have around 10 instead of 40
>
> in the development tier [the tier below the elite referees]. They have
>
> technical instructors, psychological, mental preparation…we invite all
>
> the referees who will take part in the World Cup and Africa to under
>
> 20 and 17 competitions FIFA competitions, as well as confederation
>
> competitions, seminars once a year or two times a year, but they have
>
> e-learning as well. The e-learning site has interaction for referees
>
> and they have to enter passwords to get on'.

 (Luke, UEFA/FIFA leadership, administration, technical and training category)

Remote training and knowledge dissemination, in the form of physiological training, fitness plans and technical training through intranet based applications, is also something that is utilised extensively in the training of referees across different cultures and national boundaries. The disparate nature of the referee group necessitates a certain level of distance learning and this also means that leaders must communicate with the referees. Joshi et al. (2009)

argue that inspirational leaders are important in all contexts, but are even more important in highly dispersed contexts because leaders can be the critical 'missing link' for facilitating commitment and trust in these dispersed settings. Personal commitment is evidently important for elite referees who generally train alone and additional motivation can be facilitated through the fostering of inspirational leadership;

> '*All the top referees at UEFA are monitored remotely, all the training*
>
> *programmes given out to the top referees, the results of those*
>
> *programs, are all sent via e-mail and assessed to make sure they are*
>
> *operating at the top level. Twice a year now we bring them together*
>
> *for body composition, for weight, for shape, to show their whole*
>
> *condition, so they are monitored very, very closely*'.

(Lee, UEFA/FIFA leadership, administration, technical and training category)

The support of online resources for dispersed team leaders can provide ongoing support and reinforce behavior and training that referees undertake remotely (Joshi et al., 2009; Joshi & Lazarova, 2005). The importance of supporting ICT systems is heightened for referees, especially for their remote training regimes. Referees will often have to access programmes to download training plans, and also to upload their training data to sport science support teams when referees are conducting their physical training remotely. Additionally, referees might also have to access an intranet for technical training, to view videos and review their performances. At a domestic level referees meet more often and so, perhaps, the use of ICT is not as much of an issue, although it is still important, '*the advantage that the Premier League guys have got is of course, that they will be having in depth discussions every other week when they all get together and meet as a group*' (Bill, leadership, administration, technical and training category from England). UEFA and FIFA do not have the capacity to meet the referees as often and therefore the importance on ICT and remote training is even more pronounced, '...*FIFA had a*

referee extranet [intranet] *for the World Cup. UEFA don't have an extranet they have a slightly different format, but FIFA is interactive, a lot more live'* (Brian, leadership, administration, technical and training category from England). Evidently the use and implementation of ICT systems are crucial for referees in remote working conditions.

The use of ICT in Elite Refereeing

Because the use of ICT is essential currently in the leadership, training and organization of the GDT's of referees it has to be understood that it is unreasonable to expect that all team members will be available for impromptu discussions when reacting to a new training plan or in response to a discussion topic. Moreover, now that many teams are hybrids of both face-to-face and geographically distributed members, this means that there can be behavioral norm disparities within the group (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014). Indeed, when related to referees and their structure in Europe or internationally, it is only the leadership team that would be more face-to-face at either UEFA or FIFA and this would generally be a small group of those in leadership and training roles. The referees themselves are not based at either UEFA or FIFA, they are situated within their domestic countries, to serve the domestic leagues which they officiate on a weekly basis. The referees then travel to the UEFA and FIFA training from their domestic locations.

Potential issues with remote working and a geographically dispersed workforce surround the measurement of output, in effect the importance attached to proving that referees are doing 'something' for their money. The tracking of this output inevitably means that there are a lot of statistical measurements tracking referee training, both physical and technical if on an intranet site for example, '*in England we are completely statistically obsessed, every game is marked…we have league tables and based on those league tables you get merit payments and bonus payments and all that sort of stuff'* (Adrian, elite and ex-elite referee

category in England). Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on statistics it is difficult to

envisage how referee training and performance could be tracked without the use of

technology and ICT, as well as a rigorous assessment system. Given the large financial

rewards available through television deals and sponsorship within Association Football, there

is substantial player and managerial accountability, and this is increasingly evident within

refereeing. Given these observations, and in the absence of a "big brother" style of leadership,

it would appear that issues of self-regulation are pertinent for referees. That is, while a

common philosophy can be engendered at the team level, there is a requirement for referees

at the individual level to self-regulate their behavior, training and learning. Self-regulated

work teams are groups of interdependent individuals that can self-regulate their behaviour on

relatively whole tasks (Cummings & Griggs, 1977; Goodman et al., 1988). Key

characteristics include: (a) employees with interdependent tasks who are responsible for

making a product or providing a service; and (b) employee discretion over decisions such as

work assignments, work methods and scheduling of activities (Goodman et al., 1988).

The use of ICT and electronic systems are commonplace for GDTs to ensure that

complex ideas, training data and evaluation can be determined and utilised more often than

would be the case if ICT was not employed. The technology that is adopted has to be fit for

purpose and therefore the technology has to meet the situational needs of referees and those in

leadership, administration and training roles in this instance (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014).

However, there is also a correlation between reliance on ICT for group coordination and

negative performance (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006) and this has to be a consideration for elite referee

trainers. Martin explained how the remote fitness programmes and training work at domestic

league level, '*what we have is fitness programs that we can go to the Internet and we have a*

weekly program that we follow and we log into this and we can follow this program and the

training that is recommended' (Martin, other FIFA/UEFA list elite referee category). This type

of training is even more prevalent at UEFA and FIFA level for the elite referees as James clarified, '*in UEFA we don't have many meetings between referees and the committee. We are e-mailed the video, they send referees clips of the matches*' (James, elite/ex-elite referee category from Italy).

There are some disparities between the training received from UEFA and FIFA and that evident at domestic level as Harvey described;

> '*Yes they do have different training on the FIFA list. Because it depends on the calendar and the number of the matches, so when the referees that are in FIFA and UEFA have a midweek match we control the training because it is so different. We try to reduce intensity and try to allow for the travel which is important and we try to keep in mind and modify the training...*'

 (Harvey, leadership, administration, technical and training category from Spain)

The differences in training are to be expected to some extent, given the level of contact that UEFA and FIFA have with the referees compared to the FA's in the domestic countries. Nevertheless, this means that there are differences in what is delivered and there are also differences in the use of distance learning platforms and ICT support more generally. This then returns to the important concept of ICT support and also leadership both domestically and across national boundaries. The concept and requirement of strong leadership emerged from the interview data. Respondents identified the need for effective leadership due to the changing environment that referees operate within, alongside the reliance on ICT as a means of training, development and communication.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the the leadership of elite Association Football referees and the organization of this geographically dispersed group across European and international boundaries. The research has found that there is considerable importance placed on the use of ICT and given the dispersed nature of the group there is also a strong emphasis and requirement for inspirational leadership. The organization of this group of elite athletes has been considered, as has the structure of their training and the supporting systems, such as the use of ICT and specifically tailored programmes/provision, to attempt to ensure that referees receive the best training in spite of the geographical constraints placed upon them. Additionally, the concept of culture and the impact of different cultures working and training together has been considered, when trying to standardise training and performance of groups such as the elite referees.

The leadership of elite referees both domestically, in European and international competitions through organizations such as FIFA and UEFA is complex and therefore requires leaders and trainers that provide guidance and leadership for the referees. Given the geographical constraints upon the elite referee groups, especially at UEFA and FIFA level, leadership becomes even more important. The elite referees require guidance and an ethos that they should work towards and operate within. There is an element of trust from the leaders but there is also the use of ICT and remote training programmes and equipment that ensures referees are training to the required level.

Elite referee groups are unique in terms of their training and the performance expected of them. In some respects these referees are subject to the same conditions and requirements as other geographically dispersed groups or teams and yet, on the other hand, their working conditions and the field that they operate within is distinctive. There are areas of good practice that have been identified, such as the leadership of the GDTs and the innovative training use of ICT. Nevertheless, the associated importance of self-regulation has been identified as a

necessary skill for elite referees. Due to the disparate nature of the group and the working structures that they operate within, the ability to be self-regulatory is essential. Similarly, the use and effectiveness of mentoring has been discussed and challenges identified with the organisation and overall implementation of mentoring as a development tool for referees.

Leaders must understand fully the challenges associated with mentoring and the impact that unsuccessful mentoring relationships can have upon individuals. Furthermore, a greater understanding of the influence of cultural values is required by refereeing leaders. Significant differences exist between cultures, which affect referee preparation, performance and training, and therefore, by association, training composition and delivery for the elite referees. These cultural variations can also impact upon relationships within the elite referee group and therefore any mentoring based relationships that might be implemented by leaders. Therefore, due in part to the aspects identified here, the importance of effective leadership has been acknowledged during the analysis of the interviews, and with the demands now placed on these elite referees the importance of inspirational leadership will unavoidably become a more recognized aspect of the support network for referees.

This paper has drawn on relevant theory and subject matter already in existence and applied this literature and the previous findings to the elite referees operating at domestic, European and international level. The evidence suggests that elements of the system supporting these elite referees is working well, and as Brian (leadership, administration, technical and training category from England) suggested, the system is supporting these referees more consistently than has been evident historically, '*I think one of the things that we are noticing now is that people are a lot better prepared when they come through the system*'. Nevertheless, given the changing nature of the modern elite sport industry, and the shifting landscape evident in Association Football in particular, we encourage those responsible for developing and organizing elite referees to be proactive, innovative and perhaps above all willing to adapt to

technological advancements and the increasingly globalized nature of the game when evaluating the structures that support elite referees across European and world football. For example, it is debateable whether working towards standardization at all is actually possible, achievable or indeed plausible given the cultural differences evidenced within this paper. Without further consideration of this organizational structure in light of the content covered within this manuscript, there is the distinct possibility that referees will fall behind the rest of the evolving game of Association Football.

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