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Leading and organising national teams: functions of institutional leadership

Per Øystein Hansen^{a,b}, Stiliani Chroni^a, Eivind Åsrum Skille^a
and Frank Erik Abrahamsen^b

^aFaculty of Health- and Social Sciences, Department for Sport and Physical Education, Norway Inland University of Applied Sciences, Institute for Public Health and Sport Science, Norway, UK; ^bNorwegian School of Sport Sciences, Institute for Social Science and Sport, Norway, UK

ABSTRACT

National team coaches are tasked to increase athlete capacity for success – a key task of theirs is leading the athletes and team's entourage. Few studies have detailed empirical accounts of leadership at the organisational-, team-, and individual level. This qualitative case study of institutional leadership examined how three national team coaches, who also have the role of high-performance directors, organise and lead their teams. Within the context of these successful Norwegian national teams, we identified how the coaches lead in ways that are consistent with leadership functions captured in institutional leadership, which focuses on the creation of structures and interactions that promote and protect the key organisational and societal values. Still, the coaches pursued this structuring and interactions in distinct ways, leading to distinctive organisational practices. The findings of the study stress the importance of considering contextual elements when leading athletes and entourage that pertain to national teams.

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Introduction

Elite sport is highly organised and researchers agree that athlete and team capacities for success are dependent upon how teams are organised, managed, and led (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Arnold, Fletcher, & Molyneux, 2012; Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011, 2015; Hansen, 2015; Sotiriadou, 2012; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012). Different notable approaches have been suggested as to how elite sport teams should be run (see Arthur, Wagstaff, & Hardy, 2016; Fletcher & Arnold, 2015; Peachey, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). High performance leadership and management (HPM) literature (see Fletcher & Arnold, 2015; Molan, Kelly, Arnold, & Matthews, 2019) has contributed to elite sport teams organisation

CONTACT Per Øystein Hansen Associate Professor II, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Norway Inland University of Applied Sciences  per.hansen@inn.no

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by highlighting leadership tasks critical for high performance (promoting efficiency and effectiveness), i.e. clarifying roles and responsibilities, establishing a clear vision and culture, managing operations properly, and showing active leadership of the people (Sotiriadou, 2012). While such tasks have been deemed critical, they have also been critiqued as generic (Sam, 2015).

HPM practices accentuate organisation structure and design, which can produce unanticipated (and undesired) outcomes, such as every-day interactions being loosely coupled with, or even running counter to, formal arrangements and procedures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). Sam (2015) illustrated this point by noting that informal interactions in the elite sport system shape development processes to a greater extent than key performance objectives and formalised roles and responsibilities. While HPM literature has emphasised defining criteria for performance effectiveness at the structural level (target outcomes and key indicators), contextual factors at the individual level (Armstrong, 2009), and that performance development processes are influenced by pressures in the organisations' external environment, such factors primarily focus on promoting organisational effectiveness. Alternatives to HPM literature, that focus more on legitimacy than organisational effectiveness (although organisational effectiveness may promote legitimacy), are theories that view organisations as social institutions (Scott, 2014).

Elite sport organisations have been considered social institutions (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Ronglan, 2015) with their leaders securing practices that satisfy environmental demands. Such demands are macro- and micro-level requirements that can also be internal or external; the latter referring to how leaders create and manage values inside an organisation concomitant with expectations in the wider society (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Selznick, 1957).

To this day and to our knowledge, no studies have investigated national teams as institutions and their leadership characteristics. We share here how three national Norwegian coaches (serving as sport directors) lead their teams and specifically explore how these coaches engaged in leadership. Existing studies of national sport systems at the sport policy level (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, Van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008) and existing HPM literature (Fletcher & Arnold, 2015; Molan et al., 2019) assert that sport policy and leadership factors, respectively, are generalisable across elite sport systems. We also pay close attention to practical leadership variations, acknowledging the need for tailored approaches (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012) and different performance narratives that offer varying routes to sporting success (Douglas & Carless, 2006). The research question answered here is: How do national team coaches perform institutional leadership in the pursuit of international sporting success? Accepting that leaders play a crucial role in institutionalising organisational visions,

missions, aims and values to achieve organisational integrity and legitimacy, our work is informed by a conceptual framework of institutional leadership (Kraatz, 2009; Selznick, 1957; Washington, Boal, & Davis, 2008). Unlike theories of HPM, institutional leadership can be considered as a theory on strategic leadership as it focuses on factors that go beyond how leaders mobilise personal support.

Conceptual framework: institutional leadership

A rational view on organisations, within which the HPM-literature has its place, defines organisations as ‘collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibiting relatively highly formalized social structures’ (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 29) with the aim to strengthen efficiency and effectiveness. A natural system view defines organisations as ‘collectivities whose participants are pursuing multiple interests, both disparate and common, but who recognize the value of perpetuating the organization as an important resource’ (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 30). This latter view, with which institutional theory aligns, focuses on legitimacy. Legitimacy is defined as a ‘generalized perception that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The social construction of Norway’s sports movement is captured in the values and beliefs of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), which apply to all affiliated organisations and serve as legitimacy guidelines for what is perceived to be desirable or appropriate. Since Norwegian national teams are part of national sport associations that pertain to a value-based sports movement and where legitimacy is vital, the national teams analysed in this paper are operationally approached as institutions.

We employed Selznick’s (1957) conceptualisation of viewing organisations as institutions with ideologies guiding their actions, while the external context clearly influences those actions. Accordingly, institutions embrace values beyond rational or technical requirements necessary to achieve organisational goals. Hence, institutional leadership concerns mechanisms captured in the cultural-cognitive element as put forth in Scott’s (2014) definition of an institution. This institutional structure emphasises that “internal interpretive processes are shaped by external cultural frameworks” (p. 67), and thus we looked into how the coaches’ strategic leadership for their respective national teams specifies the broadly defined values of the national sport movement.

For Selznick (1957), institutional leadership directs attention to informal organisational context; i.e., leaders protect and promote key values through the creation of institutional structures to “create a structure uniquely

adapted to the mission and role of the enterprise” (p. 138). In institutional leadership, key mechanisms promoted by leaders strengthen institutions (e.g., defining the mission and embodying purpose). The main task for institutional leaders is to identify key values and ensure that social interactions align with them, as “organizations can (and should) ‘embody’ institutional values and repeatedly emphasize the need to build values into the social structure of the enterprise” (Kraatz, Ventresca, & Deng, 2010, p. 1523). National teams are suitable examples of social structures embodying institutional values, aligning with relevant social structures definitions that serve as appropriate means to desired ends (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which give the process priority over outcome.

Institutional leadership is about strategic leadership of organisations and emphasises the importance of managing internal consistency (Washington et al., 2008), i.e. developing the institutional structures as described by Scott (2014). The two major functions of institutional leadership that explain how leaders develop institutional structures when managing international consistency, are institutional commitments and institutional embodiment of purpose. The former defines the overall aim(s) and mission while the latter ensures that the definitions are built upon the organisation’s social roles and structures (Selznick, 1957). Missions should clarify the purpose and scope of the institution (Selznick, 1957), while a leader “must specify and recast the general aims of his organization so as to adapt them . . . to the requirements of institutional survival” (p. 66). Defining and pursuing a precise mission necessitates internal commitments and external expectations. Internal commitments refer to identified strivings, inhibitions, and competences that exist within the organisation. Identifying such commitments enables the transforming of an organisation’s general aims into a course of action that guides the behaviours of its actors. By contrast, external expectations refer to practices, standards, and achievements identified as necessary for institutional survival, clarifying leader responsibilities (Selznick, 1957).

The mission of an organisation “cannot be adequately defined without also determining (a) its basic methods, the main tools or ways of acting . . . and (b) its place among organizations that carry on related activities” (Selznick, 1957). The basic methods, tools, ways of acting are about creating an understanding of individual roles within an organisation beyond formally captured in job descriptions. Considering individual personalities, Selznick (1957) also emphasised the institutional leader ability to understand informal roles. Embodiment of purpose is about building the organisation, creating its institutional core, and developing its identity, which includes specifying appropriate methods. Defining the institutional core requires leaders to create a uniform identity “to bind parochial egotism to larger loyalties and aspirations” (Selznick, 1957, p. 94); i.e., make member behaviours reflect shared values in ways that protect the institution.

Accordingly, Selznick (1957) suggested leaders conduct selective recruitment to increase membership dependency.

While a common criticism against institutional theory is the focus on reproduction and lack of agency (Suddaby, 2010), Selznick (1957) argued that opportunism and utopianism are omnipresent in organisations and called for leaders to think holistically and continuously considering the long-term (unintended) effects of everyday actions. In this regard, the overall task for institutional leaders is to make sure that their subordinates increase their commitment to common aims and mission; whereas everyday social interactions comply with well-defined and agreed-upon key values. In the absence of knowledge on how social institutions, such as national sport teams, are led and informed by an institutional leadership framework, we studied the leadership of three national sport teams of Norway and the means employed to meet organisational goals.

The context: Norway's elite sport

Norwegian elite sport seeks organisational and ideological legitimization within its organisation and wider Norwegian society. The latter is vital for receiving public support and financial resources (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Ronglan, 2015). In Norway's White Paper for Sport (Ministry of Culture, 2012), the state justified financial support for elite sport due to its capacity to create identity and its "contribution to a positive performance culture". International success is perceived legitimate under conditions where performances are in uniform with Norwegian social values and norms (Sam & Ronglan, 2016). Organisationally, Norwegian elite sport co-habits with mass sport inside NIF. Ideologically, the key values of NIF (activity values of joy, collectiveness, health, honesty; organisation values of volunteerism, democracy, loyalty, and equality) apply to all levels of sport (children, mass, elite sport), while endorsing strong interdependency between levels (Hanstad & Skille, 2010).

Norwegian national teams endorse NIF's and societal values, such as collectiveness, health, equality to place athletes at the centre of attention (OLT, 2019). The strategic plan of elite sports promotes central value compliance as being equally important as international success (OLT, 2019). When international elite sport is about "success at all costs" (Watson & White, 2007), partnering elitism (e.g., athlete selection/deselection) with collectiveness (e.g., fellowship within team) can be viewed as paradoxical, and so can be the idea of "athlete care" (IOC, 2019). Considering such inherent paradoxes, we placed our attention on how three Norwegian coaches identified appropriate means for meeting desired goals while protecting organisational integrity and enhancing organisational legitimacy.

Methodology

Our research was designed and carried out as a qualitative case study with the intent to learn about national team leadership. The case study strategy allowed us to develop a wide and in-depth view of the complexity of institutional leadership functions in the three sport teams (Hodge & Sharp, 2017). We employed an explorative approach, informed by a constructivist epistemological position based on our relativist and transactional stance, and discussed the findings until an agreement was reached between us (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

The studied sports teams formed a purposeful sample of critical cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) based on an a priori contextual understanding of their organisation formats and international success. The selected teams employed different paths for organising their core processes; all teams played summer sports, team and individual – one women's, men's, and mixed-gender team. All coaches had worked with corresponding national teams between 3 and 16 years. Coach experience prior to their current positions ranged from being an assistant national team coach to a professional team coach and a club coach. All coaches were men with families that held higher education degrees and coach education qualifications. Coach ages ranged between 47 and 61.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. In developing the interview guide, we considered research findings on organising and leading in elite sport internationally and nationally (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012b; Arnold et al., 2012; Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011, 2015; Hansen, 2015; Sotiriadou, 2012; Wagstaff et al., 2012) as well as findings on Norwegian national team coach practices (Abrahamsen & Chroni, *in press*; Chroni, Abrahamsen, & Hemmestad, 2016; Chroni, Abrahamsen, Skille, & Hemmestad, 2019; Skille & Chroni, 2018). We started the interviews by exploring matters of organisation and leadership, asking the coaches to share how they organised, managed, and lead their teams on a day-to-day and long-term basis to meet performance goals. Following these establishing questions, we asked about the missions, philosophies, values, rules, and expectations of each coach, team, and federation, as well as how these accommodate their leadership. During the final part of the interview, we asked about processes and practices that affected the coaches' work, how they made decisions and managed, and what kind of

support they received from their national team entourage. Probing questions encouraged interviewees to elaborate on important leadership and organisational details.

The interviews were conducted in English by two researchers, one of whom was bilingual (Norwegian and English). All coaches had advanced English language skills and no onsite translation was needed. Scheduling interviews that respected coach workloads and travel concerns proved difficult. Hence, we decided to have two interviewers present (with differing sport science backgrounds) to incite participants to be more open in a limited time frame. Using more than one interviewer is common in sport research (e.g., Chroni, Pettersen, & Dieffenbach, 2020; Torregrosa, Boixados, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004). The researchers' multidisciplinary backgrounds also granted an advantage when developing the interview guide and performing data analysis. The interviews lasted 60, 97, and 100 minutes ($M = 86$), were audio recorded, and were subsequently transcribed verbatim, yielding 86 pages of single-spaced text.

Data analysis

We used the theoretically flexible method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2017) to identify data patterns. This six-step method had been used recently when studying Norway's elite sport and coaches (Chroni et al., 2019). In the first three steps, we employed an inductive analysis (data-driven) allowing coach voices to emerge while in subsequent steps we employed a deductive analysis (theory-driven) that allowed us to interpret the voices through an institutional leadership conceptual framework (Kraatz, 2009; Selznick, 1957; Washington et al., 2008). In particular, while working inductively, we organised 33 sub-themes into two purely descriptive and also data-driven themes. At that point, the authors reflected jointly and agreed that the three coaches focus strongly on processes behind success. This emphasis they place on values underlying their paths to excellence, led us in employing a theory-driven analysis approach for the last steps of our work.

Ethical considerations and study rigours

Prior to the study, we secured approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (48,390/3/BGH). Each participant signed a consent form outlining the study's purpose and method as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To protect their anonymity and third-party persons, we use code names for each team and respective coach (A, B, C) while omitting identifiable information. Given the attention elite sport receives in Norway, the consent form also advised participants of the

inherent risk of being identified through their words (Punch, 1998). The coaches were finally asked to read and approve the final manuscript prior to submission for publication.

Considering the ongoing discussions about qualitative research quality criteria (Braun et al., 2017) and an absence of a universally acceptable quality criterion (Tracy, 2010), we concur with studies by Braun and Clarke (2021) and Ronkainen and Wiltshire (2019) that argued qualitative research quality is not an outcome of standardised procedures. To sustain rigour in our way of treating the collected data and to ensure that we conducted a good thematic analysis, we followed the 15-point check list of Braun et al. (2017). To ensure truthful representation of the coaches, our second author documented a research log to serve as a methodological log of concepts and logistics for following every step and decision made and a reflexive journal of the subjective truths and researcher biases arising during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Most importantly, member checks with the coaches safeguarded that we interpreted their ways of leading as appropriately and meaningfully as possible (interpretive validity; Maxwell, 1992).

Results

In this section, we share the three national team coaches' approaches to institutional leadership. Leadership practices enacted within each team are presented sequentially in light of the institutional commitments and embodiment of institutional purpose themes, as portrayed in (Figure 1). These practices are addressed as necessary within the context of each team.

Institutional commitments

Overall, these coaches defined their institutions based on close ties between missions and means but with different levels of interactions with those surrounding the national team based on what served the coach and team best. In the following subsections, we share how each coach defined the institution of his team.

National Team A

The mission and appropriate means. Previously an assistant coach for the team, Coach A followed his predecessor's way of leading and organising the team. His overall aim was to be competitive at international championships with a focus on the team mission more than its overall ambitions. He led and organised the athletes and entourage in line with the mission of developing independent athletes through self-leadership and empowerment. By

		CONTEXTUAL VARIATION			
		<i>National team A</i>	<i>National team B</i>	<i>National team C</i>	
Enacted values		<i>Athlete in centre of attention</i> <i>Unitedness at team level and in the interaction with OLT</i> <i>Loyalty to team values and aims</i>	<i>Athlete in centre of attention</i> <i>Unitedness at team level and in the interaction with the board and administration</i> <i>Loyalty to team values and aims</i>	<i>Unitedness of the [sport] community and in the interaction with OLT</i> <i>Loyalty to the collaborative project of peak performance in major international competitions</i>	
MAIN DIMENSIONS	Institutional Commitments	<i>The mission</i>	Develop independent athletes	Team tactics as a point of departure for developing individualized skills and competences	Develop a united sport community aiming for international medals
		<i>Appropriate means</i>	Self-leadership and empowerment	Prioritize national team specific training when athletes train in their clubs	Involving the club coach in national team activities Increase level of knowledge among club coaches
		<i>Organizational relations</i>	Close relation to OLT, relatively autonomous within the sport federation	Close relation to board members and employees of the federation. Relatively distant to OLT	Very close to OLT, promoting constructive relations between federation and clubs
	Institutional embodiment of purpose	<i>Leading team of athletes</i>	Defining roles in light of skills and team values	Selection based on conformity to team values and role within the team	Leading athletes through strengthening the club coach
		<i>Leading the entourage</i>	Defining roles in light of competence/expertise and team values	Role clarity with reference to field of expertise People with handball-specific competence get a bigger role than other in the entourage	

Figure 1. Key findings illustrating how the national team coaches enact key values in light of institutional leadership.

serving this mission, the coach acknowledged that the most important leader in an athlete's journey was the athlete:

The athlete has the responsibility for the athlete. It cannot be otherwise . . . the player has a contract with the club and the club likes to say that they own the player. Nobody owns no one. You own your own life.

To further illustrate the importance of self-leadership, the coach talked about injuries and choosing team tactics. When injured players do not

follow their rehabilitation plans, coaches usually oversee them to ensure necessary recovery actions. Coach A applied a rather different approach by giving injured athletes primary responsibility for their recuperation.

I am trying to challenge the physiotherapist and doctors to not always offer their help if the players are not doing their part of the job . . . we are not a health institution, we are not a hospital, [we are] just a resource to help the players be fit throughout the year. However, they [the athletes] have to do the main job themselves.

This statement reveals how interactions between the national team coach and the entourage, not just the athletes, were aligned with the team's mission.

Regarding team tactics, the athletes were empowered by their coaches to choose solutions. Athletes were involved in defining player roles for play formation, making it clear that athletes could influence formations through their captains. A typical task given by the coach was "how do we play . . . in this tournament? Sit down and write the systems, define the roles of the players." He indicated that independent autonomous athletes were better at deciding what to do under game pressure. To enhance self-leadership in athletes, the coach stated they needed to feel ownership, and "when I give them the full freedom for deciding what to do, they own the process 100%." To develop independent athletes through involvement requires ample space for making mistakes, which is provided by the coach who stated, "if the athletes miss the first attempt and I say, 'this is bad, we do it our [coaches] way', [and] you do this twice, they stop giving you information, they stop getting involved."

Organisational relations. Team A's mission to develop independent athletes influenced how the coach interacted with club coaches. With the athletes responsible for coordinating club and national team coach input, Coach A emphasised that no coach or specialist could be present for the athletes at all places and times. Hence, he challenged his players with "What is most important for you in order to be good both for the club and the national team?"

To manage federation board and staff expectations, Coach A usually interacted with them outside of training and preparation. He was challenged by the fact that they "are going to sell more [and] use the athletes more", lacking understanding of the athletes and the stress inherent in a coach's role. Board members possessing personal motives were labelled as "CV chasers", though he did acknowledge that "they are good at managing. You have to know how to use them; CV chasers are doers." If led appropriately, such members would support the team's mission by being "good at making things happen."

While Coach A tried to limit his interactions with the board, input from the organisation responsible for elite sport in Norway, the Norwegian Olympic Training Center (OLT), was highly valued – and nearly all specialists involved with the team came from OLT. He actively took advantage of an OLT coach to systematically challenge viewpoints believed to promote national team development. To maintain different growth-promoting views, he requested a new OLT coach for a fresh perspective after working closely with the previous one for several years – feeling that the relationship had become too close.

National Team B

The mission and appropriate means. Coach B also stressed athlete ownership during the development process. When developing his team’s mission as the team coach, he highlighted individualised skills and competences: “I would like my players to have more focus on individuality. I think that is important and they must have ownership for the work.” Two methods served this mission: fitting skills to team tactics and prioritising national team skill training over player skills utilised by their clubs. In this, the national team coach’s role was to steer individual training and development efforts to support team priorities and objectives, even when players trained with their clubs.

Developing athlete competences was organised around players complementing their team. Given a fast athlete, the coach’s job would be to identify “how to take advantage of his speed in our play” so that the team would always “take advantage of every athlete’s best skills when deciding upon how to play.” This was demanding “because they [athletes] play different in their clubs.” The solution lies in the second ploy that serves the team mission; always ensure that athletes prioritise training that develops their skills for the national team. However, tension can arise between the clubs and the national team, for example, when an athlete’s skills are appraised differently, “I have maybe the best young defence player in the world; he is not allowed play defence in his club.”

Organisational relations. Interactions with actors sharing the team mission are plenty, whereas interactions with actors not sharing the mission are restricted. Limiting external input appears to be a deliberate strategy for Coach B – he emphasised that knowing people within the federation was important, but introducing too many to the team was a risk. He interacts with board members and staff when it helps his role: “I talk a lot with the general secretary and the president . . . marketing [staff], I like to know them” because “to do a good job, I have to know everybody. That is important for me.” Discussions with the OLT coach assigned to team B are strictly about leadership and organisation issues, “[the OLT coach]

helped me get a clearer view on how I looked upon things. We are not discussing the philosophy of the play. It is always organisation.”

National Team C

The mission and appropriate means. Once appointed, Coach C established a new mission. “We had a qualification culture, where the main goal was to compete in international competitions or to take part, to qualify, not to have good results.” To change this, the mission became about creating a united sporting community aiming for international medals. Developing club coaches was a means for creating a united sporting community. While developing elite athletes is the core process, Coach C sees that developing club coaches is a critical condition for developing individual athletes. In his work, to establish a new team mission, it was crucial to involve club coaches, “I need the club coaches with me, not against me.” In other words, club coaches became important agents for anchoring the new national team mission by creating commitment at the club level.

Club coaches’ commitment was strengthened in several ways, and nearly all initiatives revolved around internationalisation. “When the [club] coaches join international competitions and other arenas, they often raise the standard for what they thought was good training and competition, to extremely good training and competition.” To limit in-house rivalries, he steered club coaches outwards and offered them opportunities to learn from the best milieus in the world, such as training clinics, other national teams, and scientific conferences. As such, the national team became an arena for knowledge development, thus generating quality training at local clubs. To create a united sporting community, priorities at the national team level had to become priorities at the club level, and best practices for “common goals and plans” were implemented both at the national team and local clubs. As the coach highlighted, “we cannot have one plan in the national team and another in the clubs.”

Organisational relations. Coach C enjoyed autonomy when establishing the team’s new mission and its related agencies and used OLT to legitimise the new team mission. This entailed how the OLT coach interacted with team C, “It was important to have a coach who had been a coach for an Olympic gold medallist. He knew what to do and how to think if you want to get medals at the Olympics or World Championships.” Coach C actively took advantage of the OLT coach to tell and persuade “the club coaches that the National Championship was not the important [event]; it is the international championships.” Club coaches needed to understand that peak performance had to come at international events following the new mission that aimed at international medals, “I need loyalty.

They [club coaches] cannot taper the swimmers for national competition, but for international ones.”

To assist the national team coach in capitalising on the new approach, OLT was used as a discussion partner regarding training, and OLT-personnel was actively involved in educating the coaches at training camps. Although OLT’s expertise lies mainly in improving the athlete, Coach C emphasised the importance of educating the club coaches.

Institutional embodiment of purpose

Institutional embodiment is a core function of institutional leadership, building the organisation, creating the institutional core, and developing an identity. In general, the three coaches’ definitions of the core of their institution align with their team’s missions, but they do so in different ways.

National Team A

Leading the team of athletes. Athletes are organised into small teams within the national team. There are several sub-teams, such as goalkeepers, penalty shooters, captains, where the athlete has different assigned roles on and off the pitch: “we have this playmaker team within our team; [made of] three or four players who are directing the team on the field, deciding style of play and systems. . . . They are the contact persons with the teammates and coaches.”

Tensions between individual ambitions and team objectives do occur, and according to Coach A, having personal ambitions is acceptable as long as players commit to “your role and job for the team.” Assigning roles creates an understanding of different functions, “define the role, accept the role, and act in consistence with the role. The players have to accept that there are different roles, not everyone can be the first lady.” A hierarchy exists, where athletes higher up in the hierarchy “become the role models; they have some important values and an important role in this.” Understanding different roles requires players to acknowledge that “the team is always the most important”. It was vital for him to make each player understand that she is “like a drop of water and the only mission is to keep the other drops floating.” His job was to “coordinate and make it possible,” because “no one deserves to play in a team which is better than the players want to make it themselves” – everyone must contribute towards collective achievement. To strengthen player commitment, the coach emphasised the need for team values and group discussions clarifying such values, developing team rules, and agreeing upon acceptable behaviours. Athletes who become role models receive support from the coach in shaping the norms of the team. Athlete involvement creates a united understanding of “who we

are.” As he shared, “you have to define a path, . . . the players when they have made these rules, it is easy – then you have drawn the map of where to go.”

Leading the entourage. Leading a large entourage can be challenging, “It is challenging to have many experts. Sometimes they believe that they are the most important person on the team. However, it’s not a problem, we are used to telling them if they are going too far.” To make entourage members understand that they are only a part of the whole, he clarifies their role when they join.

It’s exactly the same thing that you have to do with the players when you select them in the team. . . . you have to clarify the rules and the role with the player. This is the role if you [want] . . . Do you want to take this role in our team?

If the expert lives up to the team’s expectations, their role with the team may become more prominent, “[at] start, you have a little role, but it can become bigger.” It depends on the experts’ skills and the extent to which they contribute to the functioning of the team.

Communicating team values, rules, and culture, including the “code of conduct” defined by the players is crucial in defining expert roles. Coach A expects each expert to feel “ownership” towards team values and respect these in practice, as knowing them is not enough. “Twice, I had to take action . . . ” after entourage experts violated team values. Coach A holds the same rules for athletes and entourage, “One case we solved easy with just talking about it and becoming aware of it. The other one was with us only twice and then [was] out. It was no problem; I found another one.”

National Team B

Leading the team of athletes. Athlete ownership for their development is vital for linking team objectives with individual training, considering that different coaches can have different views. “I have talked to the [club] coach and listened to his view. However, I still do not understand it. I cannot go to every coach and say, ‘do that, do that, do that’ this is up to the athlete.” In team B, “we started working with individual goals for every aspect of the players and they started to take it seriously.” To enhance athlete development in skills needed to strengthen the national team, the coach follows up, “every day they have to write what training they do, the coach who’s head of analysis is following up with them every week.” National team athletes set individual goals, so daily training benefits national team tactics.

Organising individual development in line with national team tactics is a form of team building as an organisational strategy. Moreover, Coach B emphasised the importance of clarifying team identity, values, and roles. Athletes of team B are involved in defining the key values and the specific

rules that support those values. When such values and rules are defined, athlete selection is based on whether an athlete accepts the values and role assigned by the coach: “the first thing I’m looking for is who would fit in the group . . . if an athlete shows that he can be a part of our team, if he has the right skills in accordance with how we want to play.”

In fact, some athletes were not selected because they did not accept the values and rules, while other athletes were selected for their personality and contribution to the team atmosphere. Athletes in the national team are assigned roles primarily for their ability to interact with other athletes in ways that increase the team’s capacity for success. At selection, the coach clarifies the role of the athlete within the team. For example, here is how he approached the selection of an athlete for a major championship, “I gave him a role . . . You are maybe going to play ten or fifteen minutes, each game. Most likely, you will not play at all. However, you have to support us. Will you have that role?”

Leading the entourage. Coach B includes a few people in his entourage. The main criterion for being included in the team’s entourage is that coaches share “a common ground and philosophy, a fundamental way; we should stand on something that is solid.” Within this shared, overall philosophy, open communication is imperative, and with small disagreements, “we have to discuss our way.” For example, when appointing a new assistant, he discussed the philosophy of play with the candidate, “we had our discussions . . . he has a slightly different view from me, but I thought that these two [views] could be very good together.”

The wider entourage also has clear roles with boundaries. While it is acceptable for coaches to express their views on sport-specific matters, support personnel are asked to stay within their field of expertise. For example, “doctors are not allowed to say anything about the sport . . . they are not qualified to have an opinion about how we are playing.” A leadership approach for Coach B is to ensure that support personnel know their roles and boundaries; “there are lines here, very clear. We had one, two incidents where they stepped over the line, then we said, ‘No, you do not, you cannot.’”

National Team C

Leading the team of athletes through the coaches. Coach C focuses primarily on strengthening the conditions at the club level to achieve international success; accordingly, the club coaches primarily lead the athletes. During regular national team trainings, the athletes are primarily coached by their club coaches, yet the national team coach has to pitch in, “not always club coaches can join, then I have to do the full individual follow-up alone.” The coach believes that having a big team is the way, “working as a team, as a family, supporting each other” is vital for success but takes time to

develop. He organises long training camps to help this endeavour. To support each other, each club is also asked to ratify a training philosophy document developed by the federation, and “it’s better that the people who disagree with those guidelines, choose to stand outside the national team.” At training camps, Coach C gives “club coaches more responsibility onsite, while I have more of an overview of the whole training.” Though the national team coach assists the club coaches, he believes that his most important role is to plan the national team activities and to secure “the whole picture” for the team and each athlete. Coach C’s approach to athlete development prioritises individualisation because “it is important to acknowledge that how [the athlete] trained was the best training for him. One’s training program is not always the best training program for another athlete.”

Coach C also uses role models when leading the athletes – elaborating how a disabled athlete epitomises for other athletes a hard-work mentality (disabled and able-bodied national team athletes train together).

[The athlete] wakes up in the morning maybe 20 or 25 minutes before the other athletes. She is the first who starts to train. This athlete is a role model for the other athletes. When she has that attitude, it not so easy for the others to say, ‘this is tough.

In building team spirit, the national team coach actively also utilises role models to nurture the national team, and hence, the “team spirit is built among the coaches, the swimmers and the whole support system.”

Discussion

On answering the question, how national team coaches conduct institutional leadership in the pursuit of international sporting success, we found that these national team coaches enact their organisational context in ways that make space for creating social interactions that are loosely coupled from the formal context. This finding is in line with Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, Littlewood, and Richardson (2020) who found that micro-level practices often are influenced by other factors than arrangements at the macro-level. At the same time, the three coaches enact key values in ways that can be deemed legitimate. A key finding is that the coaches promote contextual consistency which integrates internal demands with external expectations. The leaders we studied were, empirically, national team coaches. Theoretically, it would make sense to call them “institutional workers” (cf. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) as their leadership focuses on creating and maintaining institutional structures. Put differently, they invest considerable time and effort in specifying the cultural-cognitive element for the team, that is (i) defining and clarifying the main aims and mission of their national teams and (ii) creating and maintaining the most appropriate

institutional structures (Selznick, 1957). In this sense, their leadership approach reveals that the development process is more important than the results. They lead and organise individuals in line with clearly defined and team-wide accepted vision, aims, mission, and values. In other words, they “build values into the social structure of the enterprise” (Selznick, 1957, p. 90). While leading in slightly different ways, all three national team coaches transformed their respective teams into institutions aligned with the key values of Norwegian sports and society.

The in-depth study of three national team coaches can be summarised in one sentence: Norwegian elite sports benefit from holistic and purposeful institutional leadership. An important underlying assumption in the theory of institutional leadership is that people are socialised into values and norms through social interaction. Although we did not specifically ask about what values the coaches enacted, the data suggest that their leadership focuses on building structures that contextualise and specify the content of broadly defined and agreed upon values. Institutional commitments are defined in light of “athlete in centre of attention” and “collectiveness,” yet the three coaches enact these values in their own ways. Nevertheless, their practices are legitimised at both the federation and sports movement level. National team coaches’ leadership efforts directed towards creating an institutional core (institutional embodiment of purpose) illustrate a close link between the overall mission and the operative leadership of athletes and entourages. Each coach approaches institutional embodiment of purpose in consistency with the team’s institutional commitments.

The national team coaches’ approaches to leading athletes and entourages are also in agreement with Selznick’s (1957) perspective on opportunism and utopianism. The coaches act holistically, focusing on long-term effects of everyday actions. The national team coaches are institutional leaders in an effort to instigate athlete commitment towards shared aims and missions, and they create commitment to everyday actions in compliance with the key values of each team, i.e., they promote internal consistency. In that respect, everyday training aims at developing sports competence, while the institutional environment can be seen as a dialectic relationship, where the coaches benefit from development (of athlete and own) to further facilitate athlete development. The relationship with surrounding organisation(s) considers both the focal federation and others. Coach A utilises the CV hunters in the federation to his benefits; Coach B likes to know everyone in the federation; Coach A and C both lean heavily on OLT support. Coach A and B provide access to those outside the team only when they will benefit those inside the team, because athlete development is always the priority. For Coach C, the key to this priority is inclusion and development of club coaches.

As individuals may have different motives for partaking in an organisation, leaders must remind individuals of the vision, mission, and values

(Washington et al., 2008) that make up an institution. This is the essence of holistic organisational leadership (Selznick, 1957) for creating “a ‘whole’ entity that is at least minimally coherent, integrated, and self-consistent” (Kraatz, 2009, p. 73). Taken together, our findings provide a detailed account of how three national team coaches create institutional structures that promote a coherent entity. Selznick (1957) argued that internal elites can play an important role in assisting the leader to strengthen the institution. Consistent with this argument, the three coaches emphasised the importance of role models. Elites, portrayed as institutional guardians, are those who comply and enhance the key values constituting the team culture. Certain members in the teams we studied resembled such institutional guardians. For instance, in team C, an OLT leader was used as institutional guardian to anchor key values in Norwegian elite sports (especially unitedness) that shaped club coaches’ and athletes’ norms towards achieving international success.

Concluding remarks

The present study explored how institutional leadership functions are pursued in distinctive ways by three national team coaches of one nation who also serve as high performance directors. While elite sport, is preoccupied with success (and effectiveness), the findings here illustrate that leaders of elite sport units (e.g., national teams) acknowledge that gaining and securing legitimacy in the processes leading up to success may be equally important as the success itself.

Through the lens of institutional leadership theory, we found important empirical nuances in the way the three coaches pursue leadership to secure legitimacy. Their enactment of broadly defined values illustrates that normative elements at the macro level are pursued with some variation at the micro level, and as such, the coaches specify key values differently; in particular, they specify the cultural-cognitive element differently to promote internal consistency. By focusing on the informal elements of the organisation, their leadership is primarily focused on facilitating patterns of interaction within clearly defined values and norms. Consequently, the coaches create unique institutional structures that satisfy legitimacy demands in the environment. Such institutional structures are almost impossible for others to mimic, as different national teams are situated in different environments. In the same overarching sport movement, even within the same federation, leaders should be cautious of copying institutional structures without considering contextual differences in the environment. To conclude, the findings in this study suggest that rather than copying structures and practices of successful organisations, leadership should focus on developing unique and

legitimate institutional structures consistent with environmental expectations in the process leading to international success.

The study addressed the relevance of considering leadership functions, as captured in institutional leadership, when leading a team. At the same time, the findings revealed the importance for coaches to recognise environmental expectations when leading and organising their teams. A limitation of the study is that the views of athletes and members of the federation board were not captured, and onsite observations of team leadership would also add meaningful data. Additional research on institutional leadership within elite sports is needed to better understand the complex relationship between macro-level conditions and micro-level leadership.

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