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Response to Mills and Boardley: "Advancing leadership in sport: time to 'actually' take off the blinkers?"

Andrew Cruickshank and Dave Collins

Institute for Coaching and Performance, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

Dear Editor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Somewhat confusingly given the early points in their letter, Mills and Boardley [1] do then later state that: "Behaviours are, in the main, value neutral. As such, labelling them without context is futile. The characteristic and subsequent behaviour are arguably unimportant. What is important, however, is the individual and the motive behind the presentation of the behaviour." [1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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Conflicts of Interest

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

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