The ‘C-Suite’ Executive Leader in Sport

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The 'C-Suite' Executive Leader in Sport: Contemporary Global Challenges for Elite Professionals

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Preface

> You know more than you think you know, just as you know less than you want to know. Oscar Wilde (1890)

Sport has the capacity to provide a level of social connectedness and meaning to our being that few voluntary activities in our lives can match. Research has identified that devotees of elite sport (fanatics) benefit from elevated levels of social–psychological well-being, lower levels of alienation, loneliness, and higher levels of collective self-esteem and positive emotion (Wann, 2006). Seeing another person wearing the same team colours and badge provides an instant connection. A connection underpinned by shared values and identity. An integral part of the process of identifying with a sport team is therefore not just with the team and the high-profile athletes, but with the fan base and the associated community (both virtual and physical). In simplistic terms, team success or defeat is viewed as an extension of 'self' (Hirt et al., 1992). For devotees of teams that are perennial losers, belonging appears to be more important than success. A relationship is therefore developed with a team that endures defeat, relegation, relocation, and in some cases a team going out of business.

A career in elite sport is 'the' dream for many of us. For most sport aficionados, the hours spent running, jumping, throwing, hitting, catching … kicking a ball against a wall will only result in frustrated parents and neighbours. The drive to work in an industry which engenders such passion and commitment leads a small minority of us into the boardroom and the C-suite. Elite sport is big business. Estimates vary regarding the market size of the global sports industry. In 2011, Statista estimated at $324bn, by 2018 this figure had grown to $471bn (O'Connell, 2020; PwC, 2019). The full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to sports events and professional leagues across the globe being suspended, postponed, or cancelled is yet to be fully evaluated. The pandemic, self-evidently, had a significant impact on not only the employees and fans of these sports, but also those working in the supply chains associated with the sports industry and even the economies of entire nations. The evaluation of our leader's response to the pandemic, however, has already begun. Employees of sports organisations and sports fans will already have begun to evaluate their corporate leadership and with that dismissing the 'old' ways of corporate communication that self-evidently have been inappropriate for a very human crisis. Chief Executive Officer (CEOs) that appear to have increased their reputation and that of their organisations by adopting several approaches. Firstly, CEOs appear to have 'pivoted' their communication approach from impersonal and business jargon laden vocabulary to a more open, vulnerable, and personal style of communication. Secondly, CEOs have strengthened their commitment to serving their communities either by various forms of charitable 'giving', or by taking action in supporting their internal and external stakeholder communities, that is, the people who give them a 'licence to operate'. Thirdly, successful CEOs appeared to present a more empathetic mindset or dimension to their leadership approach. Such CEOs appeared to have acted early on in the crisis to protect the individuals and families, that is, those who were being most directly impacted and then were quick to communicate bold policies with stakeholders – rapidly and regularly and often ahead of official government guidance. Fourthly, CEOs reaffirmed their commitment to a clear company mission and values, despite the dynamic impact of the pandemic, they appeared to stay in line with their vision. Empathy not power has become the new language of success for those CEOs who improved their reputation during the pandemic (Bloomberg, 2020).

Despite the current and ongoing complex challenges that society is facing, the appeal of ascending to the role of CEO is one that is still attractive to many. Bound in perceptions and connotations of power, status, and influence; aspirational executives are drawn to the role, regarded as the pinnacle of business career progression. As the highest ranking of all directors, CEOs take charge of the executive team and have greatest power and influence in their boardroom. For anyone with aspirations of reaching the top of a very narrow career pyramid, there should be recognition that there will be no shortage of suitable candidates with the prerequisite flair, intelligence, focus, and determination and energy required to fill any CEO vacancy. One of the time-honoured tropes of mainstream business research is the detailed description of the life of the corporate 'titan'. Readers marvel at stories of idiosyncratic, legendary CEOs whose regimen requires them to rise at dawn, followed by yoga, muesli, golf practice, 'quality time' with their children before responding to a mountain of emails. For many, a daily regimen that equates to a form of corporate self-flagellation. In the lexicon of business vernacular, the CEO is for many, the embodiment of organisational power, authority, and leadership. Leadership which requires an individual to be both the internal and external 'face' of the organisation and in doing so balance the complex needs and wants of owners, employees, customers, media, government, and in the case of the sports executive – the athletes and 'fans'. Aficionados of peer reviewed CEO research, quasi biographies and hagiographies are often left with concerns regarding the accuracy of the way in which CEOs are portrayed. Are they 'superhumans' with superior levels of emotional and intelligence quotients? Are they, individuals with extraordinary levels of physical and emotional resilience? Do they have a business 'X' factor which is innate? Sceptics of CEO research are left mulling over the potential for CEO research and autobiographies to fall into what could be argues as worthy, vanity, self-aggrandising and virtue signalling projects on the behalf of the author and their CEO case study. The pervasiveness of social media has somewhat inevitably accelerated the level of 'spin' surrounding the role of the C-suite executive. Readers of CEO homilies will confuse 'correlation' with 'causation' according to Pillot de Chenecy (2019). In his excellent book (The Post-Truth Business), he argues that many of the 'hagiographies' that we consume of CEOs may be harmless, such as the quirky fashion preferences of Steve Jobs (co-founder of Apple) to wear the same style of clothing (aka 'uniform') to work every day. A classic logical fallacy many aspirational CEOs have learned the hard way, that is, in emulating all aspects of Steve Jobs' wardrobe and personality, it doesn't mean you will change the world like he did. The danger is that in copying a leader's eccentricities and idiosyncratic views, readers lose sight of the core, objective, and sustainable messages which can be translated to their own business context and specific demands. In essence, there is potential, in our search for simplicity of message to fail to acknowledge the range of 'internal' (e.g. fallacy or confirmation bias) and 'external' (e.g. macro-business dynamics such as political, environmental, and social) complex variables at play for any CEO.

During my initial background research for this book, I was encouraged to read one of Rudyard Kipling's (acclaimed British poet) most well-known stories – 'The Elephant's Child', first published in 1900.

> I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew);
>
> Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Who.
>
> I send them over land and sea, I send them east and west;
>
> But after they have worked for me, I give them all a rest.
>
> I let them rest from nine till five, For I am busy then,
>
> As well as breakfast, lunch, and tea, For they are hungry men.
>
> But different folk have different views; I know a person small – She keeps ten million serving-men, Who get no rest at all!
>
> She sends'em abroad on her own affairs, From the second she opens her eyes – One million How's, two million Where's, And seven million Why's!

Although Rudyard Kipling is potentially not the first person to write about the five 'W's (What, Where, When, Why, and Who) and one 'H' (How), he is undeniably one of the most eloquent. These interrogatives, sometimes referred to as 'The Kipling Checklist', are the standard questions posed by scientists and engineers engaged in 'Root Cause Analysis'. My own use of the checklist was to facilitate nuanced and rich discussion, that is, encourage interviewees to talk and share their ideas. In my experience, the vast majority of published CEO case studies have leaned towards being soporific and romanticised accounts, and in doing so miss an intellectual opportunity to explore deeper questions of 'why' and 'how' they achieved success rather than simply describing the 'what', 'where', and 'when' of their behaviours. A clear influence upon my research approach was the work of Simon Sinek. Sinek's (2011) espoused 'raison d'être' is to go beyond the superficial what, where, when, how, which, and address the 'why' of our behaviour. With this mantra at the forefront of my mind, I aimed to maintain both a 'reflective' (review activity conducted post-interview, that is, what 'worked' and what did not) and 'reflexive' (self-awareness and assessment undertaken 'in the moment') stance.

The motivation for this book is therefore to attempt to answer the fundamental core questions of why some individuals are more successful than others and how they achieve consistent and repeated success. As such, this book aims to challenge the assumptions and presuppositions about the C-suite. Personally, the research experience and detailed discussions were enlightening in terms of understanding executives at an ontological level, that is, in terms of appreciating what was important to them as people … as a human being. Powerful stories regarding consideration of 'purpose' and the way in which senior executives in sport find meaning in the world is revealed as being far more complex.

The attraction of a career as a C-suite executive in sport is clear for all to see. The role comes with expectations of high remuneration, status, power, and emotional connection to a product that is unlike any other. The 'pipeline' for executive talent in business is one that has been traditionally provided by completion of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) postgraduate award via one of the global networks of universities and their legion of associated business schools. However, increasingly, business schools have been criticised as 'intellectually fraudulent places' in which graduates are taught that heroic transformational leaders are the answer to every problem (Parker, 2018). Critics of business schools argue that the virtues of capitalist market managerialism are pervasive, explicit, and taught with little account of corporate social responsibility, diversity, or indeed sustainability. In a finance context, successful financial strategies are those viewed as ones which produce the maximum return in the shortest period; hence exacerbating social inequalities (Mintzberg & Lampel, 2001; Parker, 2018). MBA students enter the prestigious business schools smart, determined, and often aggressive. These case studies teach them how to pronounce cleverly on situations they know little about, whilst analytic techniques give them the impression that they can tackle any problem – no in-depth experience required. With graduation comes the confidence of having been to a proper business school, not to mention the 'old boys' network that can boost them to the 'top' (Mintzberg, 2017).

Both Mintzberg and Parker's concerns are endorsed by higher education and consultancy firm CarringtonCrisp (2020) who identified that not all MBA programs are developing graduates with the 'soft skills' that employers want most, such fundamental skills as the ability to work with people from a variety of backgrounds, to prioritise tasks, and to manage time effectively. As a result, CarringtonCrisp's (2020) report that 67% of prospective students stated that they are now considering pursuing specialised master's programs rather than a traditional broad stroke 'generalist' MBA. With today's students increasingly appearing to be actively seeking out MBA programs that are relevant and targeted to their career goals, business schools now appear to have responded by tailoring their MBA programs in an effort to be bespoke and relevant to specific industry needs. North America has a long and proud history of delivering pioneering bespoke postgraduate sports programmes (e.g. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst-McCormack Dept; Ohio University) that historically have dominated global postgraduate rankings such as those provided by 'SportBusiness' (2019). New providers within postgraduate sports executive education now also include, high-profile sports teams such as Real Madrid FC who established a 'MBA in Sports Management' (in partnership with Escuela Universitaria) and the 'British Horseracing Authority' have now partnered with the University of Liverpool in creating the 'Thoroughbred Horse Racing Industries' MBA. Most recently, the market demand for bespoke sports executive education is reflected, by the introduction of initiatives such as those of Visionary Sport Investment (VSI), MSc in 'Sporting Directorship' and 'CEO of a Sports Organisation' courses which aim to provide their delegates with the opportunity to identify, analyse, and present innovative approaches to complex leadership problems in the global sporting environment.

What has become clear in recent years is that the traditional 'one size fits all' approach of many MBAs has failed (for the most part) to produce C-suite sports executives (and their equivalents) who can confidently manage financial growth and respond to increasing corporate governance responsibilities and the demands of challenging owners and stakeholders. The 'gap' between what is reported (in contemporary literature), delivered by our educational providers, but required by the sports industry has arguably become exacerbated in recent years – leading to a number of innovative partnerships between sports federations, clubs, entrepreneurs, and higher education. The motivation for this research monograph is therefore to address the 'gap' between what is reported in the literature and what is required of C-suite executives to succeed in what is a challenging, but immensely exciting industry. An industry that was forecasted to grow globally (pre-Covid-19) to over $400bn, and in doing so simultaneously impact our understanding of the relationship between culture, politics, and identity. This book will therefore deliberately challenge interviewees to consider priorities for civic society and how, in effect, it turns many aspects of professional sport into a vehicle of public governance and driver of popular culture.

For those readers who aspire to join the C-suite ranks, it is hoped that this book assists in providing an understanding of the dynamic environment in which you will be expected to compete. If you are going to help lead your sports organisation to the future, learning has to be a fundamental component of that process.

Book Structure

The aim of this research monograph is to provide a synopsis of contemporary issues affecting the performance of the modern-day sports executive strategic leader. Each chapter contains both a 'literature review' and 'interview' with an 'expert' C-suite sports executive.

The aim of the literature review at the start of each chapter is to provide a holistic understanding of contemporary research context and underpinning theory within the chapter heading. The book has a focus upon providing the audience with research insight that is sourced from a wide range of interdisciplinary sources which helps to frame the expert interviews that follow. The combining of several academic disciplines into one literature review, for example, sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, etc., allows the reader to challenge their existing knowledge on the subject matter and consider their own academic and professional experiences.

The purpose of the expert 'interview' is to provide insight to the 'real world' lived experiences of the workplace. Each chapter represents an opportunity for the interviewee to describe in their own words their lived experience as a sports executive and reflect upon their professional knowledge and competences. A dynamic, uncertain industry, whose career is often dependent on the achievements of its athletes. In the face of such volatile circumstances, Roth (1963) has eloquently argued that people make every effort to reduce the uncertainty attached to their positions by psychologically structuring their lives to anticipate potential changes in status and employment. A consideration of this book was therefore to question how executives strategise their careers, contingency plans and anticipate the required personal and professional skills required in any future roles.

The book is not intended to be a 'one size fits all' series of generalisations but allow the interviewee to focus upon a specific contemporary issue (of their choice) and contextualise to their specific role and organisational context. Each interview is designed to challenge the 'expert' to consider/reconsider their career from a variety of perspectives, for example, sociological, psychological, economics, etc. The use of a series of semi-structured interviews with strategic sports leaders (and their equivalents) is to contextualise and apply the plethora of existing management and executive training research. In other words, what is the 'lived experience' of 'C-suite' executives and how does it relate to existing research? The ambition of the text is to provide a nuanced appreciation and understanding of the major roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by senior executives.

Research Approach

A relatively small number of academics have managed to gain 'face-to-face' access to elite sports team executives for the purpose of generating objective, meaningful, and insightful research (Lawrence, 2018; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Roderick, 2006). This appears to be due to a pervasive lack of trust and resulting caution towards engaging with 'outsiders', who are, by definition, external to the business and therefore represent somewhat of an unknown quantity. Professional industry sensitivity and insecurity appears to be typically born out (a) concerns regarding the confidentiality of 'trade secrets', intellectual property, or innovations being revealed to the competition, or (b) professional 'brand' reputation issues, that is, misrepresentation and/or exposure of information obtained by the 'outsider' – leading to potential ethical/legal challenges. As such, elite sporting organisations often deliberately present themselves as 'closed' to external collaboration due to fear of being 'wronged' or harmed by the research. This tangible lack of trust of 'outsiders' means that it is highly unlikely that any initial request (on the behalf of the researcher) will translate into a meaningful research collaboration. Interviewees who are cautious regarding being quoted 'for the record' typically request anonymity, to protect, both their own personal and collective organisational reputation. Indeed, it is commonplace for social scientists to adopt a policy of 'blanket anonymisation', whereby all names, places, and other identifying features are disguised across a data set, including from interview transcripts, diaries, and field notes (Clark, 2006). However, for the experienced researcher it is possible to slowly nurture and establish a climate of mutual trust and reassurance of research integrity by integrating the appropriate level of rigour towards research ethics. This process required me, as the interviewer, to be fully transparent with each prospective interviewee regarding my expectations a social scientist and professional 'obligations' that relate to conducting work, that is, carried out both responsibly and with respect to the integrity and behaviour, that is, moral, legal, safety, and security of colleagues and participants. Each of the named interviewees within this book consented to be named and 'waved' their anonymity, providing written consent to be identified. This assurance was formally underpinned by encouraging each participant to fully interrogate the proposed research collaboration, that is: (i) my professional research background and previous publications; (ii) the research rationale; (iii) primary data collection method, that is, semi-structured interviews; (iv) how and in what form are the intended 'results' of the research to be disseminated, that is, research monograph; and (v) participation is voluntary, and consent/participation can be withdrawn at any point. In my previous experiences of producing research monographs, I have strongly encouraged research participants to fully participate in the formative review, that is, 'drafts' of interview transcripts (aka 'primary data') and provide feedback regarding accuracy of thoughts and ideas conveyed. As a result, the process of nurturing and establishing a trusting relationship and eventual data analysis was time-consuming, but key to being afforded the opportunity to obtain rich and nuanced insight into the 'what', 'where', 'when', 'how', 'which', and 'why' of interviewee thoughts and reflections. In carefully and sensitively considering the methods, procedures, content, and reporting of my research enquiries, the aim was to try to and ensure that I left the interviewee and their respective sports organisation in a manner which allowed future access for prospective researchers.

Trust in any research setting can be arguably accelerated if the researcher has the status of 'quasi-insider' (Wacquant, 1992). As a former semi-professional football player, Roderick (2006) believes that he was afforded the status of 'insider' and afforded a level of legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the players he interviewed for his excellent book on the career and working culture of professional football players. This was not a status or legitimacy that this author could claim or use to leverage access to undertake detailed research interviews. An alternative participant recruitment strategy was therefore considered. Speculative requests for interviews, via social media and professional networks, such as LinkedIn, were mostly unsuccessful – unsurprisingly so, given the industry reluctance to engage with outsiders.

The majority of interviewees for this book came from professional contacts via industry 'gatekeepers'. A gatekeeper in research terms is someone who provides access to his/her professional contacts and by doing so helps to reassure his/her colleagues of the integrity of both the researcher and the outputs of any collaboration. As mentioned above, the author did not have the status of quasi-insider and so referrals from high-profile industry gatekeepers were crucial in facilitating an introduction and potential access to club personnel. Most notable amongst the gatekeepers was Tony Faulkner.

As a former of 'elite performance manager' at both Blackburn Rovers FC and Manchester City FC and now co-founder of VSI Tony's reputation (alongside that of VSIs co-founder, Andy McIntyre) and standing within the sports executive education community was essential in identifying potential contacts and establishing the credibility of the author via a mutual association. In addition, both Tony and Andy were ideally placed to offer a number of recommendations regarding who, in their view, had industry insight, that is, the occupational experience, record of achievement, and qualifications to facilitate the required research insight necessary for the book. These initial recommendations were cross-referenced against a separate, independent 'purposive' or 'purposeful' sample undertaken by the author. The aim of this exercise was to identify C-suite sports executives (or their equivalents) whose knowledge, skills, and experience had been validated by professional reputation and associated sports industry awards. This form of non-probability sampling required the researcher to exercise a subjective regarding the selection of which individuals were selected for contact. The aim was to find 'experts' with credibility and the credentials and the enthusiasm to reflect and provide considered and 'rich' information for the audience of the book. The advantage of using expert subjects within any research project is in their ability to provide 'crystallization points for practical insider knowledge' (Collins & Evans, 2007). In many cases, the interviewee then suggested additional potential candidates with C-suite expertise that were not necessarily high-profile sports business 'names' but had industry credibility and who were highly respected by their peers. Equipped with a formal introduction and personal recommendation, I was then able to contact the next prospective participant much more efficiently and thereby gain access to an extended circle of experts. As a result, the sample of intended interviewees 'snowballed' from an initially small pool of contacts to an extensive network of mutual associations (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

In total, over 50 high-profile 'C-suite' global sports executives were interviewed from a variety of continents, sporting national associations, governing bodies, federations, and individual teams. The intention of the research project was to have an 'open mind' towards what the contemporary and emerging challenges are for C-suite sport leaders in the twenty-first century. The deliberate focus on listening intently to interviewees and using their collective insight was a crucial first step in organising a potentially complex range of dynamic issues into specific and focussed book chapters. In essence, the interviewees drove the agenda for the conversations and the book that has since emerged.

The bulk of interviews was undertaken by the author over a period of four years, between May 2016 and July 2020, and followed a 'semi-structured' format with an 'interview guide' that utilised pre-defined topic areas to guide the discussion (Relvas et al., 2010). Broadly, the interviews began with an initial 'introduction and background' discussion of the rationale for the book, its anticipated structure and the ethical protocols associated with the interviewees' participation.

Second, the interviews probed the subjects' professional background to contextualise and frame their career trajectory. Third, participants were asked to discuss their current roles and responsibilities within the club and to provide insight into its operational structures and working practices. Finally, interviewees were asked to critically reflect upon their own professional development and provide recommendations of how this could be further enhanced.

Commitment to a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews was challenging on the behalf of the interviewees, given the demands that such high-profile individuals have upon their time and availability. Inevitably, this meant that several subjects eventually withdrew from the research process due to the demands of their role and the inflexibility that this created.

It was important for this project that each interviewee would consent to be named within their respective chapter. By naming the individual, the reader is then better able to form a mental picture of the individual and contextualise the experience that is articulated. I was unsurprised by the high levels of the professionalism that I encountered with each interviewee. Each executive was highly experienced at communicating their values and experiences (as would be expected of individuals who are in the public eye); however, what was surprising was that their professional curiosity regarding the topics covered extended into a sincere desire to 'make a difference'. A commitment to detailed and inevitably time-consuming meetings was crucial if the book was to go beyond superficial observations and provide genuine insight. By allowing the subjects to identify and raise issues relevant to their own circumstances, the author ensured that the interview responses that followed were particularly candid regarding their career experiences (Andrews et al., 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Each interview was underpinned by sensitivity or 'research empathy' in order to help to minimise the 'distance' between researcher and respondent (Collinson, 1992; Oakley, 1990; Roderick, 2006). My aim within the interviews was to try and encourage the participants to become 'detached' enough to find those moments of clarity about why they do what they do but haven't necessarily reflected upon sufficiently to articulate. The ability for both the interviewer and interviewee to cognitively 'step back' and reflect, without presupposition and preconceived notions was the ambition of the project – allowing both parties to deal with their own assumptions and challenge both not to conclude too hastily. This research approach was, in part, facilitated by maintaining a structure to each interview that was flexible, iterative, and continuous. As a result, the research themes, identified in each chapter, were adapted in terms of how they were introduced into each interview according to the personality, interests, and knowledge of the interviewee (Andrews et al., 2005; Daley, 2010). Each interview was then audio-recorded to allow for accuracy of recall and the data obtained analysed using a 'thematic' approach. Subsequent interpretation was then discussed with the interviewee to ensure that discussion points and conclusions accurately reflected the content of each interview. Whilst the interviews within each chapter provide several specific implications for theory and practice, it is important to recognise the study's inevitable constraints. Beyond generalisability issues, interviewee comments and therefore data veracity may have been restricted by interactional effects such as poor recall, hindsight bias, and self-preservation bias (Nestler et al., 2008). However, despite such inevitable constraints I am confident that the research contained within provides insight to the lived experiences of C-suite executives and by doing so helps to further our 'ontological' appreciation of the world in which C-suite executives live. The research conclusions will inevitably have far reaching implications for analysis of 'C-suite' effectiveness (meeting the club's objectives) and efficiency (deploying its resources, that is, finances and most importantly players, correctly).This book, therefore, aims to challenges the reader to consider peer reviewed literature in conjunction with insight from sports industry experts, not simply a vanity project or espousing home spun homilies.

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Chapter One

Origins of the C-Suite

> Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice. (Jim Collins, 2001)

Introduction

Evolution of Organisational Structures

If we analyse the roots of contemporary organisational structures and their leadership hierarchies, we can trace the tradition of contemporary management practices back to 5,000 BC and the first government organisations developed by Sumerians and the Egyptians (Scott, 1987). The Egyptians, for example, had a highly sophisticated approach towards a variety of their civil engineering projects, which in one case required the planning, organising, and control of over 100,000 people working for approximately 20 years on one pyramid construction project alone. The practice of management is therefore as old as society itself with many of the practices employed today in leading, managing, and administering modern organisations having their origins in antiquity (Őnday, 2016). Indeed, if we reflect upon the historical evolution of our own villages, towns, and cities, we will in many cases be able to see the foundations of contemporary organisational design and the demand for workplace specialisation. Societies are dynamic, they undergo revolutions (social, cultural, agricultural, and military) and as a result their modes of subsistence evolve from 'pastoral' in which the primary means of subsistence are domesticated animals to a 'horticulturalist' society and the cultivation of crops using hand tools, to a 'post-industrial' society, in which the primary means of subsistence is derived from service-oriented work, as opposed to agriculture or industry. The structures and working practices of our communities have therefore evolved from a nascent demand for specialist 'hunter-gatherers' to demand for specialist farmers, home builders, and service providers. The demand for 'specialisation' is unlikely to be recede given the global impact of disruptive trends, such as the internet of things and technologies such as robotics, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality which are changing the way in which we live and work at an unprecedented rate.

The 'C-Suite' Executive Leader in Sport:
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It is important to note, therefore, that humankind has been making decisions about what to do and how to do it whether that be in micro-organisational units, aka 'families' by producing crafts or by hunting, gathering, farming, or indeed playing sport. Hierarchy, therefore, appears to be intrinsic to our own status, identity, and self and social worth. Such markers of status and importance appear to be symbolic indicators of where we are in the 'pecking order' (both at work and in our personal lives) (Leavitt, 2003; Pink, 2011). Despite the psychological nourishment that hierarchical structures appear to offer us, they are also self-evidently (as we can most likely pay testament from our own experience), capable of nurturing self-interest, authoritarianism, and fear amongst ourselves and our counterparts at work. Hardly anyone, it appears, has a good word to say regards 'hierarchies', whether that be our siblings, management gurus, consultants, or academics. However, forecast of their demise, by organisational critics has so far proven to be somewhat premature.

The industrial revolution of the eighteenth century provided the catalyst for most of the contemporary management models and hierarchies that we see in reflected in the modern-day elite sports organisation. The revolution built upon technological innovation and the techniques of mass production (assembly line technology) led to large-scale production of a wide variety of material goods. Technological advancements, made during this time, came about at such an accelerated pace that a certain degree of 'chaos' developed. Chaos underpinned, firstly, by inefficiency due to a lack of collaboration between employees and secondly, managerial inefficiency due to inexperience in supervising large numbers of employees. As a result, authority structures and standard operating procedures had to be developed and implemented. Just as organisations have evolved, so to have the theories explaining them. These theories range from 'classical organization theory', 'neoclassical organization theory', 'human resource theory', 'modern structural organization theory', 'organizational economics theory', 'power and politics organization theory', 'organizational culture theory', 'reform though changes in organizational culture', and 'theories of organizations and environments'. The foundations, therefore, of multilevel hierarchies, that is, the structure of relationships, power dynamics, objectives, roles, activities, forms of communications, etc., have evolved and so to have the theories explaining them.

The historical roots of organisational structural analysis can be found in what is known as the 'classical' management perspective with its respective three streams: the 'scientific' management theory (developed by Fredrick Winslow Taylor: 1856–1915); the 'administrative' management theory (developed by Henri Fayol: 1841–1925); and the 'bureaucratic' management theory (proposed by Max Weber: 1864–1920). Classical organization theory was the first and main theory of organisations and arguably still has great influence today (Markle, 2011; Őnday, 2016). Each of the classical management theories were focussed upon exploring how best to ensure achievement of the organisational goals and objectives, and thereby lower costs of production and increase in profits. The classical perspective, with its primary focus on the 'things' of production, emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of the challenges that organisations faced in 'tooling' businesses during the industrial revolution. The task of training employees, scheduling complex manufacturing operations, and dealing with increased labour dissatisfaction and resulting strikes created the need for a management structure that acknowledged both scientific and administrative principles. In the late 1800s Frederick Winslow Taylor (who later became known as the 'father of scientific management') proposed that workers could be 'retooled' like machines, that is, their physical and mental gears could be recalibrated via education and training to achieve higher levels of productivity. This meant that management itself would have to change in striving to engender cooperation and harmony, rather than discord in group actions. Fundamentally, Taylor (1911) viewed that any management structure must be based upon 'true' scientific study and analysis and not 'rules of thumb' (Koontz et al., 2005, p. 14).

Max Weber (a German Sociologist) contribution to classical management theory was in his 'bureaucratic' management approach, one that stressed the need for a 'top-down' strictly delineated formal hierarchy, governed by clearly defined regulations and lines of authority (Stoner et al., 1992). Weber viewed the executive as having a key role in the role of management of its employees, but a relationship based upon a more formal and 'impersonal rational basis'. Weber introduced elements such as clearly defined authority and responsibility, formal record-keeping, and separation of management and ownership. This was in part a reaction by Weber to many European organisations (in the late 1800s) being managing on what resembled a personal 'family-like' basis. As a result, employees were perceived as being loyal to a single individual, rather than an organisation or its collective mission. The dysfunctional consequence of this management practice, in Weber's view, was that resources were used to realise individual desires rather than organisational goals; employees in effect 'owned' the organisation and used resources for their own gain rather than to serve customers. Critics of Weber's bureaucratic and strict adherence to 'rules and procedures'-oriented model cited excessive inflexibility, red tape, authoritarianism, and general lack of 'human face' (Eze, 1998).

Lastly, Henri Fayol's (French engineer) contribution to the classical model of management was contained within an 'administrative' approach – which had at its core a focus upon the 'total organization' rather than the individual worker. Fayol's model helped to define senior management functions with regard to: unity of command and control, centralisation and coordination of planning, division of labour (role specialisation), accountability and responsibility, and subordination of individual interest to the general Interest (Stoner et al., 1995). One of the most significant implications of Fayol's research are his recommendation that organisations create a 'scalar chain', that is, one in which there is a clear line of authority from the 'top' level to the 'lowest' level. A scale in which all employees acknowledges a hierarchy of superior and subordinate relationships.

Origins of the C-Suite

The positions that collectively make up the 'C-suite' in large businesses (so named because of the tendency for all of their titles to feature the word 'chief') have their roots in classical management perspective and associated models. The trend at the top of an organisations to have an executive team with functional 'specialists' that report directly to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) include, a Chief Operating Officer (COO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Marketing Officer, Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), and more recently, amongst others, a Chief Data Officer (CDO), a Chief Sustainability Officer, Chief Culture Officer, CDO, and a Chief Experience Officer. The trend towards expansion of the size of the executive team, that is, the managers reporting directly to the CEO having doubled (from 5 to 10 or more) since the mid-1980s (Guadalupe et al., 2013). This is argued to be in part a reflection of the growing impact and 'harmonisation' of information technology within business operations and the demand for owners and their CEOs to have 'specialists' who are closer to the 'product' (for a detailed analysis of how information is 'harmonized' within the C-suite please see Guadalupe et al., 2013).

The origins of a small executive team held responsible for overarching leadership can be traced back to the period, when businesses were gaining unprecedented scale and regulators and shareholders demanded more management accountability. Alfred P. Sloan, whose years as CEO of General Motors (1923–1946) transformed the organisation into the world's largest company, created the prototypical model when he distributed profit-and-loss responsibility across managers of key business divisions and regularly assembled them to decide on matters above the divisional level. A model or template for leadership defined as 'C-suite 1.0' by Kelly (2013). Other corporations followed the '1.0' template established by Sloan at General Motors, one of a clear hierarchical structure and centralised leadership. C-suite executives reporting directly to the CEO were tasked with making critical decisions, allocation of resources, and monitoring performance. The emergence of new technologies in the 1980s, global deregulated markets famously led General Electric's CEO Jack Welch to warn in the 1995 that 'if the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, then the end is near' (cited by 2020). Prophecies of this nature led to a change in the composition of the C-suite from general managers to the demand for 'specialists' with the ability to provide technical and functional expertise and thus drive 'change on the inside' heralding the rise of 'C-suite 2.0' and era of 'command and control' (Kelly, 2013). Executives with functional specialisms in marketing, finance, sales, human resources, and IT have led to an ever expanding and more specialised leadership team and C-suite 2.0 model. A model that is now prevalent across all business sectors including elite sport. A model that is largely unquestioned, but whose complexity and layers come at a cost. Disruption within the sports ecosystem demands that each element of a business reacts with agility, dynamically. Within C-suite 2.0 it is unlikely that such complex layers of hierarchy communicate with sufficient coherence, quality, frequency, and alignment that responses to the external environment are both efficient and effective. As a result, the CEO is placed in a position of enhanced and greater responsibility than ever before. It is the responsibility of the CEO within the modern 2.0 model to articulate and maintain coherence and alignment of vision throughout a technically complex and multilayered structure. The impact of the current Covid-19 pandemic and next wave of globalisation have forced the CEO and their C-suite of direct reports to face both existential challenges and potential opportunities. Rapid technological change, evolving sports business models, demands for diversity and organisational reform will inevitably challenge C-suite to evolve further to 'model 3.0' and address the limitations of the current 'typical' team of functionally oriented executives.

Perceptions of a sports league's global allure are inevitably skewed when viewed from within the context of a nation's own enthusiasm and bias towards its own sports. For instance, in the United States, the biggest annual single socio-cultural annual event is the NFL 'Super Bowl' – typically attracting an average of more than 100m TV viewers just within America alone (Sporting Intelligence, 2019). One way to consider the global (non-domestic) popularity of leagues is to review the annual earnings from all broadcasting rights for each league derived from foreign markets. Sporting Intelligences report reviewed the 'Big 5' leagues of North America (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, and MLS) and the highest earning soccer league in Europe (the EPL). Most neutral observers can probably agree that the most popular league in the world – with genuine widespread popularity across both continents – comes from data collated from within that group (Table 1).

The Owner(s)

In contemporary society, professional sports clubs bear little resemblance to their historical roots and have changed dramatically in response to a variety of dynamic social, economic, political, and technological factors. However, sport is by its very nature competitive. Business leaders, therefore, are constantly attempting to seek a 'competitive advantage' – something that makes their club or entity more successful than its rivals (Szymanski & Kuypers, 1999). For successful leadership in a highly competitive league, there is an inevitable and understandable tendency for owners and their senior leaders to imitate and replicate what appear to be tried-and-tested ideas from elsewhere. A club owner, must however, be prepared to be courageous and in doing so have the business acumen and ability to assemble a team of decision-makers who can challenge existing models of management. A challenge that requires short-term optimisation of current 'strategic assets' of the club, for example, a 'star' player, manager, location, or club reputation whilst looking to the future. A future should be predicated on being sustainable, whilst mindful of the structural macro-environmental constraints in which the league operates.

A key factor in the appeal of investing in professional sports clubs is due to the opportunity that sport provides to 'reach' and 'engage' with a global audience. In the case of the English Premier League, for example, a reach that in 2018–2019 extended to over 3 billion viewers across 188 of the world's 193 countries (as recognised by the United Nations). The pervasive reach of high-profile sports brands, offers their owners the potential to derive revenue (from prize money obtained from domestic and international competitive success), appeal to global sponsors, and thirdly, to use the profile of their team to engage in 'sportwashing' or the strategic, intentional use of sport (by club/business owners) to enhance its

Table 1. Earnings from 'Foreign' (Overseas) Versus 'Domestic' Sources.

League	**Overseas Rights (Per Year: UK£, US$)**	**Domestic Rights (Per Year)**	**Total Rights (Per Year)**	**Overseas % of Total**
English Premier League	£1,400,000,000 $1,750,000,000	£1,665,000,000 $2,081,250,000	£3,065,000,000 $3,831,250,000	45.7%
National Basketball Association	£360,000,000 $450,000,000	£2,133,333,333 $2,666,666,666	£2,493,333,333 $3,116,666,666	14.4%
Major League Baseball	£120,000,000 $150,000,000	£1,200,000,000 $1,500,000,000	£1,320,000,000 $1,650,000,000	9.1%
National Football League	£96,000,000 $120,000,000	£3,520,000,000 $4,400,000,000	£3,616,000,000 $4,520,000,000	2.7%
National Hockey League	£12,000,000 $15,000,000	£160,000,000 $200,000,000	£172,000,000 $215,000,000	7%
Major League Soccer	£12,000,000 $15,000,000	£72,000,000 $90,000,000	£84,000,000 $105,000,000	14.3%

Source: Adapted from Global Sports Salaries Survey (2019). Available at: https://www.globalsportssalaries.com/

reputation and image. A term coined by Amnesty International (2018) reveals the importance that elite sport plays within the intersection of sports, politics, business, and society.

Given the seismic shift in the commercial and geopolitical landscape of professional sport it is not surprising, therefore, that there have been significant changes in terms of club ownership, the most noteworthy of which has been the influx of foreign investors into elite sports clubs (Rohde & Breuer, 2016). The new generation of billionaire owners and investors tend to have superior financial resources at their disposal, which are strategically deployed to purchase high-calibre players and secure the services of managerial talent in the pursuit of success both domestically and on an international stage. As such, the financial investment in 'on-field' performance may be indicative of a new strategy of owners focussing on 'profit maximising' (Kuper & Szymanski, 2009; Wilson et al., 2013). The first question to ask when analysing the role of the owner is: what makes a 'good' owner? Is it ensuring financial stability and self-sustainability? Is its strong investment and a willingness to propel the team to greatness, no matter what the cost? Or is it a desire to centre the club on community-based principles and make sure that ticket prices are affordable? Many fans would argue that a 'good' owner should have all those characteristics. Owners are held responsible by their respective national league and sporting governing body for safeguarding the future of the club by various legal and regulatory codes of governance. However, the motives of business owners whether they be to exploit the commercialisation of the league or institute a 'brand' makeover remain an ongoing concern for external stakeholders such as team fans.

Concerns regarding the level of due diligence undertaken by clubs regarding prospective ownership changes led to football licensing authorities such as the English Premier League reviewing the applications of individuals to become club owners. The legislation that followed required applicants to be reviewed against the Premier League's (2009) criteria for the selection of 'fit and proper' owners and directors of football clubs, later superseded by the Owners' and Directors' Test (2012). Test criteria specify that owners and directors:

- must not be involved directly or indirectly with another club;
- must not have a significant interest in another club;
- must not be prohibited by law to be a director;
- must not have committed any of a list of criminal offences;
- must not have been made bankrupt or taken voluntary bankruptcy; and
- must not have been a director of a club that has suffered two separate events of insolvency.

The ambition of club owners to expand their business interests from a share in one club to several around the globe has become increasingly commonplace in the last decade (Rohde & Breuer, 2017). The motives for clubs to extend their ownership portfolio is fuelled by a commercial desire to leverage their intellectual property rights and in doing so both expand the 'global footprint' and drive 'operational synergies' (i.e. the 'pipeline' of player recruitment, development and sales; 'economies of scale', that is, sharing of business 'best practices', etc.) between the 'parent' club and any partner. However, any potential partnership opens questions regarding 'conflict of interest' and challenges to the integrity of any competition in which owners have a majority shareholding in a competitor. International sporting bodies have so far failed in preventing ambitious owners from being creative and expanding their ownership portfolio to those teams that do not compete in officially sanctioned competitions. For example, within the EPL, the most prominent multiclub owners are Manchester City FC, whose holding company (City Football Group) currently part or fully own teams across the globe in the United States, Japan, Belgium, Spain China, India, Uruguay, and Australia. A similar portfolio of clubs has been amassed by the Austrian energy drink brand 'Red Bull' who currently own Red Bull Salzburg (Austria), RB Leipzig (Germany), New York Red Bulls (USA), and Red Bull Brazil (Brazil). The benefits of 'scale', that is, multiple assets from a commercial perspective for Manchester City FC are that from a commercial perspective, they now have more assets, across more time zones which allow them to better serve their business partners. Critics of the approach regard such 'franchising' as an attempt to leverage the appeal of the brand beyond its home territories into new and dynamic markets (Fig. 1).

Within a sports organisation, decision-making structures, such as the 'board' are regarded as the key governing body for the organisation. Senior executives,

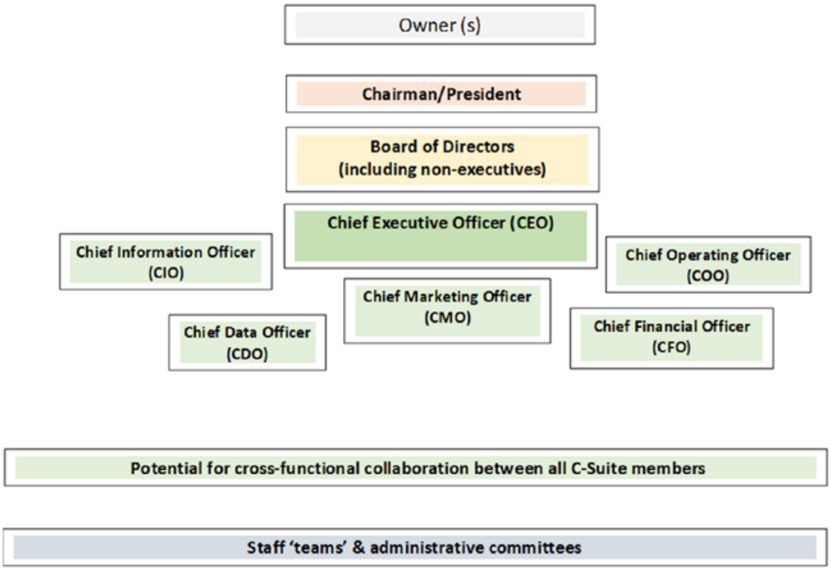

Fig. 1. Organisational Hierarchy.

such as C-suite personnel are held responsible for the organisation's goals, priorities, and reporting mechanisms. The 'board' is in effect, the organisation's controlling body with responsibility for oversight of the entire business, supervision, and regulating its employees (Institute of Directors (IoD), 2015). The size and composition of the board is in most cases left to the discretion of the owners, however in practice it is typically limited to a number which promotes open dialogue (typically a maximum of 12) whilst having individuals who the appropriate balance of skills, experience, independence, and knowledge (UK Sport & Sport England, 2016). According to Deloitte (2019), the most common board size is 9–10 members who meet on average 'in-person' 4–5 times a year (each meeting lasting on average five hours or more) with additional telephonic or virtual meeting of twice times a year (lasting on average one hour). At Liverpool FC (current EPL Champions), the following individuals will typically be in attendance:

John W Henry (principal owner, majority shareholder).
Tom Werner (chairman and shareholder).
David Ginsberg (vice chairman).
Phillip H. Morse (vice chairman).
Directors: Michael Gordon (shareholder), Michael J. Egan (shareholder).
Non-Executive Director: Sir Kenny Dalglish.
Peter Moore (CEO).
Andy Hughes (COO).

Additional attendees at board meetings could potentially include (at the time of research): Ted Alfond, Bill Alfond, Thomas R. DiBenedetto, Linda P. Henry,