



The 'C-Suite' Executive Leader in Sport

Contemporary Global Challenges
for Elite Professionals

Ian Lawrence

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

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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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 as 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 challenge 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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