

Navigating Organizational Change in Elite Soccer

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Headline

Change is ever present. It is a constant in life as we evolve and adapt as human beings. Change itself is often viewed as inherent by sporting organizations as the demand for continual improvement and success increases (Wagstaff et al., 2015). However, like the connections between individuals, change is multifaceted, non-linear, and fluidly evolves (Slater et al., 2015).

The world of elite soccer has become accustomed to change at regular intervals. According to the League Managers Association (LMA), and between 2005 - 2018, a total of 540 managers were dismissed, or resigned, across all four divisions in English soccer (LMA, 2018). Furthermore, only 40% of first-time managers make it to the 75-game mark, 50% of first-time managers are dismissed and do not get another management position. While it is typical of any organization to experience turbulent times and unexpected changes, there is often a higher instance of change, and the subsequent uncertainty, in elite sport due to the high demands for success, both demonstrable and sustained, from key organizational stakeholders (Fasey et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2016).

Whilst there is a paucity of literature investigating organizational change in elite sport, early research has widely focussed on the negative impact of change and repeated change within sport organizations (Gilmore, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2015; Wagstaff et al., 2016). Thus, the aim of this opinion article is to explore the current literature on organizational change on sports science and medicine teams (SSM) within the elite soccer domain.

Early literature on the effect of managerial change and team performance has led to mixed conclusions (Audas et al., 2002). However, it could be argued, from an organizational perspective, that a sporting organization is often unconventional, chaotic, and not typical of business practice. Indeed, working practice within elite soccer has been criticised within the literature with poor employment practices identified nearly 20 years ago by Waddington et al., (2001).

Thus, an elite sporting environment could be described as volatile, with management change often at the discretion of owners or stakeholders who demand the sustained sporting success and performance of the organization. (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2015). In this respect, the high turnover of managerial staff within English football may be explained by the constant demand for sustainable performance (Wagstaff et al., 2015). Whilst there has been an evolution in the creation of SSM departments within professional soccer clubs over the last two decades there is still a large degree of vulnerability for practitioners within the volatile climate in which they operate (Wagstaff et al., 2015).

Over a relatively short period of time, the impact that sports science & medicine-related factors can have on elite performance, has led to an exponential growth in elite soccer 'support staff'. Thus, leading to many elite sporting organizations to increase, invest and enhance their teams of performance

related staff, with the aim of seeking competitive advantages for their athletes. (Arnold et al., 2017; Gilmore & Gilson., 2007; Gilmore et al., 2017; Wagstaff et al., 2015; Wagstaff et al., 2016).

However, due to the innovations and the vast expansion of sports science and medicine (SSM) staff within elite sports environment, the levels of complexity and structure have also increased (Slater et al., 2015). Despite the somewhat exponential growth in the "team behind the team", the domain of SSM within elite sport may remain a volatile one (Fletcher and Wagstaff., 2015). Thus, with the constant threat of change and/or repeated change to practitioners, the effect of this organizational disruption to SSM staff and their subsequent departments may be of interest to key stakeholders.

Given the volatility of the professional domain, and the demands of success from key stakeholders within the organization, it is common that within changes to the coaching and managerial staff, changes may occur further within the SSM personnel. (Fletcher and Wagstaff, 2015). However, the responses of staff members, from an emotional and attitudinal perspective, during a period, or periods, of organizational change may play a large, and somewhat significant, role in the effectiveness and the subsequent success of the change process (Liu & Perrewew, 2005). Thus, the efficient and effective implementation of change is required for successful performance across a variety of domains (Cruickshank and Collins, 2012).

Group Dynamics

Humans, by nature, are social creatures. Whilst humanity has evolved to be self-dependent, it has been suggested that a key characteristic of humans is indeed that of group membership (Forsyth & Burnett, 2010). However, athletes, coaches and managers do not function in isolation and the behaviours displayed by each subgroup may influence the other groups within the sporting organization environment (Martin et al., 2014). Indeed, early work by Carron (1980) has suggested that to understand individual behaviour, we must focus on the behaviours that occur within the group. This is congruent with the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), suggesting that an individual's social identity reflects their internalization of group membership.

As an extension of theory, the social identity approach is the culmination of both the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987). Thus, the social identity approach suggests that behaviour that is based on an individual's personal identity, fundamentally differs from the behaviour of the individual's social identity (the group). Furthermore, recent literature by Haslam (2014) acknowledged that "there is now a colossal literature that speaks of the importance of internalized group memberships for peoples' sense of self, for their psychology more generally, and for their behaviour".

A key tenet of the social identity approach is the contention that in social environments an individual defines themselves with a personal identity ('I', 'me') and as that of group members, or social identity, ('we' and 'us') (Slater et al., 2016). For example, an individual may define themselves within the realms of a specific social identity (e.g. the SSM team). However, when this specific social identity is relevant, within a given situation, an individual will see themselves and other members of the same group (ingroup) as somewhat interchangeable. Subsequently, this may lead to the exaggeration of differences between the ingroup and those who do not belong in this group (outgroup, e.g. coaches, technical staff etc).

Furthermore, when there is cohesion and salience within the ingroup, the group members may share the same perspective, with the emergence of group norms. Thus, this may see a collaboration with the ingroup to achieve any specific outcomes or professional goals.

Within a sporting organization, the social identity approach may appear in the form of a group (the team) and subsequently further groups (e.g., coaches, management, sports science, medical). An extension of this may include the development of sub-groups, which are often departmental in nature. For example, within the support staff, a club may employ a group of multi-disciplinary staff (sports science, strength & conditioning and medical) as part of the organization.

Therefore, it could be speculated that a subgroup of the team may be that of the SSM department.

However, it is worth noting, that depending on staffing levels within the organization, further sub-groups could appear from an interdisciplinary perspective (a group of sports scientists, a group of strength and conditioning, and a group of medical staff). Thus, recent literature by Slater et al., (2016) has suggested that group membership may be disrupted by change within the organization, which may have implications on individual, group, and subsequently organizational levels.

The functioning of the SSM team is one that is complex in nature. Adding to this complexity is the ever-changing demands on the SSM team. However, the functioning of groups within the elite soccer environment, and drawn from the social identity approach, may be of interest to those considering change. As proposed by Slater et al., (2016), the functioning of any internalized group may be disrupted during times of change. Subsequently, this may lead to greater implications for the individual, the group, and the organization. Thus, bringing further complexity to the operation of the SSM team on a wider scale, that may indirectly have an influence on-field performance.

Thus, understanding the social identity approach may be of value to key stakeholders, department leaders and practitioners during times of change. In essence, the social identity approach may assist with the fundamental understanding of both individual and group behaviour (Slater et al., 2016; Turner et al., 1987; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

As the social identity approach describes both the individual and social identities of a person's behaviour, Slater et al., (2016) suggests the criticality in the development of psychological belonging between individuals during time of change. By developing individuals to have a shared identity, an attach-

ment to the organization or team, the individuals think and behave in a manner that compliments the group. Thus, by understanding the social identity approach and its influence on the individuals and the group, there may be clear advantages for key stakeholders and SSM staff during times of change.

Practitioner experiences of change.

Recent literature by Wagstaff et al., (2015) examined the longitudinal experiences of 20 SSM staff in 3 organizations (cricket and soccer), across a two-year period. Thus, the authors highlighted the potentially negative cost of organizational change on SSM's working practice, within the elite sporting domain, and the subsequent effect on on-field performance. Therefore, disruption to the areas within the realms of SSM, (psychology, performance analysis, rehabilitation, fitness, medical), during organizational change, may indirectly impact or influence performance on the field.

The strength of this work by Wagstaff and colleagues is the longitudinal study design. Thus, this has allowed the authors to collate the experiences, thoughts, and behaviours of SSM practitioners as the change process occurred. Drawing on their conclusions, the Wagstaff et al., (2015) suggested that change occurred over four stages: anticipation and uncertainty; upheaval and realization; integration and experimentation; normalization and learning (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. A stage-based process model of organization change experience in professional sport medicine & science department. (Wagstaff, C, Gilmore, S, and Thelwell R., (2014)

Later work by Wagstaff et al., (2016) investigated repeated organizational changes in the English Premier League (EPL). Participants (n=20) were sampled from two EPL clubs across various domains (sports science/ strength and conditioning, technical coaches, players and medical). While the sample size is low, one key strength of this study is the participants had encountered an average of 4.2 changes within the current working practices. Thus, demonstrating some relevance to the LMA (2018) data regarding managerial change statistics in elite English soccer.

Subsequently, the findings presented participants responded to repeated change both positively and negatively. However, the data suggested that repeated change was met with more negative connotations than positive. Despite some positively during periods of change, such as personal development and growth, there are significant negative consequences, such as the weakening of emotional ties between employee and organization. Thus, during repeated organizational change there may be a decline in trust and subsequent increase in cynicism towards those who instigate change (Wagstaff et al., 2016).

Institutionalisation

At present, only one study has investigated the effect of change in elite soccer and the subsequent deinstitutionalisation of staff. (Gilmore and Sillince, 2014). Drawing on the principles of institutional theory, the longitudinal case study (2003-2011) investigated an EPL's team (Club X) sports science

team and the subsequent deinstitutionalisation post managerial change. The development and implementation by Club X of an SSM department was arguably seen as revolutionary given the club's financial constraints at the beginning of Manager A's reign in 1999. One notable key aspect noted by the authors was the homogeneity between the group of sports science staff. Which is congruent with the social identity approach previously discussed. However, when Manager A departed in 2007, a change in staff was observed with some SSM staff joining the manager at his new club and some SSM staff departing for other clubs within the EPL.

Subsequently, with the introduction of a new manager, the deinstitutionalisation of the SSM department occurred within a six month period. The authors identified four key categories in which the deinstitutionalisation process occurred: asserting dominant institutional logics; reconfiguring institutional vocabularies and the contents of conversation; destabilizing the affective environment, and the disruption of a community of practice (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Deinstitutionalization of sports science at club X (Gilmore, s. and sillince, J.2014)

However, whilst it could be surmised that the creation of an SSM department by Manager A was seen to be a key in maintaining and sustaining performance in the EPL, this may have created the subsequent institutionalization. Thus, the departing of Manager A (and his performance staff), and the lack of interest in sports science by his replacement, may have led to the rapid deinstitutionalisation of the department. Therefore, continuity of key staff and practices may be of salience during times of change to preserve or maintain the group dynamics of SSM departments.

Practical Applications

Whilst change is inevitable at some point during the SSM practitioners career the author supports the call for sport organizations, senior leadership, practitioners and potential practitioners and academic institutions (Wagstaff et al., 2015; Wagstaff et al., 2016) to consider the realities of staff turnover and the prevalence and subsequent effect on SSM departments during organizational change within elite soccer.

Thus, it could be postulated that within an elite soccer organization there are various groups, and possible sub-groups that may experience change and/or repeated change throughout their careers. An understanding of these groups may provide valuable insight to key stakeholders into the working practice, particularly of SSM practitioners, during times of change.

Due to the paucity of literature on organizational change and consequences in elite soccer, by gaining a fundamental knowledge of individual and group dynamics, alongside the positive and negative implications of change and repeated change on SSM practitioners, both SSM departments and key stakeholders may be able to navigate change successfully, whilst maintaining the identities of both practitioners and departments.

Subsequently, while more research is required, the understanding of change and associated effects, may further assist in the stabilization of on-field performance through departmental continuity and avoid any potential deinstitutionalisation which may prove costly.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

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