

Becoming a leader: a study of aspirant football club managers

Authors: Brian Howieson & Stephen Morrow,
University: University of Stirling
Email: s.h.morrow@stir.ac.uk

Few professionals perform their jobs in an environment as public, as pressurised, as short-termist and as unforgiving of mistakes, as that which exists for football club managers. Early academic studies on the subject of leadership focused initially on attempts to define and analyse leadership effectiveness. More recently research has focused on the importance of leadership on business performance (e.g. financial performance; productivity) and behaviour (e.g. employee satisfaction/well-being; recruitment/retention). Some prior studies have combined sport and leadership/management; for example, Chelladurai (2006), who developed a US Leadership Scale for Sport. Aspects of football management and the role of the manager have been researched, in particular by Kelly (see, for example, Kelly and Waddington, 2006; Kelly, 2008; Kelly and Harris, 2010) and by Bridgewater (2010). The focus of this study, however, is on providing insight into what aspirant professional football managers understand about leadership and management philosophies within the specific context that is football. Specifically, the aims of this study are to: a) understand aspirant football managers' views on leadership, management and authority; b) investigate what they perceive to be the main challenges they will face as new managers; c) investigate their motivations for becoming football managers; and d) over time, to contrast managers' prior perception with subsequent experience.

As in other countries, the Scottish Football Association (SFA) offers a Pro-Licence course as part of the UEFA accreditation scheme for managers. The SFA's coaching schemes are highly regarded, attracting interests not just from managers and prospective managers in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, but from other European countries. One element of the Pro-Licence course is a residential workshop, *Management for Football Managers*, at the University of Stirling. Following on from the Pro-Licence workshop, agreement was given to undertake a series of semi structured, qualitative interviews (n=18) with the majority of candidates on the 2011/12 UEFA/SFA Pro-licence course. The interviews were taped and transcribed and analysed using content analysis in order to identify key themes. These initial interviews will also act as the baseline for an on-going longitudinal study into the differences between perceptions and experience as these candidates take up full managerial positions. Agreement has also been offered to track this cohort

in the short- and medium-term as their career develops into managerial positions and beyond.

A response rate of 85% suggested key themes: leadership was identified most regularly as providing a consistency of direction and message and the willingness to make decisions; key characteristics of football leaders and managers identified by interviewees were honesty, trustworthiness and perceptiveness; and the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with key personnel in the club. In addition, from the leadership theory, it has been argued that decision-makers themselves are active in the social construction of the context and problem which in turn legitimises their behaviour (Grint, 2005). The evidence from this study reinforces this finding, with the types of authority advocated (or expected by the interviewees) being legitimised by the ways in which the problems they faced, or expected to face, as a football manager, were constructed by them in their specific football context.

The aims of this presentation are:

- To detail why this study is important; for example, as the changing nature of the football management profession was recognised by many participants, there is a need for new tools and approaches to help them survive and/or flourish. In addition, it is hoped that a body of knowledge will be developed which will give considerable insight into leadership and management practice within professional football that can also be shared among other disciplines, which will contribute further to the academic and practitioner literature.
- To present the results in greater detail; for example, the types of problems are facing, how these problems may be dealt with, and suggestions for further research and practical tools which may be required.

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