

# The Role Of Leadership And Culture In Managing Mental Health And Wellbeing In Professional Football — A Review Of Literature

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## **Aim of the research/project**

This presentation will outline the rationale and early review of literature for my PhD research, which aims to a) critically explore mental health and wellbeing management within professional football academies in the UK, and b) consider the role of positive mental health as a contributing factor for athlete success in the long term.

## **Literature review**

A systematic review by Rice, Purcell, De Silva, Mawren, McGorry and Parker (2016) highlighted the prevalence of mental health illness among elite athletes covering a spectrum of conditions including low self-esteem/confidence, anger, substance misuse, stress, anxiety, depression. As a result, Rice, Purcell, De Silva, Mawren, McGorry, & Parker (2016, p. 1333) call for “the need for more high quality epidemiological and intervention studies” to inform strategies to identify and manage athletes.

To be clear, this research will aim to bridge this gap in exploring the issues from an organisational management perspective, with a focus upon the influence of organisational culture and behaviors, as opposed to delivering epidemiological (clinical) based insight. For example, McDougall, Nesti and Richardson (2015) highlight the challenges of delivering sport psychology support in elite and professional sport, stating building relationships within practical settings, the influences of elite sport cultures and the ‘thriving and surviving’ nature of the role as barriers to effective practice.

This influence of culture(s), and the sub-themes highlighted by McDougall et al. (2015), can be intrinsically linked with management, governance and leadership. In 2014, Football’s world governing body, FIFA, acknowledged a clear lack of understanding into mental health and well being provision in professional football, given the lack of empirical research (FIFAPro, 2014). However, a later study by FIFAPro found 26% (n = 180) of the current professional footballers reported to have some mental health problems, whilst this overall figure increased to 41% (n = 121) for retired players, who took part in the qualitative study.

As elite football clubs are becoming more professional and compete for commercial and sporting success on a global scale, the pressures of this success across club and academies structures are increasingly apparent. High profile examples of increasing, antidotal cases suggest professional footballers are suffering from a spectrum of mental health conditions, as outlined by Rice et al. (2016). At the same time, clubs are adopting strategies where players are recruited as young as nine years old to be developed and sold as commodities for financial gains, strategies arguably more clear than those which focus on mental health and wellbeing of the athletes as employees. In addition, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), a long term strategy launched in the UK, in 2011 aims to develop more and better footballers, however, it has no specific focus on mental health and well being provision, despite sections on ‘welfare and lifestyle management’ and ‘sport science’.

Rice et al. (2016, p. 1333) suggest “elite athletes experience a broadly comparable risk of high-prevalence mental disorders (i.e. anxiety, depression) relative to the general population”, whilst those who suffer injury, performance difficulty and/or approaching retirement have a greater risk of mental illness/disorder — football clubs need to consider the need and implication for intervention studies and evidenced based outcomes.

This paper is informed through a systematic review of literature across a) clinical psychology, to highlight the prevalence of issues in the management of mental health in wider societal settings, before considering b) management and leadership studies; to develop the argument in tightening the link between employee wellbeing and performance offered by Baptiste (2008). Uniquely, the employees (players) could be recruited as young as nine years old, despite not being offered professional contract terms until they are 17–18 years old. Therefore, it will also explore increasing empirical evidence in management and leadership studies, such as those offered by April, Lifson & Noakes (2012), which suggests stronger, successful leaders have a stronger understanding, acquisition and use of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Social Intelligence (SI), which, in turn can lead to positive mental health and wellbeing, and subsequent positive effects on organisational cultures. Finally the review considers literature in c) sport psychology; continuing the discussion offered by

April et al. (2012) as to whether the development of EI and SI by leaders in football, and young players can aid the increased positive mental health and wellbeing in cultural settings more accepting of sport and general psychology support (McDougall et al., 2015).

## References

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