**Abstract**

In recent years there has been a significant interest around leadership development practices within the field of management. Leadership development is particularly important within the highly competitive sport industry, where leadership performance is under constant and ever-increasing scrutiny. For sport organizations, strong leadership can be a source of significant competitive advantage and hence, increased focus on leadership and investment into the development of talent has occurred. However, there has been a surprising lack of scholarly research into leadership and the associated processes within the sport management field, particularly from an Australian perspective. This paper addresses this gap as it examines the nature of experience-based leadership development practices within three of Australia’s leading professional sport organizations. Following a qualitative multi-case study approach, the thematic analysis of 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the senior executive of each case organization suggested that the NSOs placed significant emphasis on experience-based opportunities as a way of developing their workforce. Via the adoption of McCall’s experience-based leadership development framework, four main themes emerged: the importance of experience-based opportunities for leadership development; leadership development through involvement and exposure to experiences; networking opportunities gained from experienced-based exposure; and, the relationship between on the job experience and formal leadership education. These findings extend our knowledge of current leadership development and practices implemented in national sport organisations and highlight the importance of effective leadership within highly competitive sport markets. Based on these findings, implications are provided for current practice illustrating the benefits that an experience-based approach to leadership development within sport organisations can have.

**Introduction**

Leadership is one of the most researched areas in the field of management studies; however, scholars and practitioners are still trying to determine the key attributes that generate leadership success (Avolio, 2011; Bryman, 2011; Sinclair, 2009; Yukl, 1989). An important aspect of the growth in scholarship over the past three decades has been the attempt to understand how future leaders are best developed (Bass, 1995; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; DeRue & Wellman, 2009). The work of McCall (2010) has been important in this regard arguing that developing leadership talent is much more complicated than it appears. The topic continues to be of significant interest in management studies because strong and effective leadership provides a source of competitive advantage for organizations (Day, 2001). Similarly, the idea of succession management in the context of leadership development is also of substantial interest (Day et al., 2014, Taylor & McGraw, 2004). In other words, once organizations have developed effective leaders they must be able to plan for the future fostering those with leadership potential to help prepare for periods of leadership transition (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Despite the growing significance of this area of study there has been limited research undertaken on leadership development from a sport management perspective. While sport has proved to be a fruitful setting in which to conduct organizational work (see Wolfe et al., 2005) leadership research in the sport management field is trailing a long way behind what has been occurring in the broader field of management studies (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). This is in the context of the dramatic commercialization of sport over the past 40 years – both globally and locally – and the resulting increasing pressure placed on those who hold leadership positions in sport (Fletcher & Arnold, 2015). More than ever, executives of leagues and professional clubs not only face intense media scrutiny, they also must meet the high standards expected from critical stakeholders such as the fans, sponsors, governments and the general community. Against this background, an examination of leadership development in the increasingly complex sport industry provides an opportunity for a fresh perspective and a way to advance our knowledge and understanding of this important subject. Leadership development is particularly topical within the Australian sport marketplace given the professionalization of many components of the industry (i.e. sport science, sport coaching, sport management and sport marketing). Yet, it is still unclear whether (and how) Australian professional sporting organizations have been investing in developing their leaders to best handle the constant pressure and complex challenges they face (Kellet, 1999; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012; Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2016; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011).

The central purpose of this study was to investigate the state of leadership development within the highly competitive Australian sport industry with a specific focus on experience-based leadership development. Using a multi-case study approach, this research examined the processes currently implemented within three of Australia’s leading professional sport organizations with the intent of providing insights into their experience-based leadership development practices. To achieve this research aim, the paper begins by outlining the relevant leadership development literature and the theoretical perspectives that inform the empirical study. The study’s methodology is then explained before findings are presented and discussed, with recommendations provided for future research.

**Literature Review**

The field of leadership development has been a fast growing area of research within the broader terrain of leadership studies (Conger & Fulmer, 2003). Leadership development has also become a more critical feature for organizations as they seek to effectively foster their leadership talent (Avolio, 2011). From this perspective, leadership development is viewed as a source of competitive advantage (Fulmer & Bleak, 2008; Miller & Desmarais, 2007; Thomas & Allen, 2006) and as Fulmer and Bleak (2008) argue, quality organizations and businesses cannot succeed without quality leaders that guide and develop great teams.

**Leadership Development**

Leadership development involves “expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes” (McCauley, Moxley, & Van Veslor, 1998, p. 10). In this context, Day (2001) argues that leadership development differs from management development. While the later involves managerial training and education that is focused on specific skills and knowledge to enhance task performance, leadership development is focused specifically on the enhancement of human, social and emotional capital so managers can engage more effectively in leadership roles and processes (McCauley, DeRue, Yost, & Taylor, 2013).

Against this background, a study conducted by Fulmer and Bleak (2008) investigated leadership development best practice with the aim of establishing relevant benchmarks. Four key themes emerged from the study: making leadership a strategic lever; aligning strategy and leadership development; implementing successful strategic leadership development; and, evaluating successful strategic leadership development. Fulmer and Bleak’s (2008) research suggests that overall, senior management need to be actively involved in the establishment and oversight of leadership development programs within their organizations. Miller and Desmarais’ (2007) research support this perspective; the authors state that leadership development strategies implemented effectively and meaningfully from the top of the organization, will provide a greater fit with the overall organization’s direction and vision. This is important because as Fulmer and Bleak (2008) found, organizations need to align their overall objectives with their leadership development objectives, thereby making leadership development integral to the organization’s strategic direction. In other words, if leadership development is not supported from the executive and is instead left alone to the human resources department, a ‘silo effect’ will be the likely result. Leadership development therefore needs to be considered as a strategic and ongoing process, not a one-off event, ensuring the alignment between the development needs of the organization and its leadership team (Miller & Desmarais, 2007). Moreover, support from the top does not mean that leaders restrict themselves to one-way communication. Instead, an open and engaging learning process is likely to result in best practice.

**Experience-Based Leadership Development**

The experience-based approach to leadership development essentially assumes that experience is the best teacher (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; McCall, 2010; Thomas, 2008a; 2008b; Thomas & Cheese, 2005; Yeung & Ready, 1995). Andresen, Boud, and Cohen (2001) illustrated that this style “supports a more participative, learner-centred approach” to leadership development, placing “an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning events and the construction of meaning” by the leaders themselves (p. 225). An experience-based approach represents a comprehensive new way of developing leaders because it weaves together life experience, on-the-job experience, and specific skill development, stimulating reflection on experience and openness towards continuous learning (Thomas, 2008b). However, experience-based leadership development does not happen automatically; as everyone learns differently, this method can be challenging to implement successfully. For instance, Trautmann, Maher, and Motley (2007), highlight that those with leadership talent who have been ‘fast-tracked’ into leadership positions often have the most difficulty in learning from personal experience because they have had early success and have never had to grapple with learning and recovering from failure.

Key moments in time, including company milestones or the recovery from failure, present opportunities for reflections of the status quo – also from a leadership perspective. Here, Fulmer, and Bleak (2008) demonstrate that organizations and their leaders who experience major change events can turn these into profound teachable moments. This idea reflects Thomas’ (2008a; 2008b) concept of the crucibles of leadership: “an utterly transforming period of testing from which one can emerge either hopelessly broken or powerfully embodied to learn and to lead” (Thomas, 2008b, p. 3). In essence, the learning and development of a leader is a complex thing: it rarely occurs in the classroom, instead, the richest and most memorable lessons come from personal crucible events (Thomas, 2008b). Crucibles can occur on or off the job, and Thomas (2008a; 2008b) suggests that we should draw on these personal experiences in the development process because organizations are not currently taking full advantage of these rich opportunities. Overall, he suggests that organizations have the ability to incorporate the transformative power of crucible experiences to help leaders achieve significant development by adopting an experience-based approach to leader development (Thomas, 2008a; 2008b; Thomas & Cheese, 2005).

This positive perspective is supported by McCall (2010) who suggests that experience-based approaches should be implemented in organizations in their day-to-day work environment to maximise leadership development opportunities. Here, leadership development focuses on the interaction between an individual and their social and organizational context. McCall (2010) provides extensive insight into the experience-based approach, proposing seven ‘sure bets’ about the role of experience in leadership development:

1) To the extent it is learned, leadership is learned from experience; 2) Certain experiences matter more than others; 3) These experiences are powerful because of the challenges they present; 4) Different types of experiences teach different lessons; 5) Jobs and assignments can be made more developmental; 6) People can get many of the experiences they need in spite of the obstacles; and 7) Learning takes place over time and is dynamic. (p. 3)

Why then, if these ‘sure bets’ are so obvious, are they are so rarely applied successfully? McCall (2010) suggests the reason why experience-based development is not used more effectively “lies in the executives’ drive for results coupled with a paradoxical lack of understanding about development and in HR professionals’ narrow perspective coupled with a misplaced need to exert direct influence over what they see as the leadership development process” (p. 7). To solve this current lack of effectiveness, McCall (2010) proposes his ideal framework to foster leadership talent: “a) Determine what needs to be learnt; b) Identify experiences that could offer those lessons; c) Find a way to get the needed experiences; and d) Create the necessary feedback, support, and incentives to actually learn the lessons sought” (p. 14). These aspects are supported by Nyhan, Cressey, Tomassini, Kelleher, and Poell (2004) who suggest that organizations need to create ‘developmental work’ that is conducive to learning. Here, the potential for development is increased when people have challenging tasks to undertake and are facilitated to learn from their experiences with adequate feedback and support (Nyhan et al., 2004; Trautmann et al., 2007). Thus, the most effective learners are those who can learn from a broad range of experiences by actively seeking out learning, by processing experiences and by developing a range of skills and strategies for responding to different learning opportunities (see McCall, 2010; Nyhan et al., 2004; Trautmann et al., 2007). If such on the job learning and developmental opportunities are embraced by organizations then leadership talent can be fostered most effectively (McCall, 2010).

**Leadership Development and Sport Management**

Despite the large body of literature within the field of management studies, scholarly research into leadership development in the sport domain has been minimal (see Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Hoye, 2006; Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2016; Welty Peachey, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). Most of the available sport-related leadership development research has been centred on athletes and coaches and less so on administrators. For instance, Blanton, Sturges, and Gould (2014) examined leadership development programs for high school athletes and found that for such programs to be successful, the facilitators “must share control and responsibility” with the athletes (p. 12). The work of Voight (2012) explored leadership development in the context of elite collegiate sport teams, finding that structured leadership development programs had benefits including assisting teams to meet the goals they established for their competitive season. In a similar context, Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, and Caron (2012) explored coach’s perceptions of athlete leadership and they found that empowering players through added responsibility and decision-making had benefits such as improving coach-athlete relations. Whilst not citing the work of McCall (2010) specifically, this study reinforced the same conceptual ideas outlined in the previously described experience-based leadership development framework.

In other examples, Westerbeek and Smith (2005) have argued that the sport metaphor demonstrates the importance of continuous research, development and innovation in training practices as a key to success. Applied to the sports business world, leadership development programs should therefore work towards instilling talent with the same comfort, innovation and experimentation that is common and essential to successful sporting outcomes (Westerbeek & Smith, 2005). Despite these suggestions, our empirical knowledge of the implementation and effectiveness of leadership development initiatives within sport organizations remains scarce (Kellet, 1999; Hoye & Doherty, 2011). Significant work is still required to enhance our understanding of leadership development practices within sport organizations and hence, this study aims to contribute to filling this important research gap. It does so by investigating the state of leadership development within the highly competitive Australian sport industry, with a specific focus on experience-based leadership development.

**Methodology**

As outlined by Shaw and Hoeber (2016) in their recent work on qualitative research in sport management, many studies (e.g. Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Nite & Singer, 2012; Skille, 2011; Warner & Dixon, 2011) have made significant contributions to practice and theory-building by using and developing qualitative methodologies. One qualitative approach that has often been employed when seeking a rich and deep understanding of sporting phenomena, people, events and organizations, is case study research. In other words, case studies are useful when a study seeks to explore the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of contemporary phenomena within a real life context (Yin, 2009). Case studies often draw on naturalistic, holistic and qualitative research methods to examine detailed interactions in a specific context (Stake, 1995). Particularly rich and in-depth information characterizes the type of data gathered in case study research, allowing for a thorough exploration of the phenomenon under investigation (Berg & Lune, 2012). As outlined by Yin (2009, p. 4) the “distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” and to capture the often complex and most meaningful characteristics of specific contexts being explored. Moreover, Edwards and Skinner (2009) illustrated that “through [case study] analysis, the sport management researcher is able to obtain an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of cases in order to generate new insights” (p. 202).

*Multiple-Case Design – Challenges and Opportunities*

The present study adopted a multiple-case design (see Gratton & Jones, 2010) focusing on three of the largest professional sports in Australia based on the size of broadcast rights and season attendances. Further details on the three organizations that agreed to take part in this study are not provided in order to protect the identities of the interview respondents. Yin (2009) considers single- and multiple-case designs to be variants within the same methodological framework, with no broad distinction made between the two approaches. However, the multi-case approach has distinct advantages compared to single-case design. Through the comparison of individual cases, the researchers have the opportunity to develop and refine new formulations (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). As such, the findings from multiple cases are “often considered more compelling and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Yin, 2009, p. 53). In other words, the multiple-case design provided the researchers with the opportunity to conduct cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). This approach helped to validate the three cases when similar findings emerged and alternatively assisted in showing the differences within the dataset.

It should be acknowledged that case study methodology also has weaknesses and limitations. Yin (2009) illuminates that quality case study research is difficult to conduct and that it provides a challenging avenue for the social researcher. She goes on to outline several traditional challenges and prejudices against the case study method noting that “perhaps the greatest concern has been over the lack of rigor” (p. 14). This lack of empirical rigor relates to suggestions that there may be a tendency towards verification, where researchers merely seek confirmation for their preconceived notions that could impact on the objectivity of the research (Berg & Lune, 2012; Flyvbjerg, 2006). In order to minimize such concerns, the research team kept a research diary that was used to prompt reflexion on the data collection and data analysis process (see Glaser, 2004). Moreover, throughout the data analysis process the team cross-checked information to make sure that key messages and themes were indeed representative of the transcripts.

*Sampling and Foci*

For this research study, three ‘critical cases’ (Flyvbjerg, 2004) were selected for a multi-case analysis. In line with the underpinning case study approach, we decided to focus on a critical mass of leading professional sport organisations based in Australia that allowed for an in-depth analysis of a particular section of the Australian sport industry. Originally, five of Australia’s largest professional sports were approached to take part in the study; however, only three of them agreed to be involved. The three participating organizations represent the most popular professional sports played in winter in Australia; they have been coded as NSO-1, NSO-2, and NSO-3 respectively. Overall, the multi-case context allowed for direct and pertinent comparisons to be made, particularly around the leadership practices and processes of these organizations.

Twenty-three people from across the three organizations were approached to participate in the study and in total, 15 senior managers (12 males and 3 females) agreed to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) and Chief Operating Officers (COO) of all three organizations. Additional interviews consisted of direct reports to each CEO, for instance, Directors of Marketing, Directors of Human Resources and Directors of Sport Operations. In total, ten pre-defined questions were asked of all the respondents. These did not include any probing questions that were asked when further information was sought to particular answers. Probing took place when interesting ideas or comments were outlined which the interviewer wanted to explore in additional detail; hence, the interviews remained flexible and the duration of individual sessions varied from 30 minutes for the shortest to 60 minutes for the longest, with all interviews being digitally recorded.

Some of the key questions asked of the respondents addressed the following areas: how respondents were prepared by their organisation for their current role; how the organisations supported the respondents from a leadership development perspective; how the respondents had grown and developed as a leader in their current role; how the respondents believed that the experiences gained in their current role shaped them as leaders; what leadership development opportunities were provided by the respondents’ organisations; and, what mix of external and internal leadership development training was provided.

*Data Analysis*

After the interviews were conducted, recordings were transcribed and thematically analysed. The qualitative data analysis undertaken for this study followed a hybrid inductive/deductive approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Orton, 1997). This means that theories related to sport management and leadership studies – and in particular McCall’s (2010) influential work on experience-based leadership – provided a broad framework that assisted researchers in understanding the data. At the same time, the researchers searched for emerging themes that were relevant to the leadership context. Finally, all qualitative data were organized with the help of NVivo, a software program that facilitates the systematic coding and data management processes. Here, the first step involved the creation of conceptual categories through codification of the raw data (Gratton & Jones, 2010). As Miles and Huberman (1994) explain, this presents a: “process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data” (p. 10).

The initial data codification enabled the researchers to establish themes that were exhaustive but not mutually exclusive; in fact, it was found that some statements had relevance to multiple categories. For example, the *Development Through Involvement and Exposure* theme and the *Development Through Networking Opportunities* theme contained data that fitted both in that one of the outcomes of being exposed to leadership development was the meeting of new people with the potential to expand personal networks. This resulted in some data collected being across categories and therefore the themes should not be seen in isolation, but in concert with each other.

**Findings**

Findings from the study are presented below in four main thematic categories. The first category presents data from the respondents outlining the importance of experience-based opportunities for leadership development. The second category examines how experience can lead to leadership development through involvement and exposure. The third category explains how networking opportunities arose from experienced-based exposure. The fourth and final category explores the relationship between experience and education within each of the organizations that took part in the study.

**Importance of Experience**

Experience was found to be a significant process within each case organization, with participants demonstrating its great importance to individuals’ overall development and learning. Participants explained that while education is beneficial, ultimately “there’s a whole series of things that you can only learn by experience” (Participant 2). It also emerged that all of an individual’s experiences were important in developing them as leaders and often there was no specific turning point for them, but instead a series of significant events and experiences that lead to them becoming competent and confident leaders, as explained by Participant 5:

I just don’t think there’s one experience that has shaped where I’m at and how I do things. I think, you know, there are a whole series of different experiences that you have throughout your life, personally or professionally, that shapes the way you go: and I think it’s more of an evolutionary process rather than an instant or a singular event.

Likewise, experiences of failure were also key to individuals’ development, with participants highlighting that another benefit of experience that was the opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes and by having a level of “self-awareness ... if the situation arises again you can steer through it in a different way” (Participant 8). This notion was supported by Participant 6:

People shouldn’t be scared of their experiences because we all make mistakes and have a few failures, but that’s how you learn ... At the end of it, through those few mistakes you’ve profited from a learning side of it ... and I’m the better for it.

Overall, experience was highlighted as a significant process within all three case organizations. There was no real differentiation between the opinions of participants from the NSO-1, NSO-2 and NSO-3 in this regard, with all agreeing that experience was a key element in their development as leaders.

**Development Through Involvement and Exposure**

Experience-based opportunities were found to be significant to participants’ development because these experiences provided exposure and involvement through tasks and assignments that stretched their skills and knowledge. This emerged as a major process within all three cases, with leaders using this involvement and exposure to intentionally develop their employees. At NSO-1, development through experience was a key practice, as explained by Participant 4:

A lot of [development] is on-the-job for us ... project work, exposing people to different areas of the business and predominately done through projects and working collaboratively with a cross-section of people where you learn from others. And probably also within your own role creating stretch, I think our managers are pretty good at, you know, bringing in new tasks, giving new responsibilities, reshaping roles so that people can grow within their role.

Moreover, participants highlighted this process as key to their own development and growth throughout their careers. Participants at the NSO-1 also highlighted the ability of their CEO to provide them with opportunities to work on important assignments and deals, so that they were exposed to new and challenging tasks to grow their skills and knowledge, as highlighted by Participant 2:

The most significant part of my development [has been] ... through the opportunity to work on projects; what ... [the CEO] does ... what he has is the confidence that he’s happy to give you projects ... that might well be of significant scope and let you have a crack at it ... The fact that he’s done that and has the confidence in you means you’re able to progress because he’s given you the opportunity.

The great benefit of this type of exposure to new challenges - and the potential to learn and develop oneself - is further illuminated by Participant 2, who noted:

There’s been a couple of deals that I’ve had, that ultimately, at various points, I’ve thought we were in real strife and weren’t going to get done ... Solving my way through that and the experiences and lessons I’ve learnt over those few deals ... mean I have a very consolidated and clear view of what’s required to get things done. So I’ve had exposure and ... I’ve had responsibility for a whole series of work pieces and transactions and deals that really meant I now have ... a very clear view on what’s required to succeed to my mind.

Likewise, the use of experience-based opportunities emerged as a key process at NSO-3 to develop leadership talent, with participants having similar experiences through challenging tasks and assignments. The type of involvement and exposure provided within the organization, and the significance of these opportunities, is discussed by Participant 8 who stated that:

Exposure and experience is certainly the most widely used and certainly the most important as I see it ... [for example] taking some of my staff members to meetings that they may not necessarily be partied to, but just to give them exposure and following up with them post meeting saying ‘what did you think of that, and would you have approached it in a different manner, and why do you think I went down that path?’ ... so spending some time with them to have a chat about where we are [at].

Similarly, at NSO-2 experience-based projects and tasks were a major part of employees’ development, with this exposure and involvement helping to build participants’ confidence and knowledge in their role, as Participant 13 explains:

The bigger events certainly ... give you more confidence ... they certainly give you learning, and more importantly what they do as you go from one high-profile event to another, you’re able to, if you’re honest enough with yourself, assess how many boxes you’ve ticked in one versus the other and you should be ticking more boxes next time and heading off more things earlier because you’re more in tune ... because you’ve had the experience. So it’s how much you’ve learnt from your last one, not how many times you’ve done it that counts, so you can test that and you feel confident.

Like at NSO-1 and NSO-3, participants at NSO-2 had been provided these experience-based opportunities for their employees to assist in their learning and growth. Exposure through experience was also a common characteristic of these current leaders’ own development as they moved through the organization, as highlighted by Participant 11:

[My previous manager] was a great example of how, similar to what I’m trying to do [now with my employees], he did the same, where he gives you a task or a role and says ‘alright I want you to control that role, I want you to keep me in the loop of what is happening, but don’t bombard me with little details that I don’t need to know’ ... and I’ve tried to embrace those similar qualities [in my current role].

Exposure and involvement through experience-based opportunities emerged as a major component within the development program of all three case organizations. As discussed, this approach was a common practice amongst all participants as they utilised challenging tasks, assignments and deals to stretch the confidence and knowledge of their employees. This also allowed individuals to put into practice the skills previously learnt through more formal classroom type activities and form new abilities from these different experiences. This informal approach was found to be extremely beneficial for the development and growth of all participants.

**Networking Opportunities Through Exposure**

Experience-based opportunities were also found to provide opportunities for exposure and networking, with this emerging within all of the case organizations. This was most prevalent at the NSO-1, where participants highlighted that their exposure allowed them to form contacts with industry leaders; “the [NSO-1] used to expose you to quite a wide range of industry leaders, I suppose because we worked with community so broadly, that it’s quite useful for [putting] the network contacts in place as well” (Participant 4). Such exposure also provides participants with the opportunity to learn from the practices conducted by their industry contacts, as explained by Participant 4:

I think that’s really important ... being exposed to many different groups of people ... we have such strong networks and to some very great community leaders and business leaders, you learn by just working alongside those people.

Furthermore, these experience-based opportunities also provided exposure for employees to internal leaders, allowing individuals to prove themselves to their superiors and make a name for themselves with important organizational figures. This perspective was highlighted by Participant 3:

So we invite them [the outer executive employees] to one management meeting a month where we discuss board papers, so they’re exposed to the strategy. We also invite them to all of our meetings with the club CEOs and we also invite them to any planning meetings that we have off site with the management team, so they are continually along the way on at least fifteen to twenty occasions throughout the year ... management is exposed too, so that we can have a look at them and they can have a look at us.

This notion of exposing potential leaders to management also emerged as a practice conducted at NSO-3, with Participant 9 illustrating that experience-based projects allowed employees “to increase their profile” within the organization, so they could be seen by those above them and other members from different departments. Another networking benefit that occurred as a result of experience-based opportunities was that many participants noted that their contacts formed through exposure and experience had assisted them in obtaining new employment opportunities. This was found to be the case with participants from both the NSO-1 and NSO-2, with Participant 1 stating: “One of my clients [from my previous job] had been at the NSO-1 Players Association where ... I’d come across ... [the CEO] and he contacted me to ask if I was interested in that role, which I was.” Similarly, Participant 14 from the NSO-2 noted that during their previous role “the external view of what I was doing was obviously positive and so the external thought on the fact that I could handle that pressure in that role was ... important [for securing this position].”

The networking opportunities provided through the exposure of experience-based projects was found to be very beneficial for participants from all three organizations. These experiences help future leaders to form contacts, both internally and externally, which are utilised not only for learning and mentoring opportunities, but also for future employment prospects.

**Partnership Between Experience and Education**

It was found that a partnership between experience-based opportunities and education was established within just one case organization, with this organization believing that a combination of both these processes was necessary for employees’ development. This approach was best implemented at the NSO-1, with participants demonstrating that “a mix of learning and experience is beneficial ... all of those elements have contributed to your learning” (Participant 5). As such, both educational and experience-based opportunities are provided for employees to maximise their development; “I think we do both, a combination of [experience and education]” (Participant 3). Moreover, these two components were found to be treated as a holistic approach to development, interwoven together and not just treated as separate, unrelated developmental methods. Participant 2 demonstrated this view further, stating that “they go hand in glove ... I think it’s very hard to have one without the other to really progress to the top levels without both.”

Comparatively, participants at the NSO-2 expressed a similar view about the importance of the relationship between education and experience; although, this was conducted in a less effective manner when compared to the NSO-1. It emerged that a mix of developmental approaches was believed to be significant; “so it’s a combination of methods” (Participant 14). However, the focus is still predominately on experience-based learning and education is treated as an unrelated component that is left up to the individual to initiate and organise.

Similarly, while education and experience were both part of the NSO-3’s overall development approach, it was found that these two components were treated separately and not combined in an effective partnership. Participants from the NSO-3 did not discuss any relationship between the two developmental components, handling these as independent methods, with no holistic approach currently implemented. However, as highlighted earlier by participants from the NSO-1, these two elements are both necessary to provide holistic development for employees and these should be implemented together, with the more formal approaches of education filling in the gaps of the informal experienced-based approach, and vice versa.

**Discussion**

The central purpose of this study was to investigate the state of leadership development within the highly competitive Australian sport industry. Our empirical investigation has presented several key findings and issues related to the experience-based leadership development systems and processes implemented in three of Australia’s leading sport organizations. These findings are now discussed in the context of recent literature on leadership research and in particular the influential work of McCall (2010) on experience-based leadership development.

As outlined by McCall (2010), experience-based leadership development in organizations should: “a) Determine what needs to be learnt; b) Identify experiences that could offer those lessons; c) Find a way to get the needed experiences; and d) Create the necessary feedback, support, and incentives to actually learn the lesson sought” (p. 14). The first two components of McCall’s (2010) framework were reflected at NSO-1, where leadership plans were created for all employees to determine and identify what skills they need to develop and how they were to be attained. The presence of individualised plans for each employee with NSO-1 was a great strength of its holistic approach to leadership development. The use of such plans helped to show where each employee was at in their development progress and what they needed to accomplish to reach the next level, providing support and transparency. In contrast, NSO-2 and NSO-3 lacked direction in this area and left the responsibility for leadership development with the employees. Both organizations needed to improve their practices and to take ownership of the leadership development process by implementing a more proactive, structured and hence more efficient planning program. As outlined by McCauley and McCall (2014), in successful and well-managed organizations, leadership development is deeply embedded via processes, programs, and systems that have been developed for support. In this way exemplar leadership development is viewed as part of an organization’s culture and that becomes ingrained overtime (McCauley & Morgan, 2014).

The third component of McCall’s (2010) development model outlines the value of providing engaging experience in the development process. Our study revealed that the management at all three organizations actively used experience-based opportunities to expose their employees to new and challenging tasks and experiences. This exposure was provided through specific tasks and assignments to stretch the skills and knowledge of employees. The findings from the study supports the work of McCall (2010) who has argued that an experience-based approach to leadership development is the most effective way to maximise leadership development within the day-to-day work environment. It also shows that while an experience-based approach seems desirable and straightforward, many organizations find it challenging to implement it effectively.

The fourth component of McCall’s (2010) framework is the provision of necessary support, feedback and incentives so employees can actually grow and develop from their experiences. According to McCall (2010), active feedback and support provides individuals with an awareness of the development process, so that they are conscious of their own learning, making the entire experience richer and more beneficial. The potential for development is further increased when people have challenging tasks to undertake which are subsequently discussed and assessed with adequate feedback and support (Nyhan et al., 2004; Trautmann et al., 2007). Our findings reflect the importance of this aspect of experience-based leadership development with leaders from each organization providing their employees with support and feedback through their development (DuRue & Wellman, 2009). This is illustrated partly through the performance review systems at the NSO-1 and NSO-3 and also through informal mentoring and coaching opportunities that were provided. However, this process could be developed further through the adoption of a more structured approach that specifically addresses the experience-based opportunities and allows individuals to reflect on their experiences and learn from the challenges and mistakes that occur. Importantly, any additional structure provided should not come at the expense of the necessary flexibility and informal opportunities considered so important in the Australian workplace (Parry, 1998). As alluded to by McCauley and McCall (2014) some highly successful and experienced leaders view leadership development, not only as what happens at performance review time, but “something that happens in real time, day to day, as events unfold” (p. 411). Some experienced leaders actually have argued that formal review systems can potentially harm leadership development as it determines promotions and pay bonuses resulting in employees taking less risks or getting involved in diverse projects because it could negatively impact their review ratings (McCauley & Morgan, 2014).

In summary – and as previously alluded to by Nyhan et al. (2004) – productive organizations need to generate ‘developmental work’ that is conducive to learning. When employees are given challenging tasks to complete that are facilitated in a fruitful learning environment characterized by detailed feedback mechanisms and meaningful support, the potential for (leadership) development is increased substantially (see also Trautmann et al., 2007). The most effective leaders are those who have the opportunity to learn from a broad range of experiences and who actively seek out learning challenges, thereby developing a variety of skills under various organizational conditions (Nyhan et al., 2004; Trautmann et al., 2007). In our study, these conditions were largely reflected by NSO-1, a sport organization that allowed its staff to share the responsibility for leadership development.

Finally, for leadership development to be successfully delivered in organizations, senior management need to be actively involved in the establishment and oversight of leadership development (Fulmer & Bleak, 2008). Leadership development strategies that are devised from the top of the organization provide greater alignment and fit with the overall direction and vision of the organization (Miller & Desmarais, 2007). This was evidenced by NSO-1 through the commitment of the CEO to drive leadership development across all parts of the organization. Their approach was particularly successful as they aligned their overall organizational objectives with their specific leadership development objectives in order to maximise strategic direction – a precondition to effective leadership management, as previously highlighted by Fulmer and Bleak (2008).

**Future Research**

Throughout this study, several contextual features emerged that are worthy of future research (Avolio, 1996). The most noteworthy construct was the collegial approach of the executive within the three organizations – a strong indicator of engagement and leadership as a shared responsibility (McLean, 2006, 2010). Among the executive of each organization a team environment was created to foster development and learning, providing support and guidance through challenging leadership experiences. This collegial style of leadership was considered a great strength for each organization, as it enabled participants to seek advice and support from their colleagues to overcome any weaknesses to develop their skills and knowledge. This collaborative approach was particularly strong at the NSO-2, highlighted by the strength and subsequent stability of the executive team within the organization. This finding reflects the work of several Australian scholars who suggest that Australians have a more social and humanistic approach to leadership (Avery & Ryan, 2002; Parry, 1994, 1996, 1998; Parry & Sarros, 1996; Meng, Ashkanasy, & Hartel, 2003; Trevor-Roberts, Ashkanasy, & Kennedy, 2003; Hunt, 2010). Future studies comparing cultural contexts and how experienced-based leadership development differs across global sport organizations would add significantly to the sport (leadership) management knowledge base.

Resource constraints emerged as a common limitation for the effective employment of leadership development practices. Future research should explore more closely the relationship between the resourcing of HR departments and effective leadership planning. For instance, over the past two decades NSO-1 has received substantially more revenue from broadcast rights than NSO-2 and NSO-3; consequently, NSO-1 had greater levels of capital to invest in HR management and leadership development strategies. It should be noted, however, that the level of ‘sufficient’ resources within an organization is a point of conjecture, as a) HR managers will always want more resources to conduct their programs and invest in their employees; and b) more resources does not automatically result in better or more effective outcomes (Taylor, Doherty, & McGraw, 2008). Against this background it is important to remember that organizations are constantly changing entities (Conger, 1998, 1999) – a notion that was supported through our finding which suggest that leadership development practices have continued to evolve quite rapidly over the past decade. The greatest change could be observed at NSO-1; the organization has experienced substantial change over this period and has managed to improve its leadership development processes to deal with the dramatic increase in its size and scale.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that future research could also address some of the limitations evident in the present study. In particular, studies could a) expand on the type and diversity of sport organisations that are examined; and b) focus more closely on the role of women and leadership development in sport organisations. First, future research could include a broader range of sport organisations. For example, by expanding the analysis to both large and small, professional and community-based sport organisations, a fuller and deeper picture of the leadership development landscape can be revealed. And second, this study was focused on three male dominated sports that had very few women in senior management positions. Future research needs to explore how these types of organisations can use leadership development to create a more diverse and inclusive environment for women in sport management roles. Best practice case studies of truly diverse and inclusive sport organizations could be conducted in order to set benchmarks and facilitate the development of women into CEO and other related senior administration roles.

**Conclusion**

In recent years there has been significant interest in trying to understand leadership development practices within the field of management (Day et al., 2014). These processes are also of great importance within the highly competitive sport industry, where leadership performance is under constant and ever-increasing scrutiny. Despite the increased focus on leadership and the development of leadership talent, there has – to date – been a lack of scholarly research into these concepts within the sport management field, particularly from an Australian perspective (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2016). This is surprising given the competitive advantage sport organizations could gain if they invested effectively in leadership and were able to leverage its development accordingly (McCauley et al., 2013).

Against this background, this paper examined the nature of experience-based leadership development practices currently employed within Australian professional sport organizations. The study specifically investigated the practices of three of Australia’s leading national sporting organizations though a qualitative multi-case study approach. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the senior executive of each case organization. Overall, it was found that the NSO’s placed a great deal of emphasis on experience-based opportunities as a way of developing their workforce rather than more formal means of leadership training.

Four main themes emerged from the study via the adoption of McCall’s (2010) experience-based leadership development framework. These included: the importance of experience-based opportunities for leadership development; leadership development through involvement and exposure to experiences; networking opportunities gained from experienced-based exposure; and, the relationship between on the job experience and formal leadership education. In our study, NSO-1 emerged as the most advanced organization in regards to leadership development practices. It succeeded as it had a clear and effective structure in place to allow for successful employee development and leadership transition into higher management positions.

This study and its specific findings have implications for current practice. For instance, in order to keep talented leaders within organizations a supportive environment needs to be created that can harness such talent (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). This claim is supported by different CEOs of global corporations who suggest that a large part of their success in management is due “to deep, personal investments in leadership development” (see McCauley & McCall, 2014, p. 414). While many of the world’s leading organizations today have a “leaders teaching leaders” mindset, it should be remembered that there is no single correct way to develop leaders within organizations. In other words, “every organization can benefit from a mix of performance coaches, career coaches, role models, and taskmasters who continually elevate performance expectations” (p. 416). Identifying, using and leveraging the available leadership potential remains a key challenge for professional sport organizations.

In summary, leadership development has evolved over the past few decades and is now regarded as a critical component for organizations, especially those that continually need to build leadership talent. Building on the findings of this study – and in line with McCall’s (2010) experience-based leadership development framework – leaders in organizations should be encouraged to create their own flexible approach to development. Organizations that can build leadership development practices with a clear and effective structure in place will have the best opportunity for successful employee development and for leadership transition into higher management positions.

Overall, the study’s findings extend our knowledge of the current leadership development and practices implemented in national sport organizations and highlight the importance of effective leadership within highly competitive sport markets.

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