

**“We are a team of leaders”: Relational leadership in professional sport**

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### **Note Indicating Thesis Format**

This thesis was prepared in a compilation format comprising six chapters. The first chapter, the introduction, provides the research background, perspective, and methodology. Chapter two, the literature review, provides an overview of the relevant literature on leadership in sport management and relational leadership. The findings are presented as three distinct chapters. The chapters are prepared as research papers for publication in leading sport management journals. Chapter three explores the relational construction of leadership in professional sport. Chapter four proposes a theory for relational leadership development. Chapter five provides an analysis on the notion of leading-by-example from a socially constructed relational perspective. Finally, Chapter six: Discussion and Conclusion, summarizes the thesis's overall contribution. This thesis is presented following APA (7th edition) formatting and referencing requirements, as well as the requirements of the University of Technology Sydney Graduate Research School. A consolidated reference list is provided at the end of the thesis.

## Contribution of Authors to Component Studies

### Study One

Whales, L., Frawley, S., Cohen, A., & Nikolova, N. (2021). We are a team of leaders: Practicing leadership in professional sport. *Sport Management Review*, 25(3), 476–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.1952793>

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Lewis Whales	Lead author: all data collection, primary data analysis, writing manuscript	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
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Adam Cohen	Ph.D. panel: research project guidance, secondary methodological and conceptual feedback	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
Natalia Nikolova	Ph.D. panel: research project guidance, secondary theoretical and conceptual feedback	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.

## Study Two

Whales, L., Frawley, S., Cohen, A., & Nikolova, N. (2022). Leadership development: Relationality and temporality in professional sport.

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## **Abstract**

Existing sport management research typically explores leadership from an entity perspective. The entity perspective studies leadership through distinct entities, such as leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This view is limited as it ignores variabilities like context, emergence, and dynamic social influences (Crevani et al., 2010). In contrast, relationality is concerned with the construction of leadership through interactions in social contexts (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). This perspective concerns how leadership is constructed through the ongoing negotiation of meanings in interactions (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). This approach presents opportunities for improving leadership theory, practice, and development in professional sports. Opportunities include recognizing the importance of experience for leadership, how leadership is produced through social interaction, and how shared understanding constructed in social contexts influences leadership practice. The organization selected for the research project was a professional netball club competing in the Australian Super Netball League. Data were collected through observations, interviews, focus group interviews, and video analysis over one year. An interesting problem was presented on the first day of data gathering when the captain proclaimed, “we are a team of leaders.” This statement contradicted the traditional conceptualization of leadership, where an individual or leadership group assumed that role, presenting an empirical mystery for exploration (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). An abductive data analysis process was followed, involving iterations of moving between existing relational leadership literature and the empirical material to explain leadership in the organization (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). The completed research project was presented as a compilation of three research papers.

The key findings are presented in three related research papers. First, leadership is continually constructed through interactions and meaning-making. Some interactions are implicit between people because of established shared understanding. Therefore, leadership practices are interdependent and continuously constructed and reconstructed. Second, through dialogue, shared understanding is developed, enabling relational leadership development. These meanings are constructed by engaging in dialogue with group members to make sense of the past, present, and future. Finally, leadership is practiced with others through relational processes in everyday work. Such as the case of leading-by-example, where some actions demonstrate good leadership and are emulated by others within the social context. The contribution of this project is theoretical, albeit with practical recommendations for leadership practice and development in the context of professional sport.