

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

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Doctor of Philosophy

University of Technology Sydney

Business School

2022



## Acknowledgments

I am incredibly grateful to the people who supported me throughout my Ph.D. journey. My family, friends, supervisors, advisers, colleagues, and peers. This project was unbelievably enjoyable and challenging. My project would not have been possible without the help of many people.

To my family, who have provided me with many opportunities throughout my life, academically, and in sports. My grandparents, Grandma, Grandpa, Nanna, and Grandad, who worked extremely hard to provide for their families. I know that you will all be proud. To Mum, Dad, and my sister Lisa, I could not ask for a better support crew. Thank you for always being there.

I believe that I have the best doctoral panel. Steve and Natalia, since the early conversations before I applied for the Ph.D., have always been supportive and honest. Adam, your wisdom and advice have helped me through my candidature and professional development. Thank you. I could not imagine this project without you.

My advisers, colleagues, and peers, thank you for our conversations, which led to the emergence of many ideas. The sports management group at the University of Technology Sydney is nothing short of outstanding. Thank you to Nico, Walter, Helena, and Daryl, who took the time to assist with my candidature assessments and provided me with feedback. Thank you to my colleagues who became friends throughout the Ph.D. journey, particularly Greg, Lloyd, and David. The Ph.D. community in the Management Discipline Group is one that I am very grateful for, and I would like to acknowledge you all.

To the organization that supported my research project, whom I cannot name due to research ethics, your intellectual curiosity and desire to learn were foundational for this project. I am forever grateful to the head coach, assistant coach, and general

manager, who encouraged me to start data collection as soon as possible. At that time, we could not know how important it would be to collect data before the events of 2020. If we had not had that coffee conversation, I do not believe it would have been possible to complete this project. To all the staff and players, your openness in conversations and interviews was extraordinarily valuable; it was a privilege to witness your championship-winning season from up close.

Capstone Editing provided copyediting and proofreading services according to the guidelines laid out in the university-endorsed national “Guidelines for Editing Research Theses.”

### **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>

Status: Published in *Sport Management Review* (ABDC: A).

Author	Contribution	Signature
Lewis Whales	Lead author: all data collection, primary data analysis, writing manuscript	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
Stephen Frawley	Principal supervisor: research project guidance, feedback on data analysis, primary theoretical, methodological, and conceptual feedback	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
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.

Status: Prepared for journal submission.

Author	Contribution	Signature
Lewis Whales	Lead author: all data collection, primary data analysis, writing manuscript	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
Stephen Frawley	Principal supervisor: research project guidance, feedback on data analysis, primary theoretical, methodological, and conceptual feedback	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
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 Three

Whales, L., Frawley, S., Cohen, A., & Nikolova, N. (2022). Leading-by-example: Team leadership through action.

Status: Prepared for journal submission.

Author	Contribution	Signature
Lewis Whales	Lead author: all data collection, primary data analysis, writing manuscript	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
Stephen Frawley	Principal supervisor: research project guidance, feedback on data analysis, primary theoretical, methodological, and conceptual feedback	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
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.



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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.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This doctoral project aimed to explore the leadership performance of a professional sport team. This exploration aims to understand leadership as a process in a professional team environment, considering the team's unique context and how emerging challenges are negotiated. This project presents an atypical case that provides insights into leadership within and outside of professional sport. Team sport requires continual collaboration between participants to perform and may lack the formal hierarchy evident in other forms of organizations (Landkammer et al., 2019). Therefore, studying leadership in team sport may provide valuable contributions to sport management and leadership. For example, team sport may have a higher degree of interdependence than other organizations because they cannot perform without the cooperation of others in their team. Additionally, sport teams compete in controlled markets, participate in competitions or leagues, and vie against other teams in similar conditions to win (Hoye et al., 2018; Smith & Stewart, 2010). Despite these distinct features, scholars have advocated for learning opportunities from professional sport teams because they resemble traditional organizations due to their professionalism and full-time nature (Day et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2005).

The overarching purpose began as a broad research problem common in explorative qualitative studies (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2003). However, throughout the research process, specific questions emerged that became the focus of the three related research papers presented in this thesis. The first paper explores how professional sport organizations practice leadership. The second paper proposes theory on leadership development through team relationality. The third paper explores and conceptualizes the notion of leading-by-example, which was evident in the data as representing good leadership among team members. This thesis is structured as follows.



First, this introductory chapter outlines the project, including its research paradigm, methods, outcomes, and ethical considerations. The second chapter provides a literature review of leadership in professional sport, the concept of relational leadership, and how it can be applied to leadership in professional sport. Third, the three papers are presented in distinct chapters. Each features a more specific literature review, methodology, and findings. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion chapter provides a summary and outline of the contributions and limitations of this dissertation. The focus of the project has evolved over the four years, from initial broad inspiration to a clear and coherent focus on relational leadership in the context of the professional sporting organization, viewed from a constructionist leadership perspective.

### **Research Paradigm**

The approach adopted in this doctoral thesis is constructionism, inspired by Crotty (1998) and Berger and Luckmann (1967). Constructionism recognizes that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Thus, this study investigates how leadership is constructed in a professional sporting team context. Important considerations include acknowledging that leadership is not a static phenomenon, where it starts and ends is not definitively locatable, and leadership is not reducible to static properties due to the inestimable potential contexts (Crevani, 2011). This thesis aims not to define leadership or present a formula for successful leadership but rather to highlight the often-overlooked details of human interaction in the social contexts that construct leadership. Rather than define leadership, an orienting statement is used throughout the dissertation to recognize leadership as “expressing ideas in talk or action that are recognized by others as capable

of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (Robinson, 2001, p. 93). Through interaction, groups achieve a shared meaning that helps them make sense of and guide action (Fairhurst, 2008). The constructionist approach taken to studying leadership in a professional sporting organization offers three specific contributions to existing research. First, this approach brings into question the practice of leadership in teams and how leadership is performed in everyday interactions. Second, socially constructed relational leadership challenges leadership development from the perspective of mutuality. Third, the idea of leading-by-example is presented as a theoretical finding emerging from empirical data. The dataset consists of observations, interviews, and focus group interviews considering the leadership processes and the experiences of those involved. This research approach serves as the basis of this thesis and offers reflexivity as the researcher. Throughout this thesis, the literature, methods, and findings are aligned with the constructionism approach.

Within sport management leadership literature, constructionism and constructivism have been used interchangeably. Papers that argue leadership is socially constructed within sport management journals have relied on the interpretation of interviewees; as such, they consider the subjective views that individuals have of others as leaders (Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010). Leadership studies have recognized the distinction between constructionism and constructivism. Constructivism is an interpretive approach concerned with how others, such as followers, perceive leadership (Schwandt, 1998). Constructionism studies show how leadership is constructed among people (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000). This thesis differentiates constructionism from constructivism. Constructivism is the interpretivist view that social reality is subjective (Crotty, 1998). However, constructionism involves the interplay of objectivity and subjectivity; thus, the subjectivities of people interact

socially to construct reality (Crotty, 1998). Considering this, the thesis is guided by the views of constructionism and leadership studies that investigate the processual nature of leadership as an unfolding practice in context. It is conceptually grounded in relational leadership, considering the related concepts of leadership practice, collective leadership, and discursive leadership. To capture leadership processes, the research is conducted in-situ, studying one professional sporting organization throughout one season through observation and talking with participants through informal and semi-structured interviews, along with focus group interviews. This study aims to explore leadership practices among people in the social, temporal, and spatial contexts of professional sport organizations.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is concerned with the underlying values of knowledge (Crevani et al., 2010). A relational epistemology is based on the premise that knowledge and understanding is constructed and re-constructed in social processes between people, hence a relational epistemology requires engaging with others in a social world (Hosking, 2011). The argument that leadership is relationally constructed has attracted increasing attention over the past three decades. However, the approach is contested; it challenges positivist arguments that reduce effective leadership to the traits, behaviors, and attitudes of leaders (Uhl-Bien, 2006). As indicated by Uhl-Bien and Ospina's (2012) book, *Advancing Relational Leadership Research: A Dialogue Among Perspectives*, leadership studies have become divergent. Most scholars have suggested that leadership exists within individuals as an entity of leadership. However, an emerging understanding is that leadership is socially constructed between people in interaction (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The problem may partially exist because of the many contexts and fields within which leadership is studied, for example, psychology and

sociology. Natural biases exist in this example, as one field is occupied with individuals and the other with society. Pragmatic professionals are looking for practical applications such as education and health; therefore, research that does not offer practical suggestions is often overlooked. The view that leadership is relationally constructed is largely confined to critical leadership studies and is often disregarded in mainstream leadership or only partially considered. Relational leadership is often presented in opposition to heroic, romantic, and entity approaches to leadership. Relational leadership approaches, however, have considerable opportunities for practical applications (Gronn, 2002). This is because leadership is a process of continual creation, with meaning negotiated between people (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). It is necessary to consider the wider context of leadership processes and not reduce the study of leadership or make grand generalizations that suggest that leadership occurs in a vacuum, void of external influence.

### **Ontology**

Process ontology is central to the research conducted and the presentation of the results in this dissertation. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Crevani et al. (2010) outline that a process ontology is concerned with the “leadership practices as constructed in interaction” (p. 77). From this ontological perspective, leadership is constructed among the people in an interaction. From a process ontology perspective, leadership is embedded and co-constructed within a social context. A process ontology is not concerned with individual leaders but rather with the processes in interaction that construct leadership. Crevani et al. (2010) argue that a process ontology does not prescribe a ready-made methodology for researching leadership interactions but provides a perspective to strive for: “leadership processes may thus involve practices and interactions relating to notions of ‘leadership’,

‘followership’, ‘good leadership’, ‘bad leadership’, ‘absent leadership’, and so forth” (p. 80). Hosking (2007) suggests that researchers must be open to the construction of leadership that involves all participants. Methodologies that support the process ontology include ethnographies, thick descriptions, participant observations, and open-ended interviews.

Process ontology is concerned with how leadership occurs rather than a narrow focus on leadership outcomes. A process ontology does not require a potentially reductionist definition of leadership (Crevani, 2011); however, guidance is required to recognize leadership processes when conducting research. According to a process ontology, leadership can be recognized when the social order of a group is advanced (Dachler & Hosking, 1995), turning points occur that alter group understandings (Sklaveniti, 2020), or the use of an orienting statement such as that articulated by Robinson (2001) who recognizes leadership as “expressing ideas in talk or action that are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (p. 93). Therefore, process ontology locates leadership in the interactional space between people (Crevani et al., 2010).

### **Case and Methods**

This dissertation focuses on leadership in the context of a performance-focused professional sport team by incorporating on-field (players) and off-field (coaches and support staff) leadership. A traditional leader(s)-follower(s) distinction employed in leadership studies considers this a multi-level leadership study (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). However, a socially constructed relational leadership approach considers various roles interdependent in pursuing the same objective; thus, not a multi-level unit of analysis but rather an integrated unit of analysis (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). For this purpose, this dissertation is positioned in the field of sport management. Leadership is

constructed throughout the organization to pursue the same goals and is not necessarily delegated to operational units such as the playing group or support staff, it can emerge and be mutually constructed. Observations were selected as the primary data collection method to study situated leadership practices (Larsson, 2016). To obtain a broader picture than just researcher perceptions of the team's leadership practices, observations are supported by informal and semi-structured interviews as well as analysis of publicly available data, including media releases and video interviews (Mondada, 2006). Finally, focus group interviews were conducted with players, coaches, and staff to gather their experiences of good leadership. A single case was selected to explore the organization in-depth for an extended period of one season. The benefit of this approach is the presentation of concrete and case-specific knowledge through the exploration of complex social problems. Findings from such research can provide detailed descriptions of social problems and allow researchers to propose a generally applicable theory (Flyvbjerg, 2001). A professional sport team was selected because this context is likely to provide a high level of observable interaction. Performance requires verbal and non-verbal interactions in a professional team sport, with success easily observable through wins and losses. At the commencement of the project, it was anticipated that gaining direct access to observe a team would prove troublesome; however, a suitable research partner was identified and agreed to provide appropriate access for data collection.

The case selected is a professional netball team competing in the leading domestic netball competition in the world, based in Australia. The team experienced a major transition two seasons prior, marking the commencement of the new competition, from Trans-Tasman (Australia and New Zealand) to national competition. At this time, significant player turnover occurred, and in the first season of the new competition, the team achieved only three wins. The team changed its head coach and general manager

in the following season, but the playing group remained stable. The team achieved six wins but did not play finals at this time. At the time of commencing research, the team's playing and coaching group had been confirmed for the season, a new captain was appointed on the day of the first meeting, and the team went on to win the competition. This constituted a significant change over the three seasons.

### **Research Design and Justification**

A single qualitative case study was selected to pursue the research objective of exploring and developing relational leadership practices in a professional sport organization. The purpose of conducting qualitative research is to study the key leadership elements identified by McCusker et al. (2018) that are lacking in quantitative studies. The key elements are interpersonal interactions, time, level, and context. The in-depth study included observations, informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews. The research was conducted over one season (year), commencing shortly before the season began and concluding the following pre-season. Initially, data gathering focused on observations and informal interviews until trust and rapport were built with the participants. At this stage, semi-structured interviews were incorporated into the data collection. The final data collection method employed was focus group interviews after the season to gather participants' experiences of what they considered good and bad leadership.

The case organization presents an opportunity for valuable theory construction, as it is atypical and information-rich (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The first reason for this is because the average age in the team is lower than the average age of the competition and the oldest player is only 26 years old. Second, a new captain was appointed on the first day of the research project. Third, when the new captain was announced, they proclaimed, "we are a team of leaders," a statement that does not align with heroic and

individualistic notions of leadership (Ford et al., 2008). Fourth, the team gradually improved its total wins over the previous two seasons. Finally, they allowed significant access to collect data; the selected team agreed to provide access to interview all staff, players, and coaches (subject to individual discretion), as well as facilitate access to observe training, meetings, and games from inside the team environment. Atypical cases may present interesting problems with complex narratives for further exploration. The objective was to propose a generally applicable theory for sport management based on case-specific research (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This research followed the three data analysis steps suggested by Miles et al. (2020). The data collection, reduction, and display processes are outlined in the following paragraphs.

### **Data Collection**

Observations are the primary means of collecting leadership processes in situ (Larsson, 2016; Sutherland, 2017). Informal interviews provide the opportunity to question those in the organization about what is happening at the time and place in which activities occur. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to gather more detailed accounts of participants' experiences in the team. Finally, focus group interviews allowed the participants of the organization to interact in describing their experiences of good and bad leadership, with participants building on the ideas of others in their group. The data collection process was as follows.

**March 2019:** met with the players, coaches, and managers to present the research objectives and data collection process.

**April-September 2019:** Initial observations established a reference point for further data collection. Publicly available content was collected, including biographies, history, reports, and public interviews, to obtain background information on teams and



their performance. Early observations and publicly available interviews and reports helped shape the initial interviews with the research participants.

**April–September 2019:** unstructured, informal interviews were conducted with research participants throughout observations to allow the researcher to question the actions, thoughts, and assumptions of participants at the time of or shortly after observations (Rudolph et al., 2017; Skinner, 2013). This technique was continued throughout the project to gain insight into the participants' understanding of what was happening in the organization.

**May–November 2019:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the players, staff, and coaches. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was based on the relational leadership literature, with questions followed up on the observed scenarios. Interviews imposed a low degree of structure, primarily including open questions and focusing on specific situations, actions, and outcomes (Kvale, 2007).

**February–March 2020:** Focus group interviews were conducted (see Appendix B). Participants were given an activity sheet to complete and discuss within their groups. Discussions and activities were facilitated to ascertain how leadership was constructed through verbal and non-verbal interactions and shared understanding (McCauley & Palus, 2020; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). This was derived from the relational leadership literature and earlier research findings. Observations, informal interviews, and focus group interviews included all available members of the organization; however, this was not feasible for semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the interview participants were selectively targeted to ensure a diversity of perspectives, including coaches, captains, senior players, junior players, and staff in the organization (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Miles et al., 2020). Content from observations, interviews,

and focus group interviews was accumulated throughout data collection (12 months). The duration is based on understanding leadership processes during the season.

### **Observations**

Observations were based on a literature review conducted before entering the field and empirical interpretations of leadership in the team, guided by Robinson's (2001) orientating statement. Observations were collected in the form of field notes recorded in a research notebook. Field notes began as general and non-specific; they became more refined as I became more familiar with routine processes in the team to identify how leadership was constructed (Emerson et al., 2011; Sutherland, 2017). Interactions were recorded in the field notes, including words, gestures, and contextual aspects. The context of many interactions occurring simultaneously in a sport setting meant that this was not always possible; in this case, as much detail was recorded as practical. Game day observations were supported by a review of televised broadcasts, enabling pausing and rewinding interactions that were not evident during live observations (Mondada, 2006). Field notes were used to record everyday interactions that helped construct leadership as well as examples that potentially deviated from normal practices. Field notes were recorded on the right side of the notebook, leaving the left page to add further reflections and clarifications when reviewing the field notes. Field notes were then typed, and errors were corrected for analysis using the computer software program NVivo 12, which is a dedicated qualitative research tool. This process enables reflection on field notes to consider any researcher bias that may have been introduced in consultation with doctoral supervisors (Emerson et al., 2011). During team meetings, training sessions, and daily game events, observations were made.

### **Informal Interviews**

Informal interviews provided the opportunity to discuss with the research participants their experiences of what was happening close to the time and place where it happened. This was a useful data collection tool for clarifying events that would benefit from the further details and perspectives of the research participants. Informal interviews have little structure, allowing the researcher and the research participant to question further and expand on particular points (Skinner, 2013). Informal interviews were recorded in the form of field notes.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews enabled detailed accounts of the participants' experiences in the team. The interview protocol was designed to first ask about individual experiences of leadership in the team, followed by questions relating to specific recent examples involving the research participant from observed games, training sessions, or team meetings. Therefore, the interview guide was created based on earlier observations and guided by literature (see Appendix A) (King, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the players, coaches, staff, and contractors to obtain diverse perspectives. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of data collection to allow participants to collectively reflect on their experiences of what they took to be good leadership, bad leadership, and their leadership. The purpose of conducting focus group interviews was to collectively construct leadership accounts; discussions between participants allowed them to collectively construct their descriptions, referring to examples that participants had experienced together (See Appendix B)(Reitz, 2015). Each research participant participated in two focus group interviews guided by an

activity. In the first focus group, the interview participants were asked to write down and talk about their experiences of good and bad leadership. Participants were prompted to provide more details, particularly about the actions associated with good leadership (Crevani et al., 2010). In the second focus group interview, participants were asked to reflect on their leadership experiences and how they could contribute to leadership in the future. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Table 1**

*Data Inventory Table*

Collection method	Recording method	Period	Purpose	Amount
Observations	Field notes	1 month – 8 months	Observe leadership process in context	95 hours, 87 typed pages (10 game days, 18 training sessions, 17 team meetings)
Video analysis	Video and field notes	4 months – 8 months	Observe leadership processes when unable to attend games, allow pausing and re-watching	20 hours (9 games)
Informal interviews	Field notes	0 months – 9 months	Understand the participants' accounts of what is occurring	>119 informal interviews (n = 37 participants)
Semi-structured interviews	Recorded and transcribed	3 months – 12 months	Detailed accounts of participants' experiences and follow-up on	16 interviews (average 45 minutes)

Focus group interviews	Recorded and transcribed	11 months – 12 months	Group discussion on experiences of leadership	observed scenarios Nine focus groups (1 hour each, n = 15)
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### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed by coding according to patterns and themes in the construction of leadership, noting surprises in the data based on the existing leadership literature (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The NVivo 12 software package was used to organize the data corpus into codes and themes. This process began with a broad approach, looking at general patterns based on existing relational leadership literature and in vivo coding following the participants’ language (Saldaña, 2021). From this process, specific research questions emerged for each of the three papers included in this dissertation. Then a more specific analysis approach was taken to address each of the research questions, these approaches are further detailed in each paper. The theory proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman’s (2007) model for theory development in empirical matters was developed through the breakdown of theoretical assumptions and empirical impressions. This abductive approach requires a flexible theoretical model based on existing literature and a reflexive approach to empirical materials. This dissertation contributes to the literature by iterating existing theories and surprises emerging from the research.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The findings of this exercise are presented in three journal articles consolidated in this thesis through compilation. The structure of this thesis is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Thesis Structure*

Section	Details
Chapter One: Introduction	Provides an overview of the entire project, including background, objectives, paradigm, and case. Includes the methods used to achieve the overall project outlining how the methods align to enable a congruent thesis by compilation, as outlined in this document.
Chapter Two: Literature review	Chapter outlining the three main bodies of literature dealt with in the thesis: relational leadership, leadership studies in sport management, and leadership through interaction. Identifies trends between the three bodies of literature and inconsistencies to be managed throughout the thesis.
Chapter Three: We are a team of leaders	Explores relational leadership in the context of professional sport. Contributes to sport management by highlighting the previously unexplored relational practices of leadership in professional sport. Contributes to leadership studies is an empirical case supporting the concept of relational leadership.
Chapter Four: Leadership development	Looks at the challenges faced over a season in professional sport and how these challenges are navigated through the lens of relational leadership. Contributes by proposing how leadership development is influenced by relationality in teams.
Chapter Five: Leading-by- example	Explores the notion of leading-by-example as a process of good leadership. Contributes by 1) outlining how non-verbal interactions support good leadership and 2) how good leadership is perceived based on shared understandings in the organization.
Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion	Summarizes the thesis, including limitations and future direction. The discussion outlines the overall contributions made in the thesis by a compilation with reference to other published literature. The discussion highlights contributions to both sport management and leadership studies.

**Researcher Positionality and Research Journey**

The inspiration for this doctoral research project emerged from my early observation that authors traditionally celebrate individual leaders as champions of great team performance in academia and the popular press (Fletcher, 2004). However, this is

inconsistent with my personal experience in team sport or organizations. After 20 years of playing sport and close to 10 years of experience in managerial positions, I used to hear that team success was mostly due to good leadership and that the right leader could make any team perform well. As a young manager, I was often regarded as a good leader; however, I knew that, to a large extent, my success was due to being supported by a good team. This observation is the motivating problem of this thesis, which aims to explore the mutuality of team leadership and the influence of the context on team success. My objective in exploring this problem is to determine how leadership in teams may be holistically thought of, practiced, and developed to achieve success. Improved knowledge of team leadership allows practitioners to apply better leadership practices. Better knowledge also improves leadership development in organizations and prevents experimental leadership development programs that may be detrimental to teams.

When the media and popular press cover leadership in sport, they usually start with a team that has already been successful and then talk about the people in charge. This can be seen in several bestselling books, including *Legacy* (Kerr, 2013), *Captain Class* (Walker, 2017), and *Vince Lombardi on Leadership* (Williams & Denney, 2015). The public and those not on the team rarely see the realities of leadership in successful organizations. Much of what happens during training and away from the public domain. Books on sport teams have also become popular guidebooks for managers in traditional organizations; however, there has been little rigorous research on leadership in professional sport teams.

This dissertation requires consideration of leadership in the social context of a sport team. To consider leadership in this way, it is necessary to research leadership through a non-traditional approach (Sutherland, 2017). To this end, data were collected in situ to capture the nuances of leadership that participants may not consciously

consider (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). In the case of professional sports clubs, a high level of access is required to collect data. Initially, this was considered a likely difficulty, as a competitive advantage is often built on intellectual property, and organizations would be hesitant to allow outsiders. However, I thought this would only present a barrier to entry, knowing that ethical research practices would bind me and the time between data collection and publication would be such that the season was completed before even the anonymized results were published. I contacted several professional sport organizations. The first plan was to research multiple cases to obtain a reasonable level of data. I sent letters (electronic and print) to 17 sporting organizations represented in professional leagues. I received responses from five, three of which were interested in pursuing the research project, and two that did not want to proceed based on pre-existing agreements with other academic institutions.

After initial meetings with the organizations, one was enthusiastic about proceeding and offered a significant opportunity to collect data. Having discussed these opportunities with my doctoral supervisors, I adjusted the research design to include a single in-depth exploratory case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Initially, I contacted the general manager and held positive discussions with her. I then met with the coach and assistant coach, who demonstrated enthusiasm for the project. Finally, I met with a playing group and support staff to propose a research project. It became evident that there would be sufficient access to the required primary data, while enthusiasm for the project from the organization suggested that a single case would provide sufficient rich data for the research. The team presents an atypical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and offers extensive access to data throughout the season across several contexts.

The organization selected was a performance-oriented professional sporting organization (Hoye et al., 2018; Stewart & Smith, 1999). I had no previous relationships



with anyone within the organization, nor did any of my doctoral supervisors. As an operational sub-unit of the State Sporting Organization, the roles of employees in the organization are directed toward on-field performance. Hence, the organizational objectives explored in the findings are also related to on-field performance. I attended and took notes during team training, meetings, and match days, including pre-, mid-, and post-game meetings. I engaged with the team beyond the extent to which the researcher would typically have access. I often sat with staff members or injured players while collecting field notes. For the most part, I attempted to minimize my disruption to the team by remaining an observer only (Emerson et al., 2011); however, I was sometimes invited to participate in discussions, once standing in as a defender during a walk-through in a team meeting. I must have looked out of place as the coaches found it amusing. A complete season was studied that presented consistent challenges to the team and many interesting turns. However, the team was ultimately successful and won the championship in the year studied, which presents rare insights into the leadership of a successful professional sporting organization. Throughout the research project (12 months), I became familiar with the research participants as they did with me. Initially, my data gathering focused on collecting field notes through observations and conducting informal interviews at the sight of observations. This enabled me to build rapport with the research participants and establish trust throughout the organization as they became familiar with my presence (Emerson et al., 2011). Semi-structured interviews were conducted only after the initial data-gathering period, and the participants were familiar with me as the researcher. Trust was evident in the semi-structured interviews, based on the participants' detailed descriptions of their experiences in the team (Kvale, 2007). Participants also disclosed that my presence as a researcher influenced their actions, with multiple participants stating that they wondered

what I was thinking and recording in my field notes. This allowed me to explain the research process and empirical focus, further consolidating trust and rapport.

To minimize the impact of researcher bias, I regularly discussed my field notes and data analysis with my doctoral supervisors, who remained outsiders and prevented me from sharing the worldview of participants and ‘going native’ (Ahuja et al., 2017).

### **Possible Outcomes and Ethical Considerations**

The outcome of the research project is a Ph.D. thesis, which includes three papers, each representing a unique contribution to the sport management and leadership literature. This study contributes to the practice and development of leadership in professional sport organizations by expanding the concept of leadership in this context. Paper one describes how leadership is constructed through relational practices in professional sport organizations. Paper two outlines leadership development in professional sports from a relational perspective. Finally, paper three will provide the notion of leading-by-example to describe good leadership based on a shared understanding. All three papers were intended to be published in top-tier sport management journals (e.g., the *Journal of Sport Management*, *Sport Management Review*, and *European Sport Management Quarterly*). To ensure that this is possible, political and ethical considerations were accounted for throughout the project.

### **Political Considerations**

Political concerns regarding data collection may depend on the researcher’s personality, geographic proximity to the team, nature of the research object, the researcher’s institutional background, gatekeepers, and the status of the field worker (Punch, 2003). The political concerns include subject selection, collecting and attributing secondary data, and publishing the work. The first challenge was securing an agreement from a high-performance sport team to participate in the research.

Importantly, commitment to conduct ethical research meant that they maintained the ability to withdraw at any stage. It is important for this reason and others to maintain trust and rapport with the research participants. The right to publish findings while adhering to ethical responsibilities has been maintained.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This project was approved by the University of Technology Sydney Ethics Committee (approval number: #ETH18-3169). Professional sport teams operate in highly competitive markets, and their intellectual property is particularly valuable. For the success of the research and the protection of the research participants, trust must be maintained throughout. To do so, research must be conducted and represented ethically. The project has relatively low risk; however, it is necessary to consider potentially adverse outcomes in advance. According to Stake (2003), “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world” (p. 244); thus, data collection was intended to be as unobtrusive as possible. Ethical considerations include maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of participants, ensuring no undue harm, and ensuring data collection and reporting accuracy. To protect the participants in the research project, the data is stored on secure, password-protected university servers, and the identities of research participants are anonymized for publication (Bulmer, 1982; Towse et al., 2021). In addition, all interview participants signed a participant consent form (see Appendix C), and the organizations involved in the primary research agreed to the research taking place. The UTS Code of Ethics was followed to ensure the accuracy of data collection and reporting. The researcher was clear about the purpose and method of the research to all parties to maintain trust.

According to Atkinson and Hammersley (2003), observation issues include limitations in access and data collection, the type of data to be collected, and the means

of collection. Researchers must not misrepresent themselves to deceive those they are observing. It is important to consider those whose impressions may be at risk; in this case that is the team members and staff of the organization studied. The researcher had to protect the research subjects and avoid harm, so the results were anonymized. Participants were aware of the researcher's presence and purpose during data collection. Observations were limited to team-based events, which were often public; however, other important events in teamwork and leadership were observed, which were not in the public domain. These events included training, review sessions, game days, and event planning. As the researcher, I ensured that I did not overstep my boundaries for data collection. The protection from harm of the research participants was my priority when collecting data (Adler & Adler, 2003).

Interviews were conducted with informed consent, outlining the participants' right to privacy, protection from harm, use of recording devices, and the role of the researcher (Fontana & Frey, 2003; Reynolds & Lee, 2018). The organization and the individuals involved first obtained permission to conduct interviews. Individuals were sent the participant consent form and required to provide consent before being interviewed. The interviewees' right to withdraw from the study remained at any stage. The consent forms described the background and purpose of the research, as well as the role of the researcher. Interviews were recorded and stored securely, as were transcripts. Transcripts were coded and aggregated to identify and describe trends. Quotes were used to provide illustrative points and were presented anonymously to protect the identities of the interviewees.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

This research project was completed during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection completed at that difficult time was discussed with the

doctoral panel, but it was deemed there remained an opportunity to progress with the project. Access to physical space to complete data analysis and writing results was limited, requiring the completion of the research project from home. This presented challenges not foreseen at the commencement of the research. COVID-19 presented unique challenges for the sport industry, but this also presented an opportunity for additional data collection. This includes a commentary paper that arose from a doctoral research project (Whales et al., 2020). In the commentary, two players from a professional netball team were interviewed about their experience with the league's postponement owing to COVID-19. The results were a published commentary outlining the findings of their experiences.

### **Summary**

This doctoral research project explored leadership in the context of a professional sporting organization through observations and interviews from the theoretical lens of socially constructed relational leadership. The introduction outlines the rationale and background of this research project. The following literature review conceptualizes socially constructed relational leadership and position research in sport management. The first paper outlines how leadership practice is constructed within an organization. The second paper explores leadership development from a relational perspective. The third paper proposes a relational conceptualization of leading-by-example (LBE) in professional sport. Each paper is positioned within the overall research project with a preamble introducing it and how it contributes to the purpose of the research. The thesis concludes by discussing the consolidated findings from the three papers and the contributions of the project.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This doctoral project concerns the relational processes of leadership constructed in a professional sporting organization. Studies on leadership in sport management, psychology, and science have been reviewed to help understand the phenomenon of leadership in professional sport. A noticeable evolution has occurred: studies have shifted from a focus on individual leaders and their traits, behaviors, and styles (Chelladurai, 1990) to leadership studies that are shared (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Kerwin & Bopp, 2014; Svensson et al., 2021), collective (Ferkins, Shilbury et al., 2018; Shilbury et al., 2020), authentic (Talos et al., 2018) and socially constructed (Arnold et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010). However, from the germinal constructionist viewpoint of Berger and Luckmann (1967), few studies have focused on the construction of leadership through meaning-making negotiated in interactions over time (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Various theories on mainstream leadership have been reviewed to discover if any could help inform leadership studies in professional sport. Based on alignment with the social constructionist research paradigm, relational epistemology, and process ontology socially constructed relational leadership was selected as the most suitable theoretical lens for exploring leadership in professional sport. This literature review outlines leadership studies in the context of professional sport and the reasons for introducing socially constructed relational leadership to guide empirical research on professional sport management.

Recently, sport management scholars have called for more research on the social construction of leadership (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). Thus far, studies have focused on the perception of observers when analyzing leadership (Arnold et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010). Scholars have distinguished the focus on observer perceptions, known as constructivism (Kihl et al., 2010), using a

constructionist approach. Although constructivism and constructionism are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Constructivism is concerned only with subjective interpretations (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006), such as observer perceptions (Billsberry et al., 2018). Constructionism is the approach to understanding how subjective interpretations influence social action through people mutually engaging in interactions (Walker, 2006). According to Ospina and Sorenson (2006), “constructionists bring together the ideas of an ‘objective’ reality and a ‘subjective’ interpretation of it in a single perspective” (p. 189). Barge and Fairhurst (2008) argue that reality is given meaning through ongoing interactions. The empirical focus of socially constructed relational leadership is on the relationship between people in social interactions. This approach considers how at least part of the meaning constructed through interactions is implied between people based on implicit understanding (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Therefore, leadership is not only constructed in interactions that can be observed by an outsider but also by the relationships between people (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Importantly, a constructionist approach argues that leadership is meaningful only in relation to others (Walker, 2006).

Relational leadership theory continues to evolve from a constructionist perspective, contending that leadership processes occur in relation to others. For example, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) conceptualize relational leadership as intersubjective and “leadership as a way of being-in-relation-to-others” (p. 1430). Relational leadership is constructed through discourse between people (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), and embodied leadership practices convey meaning (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). This literature review includes socially constructed relational leadership literature and leadership studies in sport management. The purpose is to provide an overview of socially constructed relational leadership theory and outline

current research in sport leadership. Socially constructed relational leadership can provide a useful perspective to improve our understanding of leadership practices, development, and education in professional sport.

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership is an established concept in mainstream leadership studies, featuring scholarship labeled relational leadership (e.g., Biehl, 2019; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Ryömä & Satama, 2019; Uhl-Bien, 2006), along with studies featuring a relational orientation that do not explicitly acknowledge the concept of relational leadership (e.g., Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Fairhurst, 2008). Relational leadership theories continue to evolve as researchers pay more attention to interdependence and dynamic social contexts in leadership construction. Dachler and Hosking (1995) and Murrell (1997) argue that early advocates of a relational approach to leadership should include more than just leaders. Uhl-Bien (2006) furthered the concept of differentiating between the entitative and socially constructed relational leadership approaches.

Entity approaches analyze the relationship between entities such as leaders and followers, with the unit of analysis for these studies being dyads, triads, or networks (Uhl-Bien, 2006). An example of the entity perspective is the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, which focuses on the quality of the exchange or interaction between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Hoye (2003) employed LMX theory to study Australian voluntary sport organization boards to determine whether relationships between executives and board chairs are stronger than those with other board members. This demonstrates the perception of in-groups and out-groups and the existence of shared leadership on sport boards. When scholars conduct research from the entity perspective, the relationships between entities are studied as fixed (Crevani, 2018) and independent of each other (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).



Socially constructed relational leadership is concerned with mutual influence processes in social contexts, and the unit of analysis for this approach includes contextual influences (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). From a socially constructed perspective, relationships are always under construction based on interactions and shared meanings (Crevani, 2018). Since Uhl-Bien's (2006) paper, socially constructed relational leadership studies have been more numerous and specific attention paid to expanding the concept. However, few published works on socially constructed relational leadership have been empirically researched; instead, theoretical arguments have been developed (Denis et al., 2012). Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) are an exception: they argue that relational leadership is constructed through dialogue in which meanings are simultaneously dispersed and unified through conversation. They conducted their research using a year-long ethnographic study in the context of airport security. They found that relational leaders act with a moral responsibility to others; therefore, both the social context and the 'other' influence those who lead. Socially constructed relational leadership encourages the exploration of the dynamic influence processes that emerge throughout the social context of a group (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Recent examples highlight the reflexive nature of relational leadership (Ryömä & Satama, 2019) and the embodied nature of the interactions that construct relational leadership (Biehl, 2019).

Literature on socially constructed relational leadership argues that leadership is constructed through social processes (Crevani, 2018). They include discourse (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Reitz, 2015), embodied interactions between people (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019), and ongoing meaning-making that occurs through interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Over time, through experience and knowing the social context, people develop shared meanings that are implicitly understood (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). In other words,

interactions build on each other in relation to the social context. Dachler and Hosking (1995) explain this by stating that leadership is constructed through “multilogue” – the multiple ways participants make meaning of interactions (p. 4). At the most basic level, socially constructed relational leadership is a mutual influence process constructed and continually negotiated between people in interdependent interactions with the context (Crevani, 2018).

Relational leadership has significantly focused on how leadership is constructed through discourse (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). For example, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that leadership involves being in relation with others through dialogue. They argue that we shape and are shaped by social experiences through interactions. Interactions are spaces of struggle in which meanings are unified and dispersed concurrently. Relational leadership draws attention to the emerging and unfinalizable nature of dialogue. Reitz (2015) adds that through dialogue, “leader,” “leadership,” and “power” are constructed, and in this way collective constructs influence mutuality. Dialogue represents the space between people in which leadership is constructed. Moreover, Crevani (2018) argued that people decide what to do and how to do it through dialogue. Through these interactions, people’s action trajectories change in relation to each other; therefore, dialogue influences social action. More broadly, Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that leadership is constructed through multiple subtle experiences, including embodied interactions in their conceptualization. They suggest that interactions continuously shape social order; thus, reflexivity is required to purposively influence the realities between self and others. This supports the work of Hersted and Gergen (2013), who argue that skillful leadership requires awareness of the content and consequences of unfolding interactions. Through dialogue, relational leadership is constructed among people through interactions within social contexts.

Recent studies have argued that relational leadership is also constructed through embodied actions and interactions (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). For example, Biehl (2019) explored the relationship between techno disc jockeys (DJs) and dancers in live music performances. They find that DJs use their bodies to appreciate situations through kinesthetic empathy, which allows them to relate to the dancers; they can then respond to situations with embodied actions that influence the dancers. The study reveals that leaders 'are' their bodies; the physical use of the body can assist the construction of leadership. In addition to dialogue, leadership is constructed through bodily gestures and postures (Küpers, 2013). Ryömä and Satama (2019) highlighted that in a high-pressure sporting context, people do not usually have time for significant dialogue; instead, they rely on responding to gut reactions developed through prior physical rehearsal. During training, repetition is required to develop action patterns in relation to others in the team. Exploring relational leadership from the perspective of embodied actions requires acknowledging that actions are only meaningful in relation to other people and contexts (Hosking, 2011).

Research on relational leadership, which suggests an embodied element in constructing leadership, has drawn on aesthetic leadership theory. This approach argues that meaning is at least partially constructed through sensory perceptions rooted in emotions (Hansen et al., 2007). According to Koivunen and Wennes (2011), aesthetic leadership concerns relational activities, aesthetic judgments, and embodiments. Küpers (2013) argues that it is through exposure to the world that people make sense of their experiences. This study extends to social interactions through aesthetic perceptions. Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that people respond to each other through kinesthetic empathy. For example, Biehl (2019) demonstrated how DJs influence and respond to their audiences through bodily perceptions. Aesthetic leadership focuses on experiences

and engagement with the senses (Hansen et al., 2007). The social construction of leadership can be supported by aesthetic leadership theory, which explains how non-verbal and embodied interactions contribute to the ongoing construction of meaning.

Dialogue and embodied actions construct and are constructed by shared meaning in a social context, with these shared agreements developed and used over time (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). For example, Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that even in relationally oriented organizations, examples of the ‘hero leader’ are still evident. However, the ‘hero leader’ is constructed in roles that are continuously negotiated through interactions (Crevani, 2018). Understanding leadership is based on a combination of people, tasks, social contexts, time, and place (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Uhl-Bien (2006) suggests that a socially constructed relational perspective may require experiencing organizations as an array of stories based on shared meaning rather than objective entities. Shared understandings inform leadership as people in interaction base some of the meanings on implicit understandings constructed in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Therefore, relational leadership is constructed through a multilogue, as suggested by Dachler and Hosking (1995), which involves making meaning through dialogue and embodied action/interactions in relation to others. Table 3 summarizes the key literature on relational approaches to leadership, demonstrating that, while relational leadership has a strong theoretical basis, conceptual arguments outweigh empirical research.

**Table 3***Summary of Key Relational Leadership Literature*

Article	Purpose	Methods	Approach	Findings
Uhl-Bien (2006)	Describe the two perspectives to relational leadership, entity and socially constructed	Conceptual	Relational and Entity	Outline Relational Leadership Theory as a process of social influence
Crevani et al. (2010)	Suggest analytical focus on leadership processes	Conceptual	Relational	Leadership research should be based on a process ontology where leadership is constructed in interactions
Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011)	Extend relational leadership theory by exploring everyday dialogical processes of leadership	Ethnography	Relational	Relational leadership is inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic, involving moral responsibility to others
Biehl (2019)	Analyze the ‘in-between space’ where leadership is socially constructed through movement and bodily presence	Phenomenology	Relational	Kinesthetic empathy is used to relate to others through movement in a mutual influence process
Ryömä and Satama (2019)	Explore relational leadership in ice hockey and ballet	Dual ethnography	Relational	Relational leadership involves reflexive verbal and bodily activities interdependent with power dynamics

## **Leadership Development**

A relational perspective presents new opportunities for understanding leadership development because it recognizes that the responsibility and capacity to lead may be shared between people with different experiences and abilities (Gronn, 2002).

According to McCauley and Palus (2020), a relational conceptualization of leadership development can help with previous leadership development theories that are too narrowly construed and devoid of context. Carroll and Smolović Jones (2018) suggest that leadership development is a “felt experience” based on aesthetic perceptions.

Although a relational perspective offers new opportunities for leadership development, it aligns with previous research on this topic. For example, Day et al. (2014) distinguish between leader development and leadership development; the latter is about the collective capacity in groups to produce leadership, while the former is about developing individual leaders. Relational leadership development suggests experiential leadership development aligns with experience-based leadership development research. McCall (2010) argues that experience is the primary source of learning to lead, while DeRue and Wellman (2009) add that experiences are developed through the availability of social support and learning orientation. However, over time, experiences result in diminishing returns. Relational leadership provides opportunities to explore leadership development through social experience, whereas understanding experience in a social context influences leadership development.

Socially constructed relational leadership conceptualizes leadership as a relational process that influences the social order of the organization (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Drath et al., 2008; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). This doctoral project incorporates relational epistemology and process ontology, similar to the approaches of Crevani (2018) and Ryömä and Satama (2019). Relational epistemology highlights

intersubjectivity as leadership is interdependent with leaders, followers, and context. A process ontology of leadership highlights the continual creation of meaning through interactions (Crevani et al., 2010). Ryömä and Satama (2019) note that the philosophical foundations of relational epistemology and process ontology are very similar to those of leadership-as-practice (L-A-P). For example, Raelin (2017) argues that leadership practices may exist in what he describes as “ordinary” or “extraordinary.” Carroll et al. (2008) identified habits, processes, consciousness, awareness, control, everydayness, and identity as elements of leadership practice. However, relational leadership explicitly focuses on the mutual construction of leadership between people in interaction. Hence, relational leadership is the most appropriate for the present research project as it most closely aligns with the research purpose. Related constructionist theories of leadership, L-A-P, and leadership through interaction were used only to help develop the theory of relational leadership throughout the thesis and are reviewed in the following section.

### **Socially Constructed Leadership**

Relational leadership is a concept within a larger category of socially constructed leadership. It is important to acknowledge that relational leadership resonates with several other concepts within this body of literature, including L-A-P (Carroll et al., 2008) and leadership through interaction (Larsson, 2016). L-A-P de-emphasizes the characteristics and traits of individuals and recognizes the importance of followers and contexts, providing useful insight into the relational practice of leadership (Raelin, 2017). L-A-P highlights the intersubjectivity between entities and warns against the reduction of theory to specific agents (Reckwitz, 2002). L-A-P acknowledges the interconnectedness of practice; it is concerned with the where, how, and why of leadership and less so with ‘by whom’ (Raelin, 2017). Leadership through

interaction describes studies that argue that leadership is mutually constructed between people in interaction, often referred to as the space between people (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Larsson, 2016). Relational leadership is an example of a theory based on leadership constructed through interaction; however, emphasis is placed on mutual understanding constructed between people. Relational leadership has a philosophical foundation similar to these theories; however, it explicitly acknowledges collective construction in which roles are negotiated through interaction (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Ryömä & Satama, 2019).

L-A-P takes leadership from a network of abstract concepts conducted by a leader (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003) to a socially constructed process of environmentally and situationally embedded actions (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2017). Therefore, L-A-P promotes a realistic leadership process, describing how leadership occurs through a socially constructed practice between people. Carroll et al. (2008) suggest a congruence between L-A-P and relational leadership in this way: “the development of leadership practice would appear acutely experiential, interactive, situated, embodied, sustained, and relational, which creates a new kind of engagement with self, others, and the world” (p. 375).

Leadership through interactions is similar to relational leadership, while L-A-P encourages thinking about leadership through practices rather than individual competence. Crevani et al. (2010) suggest a process ontology to study how leadership practices are constructed through interactions. The authors attempt to “redefine leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by people in interaction” (p. 78). The challenge in studying leadership through interactions is identifying the interactions that are considered leadership. Crevani et al. (2010) suggest co-orientation (enhanced understanding) and action-spacing (constructs of collective and individual



possibilities) as interactions that count as leadership. Larsson (2016) identifies that leadership identities may also be constructed through interaction, focusing more on the individual level. Studies of interaction are more concerned with how leadership is practiced rather than “something that floats ethereally above task accomplishment as some metalevel commentary” (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 59). Like relational leadership and L-A-P, leadership through interaction conceptualizes leadership as practices constructed in relation to others.

Despite the relevance of the theoretical approaches, L-A-P and leadership through interactions, socially constructed relational leadership has been selected as the most appropriate theoretical lens for exploring leadership in the context of professional sport organizations. This is because of its alignment with the broad epistemological premise that leadership is socially constructed in relationships between people. L-A-P and leadership through interaction are narrowly defined and specific theories within the socially constructed leadership approach. These theories help develop a broad understanding of the landscape of socially constructed leadership and socially constructed relational leadership. An important focus of socially constructed relational leadership is shared understanding constructed in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

### **Leadership Studies in Sport Management**

Leadership research in the field of sport management has often focused on models proposed elsewhere in leadership studies, such as LMX (Hoye, 2003), transformational leadership (Welty Peachey et al., 2015), servant leadership (Burton et al., 2017), or different contexts for leadership: sport for development (Kang & Svensson, 2019), sport governance (O’Boyle et al., 2019), and sport events (Parent et al., 2009). These studies have made important contributions to the sport management

discipline, given the often-unique context of sport organizations (Chalip, 2006). However, little research has been conducted on how leadership is constructed in professional sport organizations. Therefore, this dissertation proposes a generally applicable theory for the construction of leadership based on data gathered from a professional sporting organization (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Like mainstream leadership studies, leadership in sport management has continued to evolve from focusing on leaders (Chelladurai, 1990) to investigations of the broader social context (Ferkins, Shilbury et al., 2018). Sport leadership research has been conducted in three fields: sport science, sport psychology, and sport management. Leadership research in the context of sport has largely focused on on-field performance (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Much of the research on leadership in sport management deals with applying specific concepts established in mainstream leadership literature to sport management contexts (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Sport management studies have predominantly employed an entitative perspective of leadership, where the unit of analysis for leadership research is individual leaders, followers, or the dyads between them. Regarding professional sport, on-field leadership is primarily concerned with the role of the coach (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Kellett, 1999). Off-field leadership has had a significant focus on governance (Ferkins et al., 2005; Hoye, 2003; Shilbury, 2001; Shilbury et al., 2020; Takos et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2014) and the leadership of performance directors (Arnold et al., 2012; Arnold et al., 2018; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). However, Frawley et al. (2019) argue that the heterogeneity of high-performance sporting organizations offers complexities that surpass the current level of research. Hence, the opportunity for this dissertation to explore the social construction of leadership in the context of professional sport.

In mainstream leadership studies, there has been a recent emphasis on studying the social construction of leadership as opposed to traditional behavioral and trait methods. Sport management scholars have also advocated for socially constructed leadership studies. Ferkins, Skinner et al. (2018) and Billsberry et al. (2018), in their conceptual papers, argue for the need for socially constructed approaches to leadership to understand leadership influence beyond that of the individual leader. Recent empirical studies include those of Kihl et al. (2010) and Arnold et al. (2018), both of which employ interviews to gain the account of followers and other stakeholders. This approach resembles traditional leadership research methods dominated by quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, which still constitute most leadership research in sport management (Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). However, the socially constructed relational leadership concept has not been the focus of previous empirical sport management studies. Recent examples such as those by Kihl et al. (2010), Arnold et al. (2018), and Billsberry et al. (2018) signify a promising movement toward the social constructionist paradigm in sport leadership research that would suggest that time is now appropriate for this research to take place.

Studying leadership from the perceptions of followers has proven valuable in revealing the importance of context and experience in the construction of leadership (Kihl et al., 2010) and socially undesirable leadership behavior (Arnold et al., 2018). Arnold et al. (2018) studied darker traits of high-performance leadership based on the perceptions of athletes ascertained through interviews with 11 former athletes. They suggest that leaders may not only help but also exploit athletes, and they identified five themes as perceived darker traits of leadership: self-focused, haughty self-belief, inauthentic, manipulative, and successful. By exploring other's perceptions of leaders, the authors were able to take a critical lens to study leadership and reveal the less

explored negative effects of leadership, including performance and career threats, affected confidence, pressure, and anxiety, as well as lack of support. Kihl et al. (2010) interviewed 57 stakeholders of intercollegiate athletics (ICA). The purpose of their interviews was to gather the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the context in which leadership takes place. The authors found that stakeholders socially constructed leadership in relation to their experiences and contexts. Kihl et al. (2010) propose shared leadership as a suitable model for promoting organizational change. Finally, Swanson et al. (2020) study the implicit leadership theories of sport management students to determine how their individual mental models of leadership influence their entry into the sport industry. The authors find that features of a prototypical leader include: sensitivity, dedication, physical attractiveness, inspirational, and focused. These are promising studies in that they pay increased attention to the perceptions of others and context. However, these studies are essentially cognitive, concerned with the perceptions of leadership as judged by individuals, rather than social. To further advance research on the social construction of leadership, new methods are required to explore relational processes (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016; Sutherland, 2017).

Conceptual arguments for expanding leadership in sport management by incorporating socially constructed theories have been made by Billsberry et al. (2018) and Ferkins, Skinner et al. (2018) in the same special issue of the *Journal of Sport Management*. Billsberry et al. (2018) offered a conceptual paper advocating that sport leadership studies take a social constructionist approach, which they label “observer-centric,” by drawing upon mainstream leadership studies from the previous three decades. The authors argued that studying the social construction of leadership is important for understanding the collective construction of leadership. The paper achieved the authors’ objective to “advocate for the increased adoption of the social

construction approach to leadership in the discipline of sport management” (p. 171).

However, the label “observer-centric” limits the social construction of leadership to the subjective accounts of collective “others” (Sutherland, 2017). This approach aligns more closely with the perspective of constructivism rather than the constructionist perspective adopted in this doctoral thesis.

Billsberry et al. (2018) provided a useful review of the field of sport management; however, I propose that it will be beneficial to include a constructionist perspective in exploring leadership in sport management. Such an approach is not “observer-centric” nor concerned with any one entity, but rather the interactional space between where leadership is constructed and enacted (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). In the introduction to the *Journal of Sport Management* special edition, Ferkins, Skinner et al. (2018) provide a more general call for introducing new constructionist theories that consider leadership as social, collaborative, and relational, with experiences emerging from interactions in context. Ferkins, Skinner et al. (2018) acknowledged that the articles within the special issue address multiple constructions of leadership, but they do not specifically explore the social construction of leadership. Therefore, there is a possibility of greater empirical exploration of the social construction of leadership.

It is promising that studies of interactions that construct leadership have been conducted using sport as the context. Although outside the sport management literature, Wilson (2018) has employed discourse analysis and Ronglan (2007) participant observation to research dialogical leadership practices. Ronglan (2007) revealed that collective efficacy is constructed through interpersonal processes involving experience, preparations, rituals, and persuasive actions. They found that the handball team they researched had several leaders, and by modeling confidence, these people could enhance collective efficacy. Wilson (2018) studied rugby coaches as leaders through

linguistics and recognized the pre-game speeches of coaches as leadership performances. Leadership is constructed in front stage (public) team addresses and backstage (private) preparations. This finding was similar to that of Ryömä and Satama (2019) (as mentioned in the previous relational leadership section), who conducted dual ethnographies in ballet and ice hockey. Through an ethnographic approach, they suggest that relational leadership is constructed through discursive performances supported by embodied actions. Using sport as a context to study leadership through interactions and relational leadership demonstrates the suitability of a socially constructed relational leadership lens to explore professional sporting organizations. This approach is suitable to introduce to sport management.

### **Collective and Shared Leadership Studies in Sport Management**

Collective leadership practice is a philosophical underpinning of relational leadership (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Collective leadership incorporates all approaches to leadership that include all or multiple members of a group, this includes shared, distributed, processual, and discursive methods of leadership (Ospina et al., 2020). Approaches to collective leadership vary based on their methods, unit of analysis, and research paradigm. Research and theory on collective leadership have continued to evolve and popularize (Denis et al., 2012). This is not dissimilar to recent research in sport management that explored shared and collective leadership. Evidence of evolving research on sport leadership can be seen in the increasing incorporation of collective and shared leadership theories. For example, Ferkins, Shilbury et al. (2018) conceptualize collective leadership at the board level as leadership being generated collectively. The authors argue that leadership as a process (Grint, 2005) is the most congruent with board leadership, where many contributions are possible. Shilbury et al. (2020) further investigated collective board leadership; however, they found that

directors were more in tune with individualistic notions of leadership; thus, suggesting that it may still be too early for the practice of collective leadership.

Shared leadership differs from collective leadership in that it requires a leader with authority to actively delegate leadership to others (Svensson et al., 2019). From this conceptualization, shared leadership is most associated with an entity approach that is systematic rather than relational and emergent. Shared leadership has received significant attention in sport management. Most notably, Kerwin and Bopp (2014) found that implementing shared leadership can facilitate cultural change in teams. Followers (team members) are seen as co-producers of the leadership process and, therefore, have a vested interest in the success of the cultural change. In the study, there were three levels of sharing leadership: coaches were considered the ultimate leaders who control the values and goals, player leaders who provide direction to other players, and other players who 'live' the values of the team. Shared leadership has also been the conceptual focus of several studies on sport-for-development organizations (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Svensson et al., 2019, 2021). These studies advocate for empowering employees and giving a voice to communities (Jones et al., 2018; Svensson et al., 2021). Shared leadership must be facilitated by organizational structure and support (Kang & Svensson, 2019). Shared leadership will likely lead to improved organizational performance and innovative work behaviors (Svensson et al., 2019). Although practiced by multiple people, shared leadership differs from socially constructed relational leadership as it is still a delegated rather than an emergent form of leadership focused on entities rather than relations.

### **Coach and Player Leadership**

Research on coach and player leadership has been more prolific in sport science and sport psychology fields; however, this research tends to neglect the broader

organizational context. Jowett and Chaundy (2004) studied the relationship between coach and athlete, finding that positive coach–athlete relationships result in increased cohesion, suggesting that more research is required to understand relational variables: “a sport team that enjoys the coach-athlete relationship that reflects such positive relational properties is likely to experience high levels of cohesion” (p. 303). Jowett (2017) adds that through the coach–athlete relationship, coaching processes such as supporting, helping, and guiding allow the coach and athlete to succeed. Conversely, Greenleaf et al. (2001) found that coach–athlete conflict reduces athlete effectiveness. Kellett (1999) found that coaches often consider players as primary leaders and their responsibility to develop players as leaders. Recently, Frawley et al. (2018) argued that the role of the coach is “being able to lead and cultivate relationships, reduce stress, manage individuals, set goals, develop confidence, and adapt behavior to situational cues” (p. 101). It can be seen from the sport leadership literature that relations among people are an important component of leadership roles, such as coaches and captains. Fransen et al. (2014) identify that sport teams often have many athlete leaders performing several roles; rarely are all leadership roles fulfilled by one athlete leader. Strong perceived athlete leadership as related to team success (Fransen et al., 2017). Even from an entity perspective, sport teams recognize multiple leaders, but the influence of the organizational context and the emergence of leadership from dynamic relations are yet to be researched.

Sport management represents a diverse field of practice and scholarly inquiry, for an array of sport-focused organizations exist for many purposes. Some organizations exist for commercial reasons, some for the advancement and sustainability of the sport, some for health and development outcomes, and some to advance social outcomes. Leadership studies in sport management reflect these diverse contexts, with research



being undertaken in high-performance sport (Arnold et al., 2012, 2018; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Swanson & Kent, 2014), sport governance (Ferkins, Shilbury et al., 2018; Hoye, 2003; Shilbury et al., 2020; Takos et al., 2018), and sport for development (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Svensson et al., 2019, 2021). Many insights into leadership can be derived from these studies; however, the diversity of sporting organizations presents a contextual challenge and opportunity to compile this dissertation. While leadership studies in all contexts of sport management can be relevant to researching leadership in professional sport, some will be more relevant than others, and there will be important contributions from leadership studies in other fields. This literature review summarizes the research on leadership in sport management. This is not an exhaustive literature review; the aim is to highlight important research relating to leadership in high-performance sport and emerging leadership trends. Table 4 summarizes the key sport management leadership literature that considers leadership to be collective, shared, or socially constructed. The table demonstrates that emergent, dynamic, and collective leadership studies have become a valuable contribution to the sport management literature; however, constructionist and relational approaches are yet to be employed.

**Table 4**

*Summary of Key Sport Management Leadership Literature*

Article	Purpose	Methods	Approach	Findings
Hoye (2003)	Analyze relationship between leaders and followers in volunteer sport organization boards	Survey	Entity	Stronger relationship perceived between executives and board chairs than with other board members. Indicating in-group and out-group. Board

Article	Purpose	Methods	Approach	Findings
				leadership is perceived to be shared
Kihl et al. (2010)	Explore stakeholder constructions of leadership in collegiate athletics	Interviews	Constructivist/ Entity	Leadership was broadly defined. Accounts were embedded in context and experiences were articulated based on relationships with the athletics department
Kerwin and Bopp (2014)	Explore values and shared leadership associated with cognitive restructuring in an athletic team	Interviews	Entity	Shared leadership can enable positive culture change
Arnold et al. (2018)	Explore undesirable aspects of performance leadership	Interviews	Constructivist/ Entity	Dark characteristics include: self-focused, haughty self-belief, inauthentic, manipulative, and success obsessed
Billsberry et al. (2018)	Argue for the social construction of leadership to be explored in sport management	Conceptual	Constructivist	Observer-centric approach advocated, where leadership is studied from the perception of others
Ferkins, Shilbury et al. (2018)	Provide a working conceptualization of collective board leadership of a sport federation	Conceptual	Entity	Collective leadership as a concept enables the integration of leadership and governance
Jones et al. (2018)	Analyze the development and deployment of shared leadership in a sport-	Qualitative case study	Entity	Environmental, task, and group characteristics are

Article	Purpose	Methods	Approach	Findings
	for-development organization			related to shared leadership
Kang and Svensson (2019)	Introduce shared leadership to sport for development and peace and advocate for employing shared leadership in the context	Conceptual	Entity	Facilitating shared leadership is associated with improved organizational performance and effectiveness
Svensson et al. (2019)	Examine influence of shared leadership and organizational capacity on organizational performance in a sport for development and peace context	Surveys	Entity	Significant relationship found between shared leadership and organizational performance
Shilbury et al. (2020)	Examine perception of collective board leadership in a National Sport Organization	Interviews	Entity	The concept of collective board leadership was not yet adopted by the directors interviewed

## Research Gap

From the perspective of sport management, it has been argued that the research on leadership in high-performance sport is insufficient, especially considering the significant investment organizations make in performance (Frawley et al., 2019). Further, socially constructed leadership in sport is under-explored (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018), and this concept has not been explored empirically in sport management before this doctoral thesis. From the broader perspective of leadership studies, there is also little empirical work on relational leadership (Denis et al., 2012). This may be due to the investment in the time required to research that

phenomenon. The combination of these factors enables the contribution of this doctoral thesis to the fields of sport management and mainstream leadership research. Based on existing leadership literature (e.g., Biehl, 2019; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Ryömä & Satama, 2019), it is likely that relational leadership has important implications for leadership practice, development, and research in the field of sport management. Therefore, the intended purpose of this doctoral project is to contribute to sport management literature; however, it is expected to provide insights pertinent to mainstream leadership studies.

Sport is recognized as a valuable context for mainstream leadership studies (Day et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2005). Conceptually, management scholars have advocated for the possibility of using sport as a context by which to study organizational phenomena. Advocates propose that sport offers great imagery and the ability to study processes of how people do things (Wolfe et al., 2005). Within leadership, sport offers the opportunity to investigate how leadership can help negotiate competition and cooperation (Day et al., 2012). Leadership scholars have used sporting teams to study leadership through discourse (Wilson, 2013) and the reflexive nature of relational leadership (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). These studies used observations and ethnography; however, they dealt with sub-elite teams. Professional organizations offer further insight due to external pressure from the media, which also increases publicly available data, including video footage and interviews. The visibility of interactions in sport provides relevance in studying leadership phenomena, presenting the opportunity to contribute more broadly to leadership studies.

### **Research Rationale**

High-performance sport attracts significant financial investment and constitute a large industry in Australia and abroad (Frawley et al., 2019). By exploring and

developing the social practices of leadership in a professional sport organization, this project will generally lead to a greater understanding of leadership. Leadership has been linked to the success of sport organizations, which can be both performance- and financial-based (Bormann & Rowold, 2016). This project aims to develop leadership theory by adopting a whole-of-organization approach to leadership. This is consistent with the recommendation of Welty Peachey et al. (2015), who asserted that sport management requires leadership studies that take a multi-level approach to study leadership. A socially constructed relational leadership approach requires considering the broader social context (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012); hence, considering the entire organization. This doctoral project is positioned in the field of sport management because this is where the greatest opportunity for a contribution exists to both theory and practice. Managers make decisions that influence leadership development and practice in high-performance sports organizations (Arnold et al., 2012). The theme throughout this thesis will be how leadership is relationally constructed in professional sport and the implications relational leadership has on practice, development, and research in a high-performance sport context. The findings and implications of this research are intended to inform sport management practitioners on how they can facilitate better leadership throughout their organizations. New research directions will be proposed, with new avenues created by thinking about leadership from a relational constructionist perspective.

### **Contribution**

This project is intended to contribute to sport management research by expanding leadership studies in this field to include the social construction of leadership, specifically relational leadership. This project will study the concept of relational leadership in the previously unexplored context of a professional sport

organization. This project is intended to reveal everyday and mundane examples of leadership practices in a field commonly associated with heroic leaders (Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). The purpose is to propose a new theory, particularly concerning the practice and development of leadership in the context of professional sport, thereby contributing to sport management literature. However, given its design as an exploratory case study, opportunities may arise to contribute to mainstream leadership research. It is anticipated that a contribution to the leadership literature may arise through continual observable interactions between organizational members and distinct collective goals.

## **Chapter Three: We are a Team of Leaders**

### **Preamble**

The first article in this thesis introduces the concept of socially constructed relational leadership in sport management. Relational leadership practices were explored by collecting data through observations and interviews (informal and semi-structured). The data corpus was analyzed from a relational leadership lens by exploring meanings constructed through interactions between people in the social context of the sport organization that advanced the social order. This study fits these structures by exploring how socially constructed relational leadership is practiced. Verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making were identified as three categories of practice. The three categories comprised eight distinct and interdependent practices: discussions, questioning, instruction, encouragement, physical interactions, emotions, and body language, reflection, and projection. The findings revealed how relational leadership was constructed in the selected professional sport organization. This paper aligns relational epistemology and process ontology through constructionism in the context of professional sport. The findings provide the foundation for papers two and three to explore relational leadership development and the construction of good leadership by exploring how leadership is constructed.

## **Abstract**

Guided by the emerging literature on relational leadership, this study discusses how leadership is socially constructed in the context of a professional sporting organization. An in-depth exploratory case study with a championship-winning professional team was conducted during the championship season. Data were collected through interviews with various members of the organization and through observations of training and game sessions. The findings highlight that leadership is practiced through interactions between individuals and informed by established and ongoing relationships. Specifically, leadership is practiced through verbal, non-verbal, and social meaning-making processes. The outlined relational approach concerns the collective performance of leadership through social action, revealing insights that can inform leadership practices, development, and recruitment in professional sporting organizations. The paper concludes by suggesting potential directions for research on leadership in professional sport based on conceptualizing leadership as a relational phenomenon.



## **We are a Team of Leaders: Practicing Leadership in Professional Sport**

This paper aims to explore the social processes through which leadership is constructed in a professional sporting organization. Recently, sport management scholars have begun to embrace social constructivism as an approach to leadership studies (Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010). Reflecting on mainstream leadership studies, sport management scholars have acknowledged that the social constructionist paradigm broadens perspectives on leadership. Since Welty Peachey et al.'s (2015) review of 40 years of sport leadership research, scholars have increasingly advocated the recognition of leadership as a shared and collective phenomenon (Ferkins, Shilbury et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2014; Svensson et al., 2019) and have studied leadership from multiple perspectives, including followers (Arnold et al., 2018; Takos et al., 2018). This body of research has highlighted the interdependence of leadership processes, suggesting that effective leadership can be constructed by multiple individuals and should be studied from the perspective of those who are led, not just from the perspective of designated leaders.

Previous studies provide valuable insights into how leadership is constructed through exploring the experience of individuals (Frawley et al., 2018), perceived expertise (Swanson & Kent, 2014), and aspects of identity, including gender (Burton, 2015). This study demonstrates a shift in thinking about leadership in sport management, away from studying individual leaders (leader-centric) to studying the perceptions of individuals (follower-centric or observer-centric). However, socially constructed relational leadership, which involves studying the social interactions through which leadership is constructed, is still under-explored. Conceptualizing leadership as socially constructed has many potential contributions to sport management practice and scholarship. Practical implications include fostering leadership practices

through everyday interactions and the role of leadership development, recruitment, and retention in supporting such practices. Scholarly contributions extend the conceptualization of leadership as a mutual influence process by outlining the key practices that enable collective leadership. In addition, we outline the potential of in situ methods, including observation, as a suitable strategy for researching leadership interactions.

Uhl-Bien (2006) differentiates socially constructed relational leadership from entity-based approaches to leadership. Entity-based approaches study individual entities, including leaders and followers, or fixed dyadic relationships between them. On the other hand, taking a socially constructed relational leadership perspective involves exploring the social processes that advance the social order of the collective (Robinson, 2001).

Mainstream leadership scholars have explored interrelated concepts, including relational leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), L-A-P (Carroll et al., 2008), and collective leadership (Denis et al., 2012). Studies have shown that despite often being glamorized, leadership is constructed through regular mundane interactions that managers and others often overlook (Alvesson et al., 2016; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). These ordinary interactions may be of greater significance for sport management professionals than previously realized as a focus on fostering productive interactions could lead to better outcomes for sporting organizations, both on and off the field. For example, Crevani (2019) suggests that an important part of leadership work is “to be able to be in conversation, to recognize how conversations are developing, and to handle such developments by being sensibly responsive” (p. 236). Thus, research on relational leadership has advocated for and conducted studies exploring the ‘mundane’ social processes by observing leadership in situ (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ryömä &

Satama, 2019). These studies have demonstrated that by researching the social process of leadership, we can gain deeper insights into how teams operate in different contexts and the role of those not privileged as leaders (Raelin, 2016).

In this paper, we study socially constructed relational leadership in situ and thus consider leadership to be a continuous process of interaction, meaning-making, and remaking (Sutherland, 2017). We build on the body of literature that argues leadership is practiced in conversation, dialogically (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), through embodiment (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019), and through the meanings people construct (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking, 2011). This study contributes to the growing body of constructionist leadership research in sport management by providing an exploratory case to expand the concept of relational leadership. We are concerned with social action and explore the minutia of social processes involved in constructing leadership. Therefore, the unit of analysis is not leaders, followers, or relationships between them, but rather the interactions involved in constructing leadership through developing a shared understanding. As such, this study was designed to capture the continuous processes of co-constructed meaning-making that unfolds through action and interaction between the self and others (Carroll et al., 2008; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Leadership in the case organization was collectively constructed through three key aggregate practices: verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making. These practices were interdependent and embedded intersubjectively within interactions, demonstrating the multiple ways in which participants constructed and reconstructed meanings (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). By taking a relational leadership approach to study how leadership takes place in the case of a professional sporting organization, we aim to provide deeper insight into the micro-level social processes that construct leadership in professional sport, thereby informing

leadership practice and proposing further directions for research within the context of professional sport.

Professional sport offers an excellent context to observe these social processes, given the highly interdependent nature of teams, the regularity of team interactions, and the fact that professional teams mirror other traditional organizations (Day et al., 2012). Professional sporting organizations are becoming increasingly complex, employing many people in several departments, coordinated to pursue on-field performance and off-field commercial success (Forster, 2006; Shilbury, 2012). Thus, this study offers a timely contribution to understanding how leadership emerges in professional sporting organizations. It provides insight into the complex realities of practice and highlights that leadership is a collective accomplishment. Based on the results of this research, we outline practical contributions to leadership practices, recruitment, retention, and leadership development in professional sporting organizations.

## **Literature Review**

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership is a developing concept in mainstream leadership research. It gained attention in the 1990s (Dachler & Hosking, 1995), was further popularized by Uhl-Bien (2006), and has been used as a valuable perspective from which to study leadership across team contexts, such as academia (Reitz, 2015), national security (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and ice hockey and ballet (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Relational approaches to leadership argue that leadership is co-constructed through interactions between people in context, the meanings people associate with these interactions, and subsequent actions taken (Crevani, 2019). Socially constructed relational leadership is most often positioned in contrast to entity-based approaches to leadership, which focus on individuals as leaders and/or followers and their behaviors,

characteristics, and traits (Uhl-Bien, 2006). While offering valuable insights, entity-based approaches have several deficiencies: they exaggerate the importance of individuals, neglect the importance of context, and do not recognize the role of those not privileged as leaders (Raelin, 2016; Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). In contrast, relational approaches view leadership as based on the iterative process of interactions between people who struggle for and arrive at shared meanings. While the entitative approach focuses on a monologue (direction provided by the leader to follower/s), relational leadership emphasizes dialogue; leadership is practiced in conversation with others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The importance of discourse in the construction of leadership has been increasingly recognized and used in research (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019).

### **Practicing Relational Leadership**

Practicing relational leadership involves accepting that others co-construct social order through mutual influence (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Dachler and Hosking (1995) argue that “relating is a constructive, ongoing process of meaning-making” (p. 4). Crevani (2019) outlines the work of relational leadership as a movement between frames, positioning, and resonating, which are accomplished collectively. Frames allow teams to capture meaning in a particular moment/context, and movement between frames leads to the emergence and creation of new meanings (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Positioning involves building on previous conversations while paying attention to the content of what is being said, the consequences of action, and being aware of the moment, informed by the past and future (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Resonating refers to paying attention to and adapting to subtle nuances, such as emerging patterns, emotions, and changes in tone (Crevani, 2019). Therefore, relational leadership is concerned with meaning-making in relation to ongoing social interaction.

Scholars have investigated the use of the body in leadership interactions. Küpers (2013) makes the conceptual argument that leadership is experienced through various bodily senses, including touch, sight, smell, and sound. Biehl (2019) contributed to relational leadership theory by exploring the interactions between techno-DJs and dancers and describing them as co-constructors of what was happening through their bodies-in-movement in relation to each other. They argue that leaders not only have but also are their bodies, who perceive and respond based on kinesthetic empathy. Thus, relational leadership is constructed through both verbal and embodied interactions. This view is particularly relevant to sporting teams where movement and bodily interactions are critical elements of team functioning.

### **Leadership Studies in Professional and High-Performance Sport**

Definitions of elite, high-performance, and professional sport emphasize its key elements: representation at a superior level, significant training commitment, and high level of professionalism (e.g., training and performance standards akin to other professional fields) (Swann et al., 2015). The context of professional and high-performance sport is subject to regular scrutiny from governing bodies, the public, and sponsors representing stakeholder groups that are financially and/or emotionally invested in the team or individual's success (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Thelwell et al., 2008). The emphasis on on-field performance distinguishes leadership in professional and high-performance sport from leadership in other contexts in the field of sport management, such as sport for development and governance. Leadership studies in professional and high-performance sport have been conducted in the fields of sport management, sport psychology, and sport science. In each of these fields, entitative approaches to leadership are prevalent, focusing on individuals with a specific role (e.g.,

captains, coaches, managers) or dyads (e.g., coaches – players, captains – players) (Arnold et al., 2012; Fransen et al., 2014; Kellett, 1999; Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

Previous studies have revealed that effective leadership in professional sporting teams is related to positive athlete leadership (Fransen et al., 2017), positive coach–athlete relationship (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004), perceived expertise (Swanson & Kent, 2014), experience (Frawley et al., 2018), and leadership development programs (Banu-Lawrence et al., 2020). Conflict and power struggles between coaches and athletes reduce their effectiveness (Greenleaf et al., 2001). This study focuses on singular or dual levels of leadership. Such a focus is problematic because Welty Peachey et al. (2015) point out that leadership in professional sporting organizations is constructed across multiple levels, including athletes, coaches, managers, and their staff. Thus, sport management scholarship and practice will benefit from leadership research that takes a holistic organizational approach.

Recent studies have started to pay attention to relational aspects of sport leadership, including developing relationships (Frawley et al., 2018) and seeing leadership roles as distributed among multiple individuals (Fransen et al., 2014), with coaches perceiving captains as leaders rather than themselves (Kellett, 1999). This literature focuses on leadership as a mutual accomplishment through shared leadership roles.

Others have studied sporting teams in situ (e.g., Ronglan, 2007; Wilson, 2013). Although not explicitly researching leadership, Ronglan (2007) found that teams build collective efficacy through the interpersonal process of perceiving performance and preparation. Wilson (2013) explored how rugby coaches construct leadership through discourse, identifying the coach’s addressing of players as interactional performance. Performances are designed to manage players’ perceptions rather than

merely communicate content. These studies highlight intersubjectivity, demonstrating that perceptions of experience and performance are important for constructing a shared understanding in teams. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the construction of leadership in situ, they focus on the individual practices of leadership construction, with Ronglan (2007) exploring the efficacy and Wilson (2013) discourse. Thus, calls have been made to explore how leadership in sporting organizations is socially constructed (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). In professional sport, this approach explores the practice of leadership across the entire organization, including managers, coaches, staff, and players.

These calls also have methodological implications for research in the context of sport. The use of surveys and retrospective interview accounts in sport leadership studies is pervasive, and the empirical focus is typically on individuals designated as leaders. Such methodological choices have led to a lack of exploration of the social processes of leadership that include the nuance of daily, often mundane interactions, interdependencies between people, and the significance of context. Consequently, we lack an understanding of how leadership evolves bottom-up and of the interactions through which it takes place in teams. Including in situ and insider research methods in high-performance sport management can build on a theoretical and practical understanding of leadership practices, leadership development, and inform recruitment and retention practices.

### **Positioning the Research**

Crevani et al. (2010) argue that leadership is often conceptualized as an overly simplified phenomenon. Taking a constructionist perspective, this study aligns with Schwandt, who argues that “contrary to the emphasis in radical constructivism, the focus here is not on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but the



collective generation of meaning as shaped by the conventions of language and other social processes” (1998, p. 240). The present study aims to explore the social processes through which leadership in sport teams is constructed. We argue that research in sport management will benefit from supplementing previous studies that have recognized the perceptions of individuals as pertinent to leadership (e.g., Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018), which are situated toward the subjectivist end of the constructionist continuum, with studies such as this one that are inspired by constructionist views as developed by Berger and Luckmann (1967), Crotty (1998), and Silverman (2015), who are concerned with the ongoing construction of meaning through social action.

We propose that relational leadership is a suitable lens through which to study leadership in professional sporting organizations. This relational lens can provide valuable insights into the nature of leadership and the mechanisms through which leadership emerges and is co-constructed. Relational leadership is inherently multi-level as leadership is constructed across all levels of the organization; hence we situate the research in the field of sport management. Despite emphasizing emergence between people, relational leadership is enhanced by those with formal authority (e.g., sport managers, directors, and coaches), encouraging multiple sources of leadership. The ontological approach is based on Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), who conceptualize leadership as “being-in-relation-to-others” through effort and struggles to construct and reconstruct relationships through conversations. Leadership research from the perspective of socially constructed relational leadership can provide important practical implications for professional sporting organizations by exploring practices that can contribute to more effective leadership (e.g., social processes, hiring, training, and development).

## **Methodology**

We use an exploratory case study to shed light on relational leadership in one high-performance sporting organization. Building theory from a single case offers the opportunity for deep insights into an under-explored phenomenon by gaining concrete, practical, and context-dependent knowledge; in other words, there is value in researching ‘particulars’ in addition to ‘universals’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

## **Data Collection**

### ***Case Organization and Participants***

The case study organization was selected from a short list of team-based professional sporting organizations that competed in professional domestic competitions and offered practical opportunities for collecting data during a season. We contacted 17 organizations and subsequently met with three short-listed organizations. The case at hand was selected from this list because of its enthusiasm for the project, ease of access to observe and interview research participants, and the time frame deemed appropriate for the research. Participants’ enthusiasm for the project was an early indication of critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004), demonstrating the potential for an information-rich case.

The selected organization is a professional netball team competing in Australia. Netball is traditionally a female-dominated team sport, featuring seven players on the court per team. It is particularly popular in Australia, New Zealand, and England. These countries have established professional and semi-professional associations that organize competitions in and between countries. The team trains full-time; therefore, players and performance staff have team commitments on most days during the week. The professional sporting organization, as a club, is an operational unit of the state sporting organization (SSO).

The team under focus experienced a recent transition in senior roles, including general manager, head coach, and captain; however, much of the playing group remained the same for the two previous seasons and the season we researched. All players (excluding the two injury replacement players) and all but one staff member had been with the team before the season studied. Therefore, all but one of the initial participants in the study worked together before the research commenced. Over the three years of relative stability, the team achieved three wins in the first year, six wins in the second, and won the championship in the third (the season studied), demonstrating significant improvement. Winning the championship in the year studied provided a unique opportunity to see how a successful organization practiced leadership.

None of the authors had an existing relationship with the case organization. The first author, who was responsible for all data gathering, commenced as an outsider with a privileged position to study the team interactions due to the support of the organization's management established in the prior meeting. However, due to the chosen data-gathering methods, the first author became increasingly familiar with the research participants. It can be argued that he eventually became an insider (Emerson et al., 2011). The other authors did not have such access and remained 'outsiders,' which counterbalanced the possibility of 'going native' (Ahuja et al., 2017). The first author discussed the data with the co-authors throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

A multi-level unit of analysis was employed according to the suggestion of Welty Peachey et al. (2015). The interview participants were selected based on various perspectives (with and without formal leadership positions). A total of 37 participants were included in the study: players (19), coaches (5), support staff (2), contractors (7), and managers (4). Observations and informal contextual interviews were conducted

with most members of the organization. Field notes from observations were skewed toward players and performance staff, as they were more numerous in the case organization.

### ***Data Gathering***

In line with studying leadership interactions in situ, fieldwork included observations, informal interviews, and semi-structured interviews (Sutherland, 2017), as summarized in Table 5. Fieldwork was completed by the first author over nine months, including pre-season, in-season, and post-season. The season-long study enabled patterns and routines in the data to emerge, thereby achieving data saturation.

**Table 5**

*Data Inventory Table*

Collection method	Recording method	Time period	Purpose	Amount
Observations	Field notes	1 month – 8 months	Observe leadership processes in context	95 hours, 87 typed pages (10 game days, 18 training sessions, 17 team meetings)
Video analysis	Video and field notes	4 months – 8 months	Observe leadership processes when unable to attend games, allow pausing and re-watching	20 hours (9 games)
Informal interviews	Field notes	0 months – 9 months	Understand the participants' accounts of what is occurring	>119 informal interviews (n = 37 participants)
Semi-structured interviews	Recorded and transcribed	3 months – 9 months	Detailed accounts of participant's experience and follow-up on observed scenarios	14 interviews (average 45 minutes)

**Observations.** Direct observations were conducted to be as unobtrusive as possible (Skinner et al., 2014), with notes taken during training sessions, team meetings, and at the competition venue during game day. The contexts to be observed were determined before commencing the research based on their potential for interaction among participants. One to three sessions per week were observed. The observation protocol was based on the orienting statement of leadership in interaction provided by Robinson: leadership as “express[ing] ideas in talk or action that are recognized as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them [team members]” (2001, p. 93). According to Miles et al. (2020), such an orienting statement is appropriate for recording events in an exploratory case such as this. Field notes collected from observations could not be recorded verbatim because multiple conversations occurred simultaneously.

**Informal Interviews.** Once rapport and trust were built, participants sat regularly and talked with the first author, providing them with the opportunity to ask about their interpretations of what was taking place at the time. Informal interviews were held in situ, posed little structure, and enabled the researcher to get closer to understanding the world of the participants (Skinner, 2013). Notes from informal interviews and observational notes were incorporated into the research journal. Informal interviews also followed up on specific observed events while allowing the participants to direct the discussion according to their accounts (Skinner, 2013).

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** The first author conducted 14 semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes each and followed a consistent structure informed by a protocol based on relational leadership literature developed before research commenced (Skinner, 2013). Each interview followed a similar format: first, asking about the participants’ experience in joining the team, what experience they

had with the team, and then asking about recent and specific examples of events and interactions in the team. These questions encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and how they shaped their understanding of leadership (Alvesson et al., 2016). Field notes and interview transcripts were typed, corrected, and entered into NVivo for further analysis.

### **Data Condensation and Analysis**

We followed the three stages for analyzing qualitative data described by Miles et al. (2020): data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions, achieved through an abductive process.

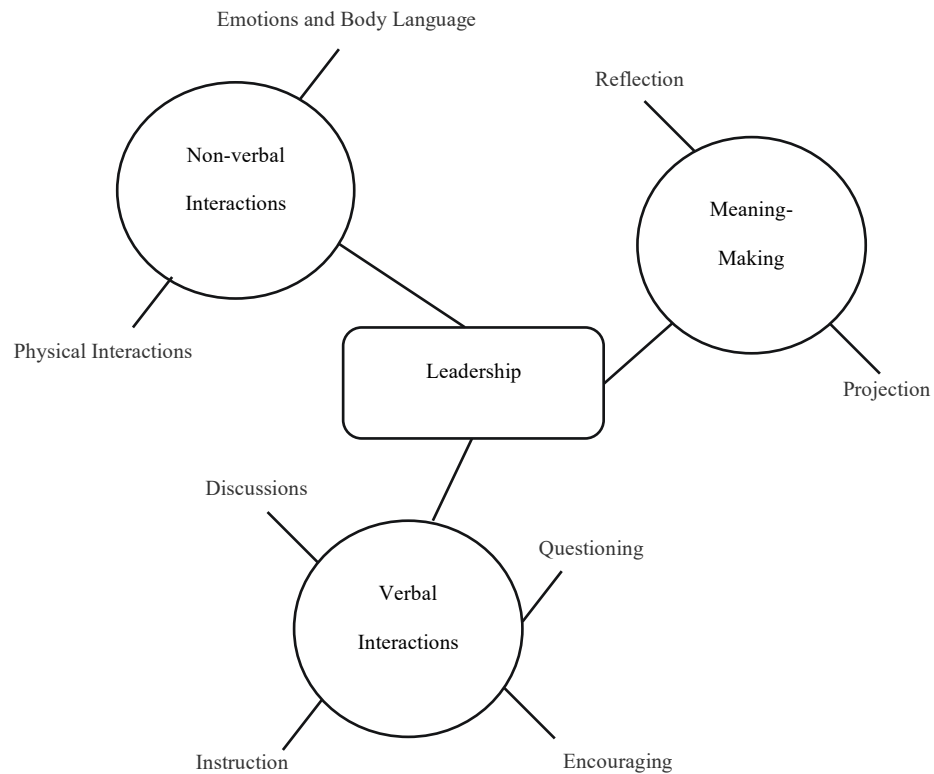
Data condensation is the process of determining from the data that are significant to the study, thereby strengthening the data corpus (Miles et al., 2020). The first level of data condensation involved the researcher selecting the field notes to take (Emerson et al., 2011). As recording field notes requires the researcher to select the most relevant details, writing field notes serve as an implicit first analysis and is subject to researcher bias (Emerson et al., 2011). To minimize bias in recording field notes, the first author avoided explicit judgments of effective or ineffective leadership and focused on the content and context of the interactions (Silverman, 2015). Field notes evolved throughout the season: early notes were extensive and general, whereas later field notes were more specific and descriptive. This is a natural progression in observations as the researcher becomes aware of typical patterns (Emerson et al., 2011). In these field notes, the first author aimed to record the interactions between people that influence social order (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Reflections made in the research notebook began to identify potential patterns, which often evolved into themes and provided the opportunity to search for cases that went against earlier observations.

We began the initial coding during the nine months of data collection; thus, the recording of field notes was informed by the ongoing analysis of the data (Silverman, 2015). The data corpus was analyzed concurrently commencing by assigning descriptive codes to identify the topic of the data being analyzed (Miles et al., 2020). During this phase, basic codes were assigned to describe the type and nature of interactions. For example, types of interaction included players high-five after a goal, coach instructing the team, positional groups discussing the plan, and player questions. The nature of the interaction was coded as positive reinforcement, critical feedback, encouragement, or tactical talk.

During the second coding cycle, we identified patterns in leadership practices and variations in those patterns (Miles et al., 2020). By reviewing the literature and data contained within our initial codes, we collapsed the basic codes into patterns. For example, the pattern ‘discussions’ was the aggregate of initial codes: positional groups discuss the plan, collaboration, planning, talking about past, talking about future, talking process, talking about other teams. Based on further iterations between the data and literature, we identified eight patterns (practices): discussions, questioning, instruction, encouragement, reflection, projection, physical interactions, emotions, and body language. Through continuous abduction (i.e., moving back and forth between data and literature), these practices were divided into three categories: verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making (see Figure 1). We observed leadership as a skillful performance in these interdependent practices.

**Figure 1**

*Leadership Practices Summary*



**Findings and Discussion**

*Verbal Interactions*

We observed almost continuous verbal interaction within the team. Verbal interactions describe the use of language between people to construct leadership. In relational leadership literature, verbal interactions have been conceptualized as the primary relational practice of leadership (Crevani, 2019; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Most studies have emphasized the importance of talking with (dialogue) rather than talking to (monologue) for relational leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The mutuality of dialogue and the ability to respond to statements allow participants to contribute to and arrive at a shared meaning. However, in the case at hand, monologic interactions involving talking to others were also observed. For example, there was a certain preference for monologic (direct)



interactions in high-pressure situations, such as during games, as expressed by Interviewee Four (player):

So, during the game, give it to me direct. If I am in a huddle, direct. I just want as few words in my head as possible when I'm out there. But other places where I can practice things, so like at training. I don't want someone just to be direct... in that situation for me, I need 'Okay, what do you think about this?'

The data showed that the monologue still contributes to developing shared meanings, as it is part of an ongoing conversation and building shared understanding. Monologues and dialogues are not mutually exclusive in relationally oriented organizations, as the context may not always be appropriate for dialogue. An important part of leadership work is understanding conversations and responding to how they unfold (Crevani, 2019). Accordingly, effective leadership work requires understanding whether dialogic or monologic interactions are more appropriate in a given context. In the following, the specific leadership practices based on verbal interactions are discussed, including dialogic practices (discussions and questioning) and monologic practices (encouragement and instruction).

**Discussions.** Discussions describe dialogic interactions in which participants mutually contribute to establishing shared meanings. Discussions mostly took place when there was time; for example, during training sessions when players and coaches could pause, slow down, and discuss activities. The availability of time allowed talking with rather than talking to; hence, discussions were regularly practiced throughout meetings and training, while discussions on game days were limited to pre-game, post-game, and during breaks. For example, during planning meetings, players worked in positional groups to create a game plan for the upcoming opposition rather than relying on the unilateral direction the coaches and performance analysts provided. Based on

reviewing video footage, each group cooperatively completed the allocated activities through iterative discussion and formed a game plan in collaboration with the coaches and performance analysts.

Discussions were also evident during on-court training sessions, in which positional groups could practice the strategies they had developed during team meetings. In one example, players formed three positional groups to practice their strategies for the upcoming game. Each group role-played the strategy using the court space, initially discussing and then walking through the plan before practicing at a higher pace and intensity. Coaches observed and sometimes provided feedback and guidance during discussions and play enactments. Following the training session, players continued to discuss tactics, performance, playing preferences, and what others did well. This way, insights into strategy and game formation were developed collectively during formal training sessions and afterward. In other words, the role of the coach was to provide an external view and facilitate these group discussions, thus creating space for players to demonstrate responsibility for the development of game strategy and activity formation. Interviewee One (player) highlighted the importance of the process of creating and practicing strategies for constructing shared understanding. When referring to the game plan, they stressed, “we all wrote it together... so there is [sic] no excuses to not know what to do.” Interviewee Seven (staff) indicated the importance of these team-based discussions: “it is a group setting, no one is afraid to talk... they’re not going to get shut down... but previously we had a bit of a hierarchy.” Discussions allowed players and coaches to contribute to problem-solving and strategy development by constructing shared meanings. Through discussions, team members could express their ideas and discuss those of others; ideas carried forward into action became a shared understanding.

**Questioning.** Questioning is a practice to open and sustained dialogue. Using a question rather than a known statement sought affirmation while encouraging a democratic process of co-creating the game plan through further discussion with other team members (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). For example, during a team meeting, one positional group presented a game strategy that they had developed for their group to the rest of the team and the coaches. One player from the group presented their work; the other drew what the speaker was saying on the whiteboard, while a third group member communicated with the rest of the team through eye contact and gestures. As they were presented, a player from outside the positional group asked for clarification and more detail on multiple points. These questions encouraged the presenting group to provide more detail. Another player from outside the group contributed a point to help build on the strategy, and this process was repeated when other players added their questions. Through questioning, the strategy presentation became interactive as multiple group members helped facilitate it, and all participants in the room came to share an understanding of the strategy.

Participants engaged in questioning demonstrated relational responsibility by actively seeking the perspective of others (Crevani, 2019). Initiating verbal interactions through questioning decreased the attention paid to those with formal roles; seeking the perspective of others perpetuated the inclusive nature of the team, encouraging contributions from many actors. For example, during a break in a game, the coach asked a positional group, “What is [opponents name] good at?” and then followed up the answer by asking, “so what are we going to do?” This encouraged the group to formulate a plan rather than being told how to respond. Asking questions empowered others, and constructing a solution mutually created a shared understanding (Seers & Chopin, 2012).

**Encouraging.** Encouraging describes the monologic process in which one person verbally rewards the actions of others. Encouraging usually did not enable a response but built on previous conversations as participants were rewarded (verbally) for desirable behaviors by the team. For example, the coach addressed the team at a break in the game: “Good job keep it up, great job in isolating in attack, [while looking at one player] just change direction, [player name] get involved, [looking at another player] you got this.” Through encouragement, participants understood the actions that other team members and coaches considered desirable, thus recognizing what they should continue doing for the team’s benefit. In a team meeting held before the season, players revisited their ‘one percenter’s’ (small actions they had written down as commitments for how they could improve). Collectively, players took this as an opportunity to recognize the actions of others. For example, one player encouraged another as they noted that their food choices had improved. A second noted that a team member improved their recovery, allowing them to be more consistently on the court for training. A third encouraged another team member to hold the group accountable and give ‘difficult’ feedback. Through encouragement within the social context of the team, participants could see desirable behaviors, informing them how they should act in a social setting. Thus, encouragement is an example of how a monologue contributes to larger conversations, as its meaning is related to specific prior actions or conversations. Thus, encouragement facilitates future collective practices and shared meanings. Dachler and Hosking (1995) describe this as multilogue: “participants in multiloguing are engaging in ongoing processes in which they take for granted some shared agreement” (p. 5).

**Instruction.** Instructions are distinctly monologic as they are directive from one person to another. They gave future actions or directions to others or the group as a

whole. Instructions were most evident when the time was limited. This was particularly evident during the games. For example, a defensive player shouted at a fellow defender, “two hands,” instructing them to defend with both hands. When the other team took a shot, they shouted, “rebounds, rebounds, rebounds,” reminding the defenders to position themselves for the rebound. Attacking enabled even shorter instructions, with players calling “yep” to other players to seek a pass or even making a loud noise to call for the ball. Additionally, players used their codenames to call set plays: a one- or two-word phrase was called out, usually the responsibility of a player in a particular position, and other players knew what to do based on previous discussions and practice. This demonstrates a commitment to perform as a team in highly time-sensitive situations.

Instructions follow up or build on previous conversations and, in this way, help construct meaning. Additionally, they help participants understand desirable or undesirable actions, thus improving their shared understanding. Given the requirement of the team to adapt to strict time pressure in games, instruction provides an efficient practice to respond collectively to emerging challenges.

### ***Non-verbal Interactions***

Our findings support Ryömä and Satama (2019), who argue that leadership is relationally constructed through the interplay of verbal and non-verbal interactions. Non-verbal interactions typically support verbal interactions. They include the display of emotions (body language) and physical interactions. Thus, leadership may be constructed through dialogue and supported by appropriate emotional responses, physical interactions, and bodily positioning. As Küpers (2013) argues, “bodily gestures and postures, facial mimic, tones of voice, and other forms of expression are part of an embodied practice of leadership” (p. 336). The construction of shared understanding through non-verbal interactions is indicative of relational leadership.

**Emotions and Body Language.** This practice refers to participants consciously and subconsciously expressing emotions through body language, which affects others. Subconsciously expressed emotion is intuitive in response to what is happening; for example, the coaches, staff, and players cheering from the bench following a good play. Consciously expressed emotions consider the response of others. For example, when someone makes a mistake during training, the body language of other participants turns positive to encourage the person who made a mistake to move on.

Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that “the masking of strong emotions in favor of the community” is critical in constructing relational leadership (p. 713). In one instance, one of the players received news that they had been badly injured and would not be able to play for several weeks. The news was devastating for this player. However, instead of focusing on their negative emotions, the injured player (Interviewee Three) described their perceived responsibility to be positive for the sake of the team, despite being consumed by the bad news of a long-term injury:

The day I found out it was like 10 to 12 weeks [period of injury], I was really distraught. [The physiotherapist] told me, then we went up to training and I was like, ‘right we’re training now.’ You’ve got to like switch off, you need to support. Because the first game was in six days.

In this case, it was evident that the conscious display of positive emotions and masking of negative feelings evoked a positive response in the group. Interviewee Two (player) reflected on the attitude of the injured player: “[They] haven’t been playing, but [they’ve] had a really big influence on the team I think, [they] are the one who is injured, but [they] are just so positive.” Thus, displaying or masking emotions can contribute to the social bonding of a team and the construction of shared meanings. In

this case, the sense that we are in this together no matter what happens to individual players.

**Physical Interactions.** Physical interactions refer to interactions between people that involve physical gestures and body positioning. Examples include high-fives, hugs, hand-pointing, and eye contact. They are important because they reinforce collective practices and shared meanings. Physical interactions are inherent in a team sport, which requires participants to move in relation to each other rather than independently (Landkammer et al., 2019). Ryömä and Satama (2019) describe how players become aware of the “nuances of gesture, movement, proximity, and synchronisation” (p. 716) to empathize with others and respond in relation to them.

Physical interactions, such as high-fives, were used to form routines, encourage others, and show support. High-fives, for example, were significant because of their repetition and place in forming and sustaining routines. After a training drill or a quarter in the game, players and coaches usually high-five each other as a form of encouragement and recognition that the agreed strategy or game plan has worked. The omission of high-fives signifies that something is not normal or that a review is needed. This is because the routine is part of the team’s shared understanding and sustaining or breaking the routine has implicit consequences for participants. Similarly, high-fives and hugs became a routinized practice after training drills, celebrating good performances, or consoling adverse outcomes. The importance of physical interaction was recognized during the video review of a particular match. The performance analyst identified a lack of enthusiasm, high-fives, and celebrations when the team scored, extending their lead in the game to eight goals. Coaches and players then recognized this lack of enthusiasm and physical interaction as a possible reason for the subsequent momentum change in the game, which eventually led to a two-goal loss for the team.

This triggered a revision of the game's strategy and the need to make sense of what had happened.

Similarly, bodily positioning supports verbal interactions in leadership constructions. For example, during a training session, coaches and team members would move about the environment to form specific interactive spaces. Working with other individuals involves moving closer to them. Coaches and a group of players working on a set of moves would create a shared physical space, sometimes using physical rehearsal to discuss what the group was meant to achieve. When addressing the entire team, individuals would gain a central position on the court for shorter messages, and when more instruction is required, the group is asked into a huddle. Küpers (2013) suggests, "gestures and postures, facial mime, and other forms of bodied expression such as tone, breath, body alignment, energetic presence, attuning, spacing, and timing and are used for enacting possibilities of coordination and collaboration in leadership" (p. 339). Aligned with Küpers (2013), Biehl (2019), and Ryömä and Satama (2019), we found that leadership is constructed through the interplay between verbal and non-verbal interactions.



**Meaning-Making** Finally, scholars have argued that leadership becomes significant based on intersubjective meaning creation (Billsberry et al., 2018; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Meindl, 1995). Meaning-making accounts for taken for granted agreements that result in a shared understanding (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Meaning -making concerns how participants implicitly construct meaning through social processes. Hosking (2011) states, “in the spirit of relational leadership, actions are meaningful and purposeful only in relation to other actions” (p. 712). By observing interactions and speaking with the participants, we found that experience and intuition played a significant role in determining how the participants perceived themselves as a team and subsequently interpreted the interactions. In this section, we explore the practice of reflection, which is related to experience, and that of projection, which is related to intuition.

Reflection is concerned with knowing the social order (Dachler & Hosking, 1995), relational achievement (Crevani, 2019), positioning (Hersted & Gergen, 2013), and bodily refinement (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Projection is concerned with moral responsibility (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), associating meaning with interaction (Carroll & Simpson, 2012), and resonating (Crevani, 2019).

**Reflection.** Reflection refers to the practice of making sense of experience. Reflection can enhance leadership by considering both personal and collective experiences (Carroll et al., 2008; Frawley et al., 2018). Reflecting on a team experience helps team members understand their interactions with others. For example, Interviewee Ten (staff) reflected on the collective experience of being part of the team and, in doing so, recognized that even though differences between players in a team occur, they do not obstruct due to the mutual appreciation of relationships in the team: “even when the team has their differences in their opinions and thoughts, it doesn’t impact the actual relationships between people. I think everyone still gets along and genuinely likes each

other and likes working with each other.” In this example, reflecting on the quality of the relationships enabled participants to handle challenges collaboratively with others.

Reflecting on shared adversity enhanced positive experiences. Interviewee Five (coach) reflected on the excitement expressed after the team’s round one win in the previous season: “we did stacks on and everything... when we won, there was just this feeling of relief that we can do it.” At the time a new staff member to the club asked Interviewee Five why there was such excitement, to which Interviewee Five reflected that it was because of the “depth of feeling that had gone on... it was this relief of it’s going to be ok, we’re actually better.” In this case, the collective experience was understood by participants who had been with the team during previous adversity but not completely grasped by those newer to the organization. The “depth of feeling” represented an appreciation of the relationship between organizational members that motivated them to overcome adversity. This is an example of relational achievement (Crevani, 2019); the actions of the team were given meaning by reflecting on their shared experiences.

When reflection was conducted socially through interactions, it enabled team members to reach a mutual understanding. Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that leadership practices are shaped by reflecting on “multiple and subtle experience between self and others” (p. 4). Reflection was observed to be an individual and social process, highlighted during an early performance review session facilitated by the head and assistant coaches following a pre-season game. As the first author entered the session, players were quietly writing in their personal notebooks while sitting in a semi-circle formation arranged around a TV. These notes were based on their performances during the game. Once the allocated reflection time was complete, players progressively spoke about their performance and what they had noted, further prompted by the head

and assistant coaches for details. In this session, players identified whether they won their positions, what they did well, and what they could improve. During this part of the session, players were very specific in reflecting on their performance or their “connection” with another position. However, small-group reflections emerged about team performance when the session progressed to reviewing the video games. Small-group reflections were a pattern in team meetings throughout the season, formed either through positional groups or an intentional combination of positions to encourage collaboration. Group reflection enabled the team to discuss each other’s interpretation of the team’s performance and included how they worked together, communicated, and responded to challenges. These individual and group reflections facilitated the construction of relational leadership. By collectively evaluating performance, the group can arrive at shared meanings through interaction and struggle (Carroll & Simpson, 2012) to develop revised or new strategies and game plans.

**Projection.** Projection is the practice of making sense of the future objectives that participants and the team aim to achieve. Projections require planning and responding to emerging challenges. Hersted and Gergen (2013) stress that people sometimes require intuition to make meaning based on the perceived consequences of their actions. For example, the team captain described the importance of not relying entirely on previous experience, to be ready to embrace the “natural flow of things,” in particular by providing the opportunity for others in the team to contribute. The team captain explains that their decision to lead or be led by others often evolves naturally: “I’m trying to think of an example where I’ve had to follow, or I’ve had to lead... it all just sort of happens naturally, whatever way it happens” (Interviewee Six, team captain). In this example, the captain is intuitively conscious of the consequences of the unfolding interaction, being aware of and responsive to the emerging social order. By

projecting a desired future state in which everyone contributes, they can participate without the compulsion to take control and lead others.

Projection is also used to construct a desired future state socially. This involves collectively discussing their objectives. For example, during the pre-season and early season, participants spoke about wanting to be recognized as genuine title contenders by the media and other external stakeholders. In this example, the participants projected a desired future state, a common goal that they shared but had not experienced. Through interaction, participants socially construct frames of reference, a process of selecting what is important (Crevani, 2019). The work of relational leadership requires interaction to move from one frame to another (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). This work began early in the season, as demonstrated by the pre-match talk moments before the round one game. The vice-captain of the team read out a story that had been written as a news article published at the end of the upcoming season. The story articulated the strategy the team had developed to help them reflectively win the championship, looking back on the season that had not yet happened. The story served as a reminder of what the team needed to do and how the strategy would help them achieve their goal. The mutual objective was to win the championship-guided action when the team faced injuries and losses throughout the season. As a result of these conversations about how they could win, participants moved from a frame of reference as ‘the young team with potential’ to a new frame as the ‘potential champions.’ Based on this frame, the conversations projected the desired future state of winning the championship and being ‘world’s best.’ The sustained frame shared by the team of being ‘world’s best’ despite significant injuries to key players provided a shared understanding to guide the team moving forward. Thus, the practices of reflection and projection enabled participants to make

sense of interactions based on previous experience and to share a desired future state, both of which supported the construction of relational leadership.

### **Summary**

We present leadership as a relational and collective performance of interactions and meaning-making. Specifically, our empirical findings contribute to advancing leadership theory and provide recommendations that can be implemented. Our key finding suggests that leadership in the case organization was collectively constructed through three key practices: verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making. These practices did not occur in isolation but were embedded intersubjectively within interactions, demonstrating the multiple ways participants constructed and reconstructed meanings (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Patterns and routines developed through interactions are collectively understood through their shared meanings. Discussing ideas led to them being accepted by the team and then incorporated into action or acknowledged verbally through consensus. These social processes enabled the team to navigate challenges, including the appointment of a new captain, long-term injuries (including those of the captain), the introduction of replacement players, and the pressure of performance and expectation. Ultimately, the organization was successful, winning the premiership. These challenges influenced the practice of leadership, which was dynamic and continuously under construction. This is consistent with the important premise that relational leadership is interdependent with context (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

The findings corroborate and expand the existing relational leadership literature and provide a novel contribution to sport management research. Leadership is constructed through mundane everyday interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). By exploring how the three aggregated practices evolve in situ, we contribute to existing

research on relational leadership that views leadership as constructed through discourse (Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), embodied interactions (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ryömä & Satama, 2019), and involving meanings interpreted and reinforced through interactions (Carroll & Simpson, 2012; Dachler & Hosking, 1995). The eight identified practices, while distinct, were not performed in isolation; rather, they complemented each other. For example, through interactions, participants make meaning collectively by verbally building on and challenging contributions by others while also engaging in the nuance of non-verbal interactions, as demonstrated by the example in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Illustrative Data Example from Field Notes*

Practice	Example data
Instruction	Performance analysis session is set up in the board room; players and coaches are spread around a large meeting table, with the players divided into positional groups. The performance analyst provides laptops with video footage of a previous game, worksheets, and instructions that facilitate the session.
Discussion	Each group is made up of three or four participants. The three groups first discuss the instructions to ensure everyone understands the task. Discussions are iterative; ideas are built on ideas by engaging within the small groups. Once the positional groups had formed strong ideas that were recorded on the worksheets, inter-group collaboration emerged. The mids collaborated with the defenders and attackers to share their views and hear ideas. Mostly the players tried to solve problems among themselves; however, on one occasion, the players sought feedback from a coach. After small groups completed their reviews, each group took turns presenting to the whole team and coaches. The first person to talk typically took the most responsibility for presenting the strategy; however, each person contributed at some stage. Each group took turns talking about how they could beat their upcoming opponent, and each identified practical and clear examples for the group. While the presenting group was responsible for discussing

Practice	Example data
	their strategies, the presentations were interactive, with players and coaches joining in on particular points of interest.
Emotions and Body Language	Within their small groups players collaborate on a review, critique, and appraisal of their opposition. Each group member is engaged and positioned to see the computer screen and worksheet.
Questioning	Ideas within the subgroups were generally raised in the form of a question rather than known statements. Ideas presented as a question aim to seek affirmation from others or invite rebuttal and further discussion from team members. Affirmations of ideas are confirmed when they are written down on the worksheet.
Encouraging	At times the discussion shifts from reviewing the footage to discussing what someone on the team does well.
Reflection	Reflection formed the basis for how to exploit strengths and beat the upcoming opposition.
Physical Interactions	The presentation of the strategy was not only verbal. Visually, worksheets displayed the tactics, and team members acted out some ideas. Good points were also acknowledged with smiles, gestures, and eye contact.
Projection	The coach had concluding comments about their perception of the high quality each group had produced. The team left the room with one player singing a tune: “we’re going to beat the [upcoming team’s name].”

In this example, players and coaches engage in interdependent practices to collectively contribute to developing the game strategy by building on previous conversations and consolidating shared understanding before completing the team meeting. We argue that verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making interdependently construct ordinary and extraordinary interactions that are entangled in relational leadership. Hence, leadership is constructed through ongoing, seemingly mundane interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The example in Table 6 demonstrates a collective approach to leadership, in which many participants contribute to social order. In this way, leadership is practiced through interactions and sustained within the relationships between people.

From a practical standpoint, our findings provide valuable advice for current and future practitioners in sport management and other management contexts. We highlight the practical contributions that have emerged from our findings for professional sporting organizations at three levels: organizations, operational subgroups, and individuals.

Practical implications at the organizational level are related to leadership practices, leadership development, and recruitment and retention. As Ferkins, Shilbury et al. (2018) noted, there is little evidence to suggest how collective leadership is developed. However, our findings reveal that developing leadership practices involves creating events (e.g., meetings) that foster collaboration between operational subgroups. We argue that such events should enhance interactions by allowing time and space for organizational members to co-construct ideas through the practices identified in our findings. According to our findings on meaning-making, leadership development activities should involve interactions between all organizational members (e.g., off-field and on-field staff) to encourage the emergence of multilateral and intersubjective leadership patterns. This is supported by Carroll et al. (2008), who argue that leadership development is interdependent between the self, others, and context. Recruitment and retention are organizational practices that can foster relational leadership. When recruiting, it is important to consider the skill of the individual, as well as how they will fit in with and contribute to the current shared understanding of the team. This is the case for all roles; in our case, we found that non-playing staff can contribute perspectives that players cannot (e.g., life experiences). It would take time for recruits to share their understanding with others. Therefore, it should be a priority for others to get to know about and work with recruits. In our case, shared understanding developed within a relatively stable organizational structure over three years. The findings demonstrate that retention contributed to the success of the team. However, this may not



always be the optimal strategy. According to Arnold et al. (2018), leaders in professional sporting organizations can also negatively influence others. In such circumstances, healthy attrition could assist in constructing new understanding if participants share common objectives and are guided by appropriate social support.

Many operational subgroups exist in professional sporting organizations among performance staff, managers, coaches, and playing groups. These operational subgroups work closely together to ensure the success of the team because of the value created by their functional units. Collaboration should be the greatest at this level to ensure that shared understandings are created between those who work closely together. Our findings revealed that the time spent interacting supported the development of sub-group-level shared understanding. Time should be made for regular sub-group interactions that involve reflection and projection to discuss experiences and what sub-group members would like to achieve. This could occur during operational group meetings or before and after other events (e.g., games and practice). Through increased opportunities for interaction, participants can struggle to create shared understandings to guide further action rather than operating on independent assumptions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Doing so increases the likelihood that participants within subgroups share the same understanding of achieving success and have the opportunity to contribute their ideas.

Individuals should consider leadership as a process of constructing meaning with others through interaction. Relational leadership does not suggest that hierarchy exists; for example, professional sport managers and coaches have significant formal authority (e.g., hiring, firing, and promoting). Individuals can contribute to leadership practices by influencing what leadership means to others in the organization (Billsberry et al., 2018; Raelin, 2016). Our findings demonstrate that formal hierarchy can be

softened by inclusive practices, such as questioning, discussions, physical interactions, expressing emotions, and using body language. Individuals with formal positions of power (e.g., general managers and coaches) should focus on creating consensus on strategy and problem-solving through the use of these practices. Individuals should focus on ensuring that managers, coaches, staff, and players understand how to progress as a team. Further, those with less power (e.g., junior staff and players) must take responsibility for sharing their perspectives if they are to contribute to constructing meaning with others. The relational approach encourages collaboration, and the emergence of multiple perspectives allows sport managers to better understand others in the organization.

In presenting these findings, we acknowledge that our selected case organization represents a relationally oriented organization. By sharing the view that ‘we are a team of leaders,’ the collective agency is promoted, and formal authority and hierarchy are softened. This may yield different results for organizations that promote formal authority and discourage collective agency. We also note that being relationally oriented does not exclude the existence of formal authority or hierarchy. The case organization appoints formal leaders, and a hierarchical chain of authority and decision-making exists among the team staff. However, instead of relying on the formally appointed leaders and formal chains of authority and decision-making, the case shows that relational leadership is constructed collectively through three key practices, which enable and promote the contributions of multiple individuals who subsequently feel encouraged and capable of contributing collectively to leadership.

## **Conclusions**

By exploring the construction of leadership in situ for one season in a high-performing sport organization, the continuous process of interactions and meaning-

making contributing to relational forms of leadership became evident. The team participants constructed meaning from verbal and non-verbal interactions; the constructed meanings were then expressed through interaction, forming ongoing leadership practices. Verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making occurred simultaneously, interdependently, and repeatedly. Throughout the season, participants negotiated interactions at the moment, reflecting on the experience from the past and projecting a desired future position. The participants maintained the goal of winning the championship while confronting challenges that required adaptation to social processes. It is likely that part of their success was based on the congruence of leadership practice, as verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making aligned, creating consistency that enabled participants to interpret unfolding situations based on shared understanding. However, we do not suggest that the team's success was due to leadership alone, nor that success always requires effective leadership. Many other factors are required for success in professional sporting teams, including skill, game plan, management, and prevention of injuries, to name a few.

Drawing on relational approaches to leadership and analyzing naturalistic data, we argue that leadership is practiced through interactions and sustained through relationships. This approach emphasizes the contextuality of leadership. For practitioners in professional sporting organizations, our findings may influence leadership practices, leadership development, recruitment, and retention. Viewing leadership as relationally constructed encourages organizational members to be aware of how they and others influence the social order, regardless of their formal position. The case demonstrates the importance of a relational approach to leadership in the context of professional sport, highlighting that leadership is always happening through often mundane interactions and is mutually constructed by multiple organizational actors. We

demonstrated this by showing how the ongoing cycle of verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making leads to the co-construction of leadership. Leadership is not only about the extraordinary acts of leaders that we can easily recall; it is also about nuanced verbal and non-verbal interactions, collective experience, and intuition in making sense of situations that call for leadership work. The processual nature of leadership sheds light on collective, contextual, and temporal dimensions that require further exploration.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study is based on the case of a professional sporting organization; hence, we acknowledge the limited generalizability of our findings. First, we acknowledge that our case organization, like many professional sporting teams, represents a homogenous group, similar in age, gender, culture, and occupation. This is both a strength and a weakness of the study. As it is reflective of most sporting teams, the findings may provide a generalizable practical understanding only to other homogenous teams. A contribution of this case is that it is centered on a female sporting team, supplementing a field of studies predominantly conducted with male participants (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). Future research might focus on comparisons between male and female teams in a similar type of sport context to offer insights on whether there are specific differences in terms of how relational leadership takes place in teams of female players versus teams of male players (see, e.g., Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Second, a distinct lack of conflict between participants was observed throughout the study. Therefore, we could not explore conflict resolution. The lack of conflict may be due to the participants being aware of the first author's presence and wanting to represent themselves in a particular way or due to the success of the team during the study period. When questioned in interviews, participants spoke of differences being

resolved collaboratively and issues being raised before they became significant, indicating that conflict did exist but did not inhibit the team. Future research could focus on how relational leadership unfolds in less harmonious team contexts.

Third, future research could explore the relational practices of leading longitudinally to explore historical paths that enhance or prevent relational leadership. Such studies could provide deeper insights into how our observed practices interact over time and then compare different outcomes to different pathways.

This study focused on social processes through qualitative methods; however, mixed methods approaches, such as social network analysis, could be employed to map and locate leadership within complex professional sporting organizations to reveal the co-dependence of organizational members/units (Fransen et al., 2014). A greater understanding of the social processes of leadership in professional sporting organizations can be achieved through the accumulation of cases exploring different contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This study discussed leadership practices from a relational perspective. A further prospect for sport management scholars is exploring the practical implications of a relational approach to leadership development. Scholars can build on the body of research by considering the micro, meso, and macro levels of meaning-making social processes, paying particular attention to temporality and contextuality.

## **Chapter Four: Leadership Development**

### **Preamble**

The findings on how leadership is practiced in the first paper inform the second. In the second paper, participants' experiences with the team were explored to understand how shared meaning is negotiated in the team over time, how these shared meanings influence leadership action, and how shared meanings are developed. This study contributes to leadership development theory by using a relational leadership lens to analyze participants' experiences of the past, present, and future in the team. The findings from paper one on how leadership is practiced inspired the analysis for the second paper. Interactions happen at the moment, and each interaction is different; however, shared understandings develop over time to inform interactions. A shared understanding provides an opportunity for leadership development that increases the overall capacity for leadership in the social context of an organization. The temporal nature of experience is valued in the paper, as participants reflect on experiences in the past, future objectives, and their perceptions of the present. By engaging in the social context through interactions, participants come to share their understanding of the team that informs leadership actions.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore leadership development in the case of a championship-winning professional sporting organization. Leadership relationality and temporality concepts were applied to data collected from a season-long study. Leadership scholars have reasoned that leadership development takes time; however, existing empirical research does not study time rigorously. Relational leadership argues that leadership is co-constructed by people who create shared meanings through interactions. The empirical focus of this project is participants' qualitative accounts of how leadership is experienced over time. The findings revealed three themes that describe leadership development in the organization: learning from experience, development priorities, and sharing expectations. The findings are supported by existing relational leadership literature, which suggests that leadership can be developed through three practices: movement between frames, positioning and resonating. We provide recommendations for developing leadership in professional sport organizations.

## **Leadership Development: Relationality and Temporality in Professional Sport**

Leadership development has recently gained attention in sport management as an organizational process that can create a competitive advantage (Frawley et al., 2018). Socially constructed relational leadership has been introduced in sport management literature and presents opportunities for leadership development research (Whales et al., 2021). A relational approach to leadership development concerns social processes that enable groups to become intelligible in action by developing social capital (McCauley & Palus, 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore relational leadership development in the case of a championship-winning professional sporting organization. Day (2000) distinguishes between leader development and leadership development. Leader development is an individual leader's intrapersonal development. Leadership development refers to the development of interpersonal leadership capacity in an organization. Carroll and Smolović Jones (2018) describe leadership development as a felt experience involving aesthetic knowledge of how to lead in particular contexts.

Traditional notions of leadership view it as temporal, contextual, and located in the minds of individual leaders, which is not congruent with collective leadership constructions (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Over the previous two decades, there has been a trend in leadership studies toward relational, emergent, and collective forms of leadership, which is reflected in sport management studies as scholars have researched shared leadership (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Kerwin & Bopp, 2014; Svensson et al., 2019), leadership from the perspective of followers (Arnold et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010), and identity constructions of leaders (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013; Banu-Lawrence et al., 2020). The shift in how scholars conceptualize leadership offers new opportunities to build a theory on leadership development (Gronn, 2002). In this paper, we are particularly interested in the concept of relational leadership, which



recognizes leadership as constructed in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Whales et al., 2021). Further, programs and developmental experiences take time to facilitate meaningful improvements, and some interventions are more effective than others (Day et al., 2014). Consequently, not all experiences are equal, and time is not a sufficient measure of experience (McCall, 2010). This is partly because, as Lord (2018) argues, time may be experienced as nonlinear, with individuals and groups being able to focus on some experiences more than others and potential futures influencing thoughts and actions in the present.

Leadership development has received limited empirical investigation in professional sporting organizations, despite leadership development being a source of a sustainable competitive advantage (Frawley et al., 2018). Research on leadership development offers an opportunity for professional sporting organizations to understand how to best develop leadership in their teams, including the supporting structures around the playing groups. By investigating developmental experiences, sport management researchers can better understand how leadership development manifests itself. Of particular concern is developing leadership to achieve team success. This study contributes to the theory of leadership development in professional sport teams and organizations by exploring relationality and temporality in this context.

To explore how teams construct leadership over time, we drew on the concept of relational leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Whales et al., 2021). Relational leadership encourages thinking about leadership as constructed through interactions between people in social contexts (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Leadership then occurs when shared understandings are constructed to advance social order (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). In the professional sport context, Whales et al. (2021) have argued that leadership is constructed interdependently between people in a social context through

verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and shared meanings. The relational approach offers opportunities for further exploring leadership development in sporting organizations. Understanding leadership as an interaction process emphasizes temporality as it takes time for leadership to emerge through relationships. During one season, we paid close attention to relational processes and the dimension of time in developing leadership. We analyze team members' experience of time, which is predominantly concerned with how they make sense of the past, present, and future (Czarniawska, 2004). This approach is distinct from conceptualizing time as linear, which Day et al. (2014) argue is an insufficient proxy for experience. Data for this study were collected through observations, informal interviews, and semi-structured interviews with members of a professional sport team during the championship season. We aimed to gather the experiences and understandings of the research participants about leadership emergence and development in the team. We find that participants use events to describe their developing understanding of leadership and often reflect on these socially, through team review and planning sessions, training, and breaks during games. By studying developmental experiences over time, we investigate how the team negotiated emerging challenges to achieve success.

We contribute to the research on leadership development in the context of sporting organizations by arguing that leadership development in the team context requires negotiation of the past, present, and future. Three key practices enable relational leadership development in teams: movement between frames, positioning, and resonance (Crevani, 2019). People in social contexts construct frames to make sense of the past, present, and desires for the future, which becomes significant through collective meaning-making (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). For leadership development to be effective, organizations must identify appropriate strategies based on what is needed

to reach the desired future state (Wallace et al., 2021). Shared understanding facilitates the mutual construction of leadership by guiding participants in how to act. Participants position themselves in an interaction according to their shared understanding, demonstrating how interactions build on previous conversations (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Relationally, making sense of the past and the future requires engaging discursively with others to create shared understandings. Engaging in social processes over time allows people to understand patterns and the emergence of ideas in their social contexts (Hosking, 2011). This is an important contribution to research on leadership development, as leadership development is achieved through what has happened and understanding what could happen and making sense of future uncertainty (Lord, 2018). Shared meaning enables team members to understand how their interactions shape their social realities, resulting in leadership development (Ryömä & Satama, 2019).

This paper begins with a review of the relevant literature on leadership and leadership development, followed by an outline of the methodology before presenting the results. The implications of this study are presented in the summary and conclusion.

## **Literature Review**

This review presents three relevant bodies of literature: research on leadership development, leadership development in professional sporting organizations, and relational and temporal conceptualizations of leadership. We begin by summarizing the significant and recent literature on mainstream leadership development.

### ***Research on Leadership Development***

Leadership development incorporates topics such as leadership training, education, leadership learning, leadership development, organizational capacity development, coaching, and mentoring. There is debate regarding the meaning of

leadership development. Day (2000) argues that leadership development is concerned with improving the capacity of collectives to produce leadership within organizations. However, Wallace et al. (2021) suggest that individual leader development also contributes to the leadership capacity of collectives. An alternate way of thinking about leadership development is provided by Carroll and Smolović Jones (2018), who suggest that leadership development is based on aesthetic knowing, or a felt experience of how to lead, rather than on the accumulation of rational leadership knowledge. Such a view suggests that leadership development conveys “a sense of being in the world in uncertain, mutually dependent, and relational ways” (p. 119). The authors propose that thinking about leadership development encourages group interaction, sense-making, and critical reflection in ways that other leader development programs would not.

According to research on experience-based leadership development, leadership is best developed through practice (McCall, 2004, 2010), which requires multi-level and longitudinal social processes (Day, 2011; Folkestad & Gonzalez, 2010). Experience impacts leadership development, with challenging in situ experiences being seen as the most effective (Turner et al., 2018). McCall (2004) describes how developmental experiences largely involve facing adversity or dealing with the unfamiliar. However, challenging experiences may also be detrimental to leadership development, particularly without appropriate feedback and support (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Importantly, time is not an appropriate proxy for experience as not all experiences are equal in developing leadership (Day et al., 2014). The opportunity for feedback, social support, and reflecting on experience contributes to the effectiveness of the experience; reflection is prompted by dissonance caused by trigger moments (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Other authors have suggested that leadership development should be an ongoing process (Turner et al., 2018), best achieved through incorporating leadership development into

teams' strategy (McCall, 2004) to identify where development is needed and facilitating experiences to help develop individual and collective capacities (McCall, 2010). Vogel et al. (2020) propose that much of the literature on multi-level leadership development is theoretical and unempirical. McCauley and Palus (2020) argue that this is because leadership development programs focus on developing individual leaders; leadership development is too narrowly interpreted to offer significant value to the problems organizations face (McCauley & Palus, 2020). Further, leadership development programs focus on individuals identified as leaders, disregarding the importance of relationships. In addition, there is a lack of understanding of the micro-processes (interactions) of leadership and leadership development (Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

### ***Leadership Development Research in Sport Management***

Leadership represents a significant field of research in sport management; however, studies that explicitly focus on leadership development are relatively recent. This section explores three approaches outlined in the field of sport management. They are experience-based leadership development (Frawley et al., 2018), gendered considerations in leadership development (Banu-Lawrence et al., 2020), and developing organizational capacity for leadership (Jones et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2014; Svensson et al., 2021).

Frawley et al. (2018) explored the concept of experience-based leadership development in a case study of multiple professional sport organizations. They found that 1) experience-based opportunities are important for developing leadership, 2) experience leads to development through involvement and exposure, 3) networking opportunities are created through experience, and 4) there is a relationship between experience and education, in which some part of the complexity of leadership may be

learned through educational programs. Supporting McCauley and McCall (2014), they suggest that effective leadership development becomes ingrained in organizational practices over time.

Banu-Lawrence et al. (2020) examined structural approaches to women's leadership development in sport organizations. The authors highlight enabling and prohibiting elements in developing women as leaders and improving the capacity of organizations to develop female leaders. This study addresses the concern that women are under-represented in sport leadership positions. Through a multiple case study approach, they identify five practices enabling sports organizations to better develop female leaders: gender policy engagement, setting gender quotas, gender-specific leadership development, gender reporting, and formal and informal development. The authors discuss how their three case organizations conceptualize gender diversity in leadership as a strategic objective, and the five practices reveal how they engage in developing women leaders. The authors indicate varying levels of success in developing women leaders and an underlying bias in the sport industry toward masculine leadership norms.

Shared leadership has recently proven to be a popular leadership model in sport management. Shared leadership requires interdependence among people; as such, it is facilitated by developing organizational capacity for leadership. Jones et al. (2018) identified three characteristics that contribute to shared leadership development: group, task, and environmental. Kang and Svensson (2019) add that a vertical structure is necessary as shared leadership requires formal leaders to actively share leadership with others. Further, Svensson et al. (2020) suggested that increased human resource capacity is needed, and time is required as participants must become familiar with stable structures. Leadership development is not a specific purpose of shared leadership

research; however, in advocating for shared leadership, these studies have outlined how practitioners can achieve such a model through organizational development. Kerwin and Bopp (2014) provided a variant of this approach, who proposed shared leadership to develop an organizational culture through internalizing and representing team values. They suggest that three levels of leaders should be engaged in organizational culture: the coaches who set the values, the leadership group who evaluates and implements the values, and the others who are asked to ‘live’ the values. Shared leadership is proposed as a model to develop an organizational culture through universal modeling values.

According to the existing leadership development research in sport management, leadership development is an organizational rather than an individual concern. It is important that organizations create environments conducive to leadership development. For leadership development to be effective in creating a competitive advantage, it must be a strategic priority for the organization (Frawley et al., 2018). Research indicates that leadership development takes time. Moreover, existing approaches thus far have studied leadership as a top-down influence process, either through individual leaders (Banu-Lawrence et al., 2020; Frawley et al., 2018), or in the case of shared leadership, senior leaders delegating leadership to others. Studies are yet to explore the bottom-up emergence of leadership in organizations or the importance of access to social support and feedback in leadership development, representing opportunities for further research in the sport management field.

### ***Leadership Development as Relational and Temporal***

Emerging leadership theories that describe leadership as shared, dyadic, relational, strategic, global, and complex (Yukl, 2013) offer exciting prospects for understanding leadership development. According to Gronn (2002), these theories provide a much stronger relationship to leadership development than the traditional

focus on leaders as individual heroes (Schweiger et al., 2020) as they consider the broader social, environmental, and temporal contexts of leadership.

Relational leadership encourages thinking about leadership as constructed through interactions between people in social contexts (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Some of the meanings constructed through interactions are due to an implicit understanding of the social order held by people (Hosking, 2011). Leadership occurs when shared understandings are constructed that advance the social order (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Understanding leadership as an interaction process emphasizes temporality as it takes time for leadership to emerge through relationships. Interactions are specific to the temporal and social contexts that construct leadership; what is desirable at one moment in time might not be at another. Further, both relational leadership and leadership development recognize the importance of interdependence among people. Interdependence develops as groups gain experience with each other in various contexts and learn how to lead (Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018). Hence, we explore leadership development as a relational process embedded in relationships between people in social contexts (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

When investigating temporality, scholars have conceptualized time in two ways: quantitatively (chronological time) and qualitatively. Qualitative conceptualizations concern the participants' time experience and are based on the importance of assigning given moments. For example, accounts may be unordered and provide great detail in some events, completely skipping others, forming judgments on who we have become and how we act presently. Czarniawska (2004) asserts that often we do not recognize the significance of a moment as it occurs, and moments only become important when we assign a value to them. Experience is socially constructed by talking about,



reviewing, recalling, and projecting assigned values onto moments (Bruni & Teli, 2007).

As experience is critical for leadership development, it becomes clear that leadership development should be considered a temporal phenomenon, though consisting of nonlinear trajectories (Day et al., 2014), with experiences flowing from the past and potential futures to the present. Studying temporality is also relevant for relational leadership as leadership is constructed in social settings over time (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). However, existing “empirical studies do not study time rigorously,” and research on leadership must “adopt novel tools to study time as dynamic, emergent, nonlinear, and complex” (Castillo & Trinh, 2018, p. 169). This is supported by Shamir (2011), who argues that leadership phenomena cannot be understood using temporal approaches. Shamir notes that in a dynamic relational process, effects may be desirable at one point in time but perhaps not at others. This may reflect the time it takes to establish trust in a relationship; for example, favoring short-term results to the detriment of relationships in the long term. Lord (2018, pp. 151–152) provided five important considerations for researchers to rigorously study time in leadership. First, leadership structures are unstable. Second, behavior is shaped by people’s future goals. Third, the present we experience was at one time one of the many possibilities. Fourth, leadership requires managing uncertainty about the future. Finally, leadership may not result in immediate changes. Lord et al. (2015) recommended employing a process-oriented approach to researching leadership, including the possibility that the potential future flows backward from the future to the present to influence the leadership action. Potential futures are reduced to the present when significant constraints exist, narrowing all possible potentials to only one (the present we experience). Objective setting and conducting needs analyses are processes in leadership development that provide

examples of virtually visiting the future to consider uncertain potentials (Wallace et al., 2021). From this process perspective, leadership occurs when ideas are expressed that are recognized by others as advancing the social order of the team (Robinson, 2001).

This study explored leadership development as a relational and temporal process. Leadership is co-constructed between people in social- and time-specific contexts. Experiences are shared with others and build on each other; over time, participants build social capital, and interactions are shaped by experiences shared by the team (Day, 2000). As Lord (2018) urged, we also consider that participants are influenced by numerous potential futures flowing backward from the future to inform the present through numerous leadership development activities such as objective setting, needs analysis, and anxieties and opportunities experienced because of uncertainty in the future. To conceptualize relational leadership development, we draw on Crevani's (2019) summation of relational leadership work as involving three discursive processes: movement between frames, positioning, and resonating. Movement between frames, positioning, and resonating are relational processes that take time to develop and are experienced as nonlinear and temporal. Frames are constructed by groups of people to discursively make sense of their social context. According to Carroll and Simpson (2012), framing is the process of putting a situation into perspective, and movement between frames involves the social processes through which groups move from one frame of reference to the next over time (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Movement between frames is achieved when new meaning is created between people in an interaction that changes the trajectory of the group. Positioning is the practice of mutually constructing meaning between people who are aware of the content and consequences of their interaction (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Therefore, positions are negotiated between people in conversations and are fluid and emergent.

Through positioning, interactions build on each other; participants become cognizant of the content and the consequences of what becomes intelligible over time (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Development occurs when team members become intelligible to these positions by understanding how interactions are built on previous conversations (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Resonating is the practice of being responsive to the nuance of unfolding interactions, a demonstration of the felt experience of leadership development (Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018). It implies being alert to changes over time, involving awareness of emerging patterns, emotions, and tones in conversation (Crevani, 2019). According to Crevani (2019), movement between frames, positioning, and resonating are the three relational leadership processes. Through these collective processes, teams construct relational leadership by becoming intelligible to the shared understandings that advance the social order (Whales et al., 2021).

### **Context**

The case study is a professional netball team with 20 years of history competing in the world's preeminent netball league. Two years before the research project, a new netball league was established, which led to a significant player turnover. Research participants referred to this period as when the team 'came together,' marking an important moment in time. In the first year after the team came together, they won three games, and in the second year, they won six games. In the two years between the team 'coming together' and the start of the research project, three new players, a new club general manager, and a new head coach joined the team. When the lead researcher initially met the coaches, they proclaimed how much growth the team had achieved over the previous months, representing perception of positive development in the team. At the end of the season that was studied for this paper, the team won the championship,

demonstrating the team's significant on-field improvement compared to the prior two years.

## **Methodology**

A single exploratory case study was selected as the most appropriate for contributing in-depth and concrete case-specific data to theorize leadership development (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Specifically, we explore shared understandings that explain how members of a professional sporting team become intelligible when constructing relational leadership in the team. To outline the methodology, we highlight the three stages of interpreting qualitative data: data collection, analysis, and display (Miles et al., 2020).

## **Data Collection**

The project incorporated a range of empirical materials, including field notes, interview recordings/transcripts, and secondary data sources. This paper is part of a larger research project; the data presented in this paper focuses on the participants' accounts collected during semi-structured interviews, as these allow the researchers to explore the participants' experiences of leadership development in the team. However, the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews are based on earlier observations in data gathering and guided by relevant literature. The interviews aim to, at least partially, capture the implicit understanding shared by participants. Field notes, based on observations and informal interviews, provide additional context.

The interview participants were selected to obtain diverse perspectives. Fourteen interviews were conducted with players (5), coaches (1), and staff (5). Three of the interviewees were selected for follow-up interviews in the second half of the season (see Table 7), based on intriguing insights from the first interviews and ongoing fieldwork. The first interviews were conducted nearly three months after the initial meeting with

the team and two months after starting observations. The purpose was to wait until a reasonable understanding of the team had been achieved, and the first author built rapport and trust with the participants (Skinner, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were designed to generate detailed accounts of how participants described their experiences with the team (Riessman, 2008). The interview guide was inspired by the literature and earlier observations, enabling participants to reflect on how they understood team leadership and the experiences and goals that have shaped their understanding. Interviews followed a consistent structure, first asking the participants about their experience with leadership in the team, then probing deeper into their responses, and concluding by asking questions about specific examples from recent weeks. The interviews were conducted throughout the season to allow for changes over time; the first four interviews were conducted before any losses were experienced and represented distinct optimism, while subsequent interviews detailed how obstacles had been and would be overcome. Table 7 provides the timeline of the interviews and of the team's performance. The timeline of interviews conducted does not represent longitudinal data as they do not occur at regular intervals with the same participants. Rather, the timeline represents the ongoing nature of data gathering and provides context for the timing of each respondent. Each interview was conducted in a private space with only the lead researcher and interviewee present; interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim to identify themes only. Hence, pauses and errors were removed for publication purposes.

**Table 7***Timeline of the Results and Interviews*

Round	Result	Interviews conducted
1	Win	
2	Win	Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2
3	Win	Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 4a
4	Loss	Interviewee 5a, Interviewee 6a, and Interviewee 7
5	Win	
6	Win	
7	Win	
8	Win	
9	Draw	Interviewee 8
10	Win	
11	Loss	
12	Win	Interviewee 9, Interviewee 11, and Interviewee 4b
13	Loss	Interviewee 10, Interviewee 6b
14	Win	
Major Semi-Final	Loss	
Preliminary Final	Win	
Grand Final	Win	Interviewee 5b

**Data Analysis**

To make sense of leadership development, we employed an abductive analytical approach involving iterations to explore the data and relevant literature. Abduction is a hybrid inductive-deductive approach that uses existing frameworks to make sense of the empirical material, allowing new theoretical insights to be developed based on phenomena that existing theory cannot explain (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The epistemological assumption of relational leadership influences our research and analysis: participants have an implicit understanding of the social order (in this case, of the team) that informs how they should act (Hosking, 2011). Leadership is recognized when shared understandings are constructed that

advance the social order (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). The transcripts were analyzed while listening to the interview recording to reduce the likelihood of taking the interviewees' remarks out of context (Silverman, 2015). Thematic narrative analysis was selected as the most appropriate method to explore experience and life lessons and provide the researchers the opportunity to understand imagined futures through prospective analysis (Sools, 2020). In a thematic narrative, the analysis content is the exclusive focus. Participants' descriptions are kept intact, and the researcher explores how the interviewees tell the story of their experiences (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are, by definition, incomplete and subjective; hence, the purpose of the analysis is to explore the participants' perspectives and the experiences that have created their understandings (Bloom et al., 2020).

During the first cycle of coding, the lead researcher applied *in vivo* codes to the data to use the participants' language (Saldaña, 2021). During this phase, the lead researcher identified 13 distinct narratives after reviewing the 14 interviews, and these narratives were discussed with the second researcher. Narratives that did not explain leadership development or were not reflected by multiple participants were eliminated. This process allowed us to divide the narratives into six codes. The second cycle involved identifying patterns between codes and grouping similar *in vivo* codes into themes informed by the literature. This process revealed three themes: learning from experience, developing priorities, and sharing expectations. The six initial codes represented sub-themes. Three main themes and six sub-themes are discussed in the Results section.

### **Data Display**

The data are presented in the following section of this paper, organized according to three themes and six sub-themes. The illustrative quotes are not shortened;

they are presented verbatim to maintain context and preserve the interviewees' accounts, providing deep, descriptive explanations of participants' understanding (Riessman, 2008). Hence, each sub-theme only contains responses from one to two participants identified by the authors as representative of the data corpus (Miles et al., 2020). The authors determined representativeness by scrutinizing the entire data corpus, including 14 interviews and the accompanying fieldwork. The themes identified were representative of the participants' responses; however, not all themes were discussed by all interviewees. Illustrative examples are provided to demonstrate the experiences of participants rather than providing a comprehensive catalog of their responses.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Through the interviews, the participants describe their otherwise implicit understandings that inform leadership practice in the team. The analysis highlighted how participants construct a continuous improvement focus through collective meaning-making even when dealing with difficult circumstances (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). From this perspective leadership development processes include objective setting, needs analyses, and collectively reflecting on experience. This is achieved by working backward from a desired future state of winning the championship and collectively determining what needs to be done to achieve that goal. Three themes, outlined in Table 8 represented leadership development: learning from experience, development priorities, and sharing expectations. Table 8 describes how the three themes were identified from the common narratives and how they relate to leadership development. The development of shared understanding is accomplished through the ongoing negotiation of understanding the past, present, and future through learning from experience, development priorities, and sharing expectations.



**Table 8***Overview of Themes and Relationship to Leadership Development*

Theme	Sub-theme	Link to Leadership Development
Learning from Experience	The Young Inexperienced Team	This narrative allowed team members to articulate intelligibility about what the group had become based on objective setting and reflecting on experience.
	Moments of Dissonance	This theme describes experiences that prompted reflection. Such experiences helped shape the objectives of the team and what they needed to do to achieve their objectives.
Development Priorities	Representing Values	‘Representing Values’ described a way of acting in the team, that was shared amongst team members. Values served as a reference point for interactions, the set values were based on objective setting and needs analysis.
	We are a Team of Leaders	‘We are a Team of Leaders’ was a common belief held throughout the team. This encouraged actions that advanced the social order from all members of the team and encouraged group members to be open to being led by others.
	Having Tough Conversations	‘Having Tough Conversations’ was a shared understanding that informed team interactions, based on the identified needs analysis, that advanced the social order of the team.
Sharing Expectations	Winning the Championship	The shared expectation of ‘winning the championship’ came about through discussing the team’s objective. Regularly discussing this objective guided action and advanced the social order of the team.

## **Learning from Experience**

Learning from experience summarizes participants' descriptions of team experiences and their associated lessons. Experiences are developmental when they help participants become intelligible within the social context of the team (Kjellström et al., 2020). Two sub-themes were identified: a young inexperienced team and moments of dissonance. The themes portray how participants construct shared understandings from experiences and meaningfully socially order them (Carroll & Simpson, 2012).

### ***The Young Inexperienced Team***

We identified three frames of reference consistent among participants: 'the young inexperienced team' (past), 'winning the championship' (future), and the 'now' (present) frame. 'The young inexperienced team' was a frame of reference located in the past and involved learning from experience. According to Carroll and Simpson (2012), frames offer "a changing repertoire of discursive resources that may be drawn upon selectively by interacting participants" (p. 1285). Participants used descriptions of who they had been as a team to help them describe who they had become. The start of the new season allowed participants to separate themselves from the underperformance of the previous season/s. Interviewee Two described the collective frustration of labeling the 'young inexperienced team' by outsiders:

The commentators were saying "[they] are a very young team" especially when we lost a game, "they have the ability, it is just inexperience." This was simply used to piss everyone off. So, we are tired of that inexperienced team.

However, the label provided a useful way to separate themselves from past underperformances. Interviewee Two reflected on how the team had grown when describing a bad period during the previous weekend's game: "Normally we would have panicked, the old [team], I would say, would panic and just throw balls back-to-

back away, but we kept our composure, we didn't drop our heads." This was a recurrent theme: collective meaning-making processes separated the team from past underperformance by constructing shared and new understandings. Participants referred to the 'young inexperienced team,' and explained how they had improved relative to how they would have performed in the past. Leadership development was evident in our case organization as they transitioned from a past frame of underperformance to a future frame of winning.

Multiple experiences supported the participants' belief that they could move on from being a young, inexperienced team to becoming champions. Participants described how the work they had invested in before and throughout the season supported their growing expectations, demonstrating movement between frames (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Interviewee Three expressed confidence that they would win their round one game because of their pre-season:

From an outsider's perspective you might think it's been a surprise. Like everyone said, "oh they've not tipped us to win." But even in pre-season... you could see how much we were all training. That camp we went to, the jerry can experiment and doing stuff like that. Seeing how much we train... I was quite confident to be honest.

Interviewee Three felt optimistic that if they continued to focus on the process, as they currently were, they could win the championship:

I think we can win, like 100 percent think we can win, if we do everything that we've kept doing, like coming in on the recovery days and doing those performance analysis sessions. I think [coach] is right, in the sense that if we stay game, by game, by game I think we can win. Yeah, we can't afford to have slip ups.

This example demonstrates how working back from a desired future state encourages team members to focus on the process of achieving success. Despite being a young, inexperienced team, participants could reframe their understanding because of experiences that developed confidence, including the work invested during the pre-season, which instilled the belief that things were different this time. The reframing away from the young, inexperienced team provides evidence of relational leadership work (Crevani, 2019). Discussions between team members allowed participants to move on from focusing on previous underperformance to the collective goal of winning the championship. Reframing meant training, preparation, and work that may otherwise feel monotonous was inextricably linked with success by the participants. Interviewee Three, for example, understood that the process was in place to enable the team to succeed, and the sessions felt valuable. Past underperformance was a developmental experience as it contributed to the participants' shared understanding of what was required to succeed.

### ***Moments of Dissonance***

Moments of dissonance encouraged collective meaning-making that enhanced the shared understanding of the team. The experience of underperformance represents a shared dissonance, prompting reflection. The discursive reflection on experiences of dissonance created new meaning in the group, enabling movement between frames (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Socially engaging in interactions resulted in the team separating themselves from past underperformance and constructing new understandings of the team. Subsequently, actions were judged according to whether they would help the team move beyond the previous frame (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). This served as a marker for improvement. The shared experiences of dissonance provided opportunities to reflect and evaluate progress toward the team's goal.

Interviewee Six highlighted a disappointing loss (round 4) when describing how their expectations had grown from the previous season:

I just remember, like, when we were sitting in the rehab room after the game, it was just like, we were saying how badly you want to go out and play again ... it was very much a different feel to what it would have been like in the past. I think in the past, we might have been like, “oh, we got so close,” like, “good effort.” Whereas this time, we were like, “holy shit, this is actually like eating me alive.”

Unlike in previous seasons, Interviewee Six demonstrates how their commitment to their desired future of winning the championship has changed their response to the loss. Their new frame was based on winning the championship. The loss could have been perceived as a setback; however, Interviewee Six highlights how through discussing with other team members, the loss contributed to the growing belief that they could win and reinforced the expectations they held for themselves:

So, I just think, even just the language that we use, it just feels different. Like you almost can't explain how it feels different, but it just does. You're shocked if you don't win, because you know that you're good enough to win. And it's not that ... you don't think you should automatically win. It's like, we've worked hard, we have the right people, we've done the right thing, we have the right culture, we all believe that we should win.

The different feeling experienced by Interviewee Six is an example of resonating, her understanding was built on her awareness of emerging patterns, and she recognized that losing no longer felt the same (Crevani, 2019). In this example, Interviewee Six demonstrated her ability to perceive emerging patterns and feelings

within the team due to their experience together (Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018). They now expected to win because they, as a team, believed they could win.

Resonating was also evident in the account of Interviewee Four. During the middle of the season, the team suffered a series of injuries, which created some concern, further demonstrating how conversations create moments of dissonance. Interviewee Four described how a discussion with a teammate put the situation into perspective:

[They] said to me, “nup like this year, we’re just going to win it the hard way, it’s gonna be an absolute slog to get there but we’re going to win it and the next year, we’re going to fly through,” and that’s kind of the mentality I’ve had. It’s going to be a slog and we’re just going to grind through, and you know, we’ve had injury after injury after injury and setback, and then people coming in and, I think people, they have come in and brought like an energy.

Results reinforced the meaning created between participants, as demonstrated by their account of the round-eight win:

We were down the whole game and then in the last five minutes, we just pulled together and that was very emotional. I think that was the point I realized it’s not going to be very pretty from now on, but we’re going to get it done.

Discussing the challenges with the future goal allowed the players to construct a path forward despite increasing constraints. Interviewee Four elaborated that their connection with teammates was a reason for being able to succeed despite the adversity and disruption created through injuries: “I feel like there was a big change because it wasn’t easy, it was still hard games, where we [listing teammates] had kind of found each other, and we kind of knew what we’re doing.” Participants demonstrate relational leadership through the understanding developed in the relationships they have with each other. During a turbulent time, the experience between the participants created sufficient

shared understanding, notwithstanding injury disruptions. Here, moments of dissonance supported the belief that the team could win, allowing participants to maintain the momentum through discursively reinforcing that ‘we’ are going to get it done, because ‘we’ know what we are doing.

The feeling described by Interviewee Four reiterated the belief between team members that despite challenges, they could still win, even if it required a different approach. Resonating is an example of how team members can develop leadership through experience by improving their awareness of others and the context. Unlike leadership development programs that neglect context and adaptability (McCauley & Palus, 2020), resonating is concerned with being attuned to emerging patterns (Crevani, 2019). Our findings suggest that participants could support each other through adversity because of their awareness of emerging patterns. Biehl (2019) supported this notion by finding that leaders and others co-construct action through their ethnographic study of techno-DJs and dancers. The DJs respond to the feel of the dancers and alter their performance, much the same as Interviewee Six responds to a different feeling following the team’s round four loss. The practice of resonating requires a shift in the leadership concept from the unilateral direction a leader provides to leadership with others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Kjellström et al., 2020).

### **Development Priorities**

Development priorities refer to the discursively constructed focus areas that advance the social order of the team, therefore representing relational leadership (Hosking, 2011). Development priorities represent the guiding principles for leadership action within any particular moment, shaped by the past and future. Three development priorities were identified from the data: ‘representing values,’ ‘we are a team of leaders,’ and ‘having tough conversations.’ These three development priorities were

regularly mentioned across the semi-structured interviews and reinforce how participants perceive their expectations as team members. Participants transitioned from ‘the young inexperienced team’ by collectively constructing a path forward. The transition began by separating themselves from past underperformance while incorporating the lessons learned. The development priorities were described as beliefs about the team that provided actionable prompts for constructing leadership with others. The development priorities provided a means of moving on from previous underperformance to a view of becoming champions. Participants collectively constructed possibilities when challenged through injuries and losses and employed the development priorities to achieve their objective. This process enabled participants to reframe their progress thus far by considering constraints and constructing a path forward for continued success.

It was evident from our case that development priorities helped with positioning because of their shared meaning to participants (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Engagement with the development priorities encouraged collective and individual agency as individuals perceived their responsibility to lead when they believed they could help the team (Sklaveniti, 2020). The terms ‘we are a team of leaders,’ ‘having tough conversations,’ and ‘values’ were developed and embedded into conversations that supported development; the reflections incorporating this language and the values became a part of the team’s weekly practice. Positioning is evident as development priorities inform the participants on how to interact based on understanding the past and future; therefore, they become intelligible to the social order (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006).



### ***Representing Values***

Formalized team values were created during a team culture session before the previous season and were carried forward into the current season. The team has three values, which are regularly discussed and displayed in the team's training facility, and value posters are put up on the walls in the team rooms at each game. The three written values refer to: 1) having fun and enjoying what they get to do every day, 2) being honest with themselves and team members, and 3) being vulnerable with other members of the team. Interviewee One describes the importance of the team's values, as they are meaningful, practical, and specific to the team:

A lot of the time you just throw out a few words, like "unity," "connectedness," "professionalism," but I felt like we've come up with core values that really resonate with us, so I think there is a lot more meaning, and doing a lot more practical exercises, I guess that really translates on court.

Interviewee Three highlights how the values facilitate conversations among team members in training, reminding each other about their expectations in the team and guiding action: "When we're training now, we talk a lot about those types of values, and you can start to see players talk, whereas a few months ago, they might not have done." The group identified values provide an ongoing mechanism for relational leadership, with participants aiming to demonstrate the values in their actions and discussions with each other and hold themselves and others accountable.

### ***We are a Team of Leaders***

The theme 'we are a team of leaders' is the recognition that all team members are expected and encouraged to lead when they sense an opportunity to help the team. This theme is based on the participants' existing view of the team and the belief that to continually improve, they need everyone to demonstrate leadership when the context

requires it. Players regularly discussed the shared belief that they are a team of leaders, which was created by the norm that everyone contributes to discussions about team direction. Interviewee Seven describes this shared understanding:

Players one to ten, even our training partners, it is a group setting, no one is afraid to talk. They know, they're not going to get shut down, I don't know what that is. Whether that be a leadership group or [coach] or whoever... if someone speaks everyone listens.

This shared understanding encourages each participant to consider the contributions of others and fosters individual agency to contribute their perspective to team conversations. Being a team of leaders also allows the team to maximize leadership through the strengths of multiple individuals (Whales et al., 2021).

Interviewee Six highlighted that a characteristic of the team was that everyone was capable of leading and had different strengths:

I think that there are people that at any time will step up and say something... we also lead in very different ways. When [player name] speaks like she demands, attention, like everyone knows, okay, we've got to listen ... You've got people like [another player name] who on court, she can be the one that can inspire the rest of the group. We have even got a [another player name], though, who's a young player that hasn't actually been playing very much, but she'll easily say something to any other player on the team if she thinks it's the right thing. And so, the fact the youngest player on the team can be calling out the oldest player or the most experienced player or someone who's playing in her position. I think that's kind of the epitome of what it means when you are a team full of leaders.

In this example, the team benefits by cherishing the perspectives of multiple individuals. It is not the responsibility of one person to lead, but everyone on the team, even those with less experience.

### ***Having Tough Conversations***

Having tough conversations refers to providing feedback and holding others accountable for the benefit of the team. Previously, this was identified as a weakness for a young, inexperienced team. Through discussions held before the season, participants identified that they were not forthcoming with feedback to others. This deficiency of feedback was thought to have arisen from a lack of confidence in individual positions within the team (e.g., players discussing the discomfort in giving feedback to others when they felt they were not playing well themselves). However, this was changed by understanding feedback positively: “we talk about coming from fear or love ... there’s two places you come from, but if I really care about you, I only come from a place of love” (Interviewee Nine). Participants used this language to reframe ‘having tough conversations’ as a way of ‘serving others,’ and it allowed participants receiving feedback to understand that the other person was only giving the feedback because they cared. Interviewee Four describes an appreciation for hearing feedback from others:

Sometimes it’s really hard for someone to come to you and say, like, you know, “you played shit.” But you know, “you need to do this,” and that is sometimes really hard to take but imagine the person giving it, it’s just as hard.

Interviewee Ten describes how the team has practically implemented the tough conversations:

This year everyone’s trying to be a lot more open and honest, in terms of when there is a problem, confronting that problem, talking about the problem, coming

up with solution to the problem, we're moving on. I think that's kind of what we've done quite well this year.

This example demonstrates the understanding that participants know how to act when they identify a problem; there is an expectation that it is addressed at the moment to help prevent bigger problems in the future. Interviewee Ten recognizes that if they see a problem, they should raise it; equally, they expect that others will raise a problem if they see one. 'Tough conversations,' therefore, do not come as a surprise and, as Interviewee Four demonstrates in the example above, can also be appreciated. Interviewee Eleven, the newest staff member, identified feedback as a strength of the team when describing a debrief post-game (round nine) after they performed below their expectations:

That was the first time for me I thought, "wow they are, they're really honest with one another." And what sounded like being a tough conversation, it wasn't really in the end, because they are easy to have now around here. And they, everyone took the advice on board.

By regularly incorporating the language of 'having tough conversations' and 'coming from love and not fear,' the team was able to take an identified weakness before the season and implement a solution that encouraged participants to give and receive feedback. Positioning is demonstrated as the consequence of initially understood as confronting feedback; however, changing the perspective led to feedback being perceived as positive (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). For leadership development to be effective, organizations must identify appropriate strategies based on what is needed to reach the desired future state (Wallace et al., 2021). In this study, ongoing conversations determined what needed to improve. The team regularly evaluated their performance according to development priorities in formal and informal methods. Team members

positioned themselves according to these development priorities when evaluating others.

Participants demonstrated intuitive understandings associated with the team's social realities, resonating with others resulted in leadership development (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Thus, development became a strategic priority for the team. Development priorities were created by reflecting on past experiences (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). The experience of underperformance made the participants aware of the consequences of not implementing development priorities. The values were created by the coaches, staff, and playing group. This ensured team members understood them and believed they would help them develop (Lacerenza et al., 2017). 'We are a team of leaders' was an understanding that guided action. Through this inclusive statement, individuals understood they should appreciate others as leaders and value their responsibility to demonstrate leadership when the team needed it. Finally, having tough conversations was identified as an area of improvement that required attention. By collectively bringing this focus to the team, the negative association with holding others accountable was diminished. Having tough conversations became seen as a marker of progress. If a team member was willing to hold another accountable, it was appreciated as a way of improving the team and demonstrating care for others. The use of development priorities within the team alters the leadership concept, enabling participants to mutually support each other through relational leadership (Kjellström et al., 2020).

### **Sharing Expectations**

The future frame, 'winning the championship,' was based on the desire to become champions in the future. This desired future state was constructed by all participants discussing the possibility of winning and acting based on these

conversations. Although the desired future had not yet happened, participants mutually constructed it discursively by discussing the desired outcome and the process of achieving it (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Finally, this frame was based on the potential to become champions, a belief that was created by the experience. Hence, the ‘now’ frame was constructed by combining shared experience and participants’ ambitions for the future (Lord, 2018). The objectives and processes are set according to the desired future to win the championship (McCauley & Palus, 2020). It was evident from the data that the participants shared the expectation and belief that they could achieve this goal. This shared expectation provided direction at a fixed time in the future; at the end of the season studied, working backward from this goal informed leadership action.

The objective of winning the championship was constructed through shared experience and discussions between team members. This goal remained unwavering throughout the season. The shared goal provided direction and a stable target for the team to aim toward when unanticipated challenges emerged. At the start of the season, there was a lack of belief outside the team that they could win and in the middle of the season confidence was tested by several serious injuries. However, the collective goal to win the championship created a shared understanding that guided action throughout the season in all team processes, including training, match preparation, performance, and review. Interviewee Five describes how this view is shared among coaches and staff as well as the playing group:

It’s not good enough that the players want it, everybody behind the team has to be really clear of their job and has to be the best and has to keep being challenged. If not by me, then by themselves or each other to be the world’s best because we keep setting that direction.

Before the season, when no media commentators picked the team to make the finals, Interviewee Six publicly declared that the team was aiming to win. When asked why they made this public declaration, Interviewee Six stated that it was to remain consistent with the team's internal discussions:

Our internal talk has been about, in the past, we were young, and we're inexperienced, and oh we were lucky to win that game. Whereas now, we're not young, we're not inexperienced, we're here to play, and we're here to win... that's kind of the whole foundation this year's been based on, this idea that we can win, and we should win, and we have the ability to win ...

When the team was tested with injuries in the middle of the year, Interviewee Four describes how they could have accepted that it was not their season but instead recognized the opportunity and maintained the belief that they could win:

Sometimes you've got look back and go like, people from the outside are probably going, how the fuck are they doing this? But I guess in our environment, we just know, we have the belief, and we know that, if you get your opportunity, you've got to step up and take it with two hands.

The shared understanding that the team was pursuing championships resulted from ongoing discussions about their objectives by the team members, a further demonstration of relational leadership. The team's consistent goal and belief that they could win the championship informed participants of how they should act throughout each match, through preparation, in their interactions, and when facing adversity.

The desire to win the championship was more than an elusive goal, as the team captain publicly stated that it was their aim before the season began. Winning the championship represented the future frame toward which the team was working. This frame contained shared meaning that implicitly guided leadership action throughout the

season (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Maintaining the future frame of ‘winning the championship’ encouraged participants to find new ways to win despite increasing constraints, including injuries and losses. This represents an important contribution to leadership development, as it is not only achieved through what has happened but also makes sense of future uncertainty.

### **Summary**

The results revealed that team members relationally constructed shared understandings that enabled the team to develop its leadership capacity. Through collective meaning, the team transitioned from a shared view of being ‘the young inexperienced team’ to a view about their desired future, pursuing the goal by implementing development priorities. The findings build on the body of relational leadership literature, which argues that leadership is mutually constructed with others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). We found that sharing experiences and discussing objectives as a team allowed team members to socially order experiences and guide leadership in relationships with others. Experiences develop through collective meaning-making processes and shared understanding, involving looking back at a desired future state (Lord, 2018). Shared understanding is negotiated between participants and evolves through discursively engaging with experience and incorporating events (e.g., wins and losses) with subjective perceptions (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Events such as performance planning and review sessions, training, and breaks during games provide opportunities for collective meaning-making, where all participants engage in these activities and create a shared understanding.

The data revealed how participants described the team’s development, their expected behavior, and the imagined future of winning the championship. Team members described their previous experience as underperformance, referring to the



‘young inexperienced team.’ This provided a reflection point that enabled them to rationalize and learn from experience (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Moments of dissonance changed how they perceived their possibilities; in particular, wins, losses and injuries were highlighted as challenges to achieving the team’s goal. Team members also described three shared understandings that helped construct leadership actions, demonstrating collective meaning-making. The shared understandings included values, social processes they were working on (having tough conversations), and the account that ‘we are a team of leaders.’ How team members described the team at present provided the foundation of the belief that they could achieve their imagined future of winning the championship. The team ultimately won the championship in the year this research was done. While retrospectively, this progression from a young inexperienced team to champions appears linear on a macro-level, this was not the case when examined on a day-to-day (micro) basis. Instead, in their interactions and reflections, team members repeatedly moved backward and forward between their past experiences and their envisioned futures and faced multiple challenges, such as losses and injuries, which they navigated through collective meaning that informed leadership action.

### **Implications for Leadership Development**

Carroll and Smolović Jones (2018) argue that leadership development is a felt experience with aesthetic knowledge rather than just rational knowledge. Therefore, the authors suggest leadership development is about becoming more attuned to the nuanced understandings and social order of the team. It can be seen through this study that it took time for experience to be effective in developing leadership; the experience of underperformance from the previous two seasons caused dissonance. Participants constructed meaning from their experience and the shared belief that they could achieve

more, which elicited leadership action. Leadership action resulted in moving between frames from ‘the young inexperienced team’ toward the desired future (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Development priorities were identified as values, being a team of leaders, and having tough conversations. They provided a shared understanding of the team’s future, which, despite emergent challenges, including losses and injuries, helped team members remain focused on their goal of winning the championship and on the processes they needed to follow to achieve this objective.

Research on leadership development has indicated that experience is more likely to be effective based on the feedback and social support available in undertaking developmental experiences (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Frawley et al., 2018; McCall, 2010; McCauley & Palus, 2020). Our research builds on this notion by arguing that leadership development is embedded in social systems (Day, 2000). Teams enhance their leadership capacity by improving and developing awareness of the social systems that support performance and allow team members to make sense of positive and negative experiences. Team members engage socially through discourse to make sense of the past and envisage the desired future. From this perspective, potential flows from the future, and constraints limit the potential of the present experience (Lord et al., 2015). Positive and negative experiences may influence leadership development (e.g., negative experiences between team members in the past or doubts and fears about the future). However, discursively, teams can share an understanding of their past and future. Demonstrating shared understanding highlights congruence in the sense-making activities of team members and indicates the likelihood that they interpret shared experiences similarly (Whales et al., 2021).

We propose five recommendations for professional sporting organizations to maximize leadership development. First, leadership development can be enhanced by

reviewing the current leadership capacity, and what leadership needs to look like to achieve success. This requires framing the experience and constructing the desired future state shared by team members. Professional sporting organizations should set objectives and practices that align with the desired future state (Lord, 2018). Second, leadership development should be embedded as a strategic objective and reflected in the development priorities of the organization (Frawley et al., 2018). It is important that team members collectively understand the meaning of the development priorities and their alignment with the desired future state. Third, all participants should be engaged in constructing and evaluating development priorities to promote a shared understanding and encourage multiple perspectives. This can be promoted through team meetings and opportunities to reflect on experiences (Whales et al., 2021). Fourth, all members of an organization should be aware of the nuances of emerging patterns to adjust positively to changes (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). In this way, leadership development can flow upward across organizations and not rely on a top-down hierarchical approach. Finally, it is important to consider that leadership development rarely follows a linear trajectory (Day, 2011; Lord, 2018); hence, leadership development requires ongoing meaning-making, involving participants looking back and looking forward in their social contexts and talking about the experience with others.

## **Conclusion**

By considering leadership development as a temporal and relational phenomenon, we can understand how experience and potential futures help construct shared understanding in professional sporting organizations. Individual subjectivities engage with specific events (e.g., wins and losses), and by reflecting on experience collectively, the participants share understandings about the team's practices (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Similar to taking a photo, what is considered important is included in

the accepted shared understanding, while those things considered insignificant or unhelpful are excluded (Crevani, 2019). These past, present, and future understandings contribute to leadership action in the here and now. Participants make sense of the past and project a desired future state, allowing them to act with a collective vision of where they have been and where they intend to get to.

## **Chapter Five: Leading-by-Example**

### **Preamble**

The final paper in this thesis extends the relational perspective of leadership in professional sport through good leadership using the concept of LBE. Papers one and two provided the background for how leadership is constructed through interactions and shared understanding. Paper three explores how action and interaction construct and reconstruct shared understandings of leadership in the team, in doing so influence ongoing leadership action. The theory of LBE is extended in this paper to explain how a shared understanding of good leadership influences leadership action and how leadership action helps construct good leadership. The findings reveal that LBE is co-constructed between members of the organization by engaging in social action, constructing shared understandings of good leadership, mutually constructing leadership practice, and aesthetically perceiving leadership action.

## **Abstract**

This study explores leadership through action in the context of professional sporting organizations. The concept of LBE arose through empirical material gathered when exploring leadership through the experiences of participants. “Leading by example” was a term used by the participants to describe their understanding of good leadership demonstrated through action. This contributes to sport management literature by conceptualizing LBE as a leadership process by action. This research has arisen through an ongoing project exploring the social construction of leadership through observations, interviews, and focus group interviews. Abductive analysis was employed, engaging with the empirical material and existing leadership literature. The findings revealed that LBE is socially constructed through action, shared understanding, collective construction, and aesthetic perceptions. These findings offer insights into leadership theory, practice, and development. The findings of this study support the overall contribution of this thesis by explaining how good leadership is constructed through action.

## **Leading-by-Example: Team Leadership Through Action**

The research question for this study emerged from a 12-month study investigating leadership and leadership development in the context of a professional sporting team. The project began to explore the social practices of collective leadership in a professional netball club competing in the world's premier netball competitions in Australia. The research involved in-depth interviews with members of the team as well as observations of team meetings. As research progressed, 'leading-by-example' emerged as a key concept in the data. Although not new to the academic literature, 'leading-by-example' has not been considered an empirically rigorous concept because existing research has not sufficiently explored leadership through action (Eldor, 2021). The purpose of this paper is to build on the concept of 'LBE' to develop new insights into leadership research. We adopt the socially constructed relational leadership perspective to explore the interdependent and contextual nature of LBE in a sport team (Whales et al., 2021).

Existing studies that have explored LBE have typically only been concerned with the actions of a leader or multiple leaders and their influence on others (see, e.g., Chiu et al., 2021; Drouvelis & Nosenzo, 2013; Eisenkopf, 2020; Eldor, 2021; Gardner et al., 2005). This focus is consistent with the traditional leadership approach in the managerial literature, which emphasizes the role of individual leaders. It has been referred to as the 'hero leader' or entity perspective of leadership (Ford et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This perspective tends to overlook the emergent and context-specific nature of social interactions when constructing leadership (Crevani et al., 2010). This is despite the growing recognition of the need to explore the dynamic relational processes between people in leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). By contrast, socially

constructed relational leadership views leadership as interdependent and co-constructed (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

In the context of sport teams, scholars have recently advocated for researchers to take a social constructionist perspective when studying leadership (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). Professional sport teams are indeed a useful context by which to study organizational phenomena such as leadership owing to the observability of performance and the competitive nature of operations likened to other forms of organizations (Day et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2005).

The lead author spent 12 months observing and interviewing members of a professional netball club competing in the world's premier netball competition in Australia. Netball is an overwhelmingly female sport played in many Commonwealth nations, notably Australia, England, and New Zealand, where professional leagues have been established. In the Australian context, netball has a long history of grassroots and elite participation; however, this has not been reflected in academic sport studies (McLachlan, 2016; Taylor, 2001). The present study evolved to become an information-rich case of leadership (Flyvbjerg, 2006), as the selected organization demonstrated significant performance improvement from the previous seasons. The team won the championship in the year the research was conducted, a significant improvement from their sixth-place finish in the previous season.

To our knowledge, no empirical research has focused on how the LBE is socially constructed. This may be particularly relevant in teams where members develop a shared understanding over time. For example, a shared understanding in professional sports organizations is found to inform leadership actions (Whales et al., 2021). Empirical studies have only investigated LBE through an entity perspective of leaders and followers (see, e.g., Chiu et al., 2021; Drouvelis & Nosenzo, 2013; Eisenkopf,



2020; Eldor, 2021; Gardner et al., 2005). Lastly, LBE is not a well-established and empirically rigorous concept (Eldor, 2021).

By exploring the phenomenon of leadership in an elite netball team context, we aim to contribute to research on sport management and leadership. Our goal is to advance scholarly understanding of LBE to inform leadership practice, including leadership development in interdependent social contexts, such as teams. Leadership development varies in team-based organizations compared with more hierarchically organized structures (Day et al., 2006; Zaccaro et al., 2001). Team-based organizations require understanding complex co-constructed leadership dynamics that allow leadership to emerge and change depending on the context (Ospina et al., 2020). Through this study, we propose theoretical and practical implications of the concept of LBE for team-based leadership. We focus on how LBE is co-constructed among team members and how leadership can be practiced through the actions of everyone in the team.

### **Literature Review**

The first part of the literature review explores the existing research on the concept of LBE. Next, relevant constructionist approaches to leadership are reviewed, including aesthetic and relational leadership. These approaches were selected as they take the perspective that leadership is constructed between people in verbal and non-verbal interactions. In other words, they are concerned about their social actions. We refer to the relevant sport management literature to position our research in the field.

The entity approach to leadership, which refers to the concept of LBE, focuses on exploring and measuring follower reciprocity in leaders' behavior. These studies found that followers are more likely to follow a leader when the leader's actions align with the leader's direction (Drouvelis & Nosenzo, 2013; Eisenkopf, 2020). Eisenkopf

(2020) found that followers are less likely to adhere to the direction of a leader who does not lead, for example, a behavior termed ‘cheap talk.’ In this respect, Drouvelis and Nosenzo (2013) suggest that followers identify with leaders who act congruently with their given direction. Methodologically, these studies have adopted computer-generated challenge experiments utilizing experimental economics. Although this offers a controlled method to measure follower reciprocity, it does not account for the unpredictability and complexity of real-life contexts or beliefs socially constructed at the group level (Yaffe & Kark, 2011).

Another approach to studying the concept of LBE is to investigate organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in leaders and the likelihood of these behaviors being emulated by followers. Yaffe and Kark (2011) found that OCB exhibited by the leader increased the likelihood of OCB being demonstrated by followers. The reciprocation of actions that support organizational outcomes is based on followers’ perception of the actions of leaders based on shared experiences and beliefs constructed within the group. However, LBE is still constrained to the designated leaders in the study. Therefore, the emergence and distribution of leadership throughout a team are overlooked, despite recognizing that people may identify with various ‘role models’ in a team. Table 8 summarizes the key studies adopting the concept of LBE, including their theoretical concepts, empirical focus, key findings, and gaps/limitations.

**Table 9***Research Adopting the Concept of 'Leading-by-Example' (LBE)*

Paper	LBE concept	Approach to LBE	Findings	Gaps/limitations
Gardner et al. (2005)	Leaders serve as models for followers through actions aligned with core values	Theoretical	Theoretical proposition that authentic leaders exhibit and communicate core values by LBE	Not empirically supported, not concerned with emergence from the group, or how core values are created
Yaffe and Kark (2011)	Role modeling of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) of leader and work group. OCB beliefs are socially constructed at the group level	Leader's ability to influence group behavior determined by utilizing a survey	Leaders must be perceived by groups as worthy role models to influence OCB	Not concerned with emergence from within the group or how beliefs are socially constructed
Drouvelis and Nosenzo (2013)	Leader sets example that inspires others	How followers identify with the leader through employing experimental economics in a hypothetical game environment	Common identity between the leader and followers enhances cooperation	Employs experimental context, not concerned with emergence from within the group or how common identities are constructed
Fisher and Robbins (2015)	LBE is grounded in the control and use of the physical body	Embodied practices of leadership consistent with expected norms.	Leadership identities constructed by the use of the physical body as	Primarily concerned with how leaders are perceived through embodiment,

Paper	LBE concept	Approach to LBE	Findings	Gaps/limitations
		Phenomenologic al approach utilizing document analysis and interviews	an exemplar. Trust is built through exemplary use of the physical body in the case example	leaders are assigned based on having the role of 'Military Adviser.' Therefore, not emergent leadership
Eisenkopf (2020)	Followers emulating leader behaviors	Hypothetical game simulation with the reward for winning team	Followers are more likely to follow a leader whose actions align with the communicated direction	Controlled experimental context. Not concerned with emergence or group-level understandings
Chiu et al. (2021)	Leader needs to role model respect and empathy to reduce negative ties	Leader behavior survey measure	Leader role modeling influences team interactions, for example, teachability, social empathy, and humility	Not concerned with the emergence of leadership. Does not account for group-level understandings
Eldor (2021)	Extent, the leader, demonstrates expected performance	Employee engagement, productivity, and service quality based on employee surveys, customer feedback, and financial data	LBE is more effective at enhancing productivity and service quality than charismatic leadership. LBE positively affects employee engagement	Entity approach not concerned with emergence or collective leadership. Only considers LBE as a top-down influence process

Table 8 shows that existing literature views LBE as the alignment between a leader's verbal communication and actions and how this alignment leads to positive organizational outcomes. For example, Eldor (2021) claims that LBE improves engagement, productivity, and service quality. LBE indicates positive influence processes, contributing to overall group effectiveness. Chiu et al. (2021) argued that LBE improves social interactions, for example, by increasing teachability, empathy, and humility. It has also been argued that LBE improves desired followership behaviors (Eisenkopf, 2020). Fisher and Robbins (2015) also suggest that LBE builds trust with others. Further, Drouvelis and Nosenzo (2013) propose that LBE inspires others and influences how followers identify with their leaders. Finally, Yaffe and Kark (2011) find that LBE improves followers' OCB when leaders exhibit these behaviors. Irrespective of how each researcher conceptualizes LBE, it is evident that it is associated with good leadership.

The current body of research on LBE is prone to the same criticism directed toward other leader-centered theories: it does not explain how leadership emerges, the influence of others on leadership, or the role of social context (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2017). This leads, unsatisfyingly, to considerations of the social order as static. Therefore, it is unclear how LBE influences and is, in turn, influenced by the social order of teams. By exploring the social construction of leadership, we aim to contribute a new perspective on the concept of LBE. A constructionist approach allows us to consider how the LBE emerges to advance social order in teams. From existing studies, it is also unclear how actions are deemed desirable and interpreted as LBE by others. The previous focus on leaders and followers as distinct entities can falsely indicate that all leaders' actions are LBE (Yaffe & Kark, 2011). Thus, existing studies have not explored the emergent, dynamic, and contextual dimensions of leadership.

In the remainder of this literature review, we explore two leadership approaches to help address gaps in the existing research on LBE: aesthetic leadership and relational leadership. These approaches were selected because they recognize the role of the social context in constructing leadership. We then summarize how these approaches help us expand the concept of LBE and discuss the implications for leadership in sport management.

### **Aesthetic Leadership**

Aesthetic leadership studies leadership constructed and recognized through sensory perceptions (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011). Like tacit knowledge, aesthetic knowledge is difficult to describe and is constructed from experience and intuition (Hansen et al., 2007). However, aesthetic knowledge is distinct from tacit knowledge as it is exclusively concerned with how bodily feelings contribute to constructing experience and guidance as to action. Aesthetic knowledge is based on senses that live through the body (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting). According to aesthetic leadership research, aesthetic leadership is premised on individuals' ability to form aesthetic judgments regarding their experiences (Strati, 1999). Perceptions of good and bad leadership are based on aesthetic interpretations shaped by bodily senses (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011). Thus, bodily senses play an important role in the construction of leadership. For example, people perceive leadership based on what they see, hear and feel. Interpretations based on bodily sensations can help build trust and thus impact how leadership is perceived and enacted.

Aesthetic leadership is appropriate for theorizing LBE in teams as it accounts for more than the verbal aspects of leadership. Aesthetic leadership incorporates perceptions responding to aesthetic knowledge developed within a team or other social contexts. For example, the likelihood of emulating shared actions in a team increases

when team members trust that others will act in congruence with the shared meanings in the team (Yaffe & Kark, 2011). Trust can be developed aesthetically when individuals perceive that others in the team are likely to act in a trustworthy manner, a perception based on their bodily senses and experiences of interactions. LBE may be perceived aesthetically, given that followers interpret the actions of leaders in more than rational ways (Fisher & Robbins, 2015). Accordingly, it is not the actions of leaders alone that construct leadership; the sensory perceptions of team members also help to construct leadership in the team.

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership views leadership as located in the relationships between people. Relational leadership has two distinct streams. First, the entity perspective focuses on individuals as distinct entities; accordingly, individuals engage in leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Second, the socially constructed relational perspective views leadership as a mutual influence process that occurs when people interact in context (Crevani, 2018). Socially constructed relational leadership is constructed through interactions in the space between people, not by individuals. Meaning is constructed and carried out through verbal and non-verbal interactions between people in social contexts (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Leadership is practiced when constructed meanings advance the social order (Drath et al., 2008). Because of the interdependence between people, the socially constructed relational leadership approach can help expand the concept of LBE in a team context.

Although socially constructed relational leadership has predominantly been studied through discourse, there is a burgeoning body of relational leadership literature concerned with the non-verbal aspects of leadership (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ryömä & Satama, 2019; Whales et al., 2021). This body of research argues that leadership is

constructed through non-verbal interactions and kinesthetic empathy (Biehl, 2019). Bodily sensations such as seeing, feeling, and touching are used to form judgments about others and their actions (Küpers, 2013). Hence, leadership is constructed relationally through verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and associated meaning-making (Whales et al., 2021). According to these studies, physical action contributes to the construction of leadership, which Eldor (2021) labels “leading by doing.” For example, Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that leadership involves the interplay between verbal and non-verbal interactions. Through experience and rehearsal, people develop knowledge of others that helps them understand and interpret the action. Küpers (2013) argues that leaders and followers co-construct action through kinesthetic empathy, allowing them to respond to each other based on interpretations of bodily sensations. Whales et al. (2021) suggest that the alignment between verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making contributes to effective leadership in professional sport organizations.

LBE is concerned with leadership action (Eldor, 2021). These actions are constructed by oneself and others in a social context. When theorizing LBE, we argue that leadership is a relational practice; leadership is constructed in relationships between people in interaction (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Meaning is constructed from the content of the interaction and the implicit understanding of the participants in the interaction (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). According to the socially constructed relational leadership approach, leading is not limited to the content of verbal interactions; it is also accompanied by non-verbal cues, supporting actions, and previous understanding (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). We will now discuss our approach to LBE in the context of sport management.



## **Positioning the Research**

Our study is concerned with the notion of LBE within the social context of a professional sporting team. We argue that a collective leadership approach to LBE closely aligns with the trend in sport management studies to consider leadership as shared (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Kerwin & Bopp, 2014; Svensson et al., 2019), collective (Ferkins, Shilbury et al., 2018), and socially constructed (Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010; Whales et al., 2021). Thus, our study is positioned within the evolving subfield of collective leadership. We take a constructionist approach to studying leadership, acknowledging that leadership is interdependently constructed between team members (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

Shared, collective, and constructionist studies in sport management have resulted in advancing leadership research in sport management. It has been found that leadership may be more effective if organizations create appropriate conditions and facilitate shared leadership (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Kerwin & Bopp, 2014; Svensson et al., 2019). Ferkins, Shilbury et al. (2018) suggest that effective leadership can be achieved by collaborating with people in leadership positions. Conceptualizing leadership as socially constructed leads to new insights, such as the importance of follower constructions (Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010) and how leadership processes are constructed interdependently between people and social contexts (Whales et al., 2021).

To understand how LBE is socially constructed, we are guided by Robinson's (2001) orienting statement that the process of leadership is "express[ing] ideas in talk or action that are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems that are important to them" (p. 93). The expression of these ideas advances the social order of

the team, including the implicit shared understandings developed by experiences between people and ongoing interactions (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). In this study, we aim to build insights into the concept of LBE by considering how leadership emerges within the context of our selected team. We consider multiple sources of leadership, not just those privileged, as derived from leaders. This constructionist approach informs how LBE contributes to collective leadership. Like previous scholars, we propose that LBE involves the alignment between verbalized directions and actions (Chiu et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2005; Yaffe & Kark, 2011). However, we propose that LBE is a socially constructed, emergent, and dynamic practice that empowers leadership throughout a team or organization and is not confined to ascribed leaders.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Context***

Scholars have argued that sporting teams are useful for studying organizational phenomena (Wolfe et al., 2005), including leadership (Day et al., 2012). Elite sporting teams closely resemble other organizations because of their professionalism (Day et al., 2012), and offer further benefits of observability and publicly available data (Wolfe et al., 2005).

From a shortlist of professional sporting teams that were currently competing at the top level of their sport in our region, we chose to research a professional netball team owing to their enthusiasm for the research project, their permission to observe most team activities, along with the opportunity to interview team members. None of the researchers had any relationship with the team.

### ***Research Process***

We followed a hybrid inductive-deductive research process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), also known as abductive research. This process required making sense

of the empirical material by constructing a mystery, then iterating between empirical material and existing theory that may help solve that mystery (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The abductive approach is useful for exploratory research because it allows researchers to investigate intriguing insights from the empirical material without being confined to the limits of existing theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Although this research process is less common in sport management, it has previously been employed by some in the field (e.g., Frawley et al., 2018; Raw et al., 2022; Schulenkorf & Siefken, 2019; Sherry et al., 2017; Whales et al., 2021).

The project began to understand leadership and teamwork in a professional sporting team. Once the lead researcher met and spoke with the general manager, head coach, assistant coach, and players, the most appropriate events to observe were agreed on. These included team training, meetings, and matchdays, as they involved rich opportunities to observe collaboration between coaches, staff, and players. Other events, such as pool or yoga sessions, were excluded because they did not involve high-level interactions. The lead researcher also regularly worked from the café of the training center, with this space providing many opportunities for impromptu interactions and observations with players and staff.

When we commenced our research, a new team captain was appointed. Intriguingly, when accepting the role, she declared that “we are a team of leaders.” This presented the first mystery, as the proclamation was inconsistent with the traditional leader-centric view of leadership, which privileged one or a few leaders over followers. A broad research question thus emerged from the initial observations, guided by the existing literature: What does it mean to be a team of leaders? Subsequently, this question presented further implications: If they are a team of leaders, are there no followers? How can one be a leader if everyone else is the leader? The second mystery

that emerged from the data collection was the notion of LBE, a term used by the participants to describe their perceptions of leadership in the team. The notion of LBE was inconsistent with the existing research, as participants did not refer exclusively to the actions of designated leaders. Instead, the participants were basing their perceptions on their actions and those of others, including those without formal leadership positions.

Consistent with the abductive process outlined by Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), we acknowledge the role of the lead author in constructing empirical material with the research participants. This required researcher reflexivity to mitigate the risk of narrow interpretation and non-valuable theory construction (Saldaña, 2021). The lead author regularly discussed the field notes and insights with other authors to consider alternative possibilities throughout the research process.

### ***Empirical Material***

The empirical material was recorded in the form of field notes (observations and informal interviews) and transcripts (semi-structured interviews and focus groups). The study was conducted over 12 months, representing one entire performance cycle for the professional team. The first three months of data collection included only observations and individual interviews as the lead author became familiar with the team and built trust and rapport through ongoing interactions over time. Following this initial period, semi-structured interviews were conducted over the middle six months, along with observations and informal interviews. Nine focus group interviews were conducted in the final month of data collection (see Appendix B). Literature and earlier observations guided the questions for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups (King, 2004).

Informal interviews were conducted in situ, usually before or after events or on the sidelines of training sessions and games. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with club staff, coaches, and players (16 interviews, 11 participants) and focused on

exploring observed interactions and events. For example, the lead researcher observed how the captain gathered feedback from coaches and players individually following a game lost by the team. During the interviews, the captain was asked about the process of gathering feedback. Asking for the participant's perspective and observing helped reduce the assumptions made by the researcher (Cunliffe, 2010). Finally, nine focus group interviews were conducted, asking participants to collectively reflect on their understanding of good, poor, and leadership. The entire organization was invited to participate in focus group interviews, to gather diverse perspectives. The focus group participants included coaches, staff, and players (see Table 9). Participants were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity.

Each participant was included in two focus groups, creating groups between two and four. The focus group questions began broadly by asking the groups to discuss their experiences of good and poor leadership. More specific questions were then asked based on previously gathered observations, including how their experiences of good and poor leadership made them feel, what was said, what was done, and what they believed made leadership effective or ineffective. The focus group interviews allowed participants to build on and challenge the responses of others within their group. The focus groups and semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to share their individual and shared understandings, something that could not be purely or solely ascertained through researcher observation (King, 2004). The findings section is based primarily on insights from the focus group and semi-structured interviews.

**Table 10***List of Focus Group Interview Participants*

Pseudonym	Role in the team
Alicia	Assistant Coach
Brittany	Coach
Denise	Team Manager
Hannah	Player
Jack	Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach
Katherine	Player
Lachlan	Strength and Conditioning Coach
Lillian	Player
Lucy	Player
Mary	Captain
Melanie	Player, leadership group
Naomi	Player
Phillipa	Vice-Captain
Scarlett	Player
Stephanie	Player
Susan	Player
Tegan	Player

**Analysis and Display**

A significant corpus of empirical material (field notes, interview transcripts, and focus group transcripts) was collected. The first step in the analysis involved selecting empirical materials relevant to the LBE concept. We analyzed the material thematically, beginning with detailed in vivo coding of transcripts and pattern coding of field notes. Data analysis was initially guided by socially constructed leadership theories, allowing new findings to emerge from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The initial in vivo and pattern codes were grouped into 12 second order codes. After the initial coding process, we discussed and debated the findings in light of the existing literature. The 12 codes were subsequently abstracted into four themes to help to explain the mysteries

that emerged in the empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Table 10 presents the coding structure. The Findings and Discussion section presents the findings from this abductive analysis process. The empirical material and leadership literature were analyzed iteratively to explore the concept of LBE discussed by the participants. The key themes identified are presented in the Findings and Discussion section.

**Table 11**

*Coding Structure for Leading-by-Example*

First order codes	Second order codes	Themes
She can be the one that can fight and inspire the rest of the group	Role model	Action
Confident, brave, and comfortable with who they are		
Always wants to be better even if they are the world's best		
Leads through action rather than just through speech	Leading by doing	
Behaves in a way people want to follow		
They don't just talk; they do		
Connect with eye contact, smile, high-five, a bum grab	Physical interactions	
Congruency of speech and Body Language		
I think the huge thing is the expectations of each and everyone in the team	Expectations	Shared Understandings
Do the little things when no one is watching		
Everything she did was for the team	Putting the team first	
Put the team first		
Team-minded		

First order codes	Second order codes	Themes
Can make mistakes and own up to it Freedom to fail Able to admit when they are wrong	Admitting mistakes	
I wouldn't have learned that if I didn't go through being treated badly Says what people want to hear, not their real voice Isn't willing to understand individual personalities	What not to do	
I like doing it and setting the standard Confident on the court, do my role, back myself Being approachable and being someone they feel they can come to	Self as leader	Collective Construction
Embraces those around them for who they are Understands when to let others take charge Not afraid to hear feedback from others	Empathy	
Supportive language and engaging discussion with the group Open body language, welcoming tone Help my teammates be the best they can be	Inclusive	
Give more energy than you take They back themselves	Energy	Aesthetic Construction
She's given me the confidence and belief to keep doing what I'm doing Instilled a lot of confidence in me They are open and honest to all	Trust/ confidence in	



## **Findings and Discussion**

This study aimed to contribute to research on leadership by expanding the concept of LBE. The findings reveal four themes that resolve the mystery of how LBE contributed to the collective understanding of “we are a team of leaders.” This section outlines four themes: action, shared understanding, collective construction, and aesthetic perceptions. Through these four themes, we propose a relational view of LBE.

LBE was prevalent throughout the data gathering, as evidenced by team members describing their leadership experiences. Participants accounted for abstract and difficult-to-describe ideas of what leadership meant to them by asserting the importance of LBE. For example, LBE was used to explain good leadership when participants found it difficult to articulate implicit understandings and experiences of leadership. According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), accounts of what leaders do tend to break down when people are pressed to expand them into further detail. One possible explanation is the everyday and mundane nature of leadership practices (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

Participants described LBE as actions associated with mutual understanding and supported by positive perceptions in the team. These actions advance the social order in the team by providing examples that set standards for the team (Drath et al., 2008). LBE was not associated only with designated leaders; rather, it was co-constructed between team members who shared meanings and perceptions of good leadership (Ospina et al., 2020).

### **Action**

For participants in our research project, good leadership was associated with action. Participants perceived good leadership as more than just the dialogical work of influencing others; it also required supporting the team’s performance through action.

To describe good leadership, Sabrina argued, “actions speak louder than words,” and a good leader is someone who “practices what they preach.” Phillipa, the vice-captain, reflected that LBE means being “a doer, they don’t just talk, but they do... They follow through on plans.” Alicia, the assistant coach, suggested LBE was based on whether other team members perceive actions as attractive: when someone “behaves in a way that people want to follow.” For Mary, the captain, LBE was about “setting standards.” Jack, a strength and conditioning coach, believed good leadership requires those who “lead through action rather than just speech.” LBE was seen as central to good leadership, and it was achieved through action; specifically, actions that other members of the team saw as good leadership through implicit and explicit shared meanings (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Participants recognized LBE as taking place in seemingly mundane actions. For example, early in the research project, during a team meeting, players and coaches recognized the small improvements individuals had made from the previous season. One player was recognized for their improved diet, and another for their preparation and recovery, which allowed them to spend more time on the court during training. A further player was thanked for their willingness to provide feedback during a previous training session and for calling for more frequent communication from the team. These actions were recognized as examples of good leadership, as they benefited the team. They were recognized as LBE because they influenced others to follow a positive example. On another occasion, the team coach highlighted positive examples of preparation before a team meeting in the middle of the season. The coach provided an example of two players who had made the greatest effort to prepare for the team meeting, indicating that they had set a standard through their actions for others to follow. These examples reinforce the argument that leadership emerges through mundane day-to-day actions (Carroll et al., 2008; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). In one

focus group interview, Melanie, Phillipa, and Hannah describe how good leadership involves action and how others can perceive this through body language. Leadership was not just about what somebody said, but how they supported what they said with what they did:

*Excerpt 1:*

Melanie: I've put things that are actiony [sic].

Phillipa: I put they are doers; they don't talk but they do.

Melanie: Yeah, I said that.

Phillipa: So, you would follow someone who is that [a doer] over someone who doesn't, like speak as much or isn't as like...?

Hannah: It's a hard one, I don't know, it's like... That's a really good question.

Phillipa: Or is it the power of how they speak?

Hannah: I think speaking for speaking sake, you don't want to just say empty words, but I think it is the power of how they say things, they've got something interesting that I haven't thought of... umm. Then I would really like that, I would follow that.

Melanie: I'm the same with that... like actions speak...

Phillipa: Louder than words.

Hannah: Yeah.

Melanie: But when someone just says it, it is less meaningful. It makes such a difference...

In the above excerpt, the three team members describe how talk without action is less meaningful and how without action, talk is not associated with good leadership. This aligns with Eisenkopf (2020), who argues that talk without action is considered 'cheap talk' and is not productive in constructing good leadership. Moreover, actions

must align with shared understandings that are mutually constructed by the team (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Participants emphasized that LBE is demonstrated by actions that help team performance and that improving performance represents good leadership. In Excerpt 1, Melanie, Phillipa, and Hannah state that someone who leads through actions can greatly influence the team without needing to say much. In other words, anyone who demonstrates actions that support a team's shared understanding leads by example (Raelin, 2017). Younger players, or perhaps less outspoken players, can influence a team through their actions. This approach may be different for vocal players who must balance verbal interactions with actions. Leading through action also makes it accessible to those who may not otherwise be considered leaders.

It is evident from the literature and our empirical evidence that LBE involves actions associated with leadership. Actions such as language can influence others by advancing the team's social order (Robinson, 2001). The notion of LBE supports the interdependence of leadership practice (Whales et al., 2021). Leadership is constructed through everyday interactions; team members interpret what is said and done based on their implicit understanding of leadership (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). For example, Hannah describes how actions must align with "professionalism," "working hard," and doing the "little things" well:

*Excerpt 2:*

Hannah: My second one was like professionalism like in the day-to-day grind. Going through your head like is this coming from a place of, "what can I do to better myself?" Then you might say like, "are we working hard enough? Can we be better at the little things?"

Actions that align with the shared meanings of the team represent good leadership and LBE. By analyzing the excerpts, we can see that team standards can be

set through actions. However, to lead, individuals must contribute to team goals through their actions. Talking without the support of congruent actions is insufficient to practice good leadership (Eisenkopf, 2020). This represents the interplay between verbal and non-verbal interactions in the construction of leadership (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Our data support existing literature in arguing that LBE involves actions that align with good leadership (Chiu et al., 2021; Drouvelis & Nosenzo, 2013; Eisenkopf, 2020; Eldor, 2021; Yaffe & Kark, 2011). However, we distinguish the constructionist approach from the existing entity approach. Existing studies argue that LBE is based on leader actions that align with leader instructions. We advocate a relational constructionist approach (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) and argue that actions by any team member can be considered LBE when they align with the team's constructed shared understandings of good leadership (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Yaffe & Kark, 2011).

### **Shared Understandings**

As discussed in the previous theme, LBE required action; however, actions were only considered LBE based on implicit shared understandings that allowed individuals to recognize them as good leadership (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). For example, Naomi said that good leaders were “not afraid to hear feedback from others about how to improve.” Mary added they are “strong in what they believe in but also able to listen and compromise. [They] form relationships and make an effort to get to know everyone.” Sabrina also noted the importance of feedback when she said they “can give and receive honest feedback. Can also implement the feedback they are given.” For each participant, good leadership was inclusive of others in the team and included the willingness to be considerate of others, seek others' feedback, and be approachable.

Two focus groups referred to the same important incident that created and sustained a shared understanding of LBE in the team. A player, Melanie, provided some constructive feedback to the coach, Brittany; the coach implemented changes based on the feedback and demonstrated appreciation for the player's feedback. Referring to the core values of the team, including actively focusing on development and admitting mistakes, another player, Alicia, reflects on how, by role modeling these behaviors, Brittany enabled others in the team to emulate the example she had set.

*Excerpt 3:*

Alicia: [to Brittany] I think that you have been on a quest for personal growth since your Melanie incident. I think that it's been a constant... really evident, you are actually hungry for it and you've gone in search for it. And, I think because of that we've got our gratefulness started... you've got everybody on the same journey.

So, when the person in charge puts themselves out as being vulnerable it gives everybody else permission to go, also, well actually that was my fault. When you put yourself right out on that slate that really does open it up for everyone else to do the same.

In this excerpt, the incident described was a catalyst for change; a team member challenged the coach on an issue that concerned them. In response, the coach acted. This 'incident' became an exemplar for the team to guide future action. This is evident from the second focus group interview. In Excerpt 4, Lucy, Stephanie, Katherine, and Scarlett reflect on the same incident:

*Excerpt 4:*

Lucy: The other day we are at camp, Brittany was saying last year, like you know Melanie challenged her on something... and she actually took that away and that's been like, "right I need to be better."

Katherine: And then she did?

Lucy: And then, yeah.

Katherine: Yeah, it's not always a direct influence, like it could just be...

Lucy: That's what I was just about to put, letting people challenge them also not always being the one that's challenging everyone else. I would say a good example of that not happening is when we had [previous coach] within the team and someone questioned him and he wouldn't want a bar of it. Like... just yelled at them... and I'm like, "mate!"

Scarlett: Whereas I would say Brittany who let Melanie challenge her, it threw her, but she got over it and...

Lucy: [She] made herself even better.

Excerpt 4 demonstrates how team members make sense of leadership by reflecting on specific examples that they jointly recognize as good leadership. Lucy compared a good example of leadership by the current coach with a negative example from a previous coach. The learnings from the incident were related to the actions of Melanie and Brittany and were reinforced through ongoing discussions in the team. In this case, the 'Melanie incident' represents LBE as it is consistent with what the team believes they are meant to do – give and receive constructive feedback. It is also interesting that in Scarlett's language, Brittany (coach) had to 'let' Melanie (player) challenge her; being in a superior position placed a responsibility on Brittany to be

approachable. Moreover, the coach appreciated Melanie's feedback by taking it on board and making improvements.

Actions that represented LBE were understood through shared understanding between team members. Shared understanding constructs the idea of LBE by informing individuals about how to act and how to interpret the actions of others (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). For example, actions must align with the team's values and needs. Being team-minded meant putting the team's interests before individual interests and being inclusive of others through understanding different perspectives. In the following excerpt, Scarlett indicates that good leadership is evident when someone is willing to "take one for the team":

*Excerpt 5:*

Scarlett: For me it's like, I don't know a bit selfless. It's not all about them and they are like willing to take one for the team sort of thing. Which, I think...

Stephanie: Puts the team first.

Stephanie concurred that good leaders think about how their actions will impact the team, and when they have to decide between personal and collective interests, they choose collective interests. Other participants supported the idea of putting the team first. Mary suggested that good leadership involves putting the team first and being aware of their contribution to the team: "putting the team before themselves but also knowing they have to do their job first." Hannah and Phillipa support this idea in Excerpt 6, suggesting that for good leaders, being team-minded is most important, but self-interest is also necessary:

*Excerpt 6:*

Hannah: She [good leader] thinks with the interests of the team first, but how she can impact that and how she can make a difference.



Phillipa: They [good leaders] think team-minded, goal-oriented but at the end of the day they are there for themselves as well, they've got to be able to be the best they can be to pull people along.

In this case, collective interests must be aligned with personal interests. Hannah highlights the personal responsibility of putting the team first by asking the question, "how she can make a difference?" Phillipa concludes that they must be their best to positively influence others; in this way, personal excellence can lead others. Excerpts 5 and 6 indicate that good leadership involves acting in the interests of the team. This notion is established through a shared understanding of good leadership in the team. In this case, the team requires shared understanding to practice LBE in a social context. A shared understanding of good leadership enables participants to recognize LBE in others and their actions that allow them to lead by example. According to Dachler and Hosking (1995), interactions in social contexts involve a degree of implicit meaning, allowing people to understand what is happening. Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that understanding is built through team experience, including bodily rehearsal. Although relational leadership often focuses on the dialogical construction of shared understandings, we can see in Excerpts 3, 4, 5, and 6 that shared understandings are also expressed through action. For example, LBE is recognized in actions that are perceived as team-minded. From a constructionist perspective, we propose that LBE is constructed by actions that align with shared understandings rather than merely the instructions of leaders. A shared understanding of good leadership allows LBE to be practiced collectively.

### **Collective Construction**

Another theme that emerged from the data was the view that all team members collectively constructed leadership in the team. Team members who did not see

themselves as leaders still saw their roles as leaders. Participants situated their own actions within the collective construction of LBE. This was evident throughout the organization, therefore individuals LBE was situated within the collective rather than distinct from it. For example, Tegan, one of the youngest team members, felt she could lead by doing: “because obviously, I am younger, I just like doing it without having to say as much. Like doing it and setting the standard.” Mary concurred: “I think you are the type of person that will like, you do lead by example, you always give 100% all the time.” The examples show how leadership in the team was seen as collective responsibility, enacted through LBE. For example, when team members lead, they act in ways that influence others in the team. This gave everyone in the team responsibility to lead by example through actions that align with shared understandings of good leadership.

Team members considered how they could lead by example based on their diverse skills and personalities. For example, in Excerpt 7, Sabrina, a younger team member, highlights how her tendency to be outspoken contributes to her experience of LBE. This excerpt demonstrates how Sabrina acts in a manner that considers how her idea of LBE is based on how her team members perceive her presence and how she perceives others.

*Excerpt 7, Sabrina:*

like if I am in a good mood, you know it. So, like me and Mary always say like, if we are quiet, people are always like, “oh my god, what’s wrong,” whereas like someone like you, Lillian, if you are quiet, you wouldn’t know if you are happy or sad kind of thing. So, I feel like I could sometimes do that [take energy from the group] but it could also be like one of my positives.

I try to lead by example, that is like my main goal to like lead by example. I feel like I do say a lot like when we have group talks and stuff like that but then it's translating it out onto court as well.

LBE made leading possible for all team members in different ways. Even though Sabrina suggests she is perceived as outspoken, she reiterates the importance of action that supports what she says when she refers to "translating it onto the court." From this perspective, team members can collectively construct LBE, whether they are formal leaders or not, through their actions. Further, Sabrina's actions are shaped by how she believes others will perceive them, demonstrating a mutually influential process of leadership construction.

In Excerpt 8, Tegan also acknowledges that her strengths can be her weaknesses, noting that despite being a younger player, she feels she can lead by example and that it shows good leadership to challenge the "older girls" when appropriate.

*Excerpt 8, Tegan:*

I try to lead by example, even though I am like obviously one of the younger ones in the group, like I try to even at training just to lift the intensity, or like give feedback and like that is something that I wasn't very good at last year. Whereas this year, I feel like I can say to the older girls, "come on, let's pick up the slack" or something. So that's been good. I want to keep working on being confident in myself so then I can give confidence to others as well. I think sometimes I still worry too much about like what I'm doing rather than like being for the team and like bringing my energy, because like I can be... provide a really good energy but when I'm worrying too much that's when I go within myself...

In the two excerpts, participants describe their attempts to lead by example in relation to good leadership. Both participants describe their ability to influence the social order of the team, despite not being formally in a leadership role. Rather, they refer to their position within the team and how their unique personality and experiences enable them to contribute to constructing leadership within the context of the team.

LBE was collectively constructed, as it was synonymous with setting the standard for others to follow and holding peers accountable to the standards. LBE started by taking actions that set and adhere to team standards and was followed by holding other team members to account to follow standards. In a focus group interview, Katherine, Stephanie, and Lucy (Excerpt 9) discuss the importance of first taking personal responsibility and then taking responsibility for the performance of others. Lucy begins with a hypothetical scenario to describe a case of poor leadership:

*Excerpt 9:*

Lucy: Or another example could be like knowing someone is doing, I am sure all of us do it in here but knowing someone has done something wrong and being afraid to pick them up on it.

Katherine: That can be bad leadership in a way...

Stephanie: Because if you are going to let that slide, they'll think that's fine.

Lucy: That expectation is okay, where it is not cool...

Katherine: Yeah, catching someone out.

The three players discuss the importance of holding others accountable to the standards of the team. This does not represent a dichotomy between leaders and followers; rather, it represents the critical aspect of being part of the team. It is important for team members to take actions that support team standards, but they also expect that if someone does not meet these standards, this is communicated to them.

Thus, leadership is not a static property of individuals but moves and emerges based on what the team and context require (Ospina et al., 2020). The person who observes that something is not up to a standard should discuss this with those who do not produce the required effort, which is a form of collaborative agency (Raelin, 2017). This is a way of setting and reinforcing the standards of the team. In this example, Stephanie begins by highlighting personal responsibility. Lucy adds that it is also important to hold others accountable if they noticeably lack effort, which Katherine supports. LBE, in this scenario, is premised on action through producing the best efforts and is reiterated by holding team members to account for the standards they have set for themselves. Through collective construction, LBE is related to the ongoing cycles of action and verbal interactions that shape shared understanding.

LBE is not confined to those privileged with leadership positions. LBE is based on actions that are considered desirable by others within the social context of the team, and anyone in the team could perform these actions. As we have seen above, young players Sabrina and Tegan describe how actions representing good leadership allow them to position themselves as leaders through LBE. Therefore, LBE is a collective and accessible leadership practice. Excerpt 9 also shows that the ability to hold others accountable for team standards is built on personally acting in a way that meets team standards. LBE is also relative to social context, as Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) suggest, as being in relation with others. LBE is collectively constructed in terms of being practiced throughout the team and mutually constructed in the team.

### **Aesthetic Perception**

Participants in our study identified how good leadership involved aesthetic perceptions of the actions of others. Specifically, they referred to providing more energy to the group than they took. Therefore, good leadership requires the creation of positive

energy reciprocated by others. The idea of creating positive energy relates to the concept of aesthetic leadership, as it is perceived through bodily senses, such as seeing, hearing, and feeling (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011). In Excerpt 10, according to Hannah, LBE involves creating energy that supports others and builds the team up.

*Excerpt 10:*

Melanie: Like energy wise, like just giving more energy...

Phillipa and Hannah [same time]: Than you take...

Hannah: Someone who can inspire a group and do it authentically and naturally. They give more energy than they take, and they are professional in the day-to-day grind... when their... like the energy that they give off like you can tell if they back themselves if they're... whether it is on the court off the court or if they speak up in like a group setting... like if you can't generate your own energy then I think you've failed already.

For Hannah, good leadership is impossible when you cannot 'generate your own energy.' The notion of 'giving energy' is aesthetically constructed, which involves 'body language' and the 'way they speak.' Team members rely on their bodily senses to perceive their actions as examples of leadership (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011). Energy is interpreted through aesthetic knowledge, as argued by Hannah:

Hannah: I think that, like body language, like I don't know I find it easier to recognize body language when someone is like happy, confident, even if it's like on the court or off the court I think the way that they present themselves and the way they speak about themselves...

The presentation of the self to the team by providing energy to others is a part of LBE. This is not exclusive to appointed team leaders; it is an important aspect of all team members.

In the previous section, we discussed how both Sabrina and Tegan described energy as an important aspect of their leadership identities. They provide further details in Excerpt 11, where Sabrina suggests that someone can bring energy into a room or take energy from others. According to Sabrina, the energy individuals present to others can have positive or negative influences.

*Excerpt 11:*

Sabrina: Takes more energy from the group than they give to the group.

Tegan: Can you explain that?

Sabrina: So, like when like someone comes into a room and instead of like giving energy and being positive and stuff, like that they come in and they make the mood of the room worse than what it was, like when they got in there. Do you know what I mean, someone like grumpy coming into the room, you feel like you can't say anything to them or whatever and it kind of like makes everyone else act differently?

The negative influence can result in a behavior change in others, for example, “you feel like you can't say anything to them.” Through aesthetic interpretations, group members perceive the mood of others, which influences their behavior. The aesthetic interpretation of someone who creates positive or negative energy influences a team. Awareness of the potential positive and negative influences of the presentation of the self can help individuals lead by example. According to Ryömä and Satama (2019), masking negative emotions is important in constructing good leadership. Similarly, Reitz (2015) argues that relational leadership involves determining when to reveal and maintain a leadership facade, noting that individuals who only present a facade are unlikely to develop strong relationships. LBE requires the presentation of positive energy.

In the final example, Scarlett, Mary, and Tegan provide a specific example when they describe how self-doubt can result in taking more energy from others. Mary suggests that the feeling can be contagious when one player doubts themselves, a suggestion supported by Scarlett and Tegan. According to Mary, a possible solution is to “do your own job first.”

*Excerpt 12:*

Scarlett: [I present negative energy] when I start to doubt myself.

Mary: It is contagious as well.

Scarlett: It is, it creates that hole for everyone to jump into.

Tegan: People can start worrying about you and lose focus of their own job.

Mary: That is where you need to do your own job first. It kind of goes back to that idea of being able to give more energy than you take...

Excerpt 12 shows that team members can sometimes become overwhelmed. The negative ‘energy’ this creates can negatively influence others. Mary proposes that it is better to focus on your role in such situations. In this way, team members engage in LBE, which is perceived as ‘giving more energy than you take.’ We can see from the excerpts that positive (LBE) and negative examples (not LBE) are constructed aesthetically through bodily interpretations of ‘energy.’

LBE is achieved through action; however, our research highlights the importance of bodily perceptions in constructing good leadership. This argument supports Fisher and Robbins (2015), who argue that LBE requires using and controlling the physical body as an exemplar. Our data demonstrate that bodily perceptions enable the representation and perception of emotions. In our case, this means that the LBE requires the construction of positive energy, which builds up the energy of the team. Negative feelings such as self-doubt can also influence others in the team and are



‘contagious,’ requiring individuals to attempt to control their own emotions and their presentation of emotions to others.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we expand the concept of leading by example. We argue that LBE involves the interplay of verbal and non-verbal leadership constructed between team members and involves shared understandings and aesthetic perceptions of good leadership. In this way, LBE is a relational practice that is collectively constructed. This perspective on LBE challenges existing empirical studies focusing on the unilateral influence process from leaders to followers. Our position supports the argument that socially constructed relational leadership is both dialogic and embodied (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). LBE is constructed by actions associated with good leadership, based on what team members come to expect and perceive in the context of their team. LBE is informed by experience, interactions, and bodily perceptions that generate a shared understanding of leadership.

The findings that emerged from the empirical research are guided by integrating two themes in the leadership literature. First, LBE, the concept of accomplishing leadership by aligning action with what leaders say, otherwise referred to as ‘leading by doing’ (Eldor, 2021). Second, constructionist leadership theories argue that leadership is constructed in spaces between people through interaction. The findings extend the existing theory by demonstrating that multiple team members construct LBE through action, shared understanding, collective construction, and aesthetic perceptions. Like the existing literature, our findings demonstrate that LBE is also associated with action (Chiu et al., 2021; Drouvelis & Nosenzo, 2013; Eisenkopf, 2020; Eldor, 2021; Fisher & Robbins, 2015; Gardner et al., 2005). An important contribution of our findings is that LBE involves actions associated with shared understandings or beliefs held by team

members. This extends the existing theory that associates LBE with a leader's actions that align with what that a leader has said (Chiu et al., 2021; Drouvelis & Nosenzo, 2013; Eisenkopf, 2020; Eldor, 2021; Gardner et al., 2005). Importantly, shared understanding is constructed and held by all team members who lead by example through action, a finding consistent with the relational leadership literature (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Ospina et al., 2020). Finally, LBE is constructed by sensory perceptions beyond words and actions. This corroborates arguments in the aesthetic leadership literature that leadership is perceived through bodily senses (Fisher & Robbins, 2015; Koivunen & Wennes, 2011).

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study provides four practical outcomes. First, we argue that good leadership requires actions that align with a shared understanding of the team. LBE is practiced and perceived by all team members in different contexts and ways. It involves the expectation that all members contribute to the team through their actions and follow-up on feedback and listening. Talking without action is considered inadequate for leadership. Therefore, all team members should encourage positive actions. Managers should emphasize that everyone in an organization can lead through their actions. Second, a shared understanding can be developed by reflecting on experiences and discussing expectations. Positive actions should be encouraged to create shared understanding. Important examples can be discussed to create exemplars; these exemplars become shared understandings that serve as a point of reference for people in the organization to know how to act. Third, LBE reaffirms the collective construction of leadership. Hence, leadership should be developed throughout the team. This can be achieved by individually and collectively reflecting on actions and how they influence the performance of the organization (Cunliffe, 2010). Finally, LBE is perceived aesthetically, as it is influenced by how

others perceive team members' actions. Therefore, individuals should be cognizant of non-verbal and implicit influences on others, such as body language. This requires choosing when to present a facade for the benefit of the collective group and when to be more open and vulnerable regarding how one feels (Reitz, 2015; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Team members should be aware that such choices influence how others respond to their actions. These four practical insights are valuable for all organizations that rely on collective performance in teams.

Returning to the earlier mystery, LBE emerged in our study as a key practice enabling participants to be 'a team of leaders.' LBE is accessible to all team members capable of performing actions interpreted within the team as good leadership. Actions can influence others in the team by 'setting the standard' for others to follow based on actions that help the collective achievement of team goals. LBE is a social construct associated with good leadership, and what counts as good leadership is constructed through shared meaning and aesthetic perceptions. Team members become intelligible about what LBE means in their social context through implicit understandings and ongoing interactions. Our research expands the existing conceptualizations of LBE by moving beyond the entity approach, which limits LBE only to designated leaders. We agree that the roles associated with leadership, such as captains and coaches, are important in constructing leadership; however, LBE is not exclusive to formal leaders.

This study provides an in-depth exploration of one professional sporting team. An important strength of the research is the empirical material gathered. Collecting such rich data requires a significant investment in time, which is not often available to researchers. We recommend that future research incorporates naturalistic data collection methods, such as observation over an extended period, such as a complete season. However, we acknowledge that this type of research may be limited to doctoral

research. Obtaining data access in professional sports teams can also be challenging due to anxieties about protecting intellectual property. Hence, a significant degree of trust must be built between the researcher and participants in similar studies.

Based on our analysis, we propose generally applicable insights into LBE (Flyvbjerg, 2001); however, there are limitations to this study that must be identified. For example, the shared understandings established in the team we studied are unique, based on the people involved, their experience, and social context. Sporting teams are useful for studying organizational phenomena because they offer empirically rich insights due to the interdependence of people, highly visible interactions, and the ability to easily measure performance against others (Wolfe et al., 2005). However, we acknowledge a limitation of sport organizations as they represent relatively homogenous groups, with all players being of the same gender and similar age and experience. This is unlike other organizational teams, which may offer greater diversity in age, gender, experience, and other factors. In addition, the practice of LBE is likely to be different when pursuing team-based objectives than when pursuing hierarchical organizational structures that may emphasize individual performance. Despite these limitations, the research design effectively addresses the research purpose of exploring the notion of LBE in a team environment.

Future research could explore LBE in teams working in other contexts, such as corporate, not-for-profit, government, health care, and emergency services, to name a few. These contexts may differ due to their objectives and perhaps more robust standard operating procedures, as opposed to sporting teams that are highly adaptable within the rules of their sport. In-depth research methods should be employed to understand the concept of the LBE. A persistent challenge will be understanding what counts as LBE, as this varies based on context. Hence, naturalistic data must be augmented with

participant' experiences captured through discussions and interviews (Silverman, 2017). Finally, the relationship between LBE and leadership development could be further explored. Other scholars have proposed that leadership development is an experiential and aesthetic process (Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018). LBE and leadership development could offer complementary and ongoing cycles of development.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion**

This study on relational leadership provides theoretical and practical insights into our understanding of leadership in the context of professional sport. The focus of the research was driven by my personal experience that leadership in sport is constructed by many members of a team, not one or a few. This personal experience did not align with the dominant leadership theory, that of the hero leader, who is responsible for subordinate followers (Ford et al., 2008; Tomlinson, 2014). Socially constructed relational leadership was selected as the epistemological lens to explore leadership because it aligned with the purpose of the research to shed light on the socially constructed nature of leadership. Socially constructed relational leadership is concerned with mutually constructed meanings that influence the social order of a group of people (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

This research project was completed when sport management scholars called for further studies exploring how leadership is socially constructed in sporting contexts (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). Methods were chosen and data collected to provide detailed insights on leadership practice. This thesis contributes to leadership theory in sport management by proposing new ways of researching, practicing, and developing leadership. Generally, the applicable theory is presented to promote good leadership in sporting organizations. This chapter presents an overview of the research process, consolidated findings, and contributions from the research and outlines the key limitations and future directions.

### **Research Process**

On the first day of data collection, the team captain presented an interesting problem when she declared, “we are a team of leaders.” This statement was a source of inspiration for the analysis and exploration of the empirical material gathered because,

like my personal experience, it is inconsistent with traditional ‘heroic’ notions of leadership. This statement and the belief that leadership was the responsibility of everyone in the team presented an interesting problem to explore from a socially constructed relational leadership lens. Socially constructed relational leadership assumes that meaning is continuously negotiated by people interacting in social contexts (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Although relational leadership scholars have advocated various ontologies, including relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), a process ontology was adopted to explore the continuous social processes involved in the construction and reconstruction of leadership (Crevani et al., 2010). This is agreed with previous studies by Carroll and Simpson (2012), Crevani (2011), and Ryömä and Satama (2019). The findings of the doctoral research project reflect the social processes involved in constructing and reconstructing leadership in the selected sporting organization. The implications of the findings are further explored in the following sections.

The selection of professional sport in the research context has three significant benefits. First, the selection of this context enabled the exploration of leadership in a performance-oriented professional sport organization, where the goal of the organization is different from that of profit-oriented organizations. Organizations exist to achieve success within their sport (Hoye et al., 2018; Stewart & Smith, 1999). Second, the pressure of performance, financial investment, and the heterogeneity of high-performance and professional sport justify the need for further research to explore the intricacies of leadership in this context (Frawley et al., 2018). Third, professional sport offers significant possibilities for studying leadership theory beyond the sport management field owing to the observability of performance and organizational pressures and standards that resemble other organizations (Day et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2005). Leadership studies in sport are regularly undertaken in sport psychology, sport

science, and sport management (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Mainstream leadership literature also features research conducted in the context of sport (Ryömä & Satama, 2019; Wilson, 2013). However, this project is positioned in the field of sport management because of the theoretical and practical implications for leadership practice at all levels of professional sport organizations. The study also responds to Welty Peachey et al.'s (2015) call for multi-level leadership studies in sport organizations because leadership is an interactional process situated in context. However, the existing studies are mostly limited to a single level. In addition to the theoretical and practical outcomes from the study, the context and case selection provide additional insights into professional sport organizations, specifically within the professional Australian female league, Super Netball – a sport that previous scholars have argued is under-represented in academic research relative to the significance of the sport in the Australian landscape (McLachlan, 2016; Taylor, 2001).

Previous sport management articles have included research on leadership as socially constructed. These studies have adopted an interpretivist perspective that considers leadership a subjective experience (Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010). As such, subjective perceptions provide the basis for empirical data gathering, focusing on gaining insight into the thoughts of followers, observers, and stakeholders. These studies have provided valuable insights into leadership in the context of sport management. However, before this doctoral project, constructionism – as advocated by scholars such as Berger and Luckmann (1967), Crotty (1998), and Silverman (2015) – has not been reflected in sport management leadership studies. This approach is concerned with how subjectivity (such as individual thoughts) entangles objectivity (such as the content of interactions) to construct leadership socially through the ongoing processes of socially constructing meaning (Walker, 2006). The



constructionism approach is employed in this doctoral research project to reveal the construction of leadership through interactions and meaning-making, the development of team leadership through shared understandings, and the practice of LBE.

The outcomes of this study reflect the intended purpose. Generally, the applicable theory is proposed by exploring the construction of leadership in professional sport through the lens of relational leadership and in-depth exploratory methods. This thesis provides new insights and implications for research, practice, and leadership development in the context of professional sport and beyond.

The consolidated findings, contributions, limitations, and future research directions are discussed in the remainder of this chapter. A key argument is that leadership is practiced through interactions in which at least some part of the meaning is implicitly understood by the participants (paper one). Therefore, leadership is constructed through verbal, non-verbal, and meaning-making interactions. A shared understanding that influences social order can be developed by reflecting on the experience, setting objectives, and identifying development priorities (paper two). Leadership development involves processes that reflect a shared understanding of good leadership. LBE is identified as a key leadership practice involving acting in ways that support a team's shared understanding of good leadership (paper three). The relationship between the studies is further explored in the next section.

### **Consolidated Findings**

The findings from this research project indicate that leadership is relationally constructed through verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making. Through experience in the team, coaches, players, and staff develop a shared understanding. This shared understanding allows implicit assumptions to be made about what is happening, so not all of what is communicated through leadership interactions

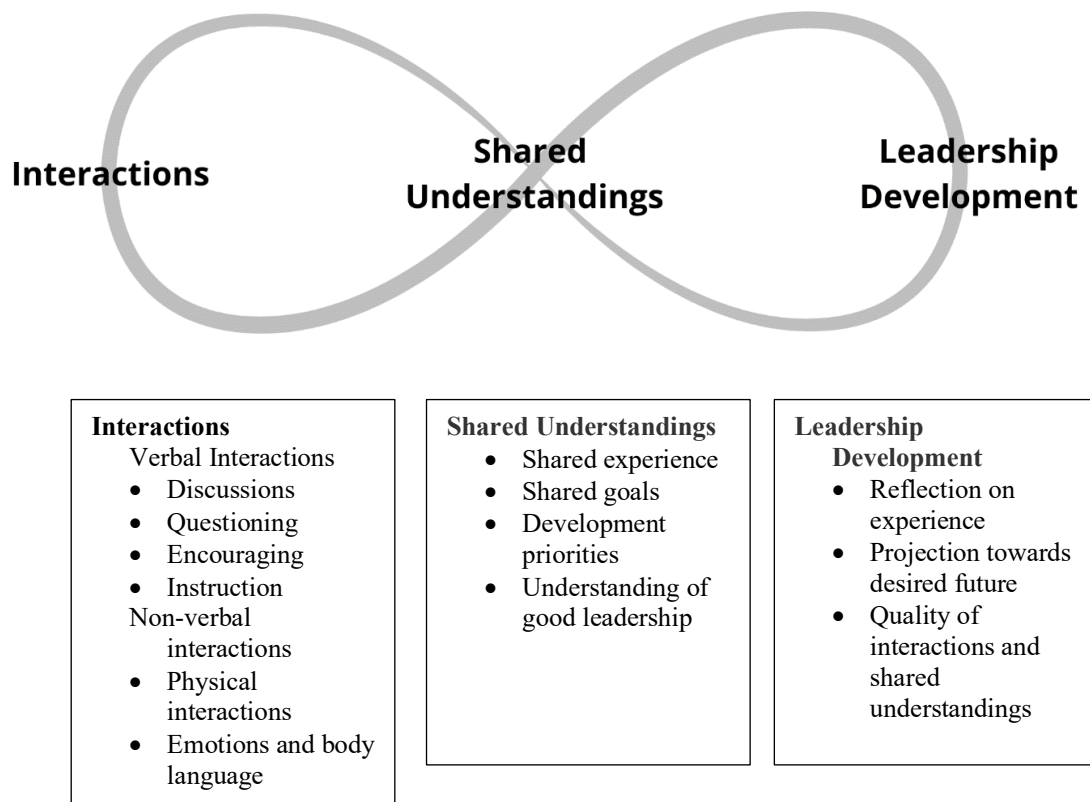
and practice needs to be explicit each time. Patterns form, and team members become intelligible to the team's social order through experience. LBE illustrates how leadership can be constructed by many team members, not just by formal leaders. Paper three proposes that LBE is about actions that support a shared understanding of leadership in the team. All team members contribute to the construction of shared understanding through discussions and reflecting on the experience, and through their actions, they lead by example. These findings provide insights into leadership in teams in the context of professional sport and beyond. This research project advances relational leadership theory, particularly in sport management, and can be applied to leadership development and other organizational processes, thereby contributing practical implications. This section further outlines how the findings from this project and the relevant literature contribute to theory and practice.

The consolidated findings concern leadership interactions, shared understandings that inform leadership, and how good leadership develops through interactions and shared understanding. The process ontology identified the interdependence and continuous construction and reconstruction of leadership interactions, shared understandings, and leadership development, as illustrated in Figure 2. Interactions, the construction of shared understanding, and good leadership development were seen as interdependent and continuous. The three interdependent practices require the consideration of past, present, and future through processes such as objective setting, needs analyses, reflecting on experience, and acting based on shared understandings. Interactions were influenced by shared understanding constructed based on previous leadership development efforts. Leadership development efforts, such as reflecting on the experience, setting an objective, and identifying development priorities, continued to construct shared understanding, as did ongoing interactions.

Moreover, monologic and dialogic verbal and non-verbal interactions enabled leadership development and the construction of shared understandings.

**Figure 2**

*Relationship Between Interactions, Shared Understandings, and Leadership Development*



Leadership processes are related to how leadership is constructed. Primarily, this is concerned with interactions and includes implicit meanings conveyed through interactions. Leadership is practiced when interactions advance social order, informing participants of how they should act and interact to pursue mutual objectives (Drath et al., 2008). Through these interactions, shared meanings are negotiated between people. Concurrently, these negotiations unify and disperse meaning, most often through dialogue (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) but also through monologue (Ryömä & Satama, 2019) and non-verbal interactions (Biehl, 2019). Ideas and practices are valuable when

they are carried forward into action and future patterns, thus fostering changes to the social order. Paper one highlighted several interactional forms that enable mutual leadership construction, including verbal interactions such as discussions, questioning, instruction, and encouragement. This also involved non-verbal interactions, such as physical interactions, emotions, and body language. Meaning-making also supports verbal and non-verbal interactions by reflecting on the experience and projecting toward the desired objectives. The processes of leadership interaction were not isolated; rather, they were interdependent and supported each other through ongoing cycles of interactions.

Interactions supported relational leadership practices proposed by previous scholars, including movement between frames (Carroll & Simpson, 2012), positioning (Hersted & Gergen, 2013), and resonating (Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018). Therefore, the findings from this research project on leadership interactions corroborate and extend existing theories on socially constructed relational leadership. Relational leadership involves framing experiences by discussing them with others. Movement between frames occurs when new frames are constructed that change the trajectory of a group (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Positioning involves the awareness of content and consequences when interacting with others (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Resonating refers to awareness and responsiveness to the nuances of interactions and emerging patterns (Crevani, 2019). These examples of relational leadership are enabled through verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making.

These findings consistently highlight the importance of a shared understanding in constructing relational leadership. Shared understanding informed interactions and accounted for implicit meanings associated with them. The idea of shared understanding is fundamental to socially constructed relational leadership. For example, Dachler and

Hosking (1995) describe the multiple ways people construct meaning from interactions as multilogue. Ospina and Sorenson (2006) argue that over time people mutually construct meaning through interactions. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) similarly suggest that leadership is constructed by people who negotiate shared understanding through dialogue. The findings that have emerged from this research contribute to relational leadership theory by highlighting the importance of a shared understanding of ‘good leadership’ and how leadership development can be achieved through shared understanding. Shared understandings persist until there is a reason for them to change, such as trigger moments or dissonance (Cunliffe, 2004). Paper two demonstrates how shared understanding is constructed in a social context over time. This is based on experience, objective setting, and identifying development priorities. However, over time, things change and new challenges emerge that obstruct goal attainment. Paper two discusses how ongoing interactions enable the negotiation of emerging challenges by developing a shared understanding of good leadership by reflecting on objective setting and setting development priorities. Shared understandings were developed by virtually visiting the past and future so that participants understood how to construct good leadership (development priorities) in the present. Shared understanding allows the team to negotiate emerging challenges. The evolution of shared understanding and the ability of participants to understand good leadership demonstrates leadership development.

Shared understanding also helped construct LBE, as discussed in paper three. LBE was described as an action that supported a shared understanding of good leadership. Actions that did not support a shared understanding of good leadership were undermined, LBE. Leading, for example, involves consistently setting the standard through action, and this is not confined to formal leaders. Over time, the construction of a shared understanding resulted in recognizing leadership in actions. This resulted in

leadership being a collective construction of actions, as LBE was performed not only by formal leaders providing direction. Anyone on the team who acted in support of a mutual understanding of good leadership could lead. LBE is one instance of how leadership is constructed collectively through verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making. By discursively constructing a shared understanding of good leadership through reflection and projection, participants became intelligible to leadership action. The shared understanding that 'we are a team of leaders' became self-supporting as many individuals recognized their responsibility to lead when they understood how their actions and interactions contributed to the team. It is important not to ignore the value of formal roles such as coaches and captains; however, a shared understanding softens the centralized authority of these roles and promotes collaborative agency (Raelin, 2016). From the perspective of constructionism, leadership is not delegated to subordinate others but is mutually constructed through the ongoing negotiation of meaning through interactions (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). The findings of this research also demonstrate the practices and possibilities of leadership development from a socially constructed relational perspective. For example, the relational practice of leadership involves collective construction, thereby promoting opportunities for relational leadership development as it facilitates the construction and reconstruction of shared understandings. From a relational perspective, leadership development aligns with Day's (2011) suggestion that leadership development concerns the capacity for leadership within a group. Leadership development can be promoted by interactions that facilitate shared understanding based on reflecting on the experience, setting objectives for the future, and identifying development opportunities. The findings extend research that argues that leadership is best developed via experience (Frawley et al., 2018). Through ongoing interactions, participants reflected on their

experiences to understand what is needed to reach their objectives. Leadership development involves constructing good leadership through development priorities and awareness of emerging patterns that advance the leadership construct (Kjellström et al., 2020). Table 11 summarizes the consolidated findings, further representing the interdependence between interactions, shared understanding, and leadership development.

**Table 12**

*Relational Construction of Good Leadership*

	Interactions	Shared understandings	Leadership development
Who	Between all members of the social context and those with an influence on the social context.	Shared by members within the social context.	Possible by all members of the social context.
What	Verbal interactions including monologic and dialogic. Non-verbal interactions including physical interactions and emotions, and body language.	Implicit and explicit mutual agreements between some or all of the people in the social context that influences the way people act and interact.	Improved leadership and performance based on the creation of shared understandings that promote good leadership through ongoing interactions. Processes include movement between frames, positioning, and resonating (Crevani, 2019).
Where	Interactions occur in spatial and social contexts that influence and are influenced by the interactions.	Within the social context.	Within the social context.
When	Temporal, at the time interactions, take place.	Shared understandings take time to develop; past experiences and future	Ongoing process.

	Interactions	Shared understandings	Leadership development
		objectives influence shared understandings in the present.	
How	Take place between people who mutually construct meaning. Through negotiation, meanings are simultaneously unified and dispersed (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).	By engaging in interactions over time, discussing shared experiences and objectives, as well as intuitive understandings of the social context (Hersted & Gergen, 2013).	Through purposeful experience, reflecting collectively on experience, and setting objectives and development priorities to achieve the objectives.

Building on Table 11, we can differentiate between interactions, shared understanding, and leadership development, appreciating how they relate to each other. Socially constructed relational leadership is constructed in the professional sport organization through interactions with all members of the organization. These interactions are often mundane and include verbal and non-verbal content. Organization members construct meaning through interactions based on shared experiences and objectives. Reflecting on interactions and shared understanding is an example of a developmental effort. According to Ryömä and Satama (2019), relational leadership requires reflexivity, which allows participants to construct meaning from multiple and subtle experiences, as well as through purposeful action. Reflexivity helps groups develop leadership as they become intelligible in action and social capital (McCauley & Palus, 2020). Intelligibility in actions and ideas about good leadership shifts the leadership construct in the social context of the team (Kjellström et al., 2020).

The following section highlights the contribution of these findings to sport management.



## **Contributions**

From the three papers and consolidated findings, contributions to sport management literature and practice have emerged and are outlined in this section. The primary contribution of this thesis is the theoretical contribution achieved by applying the socially constructed relational leadership lens to garner and analyze empirical data gathered from in-depth exploratory methods. Recommendations for professional sport organizations are provided as practical contributions to leadership practices and development. Additional contributions are also presented, including methodological contributions, contributions to leadership theory, and the addition of a new case in professional sport.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

Leadership studies have focused on leaders and followers as separate entities in static contexts. There is recent evidence that this perspective is shifting in mainstream leadership and sport management; thus, more insights are called for regarding the mutual construction of leadership in social contexts (Denis et al., 2012; Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). This thesis has contributed to leadership theory from a constructionist perspective, informing how leadership is practiced and developed through social processes of interactions and constructing shared understandings by specifically highlighting 1) how leadership is constructed through non-verbal interactions, 2) the relevance of relational leadership to sport management, 3) the interdependence of social processes in constructing leadership, 4) the importance of monologic and dialogic opportunities for leadership, and 5) the development of leadership with others. The first paper outlined how relational leadership is constructed through verbal, non-verbal, and meaning-making interactions. A significant contribution of this paper to sport management leadership studies is emphasizing the value of non-verbal interactions in

constructing leadership, as earlier studies only recognized dialogue (Denis et al., 2012). In sport management, previous studies have explored how leadership is performed and perceived (Arnold et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010), but non-verbal interactions have rarely been explored. The value of non-verbal interactions is echoed in papers two and three, particularly with the construction of LBE, where research participants privilege action in constructing good leadership.

Second, a new perspective is provided to sport management – that of socially constructed relational leadership, which asserts that leadership (particularly good leadership) is premised on shared understandings of leadership specific to the social context. This extends earlier studies that value interpretations of leadership (Arnold et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010) by arguing that the perceptions of leadership are intersubjective as they influence ongoing interactions; therefore, judgments form part of socially constructed leadership. Using the orienting statement as a starting point for this research project allowed leadership to be observed without an overly simplistic description of leadership (Crevani et al., 2010). As Robinson has put it, “Express[ing] ideas in talk or action that are recognized as capable of progressing tasks or problems, which are important to them [team members]” (2001, p. 93). This study served as an orienting statement for recognizing leadership in interactions and experiences. The findings determined from this starting point recognized what was seen as valuable to the group in constructing leadership in pursuit of their objectives. Third, this thesis contributes to the theory of how leadership is constructed through three interdependent but distinct social processes: verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making. These processes were all social as they occurred through interactions, with some agreements implicitly understood because of the relationships between people (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). Thus, participants constructed and reconstructed meanings

in multiple ways (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Purposeful verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making help construct shared understanding through reflections that facilitate leadership development. LBE demonstrates interdependence between verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making as actions that align with shared understandings, the culmination of which is the recognition of good leadership.

Fourth, the socially constructed relational perspective can advance leadership practices in professional sport by incorporating interdependent practices. By raising awareness of dialogic and monologic verbal interactions, professional sport practitioners, especially those who influence organizing opportunities for collaboration, can better interact in pursuit of mutual objectives. For example, questioning and discussions (dialogic) can be used to negotiate meanings between people. Instruction and encouragement (monologic) can be used to contribute to ongoing conversations when the available time is brief, such as during games. Non-verbal interactions, including physical interactions, body language, and emotions, and LBE support the meanings constructed in verbal interactions. Sport management practitioners can use this knowledge to promote better leadership practices and awareness in their organizations. Fifth, leadership is developed in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Verbal, non-verbal, and meaning-making practices can be used to reflect on the experience, set objectives for the future, and identify what is needed to move from experience to a desired future by constructing development priorities. Development priorities should be established based on the needs of the team and organization (Wallace et al., 2021). These needs are established based on projecting toward objectives and reflecting on experience. Experience in the organization is socially constructed through discussions, reviewing, recalling, and projecting assigned values to

moments (Bruni & Teli, 2007). Leadership development should focus on leadership capacity (Frawley et al., 2018) and leadership action, as demonstrated through LBE. By exploring leadership development from a relational perspective, this thesis addresses the call of Frawley et al. (2018) for further studies addressing the complexities of leadership in professional and high-performance sport.

The theoretical contributions of this thesis provide greater insight into the social construction of leadership in sport management, including social, collaborative, and relational experiences (Ferkins, Skinner et al., 2018). Moreover, the case analysis is based on an integrated unit of analysis that resembles the suggestion by Peachey et al. (2015) to undertake multi-level leadership studies in sport organizations. The findings from this thesis support the construction of leadership across different levels of the organization, with influence flowing up and across, as well as down, throughout the organization. This multi-directional flow of influence recognizes hierarchy and emergence, with relational dimensions established through experience contributing to the construction of leadership that advances the social order in the professional sport organization.

### **Practical Contributions**

The theoretical contributions also present practical implications for leadership practice and development in professional sport organizations. As proposed in the first paper good leadership involves the alignment of verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning-making, which promotes consistency within the social context. These findings are extended in the first paper, arguing that action is necessary to ensure good leadership, such as in the case of LBE. Indeed, action should align with the shared understanding of the organization, often referred to as culture (Alvesson, 2011). It is possible for anyone to lead by example when their actions align with the

shared understanding of the organization. LBE is collectively constructed where multiple people set an example, and it is perceived aesthetically by those in the organization when leadership is recognized through their bodily senses (Fisher & Robbins, 2015). Shared understandings that both inform and are informed by leadership actions are negotiated between people by reflecting on the experience and setting objectives through discussions. Leadership is collectively (mutually) constructed; therefore, the whole organization matters for good leadership. A shared understanding changes through discussion; thus, practitioners should be aware of how changes influence leadership constructs in the social context (Kjellström et al., 2020).

Practical contributions for leadership development are presented in the second paper. These contributions relate to the theoretical findings that leadership developments occur interdependently between team members advancing the social order in the direction of collective goals. Leadership developments are not always experienced linearly as different experiences contribute unequally to development. The effectiveness of experiences depends on shared reflection. Leadership development should become a strategic priority in professional sport (Frawley et al., 2018). This can be achieved by reviewing current leadership capacity and actions to determine what is needed to succeed. All participants in the organization should be engaged in constructing, executing, and evaluating development priorities. This inclusive nature should extend to the awareness of the nuances of interactions and emerging patterns in the organization. Participants should be encouraged to respond through actions and interactions in line with the development priorities of the team. For example, holding others accountable when the expectations of the team are not met, including bottom-up influence. Understanding that development is nonlinear, interpersonal reflection should be a regular and ongoing interaction process. Leadership development involves the

construction of meaning with others. Collaboration should be promoted between operational sub-units of the organization, as this is where shared understanding is most required to promote implicit awareness. To maximize leadership development, practitioners should create events that foster collaboration and interaction throughout day-to-day operations. Retention is important for sustaining shared understanding, and when recruiting, it is important to consider how recruits will influence social order. From a relational perspective, these are important considerations in leadership development. Considerable resources are invested in professional sporting organizations to maximize performance, with one area believed to enhance leadership. However, little is known about effectively practicing and developing leadership skills in professional and high-performance sports (Frawley et al., 2019). The practical implications presented here can help professional sporting organizations better invest their resources to enhance performance.

### **Methodological Contributions**

This thesis makes methodological contributions to the literature. First, data gathering of in-depth empirical material required long-term on-site access to a professional sport club; that opportunity is rarely obtained. During the data-gathering period, I had a privileged position within the organization to observe daily operations and interactions and developed trust and rapport with the participants. This emergent familiarity led to insights that would be difficult to obtain through surveys or interviews alone. The time invested in gathering the data corpus may also not be available to anyone other than doctoral research students. The methodological contribution is the introduction of in situ methods to study leadership in professional sport. In-depth qualitative data collection methods can continue to provide important insights for sport management researchers to address several research problems, not only leadership

(Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). It is also advantageous to undertake research over an extended period, such as a full season for a professional sport organization (McCusker et al., 2018). This allows researchers to familiarize themselves with the patterns and behaviors in the organization, how emerging challenges are handled, and questions participants on their experiences. This methodological approach differs from earlier socially constructed leadership research, which focused only on the perceptions of others. Observations allow researchers to see how subjective interpretations influence ongoing social actions (Emerson et al., 2011). The research conducted in this doctoral project provides an additional case of sport management. The organization researched has three important distinguishing features. First, the team studied won the championship in the year that research was conducted, providing insights into a successful professional sport organization. Second, the organization is a professional female sport organization in a field where studies are dominated by research on male sport teams (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). Third, the sporting organization studied competes in a professional league for netball in Australia. Netball is a significant sport in the Australian sport landscape; however, this significance is not reflected in empirical research investigating sport (McLachlan, 2016; Taylor, 2001). The insights obtained from studying the selected netball organization may provide important background for future research in sport management.

### **Limitations**

This research project is limited to a single exploratory case. Although this allows in-depth research to take place, the generalizability of the findings is limited. For example, the organization was performance oriented and an operational sub-unit of the SSO; therefore, the roles of the participants were all oriented toward the playing performance of the team. Therefore, the findings may differ between selected

organizations and other organizations with different sets of goals and roles. The benefit of the in-depth approach is that it enables context-dependent knowledge consistent with developing expertise. Good cases present complex narratives demonstrating interesting problems worthy of further exploration (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The findings consistently highlighted the importance of shared understandings in constructing leadership; thus, it is important to recognize that these shared understandings are context-specific and do not necessarily apply to teams operating in other contexts.

The research methods are based on an in-depth exploration with a significant data corpus; however, observing everything that occurs in the organization will never be possible. Moreover, the presence of a researcher is likely to influence the participants. This may potentially bias the data gathered toward positive outcomes, as research participants attempt to present themselves positively when they know they are being observed. Additionally, sporting organizations, particularly teams, represent homogenous groups of like-minded people, which is often not the case in other organizational forms. Because of these and other potential contributing factors, such as the success of the team under focus, little disagreement and tension were observed or referred to during the data-gathering process. This limits the findings, particularly regarding conflict resolution. It is also important to note that leadership is not the only determining factor in success, there are many reasons a team can succeed or fail in sport. These reasons can include the quality of players, strength of the game plan, and quality of competition. Although researching a successful team presents a fortuitous case a direct correlation between leadership and success is not implied.

### **Future Research Directions**

Six future research directions have emerged from this doctoral project. First, it is recommended that the socially constructed relational leadership approach is further



employed in sport management contexts. Second, leadership research in sport management and beyond should continue to employ naturalistic and in situ data collection methods. Third, other cases in sport management should be explored by building on constructionist approaches, including male and female teams and poorly performing teams. Other contexts within sport management, such as community sport, sport for development, and sport governance, can also be explored. Fourth, although qualitative methods have proven valuable for this research project, mixed methods approaches can be employed to triangulate the relationship between experiences, networks, and performance. Fifth, research may be conducted to identify good leadership and specific leadership developments in the sport management context. Finally, further research can be conducted to explore collective leadership development from relational and entity perspectives.

The socially constructed relational leadership approach offers numerous possibilities for improving leadership practice. This project focused on the context of professional sport in a successful female-dominated organization. The approach enabled the exploration of who, what, where, when, and how of leadership, including the broader social context. Future research employing this approach could potentially reveal new context-specific insights and indicate the importance of contextual influences on the findings. It would be valuable to compare this study with a study of a male-dominated sporting organization to gain insights into whether there are differences in how leadership is socially constructed, which could be related to gender differences (Fletcher, 2004).

A relational perspective could also be applied to studies in sport management beyond leadership to other ideas such as teamwork, or team learning, to identify how teams learn to work together and how relational practices influence learning. The

pursuit of socially constructed relational leadership direction undertaken in this doctoral thesis can continue to inform the temporal, contextual, and collective dimensions of leadership research and practice.

In situ methods, such as observations, will advance leadership in the context of sport management. As researchers explore leadership as it unfolds in context, they can explore leadership through interactions. Observations and video analysis were employed to capture field notes about the construction of leadership by advancing social order. Further methods could include ethnographies, recording meetings and other interactions (audio and visual), and action research. These research methods will allow sport management researchers to gain deeper insights into the dimensions of leadership that McCusker et al. (2018) argue are often overlooked in leadership research, including interpersonal interactions, time, levels, and context.

Constructionist approaches to exploring leadership could be undertaken in other contexts, including professional sport organizations that differ from the one studied, such as a profit-oriented professional sport organization (Hoye et al., 2018; Stewart & Smith, 1999), a male or a mixed sport organization, organizations outside of Australia, or an underperforming professional sport organization. The research revealed valuable insights regarding the contextual influences of a successful, female, performance-oriented sport organization, and these influences would be interesting to compare to other cases. Of particular interest are the implications that COVID-19-related changes may have on the relational practice of leadership in organizations (Baker et al., 2022). Cases in contexts outside of professional sport could also offer valuable opportunities for sport management scholars. For example, the leadership of volunteers may be constructed in different ways, considering different power structures. These insights could provide useful implications for governing bodies in sport, considering their

dependence on volunteers (Cuskelly et al., 2006). Other contexts within sport management that may benefit from undertaking research from a constructionist perspective include community sport, sport-for-development, and sport administration.

This research project employed qualitative research methods to explore leadership in-depth over an extended period. However, leadership research in sport management would also benefit from mixed methods approaches to triangulate in-depth qualitative data with performance measures. For example, this could include comparing recorded field notes and participant measures of leadership effectiveness and team performance. In the present study, leadership is explored in a successful sporting organization; however, it is impossible to determine to what extent leadership is responsible for the team's performance. Social network analysis is another example of a mixed methods approach that can be applied to understand relational leadership. For example, how do leadership experiences relate to social networks within and beyond a sporting organization?

This thesis proposes that good leadership is actions and interactions that align with shared understandings of the team. However, it is difficult to generally define good leadership or simply determine what constitutes good leadership in other examples. It would not be possible to determine this from the data collected for this research project beyond accepting the participants' judgments of good leadership. Future research could determine measures to identify good leadership, this could include organizational performance, interaction quality, and perceptions of leadership. Furthermore, it is difficult to identify leadership developments beyond perceptions and organizational performance. Future research is needed to identify when leadership developments have occurred, this could incorporate documenting objectives, needs analyses, leadership reflections, and interaction quality.

Finally, this project highlights the benefits of studying leadership development from a relational perspective. Such an approach suggests that leadership can be developed through experience and by improving the quality of interactions and shared understanding in a social context. This understanding can be extended by further exploring leadership development efforts from the perspective of collective capacity for leadership, particularly by researching interactions and shared understanding. An ongoing exploration of relational leadership development offers sport management scholars and beyond opportunities.

### **Summary**

This doctoral research project has fulfilled its intended purpose of understanding the collective construction of leadership in professional sport. By aligning the study with a relational epistemology and process ontology, the findings revealed how leadership is collectively constructed in professional sport and proposed how leadership can be developed. Leadership is practiced through interactions, where some of the meaning is constructed through an implicit shared understanding. Leadership can be developed by improving the quality of interactions, including social action (e.g., LBE) and the quality of shared understanding. Improvements can be achieved through reflexive social processes, such as discussions to reflect on experiences and develop shared understanding. Good leadership is practiced through actions and interactions that align with shared understanding. Hence, there is the opportunity to develop leadership through the ongoing construction and reconstruction of everyday interactions and shared understanding.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview questions are to create a dialogue with the interviewee in which responses of interest are investigated further by deeper questioning. Questions are deliberately open to not lead the interviewee toward a particular response first but rather gain their perspective on what is most important and immediate. Examples and purposes are included below.

1. In the context of your team what does leadership mean to you?
  - a. Purpose is to understand the expectations of leadership, paying particular attention to whether participant indicates abstract concepts such as to “motivate and inspire” or concrete actions such as “lead drills and direct play.”
  - b. Follow-up question example: how does a leader motivate others?
2. How do you contribute to the leadership of this team?
  - a. Purpose is to understand the participants understanding of their role in team leadership
3. Overall, what is your role in the team?
  - a. Purpose is to see if participant views their responsibility as just task roles, or whether they view supporting/ helping others as a part of their role, whether these roles are perceived as only on gameday, or away from the game as well.
4. What is important for you to follow the leadership of others?
  - a. Purpose is to understand if participant believes it is more important to be a follower than a leader
5. Have other players and mentors helped you to become a better team player?
  - a. Purpose is to understand how others have contributed to the development of team skills and leadership
  - b. Follow-up question: do you have any recent examples?
6. What do you think it means to be a team player?
  - a. Purpose is to understand participant’s perception of team roles
7. Can you describe a day or game when a team that you have been a part of has performed best?
  - a. Purpose is to understand what contributes to effective team performance from the participant’s perspective
8. Do you actively work on improving your leadership and teamwork? If so, how?
  - a. Purpose is to understand how the participants believe they are improving their leadership and teamwork and if they are actively trying to develop these areas
9. Ask questions based on recently observed events
  - a. Purpose is to understand observed scenarios from the perspective of participant

## **Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Protocol**

Interview questions are designed to provide prompts, interview questions are to be presented in an open way, inviting collaborative responses from the group. Groups are to discuss the responses. Group members are advised to ask questions and seek clarity when they do not understand another members point.

1. Think of the best leaders you have ever known, real or fictional. What is it about them that makes them special? Why do you think you thought of these people?
  - a. Goal of this question is to get the group members thinking about examples of effective leadership. Question is asked around individual leaders but with the intention of identifying leadership action.
2. Next describe leaders who have not been effective, what did they do for you to believe they were ineffective?
  - a. In contrast the groups are asked to consider the bad leadership that have experienced and again to identify actions/ examples.
3. Are there ways you can relate to either the good leadership or poor leadership you have identified?
  - a. Aim to encourage self-reflection based on the examples of action they have identified.
4. Can you identify the good in your organization? Can you identify the bad?
  - a. Aim to encourage group level reflection on effective leadership they have identified.
5. Is leadership always good or always bad? Why or why not? If not, when could it be good and when could it be bad?
  - a. Aim to reflect on temporal and contextual influences, what may change that requires a different type of leadership action?
6. How can you help others to be lead the team effectively?
  - a. Identify opportunities for personal agency
7. What help do you need from others?
  - a. Identify areas of dependence on others, potentially collective agency.

## Appendix C: Participant Information and Consent Form



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET *Leadership Development in Teams (HREC APPROVAL #ETH18-3169)*

#### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is *Lewis Whales* and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is *Dr. Stephen Frawley* – [stephen.frawley@uts.edu.au](mailto:stephen.frawley@uts.edu.au)

#### WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is to find out about the leadership roles and expectations in elite sports teams and how they develop over time. The research is particularly concerned with the interactions and relationships that form in sports teams and how they impact performance.

#### FUNDING

Funding for this project has been received from the Australian Government's Research Training Program and UTS

#### WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because of your involvement in elite sporting teams. Your contact details were obtained by/from your organisation.

#### IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I would like to observe your usual practice within your team including training, team meetings and games over the course of a season. I will take notes on observations and interactions that occur within your team. I would also like to interview you for 45 minutes to understand your perceptions on your team involvement and follow up on observed scenarios. I aim to understand how leadership emerges through interactions through my perspective as the researcher and your perspective as a participant.

#### ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

It is possible that you may have concerns about confidentiality (see below) and inconvenience. I would ask that you participate in at least one 45minute interview or up to four interviews over the season.

#### DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part.

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney. If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Lewis Whales – [redacted] or [lewis.whales@uts.edu.au](mailto:lewis.whales@uts.edu.au)

If you withdraw from the study, all field notes, recordings and transcripts attributable to you will be destroyed.

However, it may not be possible to withdraw your data from the study results if these have already had your identifying details removed.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. Data will be stored securely and results will be published only in anonymised form. Your information will only be used for the purpose of this research project. We would like to store your information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances your information will be treated confidentially.

We plan to publish the results in academic journals and at academic conferences. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

**WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?**

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me on [redacted] or [lewis.whales@uts.edu.au](mailto:lewis.whales@uts.edu.au) or Dr. Stephen Frawley at [Stephen.frawley@uts.edu.au](mailto:Stephen.frawley@uts.edu.au)

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

**NOTE:**

This study has been approved in line with the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC] guidelines. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: [Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au](mailto:Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au), and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.





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