



CULTURE IN SPORT

What sporting organisations need to do to create safety for athletes and achieve high-performance

By Colin Ellis and Danny Donachie

“ Team culture - a shared set of values that inform a group's behaviour - is considered one of the most prominent contributors to the success of a sporting organisation. ”

Salcinovic, Drew, Dijkstra, Waddington and Serpell 2022

Report reveals toxic culture within Rowing Canada's high performance program

Spanish Women's Soccer Stars Protest National Team

Olympian says 'toxic' culture in Malaysian swimming

Toxic Culture, Verbal Abuse Outlined in ESPN Report About Maryland Football Team

Suns organization faces new accusations of toxic workplace culture

Exclusive: Australian swimming's dark secrets around treatment of female athletes laid bare in scathing independent review

Toxic sport cultures are damaging female athletes' health, but we can do better

Child gymnasts abused and denied water, food and toilet breaks - the damning report on British Gymnastics

Toxic Culture In Sports: The Price Of Success

Why this paper and why now?

The culture of any team is the single most important factor in its success. When done well, culture provides the foundation for strong relationships, effective communication, enhanced ways of working and playing together and continual feedback between team members leading to high-performance.

When done badly - or not at all - it can destroy the lives of the humans that form part of the team. This is when culture becomes visible to the outside world as the media bring the concerns and lived experiences of athletes and employees into the public domain.

The last five years alone have seen a string of high profile culture failure stories in sporting organisations and teams around the world. Rowing Canada, Phoenix Suns, Spanish Football Federation, Washington Commanders, British Gymnastics, Cycling New Zealand, Malaysian Swimming and many others have all faced allegations of toxic culture. The highest profile of these - USA Gymnastics - has destroyed the lives of some athletes forever and has led to jail time for those responsible.

According to one survey, **one in five athletes suffers from mental health challenges which are often brought on by the culture that they experience.**

This has led to athletes such as Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka taking breaks from their respective sports and highlighting the pressure that high performance can place on individuals and teams.

Many coaches around the world still think that to get the best out of their athletes they have to shout, scream and abuse. They defend their actions when results are achieved, yet this ignores the huge mental toll it places on the athletes who they are supposed to care for.

Athletes are not prepared to tolerate this approach any longer and are calling out these 'old-fashioned' behaviours in an attempt to force a change in culture within the environment in which they work.

The sporting world has yet to catch up with the changes being made in the corporate world. Where once concepts such as emotional intelligence and psychological safety were seen as 'nice to haves' for companies that had money to invest, they are now recognised as being critical to results and the performance and retention of the people they employ.

Indeed, some governments are now taking an active role in promoting the importance of culture in sport. Canadian sports minister Pascale St-Onge, speaking in 2022, said: "It is also

my goal and my priority to work on the culture in sport’.

What’s required now is for sports leaders, coaches and players to take an active role in educating themselves on what culture in sport is and to play their part in defining the conditions required for success.

Core elements of culture such as purpose, vision and values are used to ‘inform’ the culture that is required to ‘win’ within the team context. These elements are central to the behaviours required from athletes and support staff as well as the culture principles which create the conditions for collaboration on and off ‘the pitch’.

In the absence of this definition work, athletes and support staff adopt the behaviours and practices that they see in others and whilst this may be good in the short term, it almost always deteriorates should results not be as expected.

Researchers MacIntosh, Kerwin and Doherty interviewed 28 elite athletes in 2022 and found that the following experiences led to a reduction in the safety that they felt:

- **COACH BEHAVIOUR:**
 - Overstepping boundaries
 - Aggressive language/training
 - Uninformed, unaware, outdated beliefs and practices
 - Exclusionary

- **TEAMMATE BEHAVIOUR:**

- Exclusionary
- Physical/emotional aggression

- **LACK OF RESOURCES:**

- Insufficient support (physiotherapy, psychology etc.)
- Insufficient regulations
- Insufficient equipment

- **INATTENTIVE SPORT SYSTEM**

- Limited recourse
- Lack of accountability/action
- Limited confidentiality

All of these issues can be resolved through education and a commitment to action.

Senior sports leaders, managers and coaches (in particular) need to accept the importance of defining the culture required to achieve high-performance, and invest time and effort into educating themselves, their athletes and support staff on the skills required to build the conditions for success.

Research shows that when teams and leaders define the culture they require to achieve their vision they are significantly more likely to achieve it.

A winning team (one that continually makes the most of its talent and resources by working together in a constructive way) is only possible through the definition of culture.

A team that doesn't define the way its people will work together may achieve short term success, however, it will not be sustained.

A good example of this is UK soccer team Manchester United. Under the management of Sir Alex Ferguson, United were high-performing over a 20-year period. Ferguson put his trust in his players to agree how they would play together and went to great lengths to emphasise that no one individual (not even himself) was bigger than the club. Former assistant manager Steve McClaren reinforced this, saying: 'At other clubs you get players who think they have made it. Not here. The manager and the other players don't stand for that.'

For those still sceptical about the role that culture plays in the achievement of continual success, what follows is empirical evidence from researchers who have **studied the effects that defining culture has on sporting team cohesiveness and high-performance.**

- The effectiveness of a team is not defined solely by the result(s) it achieved but also how the team interacted attempting to achieve it (Salcinovic, Drew, Dijkstra, Waddington and Serpell 2022)
- A well defined balance of challenge and support in a facilitative environment helps individuals and teams to thrive under pressure (Sanford, 1967, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016)
- When teammates take the time to understand each

others' personalities and communication styles it enhances collective team resilience (Grinde, 2021)

- Taking the time to clearly define the culture of a team significantly shapes team member cognition, behaviour, development, well-being and performance (Andersen, 2011; Krane & Baird, 2005; Quested & Duda, 2010)
- When negative and malignant players are allowed to undermine the team culture it distracts other team members and the support they provide to each other (Copa et al 2007);
- Teams educated about the mechanisms of team culture have better performance outcomes (Salcinovic, Drew, Dijkstra, Waddington and Serpell 2022).

Yet, as mentioned earlier in this paper, despite the evidence of the importance of defining team culture to achieve continual high-performance and results, it's still not something that is understood or practiced by sporting organisations and coaches. Many still seem to cross their fingers and hope that their previous experience and way of doing things will generate results. Or else, try to generate team bonding through external events such as army training camps. However, neither of these approaches is proven to generate the conditions for sustained high-performance.

It's time for all those involved in sports to educate themselves on how to create winning cultures that protect the physical and mental health of their people. Our aim in this paper is to help people to get started.

Everyone plays a role in culture

It is very easy to think that culture is just the responsibility of the sporting organisation leader or the head/coach manager. However, this is not the case and even supporters and the media have an impact on the club or team culture. We have produced a simple diagram - which leans heavily on the work of researchers MacIntosh, Doherty and Kerwin in Canada - to demonstrate how different stakeholder groups can affect the culture experienced by the people that work within it. The following page contains a demonstration of the model in action.

The diagram shows that athletes are at the centre of the culture. It is athletes that are required to perform at the highest level and the culture needs to be created to help them to achieve this.

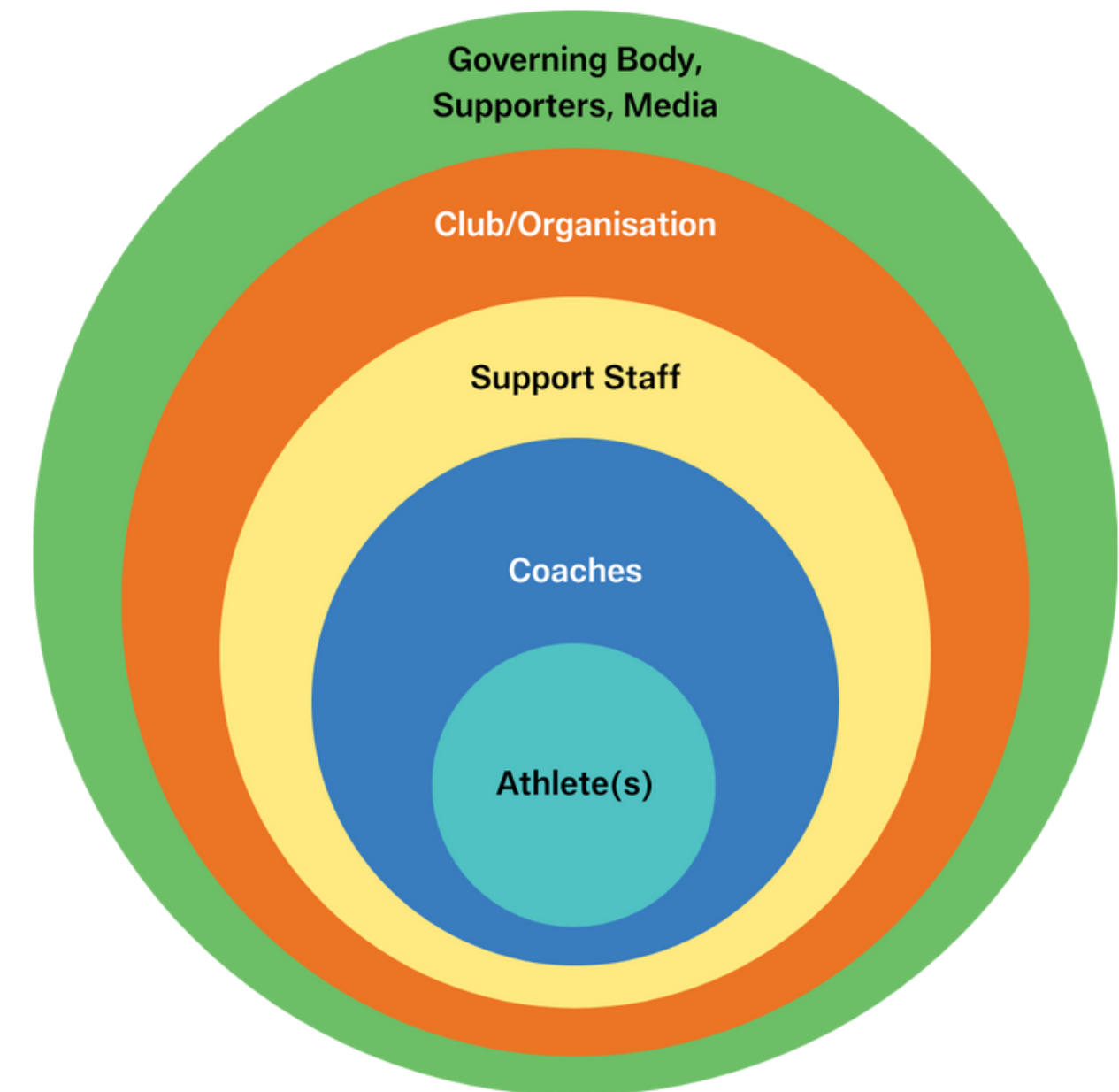
The head coach/manager has the biggest influence on culture, both positively and negatively. They set the tone for others to follow and manage the relationships with the club. They role model the culture they expect of others, not least their own coaching staff who should similarly uphold the expected behaviours required to inspire and motivate athletes.

No less critical are the staff who provide support, advice and care to athletes. Their views, approaches and recommendations should be respected and they should also look for ways to contribute to the overall team culture.

The club/organisation has a responsibility for setting the vision, strategy and goals whilst providing the vital administrative support to ensure that there is long-term sustainability and viability.

The governing body provides education to coaches and leaders, and decision-making to benefit the culture of the sport. The supporters contribute to the culture through their behaviours and treatment of athletes/coaches, whilst the media report on the culture.

Where sports organisation leaders, athletes, ex-athletes or the media don't believe that the governing body is working for the best interests for the sport they can attempt to force change, as has been called for in Bulgarian soccer or the Australian Football League, for example.



Case Study: Tottenham Hotspur FC

English Premier League Soccer team Tottenham Hotspur FC are an excellent case study for culture. At the time of writing, the club is going through a cultural change having recently moved to a new stadium, sold its best player, hired new head coaches for the men's and women's teams, invested in the playing staff whilst trying to overcome supporter and media apathy as a result of not winning the league for over 60 years. They are also looking to appoint a new Sporting Director, who will contribute to the evolution of the club's culture.

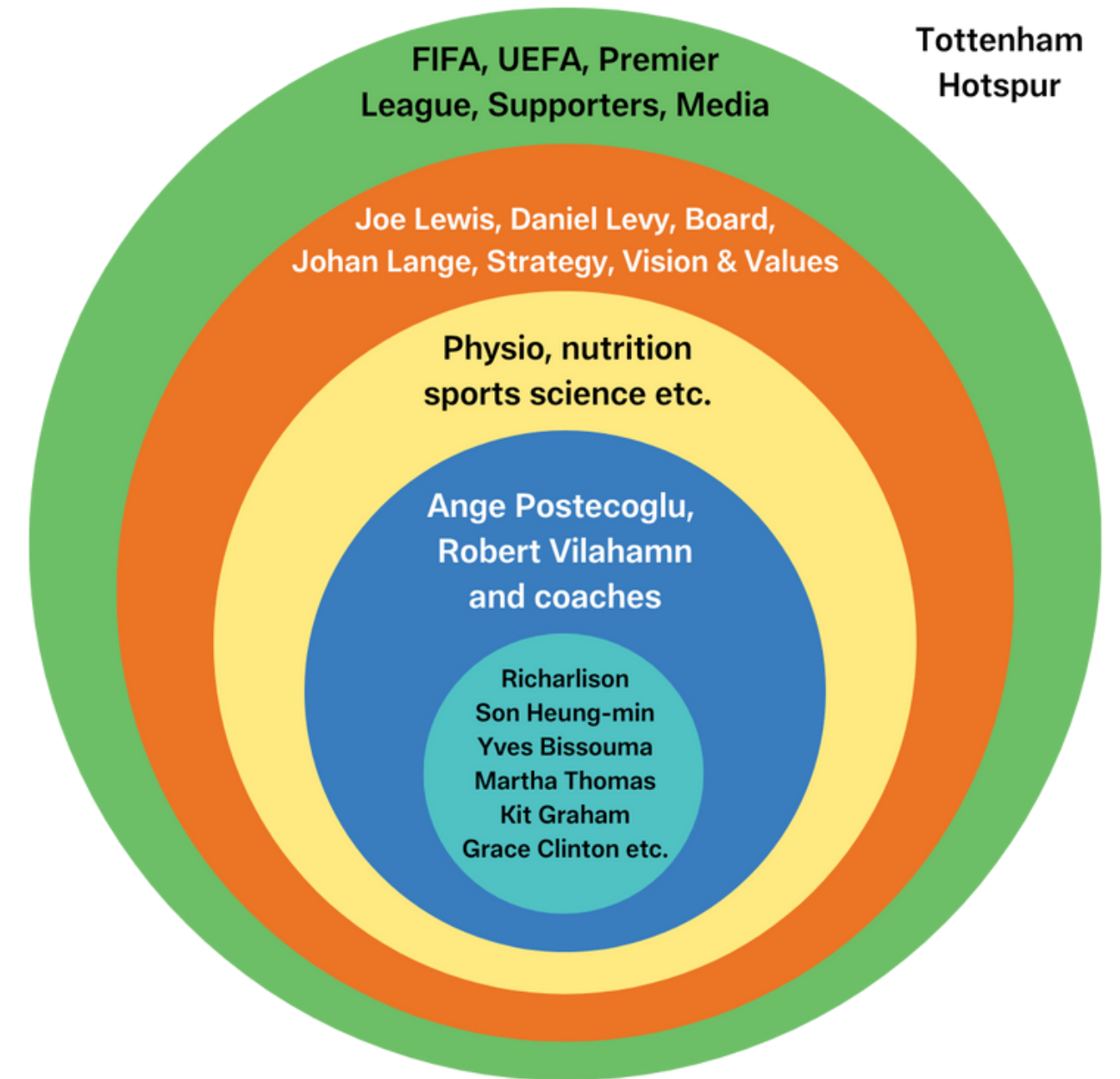
In order for the club to attract new talent and retain they players they need to achieve their goals (as part of the strategy) they need to provide a safe environment where players can be their best selves and bring the attitude and drive required to succeed.

Head coaches not only need to be good humans who take time to build relationships with players, but they also have to work with their team to create unique training approaches that makes the preparation work rewarding. That will mean pushing players just a little bit outside their comfort zone so that they grow and make the most of their talent. In an early interview, Men's Head Coach Ange Postecoglou said: 'It's not about making them happy; it's about giving them joy. Joy that comes from suffering.' Players accept this, providing it is done respectfully.

The support staff need to ensure that they not only work with the coaches and athletes to maintain their diet, health and wellbeing, but that they are also across new techniques and approaches that can either speed up injury recovery times or else make players more resilient.

Owner Joe Lewis provides the Chairman, Daniel Levy, with the money and decision-making capability to run the club on a day-to-day basis. This requires vision and values - both of which the club has. Levy will work with the incoming sporting director and his head coaches to ensure that they understand the goals (and resources) for each season. He will also ensure that the club's administrative function is engaged in their role to support successful team performance.

The Premier League ensures that ownership and coaching are fit and proper to meet stakeholder expectations, whilst the supporters get behind their team to provide extra motivation. The media report on Spurs results and will paint a picture (accurate or not!) of what they see on the pitch, which in turn will affect how the supporters and other stakeholders see the culture of the club.



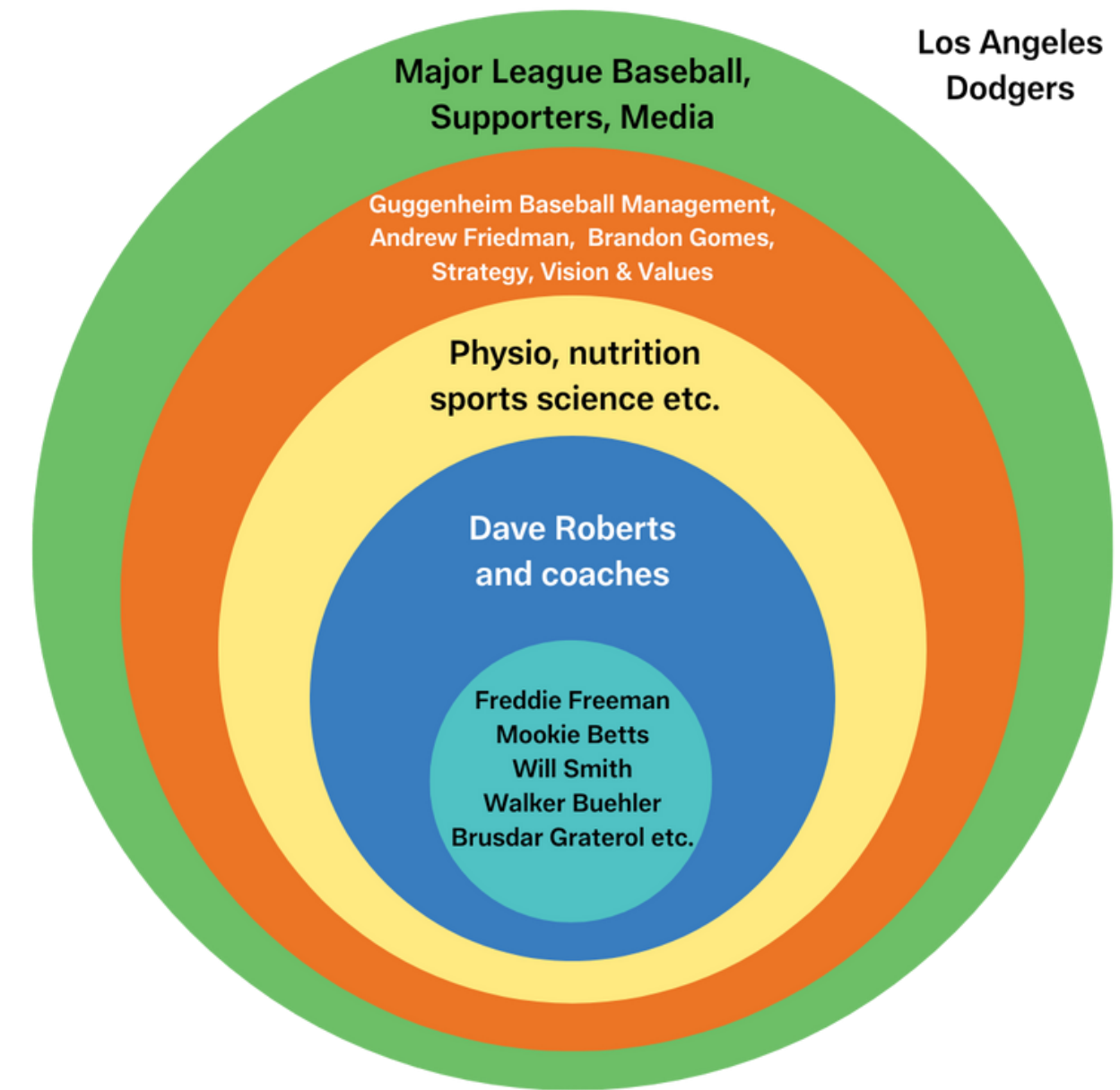
Case Study: Los Angeles Dodgers

The Los Angeles Dodgers play in the National League of Major League Baseball in the USA. They have a stable back office structure and their Manager Dave Roberts has been in charge since 2016. They have a rich history that dates all the way back to the Brooklyn Grays in the 19th century and they also have a strong global fan base. Whilst they have won the World Series seven times, there's still a sense - given the investment that the club makes in it's playing staff - that they've underperformed, especially in light of the fact that the New York Yankees have won 27 world titles. Changes are made to the playing roster every season, which means that a constant reset of the culture is required every year at spring training. This ensures that the new players, coaching and support staff are integrated, but also that new expectations are set around the vision for the season ahead. Often in elite sports much is made of trying to find 'the final piece of the jigsaw' to create a championship winning team. However, what most fail to realise is that often this piece of the jigsaw is the definition of the team culture, not an athlete.

Much like Tottenham Hotspur (previous page) the Dodgers need to build an environment where athletes such as Freddie Freeman, Mookie Betts, Walker Buehler, Will Smith, Brusdar Graterol etc. can play make the most of their talent through their attitude, mindset and continual improvement with the help of the coaching and support staff.

Manager Dave Roberts has to work with his coaches to come up with different training techniques every year to keep the culture fresh and the coaches will each work with their different subcultures (outfielders, pitching, batting etc.) The support staff will help athletes with their diet, health and wellness so that they can maintain peak performance across the 100+ games that they will play in a season. They will also aid recovery from injury. Pitchers often require extensive mental health support when recovering from long-term shoulder or elbow injuries.

President of Baseball Operations Andrew Friedman is largely responsible for player recruitment. At the Dodgers he is supported by General Manager Brandon Gomes and together they will take responsibility for ensuring that the culture of the club also has a strong connection to it's multicultural fan base. In appointing Gomes to GM Friedman said that his '...ability to connect with people' was one of the reasons that he was regarded so highly. The money comes from owners Guggenheim Baseball Management who are represented by President (and part-owner) Stan Kasten. Major League Baseball has responsibility for setting the rules.



The four types of culture

The greatest value that can be obtained by an investment in culture is of course individual and team success. Red Bull Racing are a fantastic example of this. Team Principal Christian Horner is very clear about the culture that they need to have in order to win Formula One races.

He said: 'The best form of defence [for Red Bull Racing] is attack. That's part of our culture. We are an attacking team. If you go defensive then you are conceding something.' This culture is evident from the factory to the pit lane to the driver's cockpit. It's evident in the language the team uses and its strategic risk-based approach. An approach that was very evident at the end of the 2021 season, when the team brought Max Verstappen in for new tyres - much to the chagrin of the more cautious Mercedes team - that ultimately led to him winning the race and pipping Lewis Hamilton to the championship.

Many cried foul, however, Red Bull Racing was merely 'playing' to its culture. This is the essence of **WINNING** cultures. Where the team collaborates on how they will leverage the talents that they have, whilst ensuring that no 'player' is bigger than the team. Sustained high-performance becomes commonplace as athletes and support staff rigorously defend and enhance their culture. It is this commitment that led to the dominance of the All Blacks in rugby union.

However, whilst positive results generate athlete and team satisfaction, it doesn't always generate happiness.

If positive results are generated in a way that increases fear, stress, anxiety and adds to the mental health load of athletes, results may be achieved in the short term, but the long term value is undermined. These **FIGHTING** cultures often lead to toxicity and potential athlete and employee harm. Once a culture has become toxic, it is a long and arduous journey back to winning, one which often requires significant personnel change.

We also observe teams that pay lip service to culture rather than committing to it. These **OBLIGING** cultures may look good on the outside - full of camaraderie, laughter and people being nice to each other - however they rarely perform when required and often look for excuses elsewhere. These teams aren't very good at providing feedback to each other and will excuse poor performance or behaviour of teammates or employees.

The final type of sporting cultures are those that athletes, support staff and often, coaches, don't care about.

In these **STAGNATING** cultures, individuals are only interested in doing things their way; they have no respect for the expertise or experience of others and relationships are irretrievably broken. In these kinds of cultures, athletes often care more about their image and entourage, than their teammates!

The value of culture

One of the most impactful gains as a result of an investment in culture - other than the attainment of honours - is a reduction in injuries in elite athletes.

In 2018, researchers Ekstrand, Lundqvist, Davison, D'Hooghe and Pensgaard found that 'the injury burden and incidence of severe injuries were significantly higher in teams with low quality of communication between the head coach/manager and the medical team, compared with teams with moderate or high-quality scores'.

As you'll see in the 'What is culture?' section, communication (and an understanding of different personalities within the sporting organisation) is a crucial requirement of building a high-performance culture. For many, a reduction in the injury burden - and an increase in the availability of elite athletes - should be reason enough to invest in culture! **Other proven benefits of investing in culture include:**

- Higher levels of individual and team performance
- Stronger relationships between team members
- Improved attitude/mindset of individuals
- Improved reputation
- Retention and attraction of talented people
- Increased collaboration

- Increased creativity/innovation
- Increased connection between the organisation and it's stakeholders.

The risk of not investing in culture includes:

- Increase in athlete harm
- Reduced psychological safety
- Loss of key personnel
- Organisation not seen as an attractive proposition to high-performing people
- Disconnection between the organisation and the community
- Negative media coverage
- A never ending cycle of uncertainty for athletes, support staff and supporters which will continually undermine performance.

Often an investment in culture doesn't immediately improve results and this is very hard for sporting leaders to come to terms with. What an investment in culture does immediately generate is empathy, compassion, feedback and understanding. However, patience and commitment is required from coaches, athletes and support staff to stick to the agreements made to each other.

The culture value model

Comprehensive studies have demonstrated that investment into culture is the key difference between high-performance and under-performance. When senior sports leaders and coaches invest time, money and effort into building team culture and enhancing the relationships between athletes and support staff, they are rewarded with a **WINNING** culture full of people who are invested in sustained goal achievement.

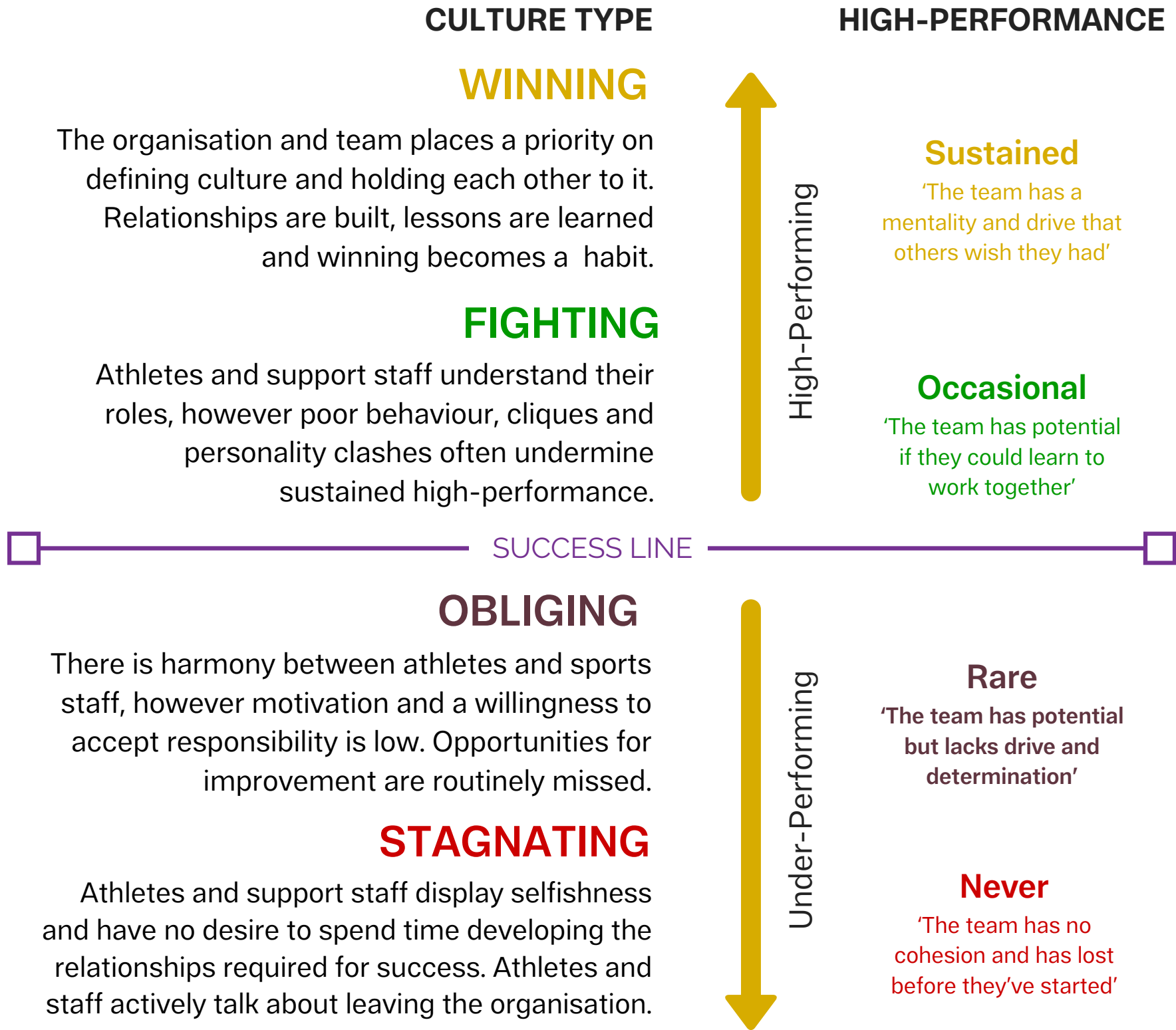
Without this investment, the culture will naturally evolve through the style of the leader. Whilst this may provide some short-term success, only when the team sets its own rules does it achieve consistent high-performance.

FIGHTING cultures contain motivated individuals, however behaviour is often poor and high-performance is occasional.

Athletes and support staff in **OBLIGING** cultures wait to be told what to do and have little initiative or drive for success.

Whilst in **STAGNATING** cultures, individuals are only invested in themselves, not contributing to the success of the team.

Where is your sports organisation/team right now?



**““ Human beings
subconsciously understand
that alone I am nothing, but
in a team I can achieve great
things.””**

Arsene Wenger

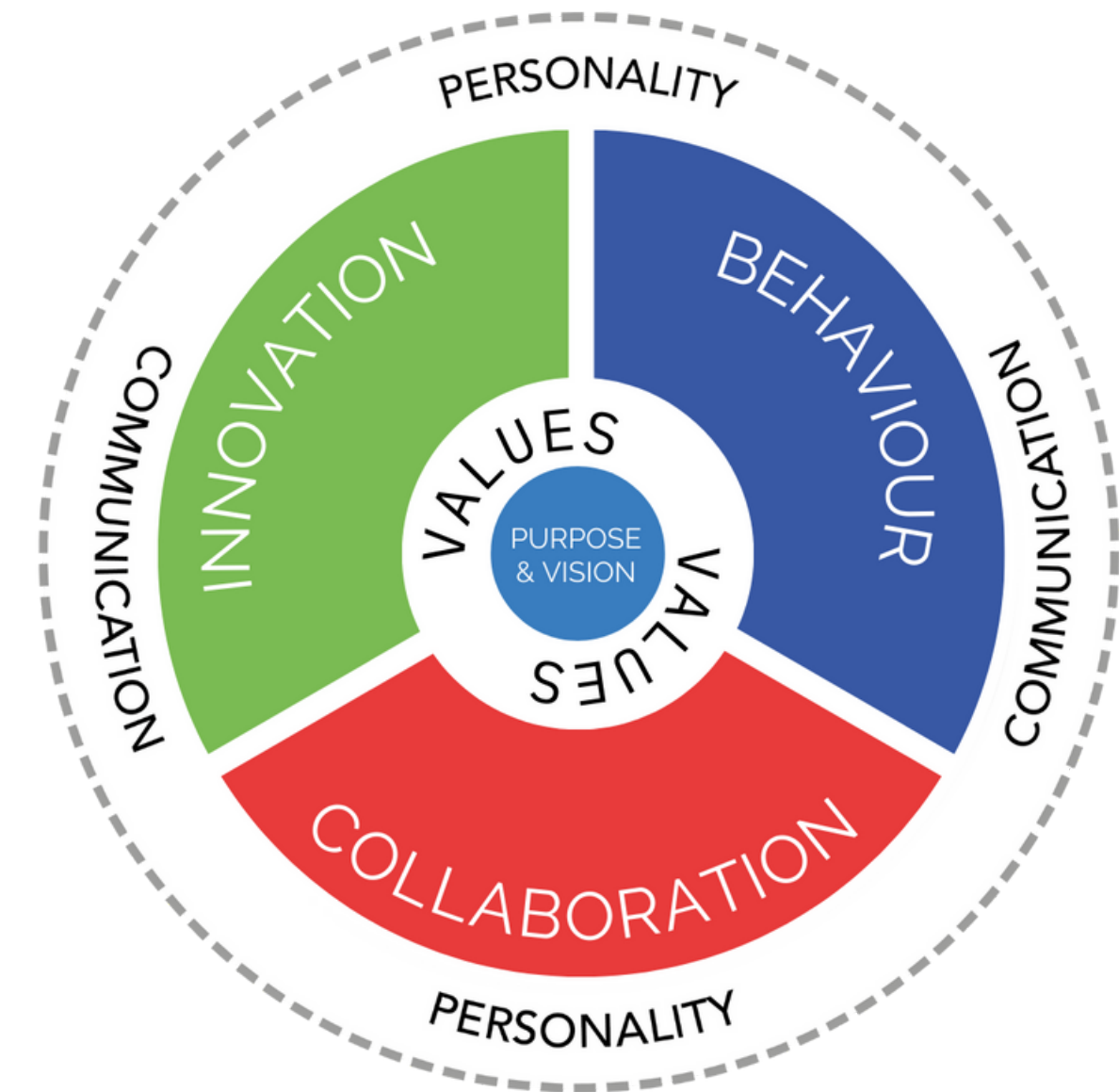
What is culture?

As we have stressed earlier in this paper, culture is often talked about, yet very few sporting bodies, sporting organisation leaders, sporting directors, managers, coaches, athletes and support staff truly understand how it's built and the pillars that underpin consistent high-performance.

There are six pillars of culture applicable across all working cultures regardless of country, industry, sector or company. It's critically important that each of these pillars is purposefully designed – involving as many members of the team as is possible/practical – to gain maximum buy-in and engagement to the process of further evolving culture.

It's easy to see these pillars as stationary/static (as the name 'pillar' implies), however, they are anything but. Defining the culture merely provides the foundations upon which all future success is built. Key to a head coach or manager's long-term success is the emphasis and effort they put into evolving the culture such that it is always relevant and fit for purpose. Key to the profitability of the organisation is the vision and values they set and the importance they place on creating strong relationships across each team.

Often the cultural issues of the organisation will affect performance on the pitch. As we were writing this paper, former Manchester United defender turned pundit, Gary Neville, said: 'Chelsea and United are the way they are



currently due to cultural issues and chaos. ETH (Erik TenHaag) and MP (Mauricio Pochettino) are good managers working in very difficult and challenging environments. Look up top!

We agree whole-heartedly with this assessment and in our experience, winning cultures are only possible 'on the pitch' if there is stability and an understanding of the importance of culture in the boardroom.

Over the next six pages, we will outline each pillar and its importance in building a winning culture.

Personality and Communication

The entry point into any team culture is through the personality of its people and how they communicate with each other. Indeed, how self-aware people are within a team is a key determinant of how they work with others to generate team performance. Connecting with other people is a basic human need, regardless of personality preferences, role within a team or level of technical expertise.

In many sporting establishments divides exist between teams that are often a result of personality clashes or communication breakdowns. As an example, recent research found that there was a direct correlation between injury risk and poor communication between the head coach and medical department.

Connection is achieved through empathy, the ability to generate understanding between different personalities and the different roles they perform. For example, sports scientists can be detail focused in their approach, whilst physiotherapists can be more people focused. These preferences need to be taken into consideration when building culture to ensure that trust and understanding can be experienced.

A lack of connection undermines performance and puts the manager or head coach of a team in the spotlight, or worse, often means they are held to public account which culminates in them losing their job.

By helping people understand the strengths of their personality and their opportunities for improvement, sporting leaders not only create a sense of belonging, togetherness and empathy, they also gain a productivity advantage - people who are prepared to work harder than they do currently - by up to 3x higher. That's how important it is to connect humans to each other.

Once humans feel connected to each other they find it easier to communicate and to set expectations clearly, hold each other to account through difficult conversations and motivate each other to succeed.

It is only through the ability to provide and be able to receive immediate feedback - sometimes in the heat of the moment - that all employees of the sporting organisation are able to perform, learn and grow.

This requires high degrees of self-awareness and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, that is, wanting to do something well without having been told to do so, is the difference between athletes realising their potential and failing to do so. And what makes intrinsic motivation easier is the feedback and support you receive from those that understand you.

As new athletes and support staff join the culture, this activity needs to be run again to help the new people instantly feel 'part of the team'.

Purpose / Vision

Every sporting organisation has a reason for existing and an aspiration that it seeks to achieve. In other words, a purpose, and a vision. Unfortunately, this is usually a cultural pillar that is not done particularly well with the vision often centering on a goal - 'Win the Premier League', 'Top the medal table' or 'Qualify for the playoffs' - rather than describing the aspiration of the culture required to achieve the goal.

A vision is a short but clear statement that describes the aspiration that the organisation has within its strategy. It is used daily as a basis for decision-making and serves as continual inspiration for teamwork. It describes the target culture that it wishes to see across the organisation to provide the inspiration for teamwork and, ultimately, success.

A manager or head coach's role is to work with their coaches and department heads to ensure that team cultures exist that are aligned to the vision and that define how they'll put the team's values (see next page) into practice.

Kristof Vanhout, Technical Director of Rugby Netherlands, is one of a new generation of culture-first coaches. When we spoke to him, we specifically asked about the role of the vision and its importance to culture. At that time he had been in his role for just over six months and the team had performed magnificently in the Rugby Europe Championship, narrowly missing out on a place in the World Cup, which is the goal for 2027.

Kristof said: 'When you come into a new culture... you try to see who your stakeholders are and the history and why we are where we are. You have to understand the vision and then bring the changing room together to make it a culture that people want to be part of. You need to use the shared values and beliefs, listen and work together to build a sustainable culture. Then you can work on changing the environment together to get the behaviour change and achieve the vision you have set.'

Purpose helps a sporting organisation to stand for something beyond the competition in which it competes. Purpose has been crucially important for women's soccer team Angel City FC. The team, established in 2022, has a shared ownership model - including Natalie Portman, America Ferrera, Eva Longoria, and Serena Williams - and wants to change the culture surrounding women's sports. Co-founder and president Julie Uhrman said that having a strong purpose meant that getting investment was easy. She said: 'They came to us because they wanted to be a part of Angel City, and understood the role they would have to play as an investor. That makes the best type of owner, because they care both about the purpose side and the profit side.'

For sporting organisations profit is important, and if it can be achieved by making a difference in the world then success will be much easier to attain because people want to be part of something bigger than themselves.

Values

If a vision provides an aspiration for the culture, then values are statements that connect humans to it. Values are 'ideals employees strive to fulfil' and should align to the needs of the organisation.

It's important to note that values are not behaviours or single words such as 'Excellence', 'Integrity', or 'Collaboration'. They are short statements of intent that guide the behaviours and actions of all employees within the sporting organisation. Researchers Collins and Porras succinctly define core values as being inherent and sacrosanct. They should never be compromised regardless of whether it's easier to do so in pursuit of a short-term goal.

Living values in plain sight is something that the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team do incredibly well. They make their culture visible before every game by performing the Haka. The Haka honours Māori culture and acknowledges the land from which they are descended. The Māori people performed the haka to demonstrate pride, strength and unity, core values of their community.

However, it's their commitment to the vision and values inherent in their team culture that sets them apart from other teams. They have 15 core principles and they are embedded into the way the team performs, not only on the pitch during match days, but also off the pitch and when training.

Each player is given a little black book that explains the values and also provides space for them to document their All Black journey and thus, contributing their own story to the All Black legacy.

While the All Blacks may not win every game, they certainly come close! They are the envy of most sports teams in the world, and yet what they do is relatively easy to copy, providing sporting organisation leaders have the courage to make culture their number one priority.

Values are a crucial component of winning teams and potential employees and athletes alike are increasingly looking at them to determine whether it's an organisation that they wish to join, or not!

If values are uninspiring or not 'lived' in plain sight by all team members day-to-day, then it could be a sign that the leaders within a sporting organisation no longer take them — or worse, their culture — seriously.

Values mean more if all employees are involved in their creation or the definition of the behaviours (see next page) required to live them.

Head coaches, managers and department heads need to ensure that values are inherent in all work and are not just words on a strategy document, webpage or wall.

Behaviour

For values to mean anything, they must be complemented by a consistent set of behaviours. Whilst vision and values will be set at an organisation level (or 'at the top'), the behaviours required to demonstrate them may differ from team to team across the organisation. This is a result of the fact that the nature of work being undertaken will vary and therefore require different behaviours and/or the culture within the team will demand it.

For example, a first team squad may need to show discipline, determination and resilience, whilst the physiotherapy team may need to focus on collaboration, creativity and empathy. Providing the behaviours are defined in line with the values and vision, then cultural consistency will be achieved. However, make no mistake that poor behaviour and/or a refusal to hold someone to account for their behaviour can often be the difference between winning and stagnating.

It's behaviour that regularly holds culture back or, at its worst, causes it to turn toxic. We have seen many instances where 'brilliant jerks' (people who are technically very good at what they do but behaviourally very poor) will often drag the culture down and generate an atmosphere of stress, fear and anxiety. There are many examples of sporting organisations that have allowed one or more athletes or coaches to behave in a way that undermines the culture of the team. This cannot be allowed to happen.

Once the team has agreed how they'll behave towards each other then it's everyone's responsibility to uphold these behaviours, it can't always be left to the the head coach or manager to do. American football coach Jeff Hecklinski called it correctly when he said: 'Culture doesn't change when a coach tells a player that they're wrong. It changes when players tell other players, "No, that's not how we do things here".'

Head coaches, managers and department heads not only need to agree the behaviours required of everyone within their team, but must ensure that everyone has the skills to be able to hold each other to these promises.

All staff need to be good humans as well as being technically good at what they do and senior leaders across the organisation need to consistently role model what this looks like to ensure that the rest of the team practices it too.

Expectations around behaviours have changed significantly over the last 10-15 years. One coach we saw interviewed said, 'I keep getting told off for the things I say.' This is simply not good enough in today's world.

If a manager or head coach doesn't know how to behave, then it can impact just about everyone and everything and eventually they will be deemed to have 'lost the dressing room'. In our experience this is most likely to occur through their behaviours.

Collaboration

Collaboration is the act of working with others in the organisation to generate forward momentum. Sustained success is not possible without it.

Collaboration is required between ALL teams within the organisation if high-performance is to be maintained. To this end, it's important to recognise the different sub-cultures that exist within the organisation and to ensure that they not only work well within their own team, but also work well with others. And a sporting organisation can have many different subcultures.

To use baseball as an example, the pitching staff will have different routines and processes than the batting staff. The sports science team will have different routines and processes than the ticket office staff. Often each of these subcultures is set up differently and, in sporting organisations where there is no common vision or values, when these groups interact it is likely to be dysfunctional with no connection between the way that they do things.

As an example, a physiotherapist we spoke to said that often in their organisation they would be undermined by a coach who demanded a player return to training before they were fit to do so. This led to a rift between the physio team and the first team squad and caused relationships to fracture.

Similarly, if different subcultures start to see themselves as

being more important than other subcultures (as often happens in elite sports) then the culture will break down and the chances for toxicity and negative media coverage increase greatly. In winning team cultures, everyone is equal.

Consistently high-performing teams not only work hard to ensure that their subcultures are cohesive and everyone understands their role. They also create cultural norms (i.e., agreement on the way that people will collaborate) that enhance collective self-awareness and thus a greater commitment to overall team success. These cultural norms are different to values and behaviours as they are agreements on **how** work will get done, rather than the behaviours of the individuals required to do so.

In his book *Eleven Rings*, former Basketball coach Phil Jackson talked about collaboration. He said: 'For me that's what sports is all about... bringing people together in a common spirit ultimately transcends wins and losses.'

Collaboration is key to culture as it brings people together, sets expectations and outlines the support structures required to succeed. These structures include processes, methods, team meetings, facilities and how technology is used to support goal achievement. These things embody the 'common spirit' that Jackson talked about and create a unity that produces pride, drive, resilience and ultimately a winning culture.

Innovation

Whilst innovation is the sixth and final pillar of culture, it is no less important. It may feel like it's applicable only to cultures in technology or creative organisations, but it's worth remembering that it's only through continual creativity and improvement that ANY organisation, including sports, can fix the things that are broken and produce new ideas to further enhance the way that athlete and team performance improves.

It's not enough to hope or expect the team to replicate what they've done previously. Phil Jackson again: 'The mistake that championship winning teams often make is to try to repeat their winning formula.' To that end, innovation is about changing the conditions to gain an advantage over the competition, which continually changes.

Creativity is the process by which new ideas are generated and assessed for not only their relevance in relation to the work that needs to be done, but also their practicality and, crucially, the value that they offer to the team.

Pep Guardiola thought he knew about football until he worked with Johan Cruyff. Cruyff opened up a new world to a young Guardiola and a whole generation of players too. Cruyff invented total football and ensured this culture was instilled throughout the whole club he worked at. Although Pep learnt so much from his hero, he continues to be creative

and see the game differently. Because he knows that there's no perfect system as tactics are constantly evolving.

Creativity is also required around how technology is embraced, data is gathered and used, which is something that Sir Dave Brailsford mastered when he was head of the Team Sky cycling team. He and his team used data to provide a clear coaching plan to work out which of their riders could win the Tour de France and then the riders found the 'marginal gains' to achieve victory.

Innovation is the act of implementing these ideas and winning cultures are great at not only making time for new ideas - wherever they may come from - but also implementing them too. Of course, not every idea will turn out to be as good as first thought, but the learning from this will provide fuel for future creativity.

Too often teams are time poor or continually focused on the task at hand and as a result creativity suffers. Head coaches, Managers and department heads across the sporting organisation need to ensure that creativity not only remains a priority within their own team culture, but also that it leads to a pipeline of continual improvement.

Sporting bodies meanwhile need to look at ways to evolve the sport to the benefit of stakeholders and spectators alike.

The Role of Governing Bodies

It would be remiss of us not to talk about the role of sports governing bodies in facilitating the changes that we propose in this paper.

Often it's the governing body that is the root cause of the culture issues within the sport, or else they have their own internal issues that make it into the media. There are too many to mention without appearing to single certain ones out for criticism, however, if you search Google for ***Sporting body toxic culture*** you can read them for yourself.

We hope that this paper is a wake up call to sporting bodies everywhere to start taking culture in sport seriously. As we discussed earlier, fighting cultures - often seen as the default to create high-performance - generate physical and mental health issues that can lead to athlete and support staff harm.

In early 2023 former British Olympic rower Cath Bishop wrote an excellent piece for the Guardian highlighting the global issues surrounding culture within sporting governing bodies. She discussed the approaches being taken by some that fail to address the root causes of poor culture. Namely, the education of senior leaders and coaches.

She ended her piece by saying: 'New structures, policies and roles in any country will be worth little unless underpinned by a new ethos, vision and values. Are we ambitious enough to pursue a compelling vision of high-performance sport with longer-term benefits, or are we just going to wait and see which sport rolls up next needing a cultural review?'

All sporting bodies that require leaders and coaches to pass capability tests should ensure that the skills to be able to build and positively evolve culture are inherent in these badges and qualifications. A failure to do so will ensure that cultures will continue to rot and athletes and support staff will suffer at the hands of those who simply don't understand how to build an environment that not only treats people with empathy and respect, but that employs motivation techniques that lead to sustained high-performance rather than sustained stress and anxiety.

In Summary

The toxic culture crisis in sports has to end. No longer can athletes or employees be put at risk through old-fashioned approaches to high performance. The expectations of supporters have also changed and new generations of sports fans are not willing to support, financially and otherwise, organisations that do not demonstrate the values they expect.

Some sporting bodies and organisations already recognise this and are taking steps to correct it. These will be seen as role models for the future of sport both by other organisations and by supporters and stakeholders too.

The Nederlands Olympisch Comité * Nederlandse Sport Federatie (NOC*NSF) is the governing body for organised sports in the Netherlands. They are investing time and effort to build the relationships and develop the knowledge to create, in their words, an 'Inclusive, ethical and safe sporting culture, including an 'ethics in sport' plan'. Dutch Sport's strategic plan 2032 outlines some of the key changes that they are looking to work together (across its 74 member organisations) to implement. These include:

- We feel safe and welcome in the sporting community
- We are proud of our country's successes in elite sports
- We feel mentally and physically fit, resilient and flexible.

Every sports governing body and national organisation should have similar objectives.

This process starts with education and requires a methodical approach to building and evolving team culture in a way that includes athletes and staff, rather than dictating to them or creating an environment in which their physical or mental health is compromised.

This requires a change in attitude. Away from a 'win at all costs' approach to a 'win in the right way' one. Those sporting organisations and coaches that invest in their cultures and continually do so will reap the rewards. Those who continue to rely on old-fashioned approaches and behaviours will ultimately fail, on and off the pitch.



ABOUT COLIN D ELLIS

Colin is a highly sought after culture expert, keynote speaker and executive coach with a 30-year track record of team success. He is the best-selling author of four books and the host of the Culture Makers and Culture & Coffee podcasts.

He has worked across five continents, 15 countries and 80+ cultures with clients looking to educate their people on how to create winning cultures that know how to get the job done in a way that generates motivation and enjoyment, not fear and anxiety.

With his ideas, energy and humour, he gets people excited about achieving success whilst making a positive difference.

Find out more about Colin:

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[Website](#)



ABOUT DANNY DONACHIE

Having led performance departments in the English Premier League, Danny now works with global organisations, leaders and elite athletes.

He draws on over 25 years experience of elite sport, including playing professionally and working at all levels of sporting organisations.

His approach is informed by a master's degree in organisational change alongside cutting-edge knowledge in all performance related matters.

He was recently a member of the England U-21 squad that won the European Championships and understands what a sporting culture needs to win.



Find out more about Danny:

[LinkedIn](#)

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CLIENTS

We have a global client list and work across multiple sectors. These are just a selection of the organisations around the world that we have had the pleasure to individually or collectively work with.

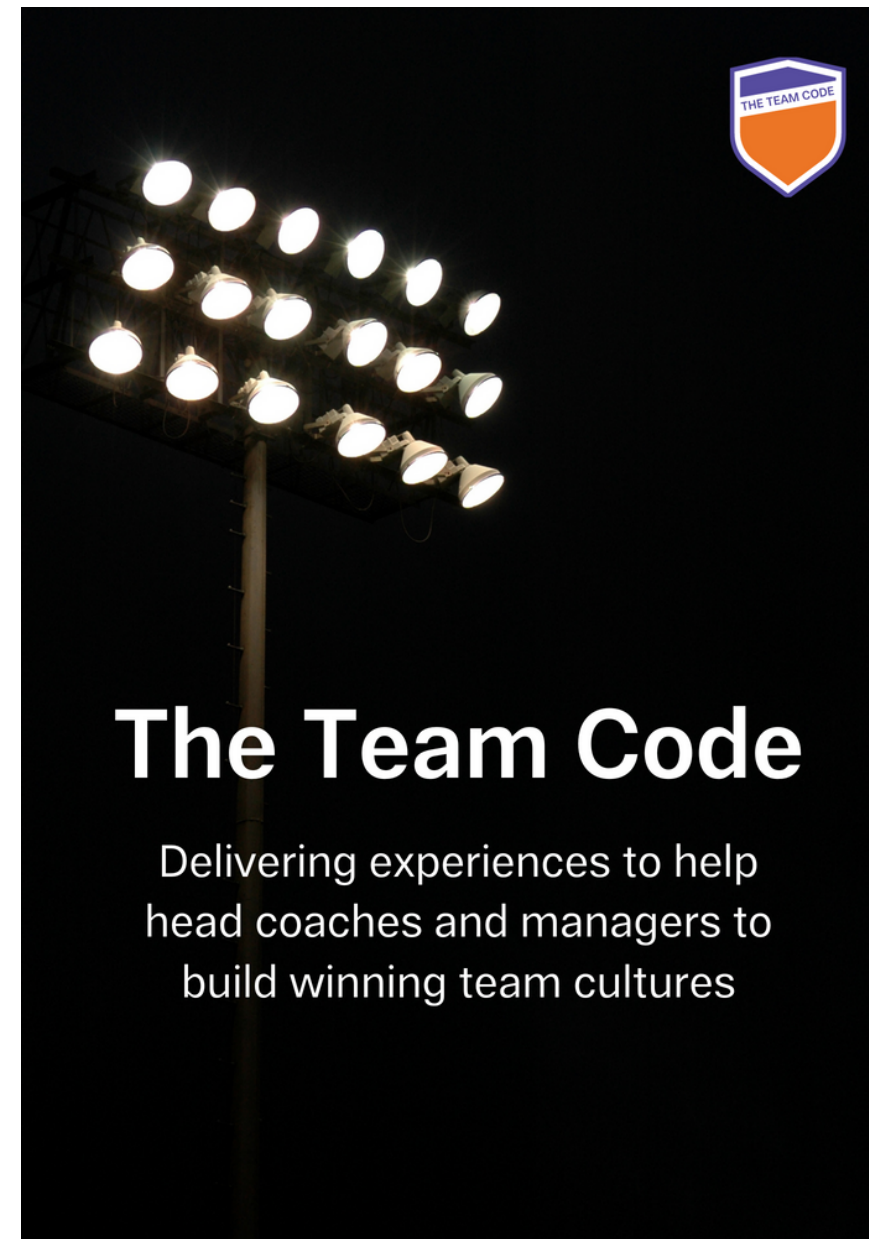
We also provide coaching to head coaches and senior leaders.



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“ The hope is - if you look at the top organisations in any top professions - you will see that having balance in the workplace is tantamount to successful environments. ”

Emma Hayes, Head Coach USWNT

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