

Leadership: why many heads are better than one

By *Folkert Mulder, Steffen Giessner and Max Caldas*

Many heads are better than one, not just for large canines guarding the gates of Hades but also in the developing world of modern leadership, where the emergence of multiple leadership can be seen as very much a characteristic of our times.

As the Dutch Olympics field hockey team has demonstrated in recent years, appointing multiple leaders in a squad – each having clearly defined personal qualities and functional responsibilities – can deliver energy, cohesion and optimisation in a way that the traditional single leader approach simply cannot.

The experience of the Dutch team at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro represents the starting point for the change in approach that ended in embracing multiple leadership. Much had been expected of the team ahead of that tournament, but in the end they came fourth, after losing to neighbour Belgium at the semi-final stage.

It became clear early in the Rio tournament that the team was dysfunctional, and the appointment of a sole leader, a traditional captain, was a key part of the problem. To put it bluntly, the chosen captain did not enjoy the support of his teammates. The post-tournament response was to overhaul the squad leadership structure.

The decision was taken to change the system, and encourage leadership to emerge from the players themselves. There then followed several months of team gatherings and activities, which included training with the special forces of the Dutch army. During the bonding process, three leaders who enjoyed the support of the group merged

organically and were in due course formally appointed.

One is very opinionated and not afraid of sharing his views. Another is a fine example of a sportsman who understands the red lines in processes, and will challenge those who do not do what they said they would do. The third understands grey areas, knows when to speak out and when to shut up, and gets on well with everyone.

The group has changed as older players have left and younger ones have joined, requiring further change in the leadership team to reflect the group identity. Two of the younger members have now also joined the leadership group and this process will continue as the group evolves.

All are involved in the leadership effort, sharing the workload, discussing what has been achieved in training sessions, and helping to set out future plans. They know it is the head coach's job to make the necessary decisions, but the more they understand the underlying process the better.

Greater than the sum

Opinions matter, especially in a Dutch team, but there is a natural hierarchy for who communicates what and in what context. By letting leadership emerge organically from an already strong squad of top players, the team became greater

than the sum of its parts. Having multiple leaders makes it easier for other squad members to connect.

Having multiple leaders also helps to distribute tasks and responsibility and to build social cohesion within the squad, without stifling the creativity that might make the difference between one team and the other in a closely fought encounter.

With the new multiple leadership regime in place, the Dutch men's hockey team won the European championship in 2017, beating Belgium. In 2018, the team finished second in the hockey World Cup, losing in the final to Belgium, in a shoot-out.

While this can be seen as a setback for the longer-term project, it also serves to emphasise the need to keep developing true teamwork. In that respect, the postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo to 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic gives younger Dutch players an unexpected chance to grow into the team and a new leadership to emerge and establish itself.

Some who might not be quite ready this year to perform well in an Olympic Games, will almost certainly be ready by this time in 2021 – while an already ageing Belgium team ages that little bit more.

Driving the evolution

Many of the lessons learnt from studying leadership in the world of sport often translate readily into other fields of human activity.

A number of factors are driving the evolution of multiple leadership. These include higher levels of education, the



growing complexity of problems being encountered and the gradual rise of the concept of multiple leadership.

A higher level of education in much of the world has had the beneficial side effect of delivering a broader spread of capabilities in many organisations. As a large number of people have become increasingly well equipped to challenge traditional hierarchical management structures, the very usefulness of such structures has come into question. Multiple leadership helps in the customisation of leadership to a specific time and context.

Collective responsibility in itself is not new, but multiple leadership, of which holacracy (a decentralised management and governance method in which decision-making and authority are distributed throughout the whole organisation) is arguably the most extreme variant used in some businesses. It is a relatively novel addition to the armoury of organisational tools and is an option that, we believe – working as a team within a team ourselves – deserves to be given serious consideration.

What works in sport need not be confined to sport. We are already seeing some major corporate names in the Netherlands pushing beyond traditional leadership boundaries. Dutch science-based company DSM, which specialises in solutions for nutrition, health and

sustainable living, has adopted a structure based on having two chief executive officers, giving a strong signal that leadership in the organisation should be shared.

Amsterdam-headquartered global financial institution ING has in recent years adopted a team- and people-based approach to management and leadership. As it says in its own profile presentation: 'We need to be agile, with short reporting lines and with the right people empowered to make important decisions quickly. We need to excel at attracting and keeping the talented people we need to get us where we want to be.'

Bart Schlatmann, the former chief operating officer of ING Netherlands who left the organisation in 2017 after 22 years with the group, said of the change: 'We gave up traditional hierarchy, formal meetings, over-engineering, detailed planning, and excessive "input steering" in exchange for empowered teams, informal networks, and "output steering". You need to look beyond your own industry and allow yourself to make

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mistakes and learn. The prize will be an organisation ready to face any challenge.'

It is not that everybody is the leader: there are still followers. However, that there is more than one head is both required and accepted; multiple leadership needs to be set up in an intelligent manner and monitored over time.

Indeed, a recent study¹ exploring team leadership structure has revealed three important insights that should apply to business teams working in high interdependence and with strong motivation in competitive environments (similar to the context of the Dutch national hockey team):

- Where there is team complexity in terms of i) expertise within the team, ii) the size of the team and, iii) task complexity, multiple leadership is not only viable, but even a required option for a team leadership structure.
- Setting up team leadership needs a bottom-up approach combined with a top-down approach. Just appointing a leadership team without consultation of the team members is ineffective. The only way it works is to find out what leadership team might be accepted, how roles can be distributed, and whether the potential leaders are accepting their responsibilities. ▶

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- Team members change and situations change. As a consequence, a multiple leadership structure is not a fixed thing but rather a dynamic construction. Multiple leadership structures require ongoing mentoring and adjustments over time. It is hard work, but if managed well, it pays off.

Addressing complexity

The complexity of many modern problems is well illustrated by recent events surrounding the emergence and spread of the coronavirus known as Covid-19.

Readers will need little reminder of how an outbreak of it in a remote town in China that most of us had never even heard of caused utter chaos as it moved in a westerly direction.

This will surely serve as a future case study in the application of different rules in different countries. Despite the claims often made by the most sincere supporters of the European Union as a long-term project in standardisation and harmonisation, Europe was not well enough prepared to tackle the problem as a united bloc. Effective leadership, for the most part, clearly went missing.

In some respects, the ongoing Covid-19 experience serves to underline the need for diversification of thinking, of heightened co-operation and greater alignment of the elected leaders of individual countries in acknowledging a major new challenge, addressing that new challenge and (we clearly must all hope) successfully solving the problems it has posed.

far as possible in any competition, if only on the grounds that if games or matches are taking place, someone has to be the winner and someone else the loser.

This notion is ingrained at the top level. Compromising and being nice will not win anyone a gold medal. But focusing on constantly improving performance very possibly will.

Doing one's best is relatively easy. Raising the standard that represents one's best is more of a challenge for individual team members and for their leaders. Multiple leadership has a central part to play in that constant, dynamic process. ■

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¹The development and maintenance of multiple leadership and team functioning: a qualitative study of sports teams, working paper written by Folkert Mulder and Steffen R. Giessner.

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It's winning that counts

Returning to sport, preparations are under way for the postponed Summer Olympics in Tokyo, despite the global isolation caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Whatever Olympic idealists might believe, it is the winning that counts, not simply the taking part. Any leader worth their salt will want to progress as