



MODULE: MANAGING AND
LEADING SPORTS
ORGANISATIONS (BMSM6004)



NAME: ADELAIDA TERENCE



STUDENT NUMBER: 2224223



Leadership in Sport: Theory, Application, and Athlete Welfare

Leadership plays a central role in shaping performance, culture, and ethical standards within sport organisations. In modern elite sport, leaders are not only responsible for winning, but also for safeguarding athlete wellbeing.

Sport environments are increasingly complex due to commercialisation, governance scrutiny, and growing awareness of mental health responsibilities.

This presentation will:

-Critically evaluate four leadership theories:

- Transformational
- Transactional
- Situational
- Servant

-Apply these theories to the contemporary challenge of athlete welfare and mental health.

-Demonstrate how theory informs practical leadership in sport.

(Dugan, Turman and Barnes, 2017; Megheirkouni and Norrington, 2024; Frawley, Misener, Lock and Schulenkorf, 2019)

Leadership in the Contemporary Sport Context

Leadership in sport operates at multiple levels, including coaching, management, and governance. It involves guiding athletes toward performance success while ensuring ethical and organisational accountability.

Modern sport leaders face increasing pressures:

- Commercial and stakeholder expectations
- Global competition and professionalisation
- Public scrutiny and media exposure
- Rising mental health and safeguarding responsibilities

Research highlights that leadership in sport governance must be collective, strategic, and ethically aligned. Therefore, effective leadership requires balancing performance objectives with welfare obligations.

(Ferkins, Shilbury and O'Boyle, 2018; Ibrahim, 2016; Megheirkouni and Norrington, 2024)



Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring followers through shared vision, ethical role modelling, and individual support. It aims to elevate motivation beyond transactional exchanges.

Core components include:

- Idealised influence
- Inspirational motivation
- Intellectual stimulation
- Individualised consideration

In sport, this leadership style strengthens team cohesion and intrinsic commitment. Evidence strongly links transformational leadership to improved performance and engagement.

However, research also identifies conceptual overlap with other positive leadership styles and suggests that it may lack structural precision in highly tactical environments.

(Bass and Riggio, 2006; Banks et al., 2016; Antonakis and House, 2014)



Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is based on structured exchanges between leader and follower. Performance expectations are clarified, and rewards or corrective actions reinforce compliance.

In sport settings, this involves:

- Clear tactical instructions
- Performance-based selection
- Monitoring and feedback systems

This approach provides stability and accountability, particularly during competitive periods.

However, its focus on compliance may limit intrinsic motivation and long-term development. Research suggests that while effective for short-term outcomes, it is less impactful on engagement compared to transformational leadership.

(Antonakis and House, 2014; Banks et al., 2016)



Situational Leadership

Situational leadership proposes that no single leadership style is universally effective. Leaders must adapt their approach depending on athlete competence and psychological readiness.

In practice, this may include:

- Directive leadership with inexperienced athletes
- Coaching and mentoring during development phases
- Delegation and empowerment of senior players

This flexibility is valuable in dynamic sport environments where squad composition frequently changes.

However, critics argue that developmental categories may oversimplify complex individual differences. Empirical support for the model is also mixed.

(Dugan, Turman and Barnes, 2017; Megheirkouni and Norrington, 2024)



Servant Leadership



Servant leadership prioritises the growth and wellbeing of followers. The leader acts as a steward, placing athlete welfare at the centre of decision-making.

Key principles include:

- Empowerment and trust
- Ethical responsibility
- Psychological safety
- Community building

In sport, this aligns strongly with safeguarding policies and athlete mental health frameworks.

Research shows servant leadership is linked to positive wellbeing outcomes and explains additional benefits beyond transformational leadership. However, tensions may arise in high-performance environments that prioritise authority and results.

(Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2016; Lu, Falahat and Phaik Kin Cheah, 2023; Jonker and Dube, 2025)

Comparing Leadership Theories



Each leadership theory contributes differently to sport leadership effectiveness.

- Transformational leadership enhances vision and intrinsic motivation.
- Transactional leadership ensures structure and accountability.
- Situational leadership provides contextual flexibility.
- Servant leadership strengthens ethical culture and wellbeing.

Meta-analytic research confirms that leadership style significantly influences motivation and organisational outcomes. However, no single framework fully addresses performance, governance, and welfare simultaneously.

Effective sport leadership therefore requires integration rather than reliance on one model.

(Ding and Wang, 2024; Megheirkouni and Norrington, 2024)

Contemporary Challenge: Athlete Welfare & Mental Health



Athlete mental health has become a central leadership challenge in modern sport. Elite athletes face:

- Performance pressure
- Injury-related stress
- Media scrutiny
- Burnout and transitional difficulties

Research highlights increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological strain within elite sport contexts.

Leadership must therefore extend beyond performance management to include systematic welfare support, policy development, and cultural change.

Failure to address mental health negatively impacts both athlete wellbeing and long-term performance sustainability.

(Lang, 2021; Campbell, Brady and Tincknell-Smith, 2021; Pilkington et al., 2024)

Simone Biles: A Contemporary Leadership Challenge in Elite Sport

Simone Biles (born March 14, 1997) is an American gymnast, the most decorated in history with 11 Olympic medals and 30 World Championship medals. A contemporary leader, she has redefined excellence while advocating for athlete welfare and mental health, notably prioritizing wellbeing at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

Why Simone Biles?

During the 2020 Summer Olympics, Biles withdrew from multiple events citing mental health concerns and the “twisties” (a dangerous psychological block in gymnastics).

Her decision highlighted:

- Extreme performance pressure
- Injury-related psychological stress
- Media scrutiny
- Burnout risk
- The danger of prioritising medals over wellbeing.

(Olympics, 2021; Park/Tokyo, 2021; Guinness World Records, n.d; BBC, 2026)



Applying Leadership Theories to Simone Biles

Transformational Leadership

Biles shifted cultural norms by:

- Encouraging open dialogue about mental health
- Redefining strength as self-awareness rather than silent endurance
- Influencing global sport discourse

She inspired systemic reflection across Olympic sport.

Transactional Leadership

Her case exposed governance gaps and reinforced the need for:

- Clear safeguarding frameworks
- Welfare-based performance policies
- Accountability structures within organisations like USA Gymnastics.

(Lang, 2021; Campbell, Brady and Tincknell-Smith, 2021; Pilkington et al., 2024)



Situational Leadership

Her withdrawal demonstrated:

- Leaders must adapt expectations to individual psychological readiness
- Performance demands must change according to mental state

Rigid leadership would have risked physical harm.

Servant Leadership

Biles prioritised:

- Psychological safety
- Long-term wellbeing
- Athlete-first culture.

(Lang, 2021; Campbell, Brady and Tincknell-Smith, 2021; Pilkington et al., 2024)





Conclusion

To conclude, this presentation has critically evaluated transformational, transactional, situational, and servant leadership within contemporary sport. Each approach offers distinct strengths, from vision and motivation to structure, adaptability, and ethical responsibility, yet none is fully effective in isolation.

The example of Simone Biles at the 2020 Summer Olympics illustrates how leadership decisions directly influence both performance and athlete welfare.

Ultimately, successful sport leadership requires an integrated, ethically grounded approach that balances competitive excellence with the protection and development of the whole athlete.

Cites: (Megheirkouni and Norrington, 2024; Hoch et al., 2016; Pilkington et al., 2024, Olympics 2021; Lang, 2021; Eva et al., 2019; Bass and Riggio, 2006; Dugan, Turman and Barnes, 2017; Antonakis and House, 2014)

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