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Title: 5000-1: lessons on luck and leadership from football's great ever upset

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Summary

Leicester City's 2015/16 Premier League title triumph has been viewed by many as one of the most unlikely sporting successes of recent years (e.g. Tanner 2016, James 2016). Offered at odds of 5000-1 at the start of the season, this achievement was considered by bookmakers to as probable as Elvis being found alive or Kim Kardashian becoming the next US president (Hill 2016, Northcroft 2016, Harris 2016).

However, while the achievement itself is well chronicled, little academic consideration has been given to the potential wider lessons it offers for organisational performance. This developmental paper examines this success in more depth, with a specific focus on the roles that chance and leadership played in this context.

The paper finds that a combination of *luck as counterfactual* and *serendipity*, rather than random chance, was important in Leicester City's success (Liu and de Rond 2016). At the same time, it also highlights the significant contribution that *individual leaders* [the incumbent and previous manager] and a wider *shared leadership philosophy* [i.e. the players, wider coaching staff] made to this title triumph.

It concludes by highlighting the need to develop multi-causal explanatory frameworks for exceptional organisational performance of this nature. In doing so, it advocates a more inclusive leadership discourse which simultaneously challenges romanticised views of leadership (Meindl et al. 1985) while continuing to recognise the significant difference individual leaders can make.

Track: Organisational studies

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Background to the paper

In recent years, two strong discourses have emerged within the field of leadership studies, which call into question the role individual leaders play in securing positive outcomes.

Romanticisation of leadership

Firstly, critical theorists have increasingly challenged models which utilise ‘effective’ leadership as the principle driver for organisational success, claiming that such ‘romanticised’ explanations (Meindl et al. 1985) simultaneously underestimate the complexity of organisational life while at the same time overstating the impact of the individual, ‘heroic’ leader (Collinson et al. 2018). Explanations of this nature, they argue, offer a simplistic vision of leadership, which does little to move debate on from the earliest ‘great man’ theories espoused by the likes of Carlyle (1988), and instead serve only to reify leaders as somehow special and divorced from the mere mortals they lead.

Distributed leadership

Secondly a range of collegial, shared and distributed leadership theories have grown in popularity over the last two decades. Collectively these emphasise more ‘egalitarian’ organisation models, in keeping with a supposedly more enlightened and democratic time. For instance, work by authors such Gronn (eg 2003), Spillane (eg 2004) and Bergman et al (2012) has frequently highlighted a variety of factors which constrain individual leaders and mediate their influence on organisational outcomes, especially, for instance, in large and complex contexts. As an antidote to this, they may be characterised as rejecting the ‘power of one’ in favour of the ‘power of everyone’, thereby emphasising the need to build the leadership capacity necessary to ensure success.

The contribution of luck

A third perspective considers the role that luck, chance, fate and fortune play in organisational performance and the degree to which success [or otherwise] is ‘falsely’ attributed to an individual leader. Interestingly this remains largely unexplored in the leadership discourse: Liu and de Rond (2016) for instance found that only 2% of articles published in six leading management journals included the word ‘luck’ within their main text, title or abstract.

Collectively, these three discourses look beyond a historic narrative of the leader as a pivotal or even primary driver of organisational performance. However while they provide an important challenge to potentially simplistic heroic theories of leadership, they also risk under-estimating the difference an individual can make and their contribution to success (Grint 2008).

This article seeks to offer fresh insight into debates about chance, shared and individualised leadership models, by examining Leicester City's historic Premier League victory of 2015/16. In doing so it explores the respective contributions of the pivotal individual leaders [e.g. the current and previous first team managers], shared leadership [coaches and ‘the team behind the team’] and chance [including random luck and serendipity] in this most unlikely tale of sporting successes.

Methodology

This paper is based on an analysis of secondary data, which chronicled Leicester City's title winning season, including:

- insight from key individuals within the club [e.g. players, the manager, the chairman] documented in sources such as match day programmes and official club interviews
- reports and analysis from experts including sports journalists and commentators
- books and articles which chronicled and analysed this season, many of which also drew on interviews with club employees.

This analysis has then been examined through the lens of several of the most relevant theories to examine the respective contributions of luck, individualised leadership and shared leadership to Leicester City's title success. These include work by Liu and de Rond (2016) [luck], Bass (eg.1998) [transformational leadership], Bridgewater (2010) [alternative styles of leadership] and Spillane (e.g. 2004) [distributed leadership].

Main findings

This paper concludes that fortune did indeed play an important role in Leicester City's title victory. However rather than simple *random acts of chance* (de Rond and Thietart 2007), luck in this context took two alternative forms, **both** of which were required to facilitate Leicester unexpected achievement. These were:

1. *Counterfactual* luck: this season saw an exceptional underperformance by the most successful and resource rich clubs in the league, which was essential in producing the more generalised and favourable operating conditions required for any 'smaller' club to succeed (Durand 2003)
2. *Serendipitous* luck: by developing sufficient additional capacity and the generation of momentum (Taylor and Demick 1994), Leicester City [rather than another club] were able to take advantage of the opportunities this improvement in operating climate generated (de Rond 2014, Burgelman 2003).

The paper also finds that elements of *individualised leadership* were fundamental to the second of these issues. In doing so, it utilises transformational leadership theory (Bass 1998) to understand the change programme introduced by former first team coach Nigel Pearson, which laid the foundations for this success. The paper then examines the leadership of Claudio Ranieri, his replacement and incumbent during the title winning season. To do so, it examines Bridgewater's (2010) typology of alternative leadership styles, finding that of the *accelerator* provides the most appropriate explanatory framework. Thus it concludes that a critical element of Ranieri's contribution to City's success centred on his decision to retain and build upon the principle aspects of Pearson's change programme. However it also utilises trait theory (e.g. Stogdill 1948) and evidence on the 'Big Five' personality factors (e.g. Goldberg 1990) to highlight how Ranieri deliberately sought to promote a more favourable operating environment for his team, by improving the club's relationships with the media.

While cautioning against romanticised and heroic narratives of leadership [of which the *fetishization of football managers* is a particular strand] this paper concludes that the

contributions of Pearson and Ranieri were critical in City's success. However it also highlights importance of distributed leadership (e.g. Spillane 2004) in establishing an exceptional 'team behind the team' (Arnold et al. 2019) in this story, for instance through the utilisation of advanced training techniques, data analytics and improved player acquisition.

This paper concludes by endorsing multi-causal explanatory models for considering exceptional organisational performance. In doing so it offers support to more inclusive leadership discourses which simultaneously reject romanticised views of leadership while continuing to recognise the significant difference individual leaders can make.

Contribution to knowledge

The author argues that the case study outlined in this paper is particularly suited to the examination of these issues for a number of reasons, which collectively underpin its contribution to knowledge.

Firstly, elite sport per se provides an unusually clear means for gauging organisational performance. For instance, in the Premier League, while measures such as profit, turnover and fan base are undoubtedly important, on-field performance and trophies secured remain the ultimate arbiter of success. Furthermore the fact that players' salaries are so closely correlated to a team's final league position (Kuper and Szymanski 2012) makes the exploration of Leicester City's success particularly compelling, given their relative lack of wealth in comparison with the Premier League's largest clubs.

Secondly, the Premier League offers an unusually high level of transparency into both the actions of the coach and their interaction with followers (Schyns et al. 2016). For instance, managers are contractually required to share their reflections with the press before and after every game. Matches themselves can be directly observed while articles, reports and books are further sources of insight into the goings on within the club. No other working environment offers such unprecedented access and rich data through which the practice of leadership and the performance of followers can be explored.

Thirdly, the highly competitive nature of elite group sport offers particular insight into the potential impact of shared leadership in organisational success. Again, Premier League football offers a uniquely high level of visibility into this phenomenon, for the reasons already outlined.

Finally, sport is perhaps the field where the contribution of luck to organisational outcome is most clearly recognised (Anderson and Sally 2013, Skinner and Freeman 2009). Indeed, the contribution of outrageous fortune to the story of sporting success is well documented, and in turn reflected in the eccentric superstitions of many sporting greats.

For these reasons, the author argues that as little, if any, rigorous academic consideration has been given to the leadership lessons from this remarkable sporting success, this paper makes an important contribution to knowledge by helping to address this void.

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