

What are your 'odds-of-success'?

Reflecting on the role of adaptive leadership in Leicester City's (2015/16) Premier League Title win

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What are your 'odds-of-success'? Reflecting on the role of *adaptive leadership* in Leicester City's (2015/16) English Football Premier League Title win

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This article utilizes the concept of adaptive leadership to explore how Leicester City, a small, provincial football club, defied odds of 5000-1 to become only the sixth winners of the English Premier League. It examines two research questions:

1. can adaptive leadership be used to explain how the club developed the conditions for the team's success? and;
2. what practical lessons can be learned from this?

Design/ methodology/ approach

This case study utilizes secondary material, published from 2011-2019, including interviews with players and staff, recordings of press conferences, club announcements, match programmes, books, magazine and newspaper articles, television reports, and social media coverage.

Findings

Adaptive leadership provides a mechanism for understanding the organizational change necessary for Leicester City's title victory. Three core elements of adaptive leadership are identified:

1. *the 'change leader's' deliberate decision to engage others across the organization in a process of 'intelligent reflection', to identify the required approach to address an identified organizational objective;*
2. *an organization-wide focus on building leadership capacity, to promote continuous improvement through personal and organizational learning;*
3. *a long term commitment by the most senior organizational leader to elements of the change process, thereby ensuring new ways of working became normalized over the longer term.*

Originality/ value

While theoretically well-developed, the practice of adaptive leadership remains under-researched (Yukl and Mahsud 2010). Leicester City's Premier League victory illustrates several key aspects of adaptive leadership in action, in a way that many people can easily relate to. The efficacious and team learning aspects of Leicester City's success story are important for organizational development scholars and practitioners alike. In summary, the key findings and lessons within this article can be metaphorically transferred to other team-based learning organization, i.e. including and beyond the world of sport!

Keywords

Adaptive leadership; football; organizational change

Introduction: What is adaptive leadership?

Heifetz defines adaptive leadership as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz et al. 2009:14). It therefore provides a framework by which organizations can address increasingly complex and competitive operating environments (Yukl and Mahsud 2010).

In simple terms the practice of adaptive leadership involves three phases:

1. the development of a core *objective*, through which the organization outlines a ‘bold aspirations amid their challenging realities’ [(Heifetz et al. 2009:2);
2. the determinization of specific *strategies* to achieve this objective, best achieved through a process of ‘intelligent reflection’, wherein a leader utilizes the wisdom of a wider group;
3. the operationalization of this *strategy* through various *tactics*, employed on a day to day basis to secure the changes required, by drawing upon the latent creativity and leadership capacity across the organization more broadly.

Adaptive leadership’s focus on flexibly tackling challenges echoes earlier theories [e.g. situational leadership, transformational leadership, contingency and complexity theory]. However its focus on building *leadership capacity* contrasts with more traditional dyadic and hierarchical leader-follower paradigms (Yukl and Mahsud 2010). It therefore effectively integrates formal [positional] and behavioral perspectives on leadership as a mechanism for success.

While adaptability is increasingly recognized as an essential characteristic of leadership, its practice remains under-researched (Yukl and Mahsud 2010). The remainder of this paper is intended to contribute to this discourse by exploring how adaptive leadership stimulated the changes necessary (but by themselves insufficient) for Leicester City’s surprise Premier League victory of 2015/16.

Adaptive leadership in action at Leicester City

At Leicester City, the process of adaptive change that culminated in their 2015/16 Premier League title can be traced back to the acquisition of the club by Thai businessman Vichai Shrivaddhanaprabha five years earlier. Kun Vichai’s *objectives* for the club reflect Heifetz’s criteria outlined above, these being to improve the team’s performances to achieve promotion to the Premier League and then qualify for European football within a further five years.

While incremental improvements in team performance were evident in the seasons immediately following Kun Vichai’s arrival, a more fundamental reconsideration of organizational *strategy* was necessary to achieve the step-change necessary to meet these objectives. To this end, first team manager Nigel Pearson employed adaptive

leadership's core principle of 'intelligent reflection', actively engaging leaders from a variety of performance areas in a root and branch review of the club's playing activities.

Such an inclusive approach remains relatively rare in football club management where power is commonly concentrated in small groups, often tightly bounded in historical friendships and working relationships. Indeed such openness can still be viewed as a weakness in an industry where command and control models of leadership largely dominate. In City's case this collective review identified two *strategic priorities* to address the team's objectives:

1. increase the utilization of the existing squad by reducing injuries, increasing physical fitness and improving mental resilience;
2. generate greater cohesion within the squad, by promoting a shared ethos of personal and collective responsibility.

Taken together these elements illustrate the essential role both individual and shared aspects of leadership play in adaptive leadership. Firstly, only Pearson as the key 'change-leader', had the legitimate power to both initiate the change process and articulate the core expectations related to it [eg inclusivity]. However at the same time, the *tactics* for achieving the overarching goals for this change were fundamentally reliant upon successfully developing and deploying leadership more broadly across the club. These included:

- increasing the club's sports science function, to integrate techniques to improve fitness and reduce incidence of injuries to levels consistently below Premier League averages (Fraser and Burrows 2018);
- developing the club's medical facilities to improve rehabilitation and recovery from injury (Tanner 2016);
- integrating the club's scouting function into its Senior Management Team, thereby ensuring potential signings were both technically and attitudinally able to integrate into the side (Northcroft 2016);
- taking steps to promote a culture of adaptability more broadly by removing negative influences from the club, for instance by transferring out players who were either unable or unwilling to contribute to the adaptive change process (Tanner 2016)

Finally, Pearson and other leaders collectively promoted a *learning organization* ethos at the club, thereby building adaptive capacity for the future. Examples of this included developing the capability to utilize player performance data to secure 'marginal gains' in training during matches and encouraging coaching staff to attend and present at relevant conferences (Magowan 2016).

The legacy of Pearson's change process

Adaptive leadership takes time (Heifetz 2009). In an industry renowned for demanding immediate success, the subsequent transformation in City's results was predicated on Kun Vichai's willingness to provide the space and support necessary to embed the

strategy and tactics collectively identified by Pearson and other leaders to achieve his overarching objectives.

The serendipitous underperformance of the Premier League's 'elite' clubs in City's title winning season unquestionably contributed to its objectives being so spectacularly exceeded. However the improvements achieved by the utilization of adaptive leadership strategies have allowed the club to enjoy its longest run in the top division for twenty years. Furthermore core adaptations implemented in this process have become embedded in its organizational fabric and remain evident, despite the departure of individual leaders, including both Pearson and, more tragically, Kun Vichai himself.

Conclusion: What key practical lessons can be learned to improve your 'odds-of-success'?

1. Adaptive leadership supports organizational improvement in competitive contexts. However its success is predicated on senior leaders' willingness to engage more widely across the organization, to identify the adaptive challenge itself and the strategies and tactics required to address it.
2. Building leadership capacity is key to adaptive leadership. However this demands both a personal and organizational commitment to learning, to identify and embed areas for continuous improvement.
3. Patience and the continued commitment of senior leaders to the core strategies for change is critical to realizing the longer term benefits of adaptive leadership. However this is likely to be particularly challenging in high stakes contexts, where the focus is predominantly on short term success.

1448 words

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