Toxic Leadership in the Management of Sport: Challenging the Context of the ‘Toxic Triangle’

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Sport is replete with examples of leaders who ‘push the boundaries’ of what would be considered as ethical leadership. Current and former presidents of some of sports’ largest and most influential governing bodies, including FIFA, the IAAF and the UCI, have been accused of, and in some cases found guilty of, behaviors that constitute corruption. While much of what can be deemed toxic or destructive leadership behavior is conducted by individuals, the environment is such that these activities are tolerated and, in some cases, facilitated by those in positions of power. For example, it could be argued that officials working at organizations such as the IAAF and the UCI may have perpetuated the use of PEDs by a lack of oversight or other forms of corrupt behavior.

The concept of toxic, or destructive, leadership behavior has been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g. Fraher, 2016; Lipman-Blumen, 2010; Krasikova, Green & LeBreton, 2013), primarily focusing on the contexts of business (e.g. Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Pelletier, 2011), politics (e.g. Heppell, 2011; Bostock, 2010) and, interestingly, the military (e.g. Box, 2012; Gallus, Walsh, van Driel, Gouge & Antolic, 2013). It is, however, the work of Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser (2007) that provides the theoretical foundation for this research. In developing the ‘Toxic Triangle’ model, the authors discussed three dynamics – Destructive Leaders (where they analyzed the characteristics of those who might be considered this type of leader); Conducive Environments (that facilitate toxic leadership); and Susceptible Followers (why colluders and conformers might ‘allow’ this type of behavior to manifest and why this type of leader might remain in a position of power) – in the context of political leaders, focusing on Fidel Castro and Adolf Hitler, that could begin to understand the dynamics of toxic leadership. Although the model is applicable in the political context discussed by Padilla et al (2007), the contention here is that, while each of the broad dynamics of toxic leadership certainly apply in the unique or special context of sport (Smith & Stewart, 2010), the characteristics that comprise each of these dynamics, including for example charisma and negative life themes, perceived threat, and unmet needs and ambition, need to be reimagined to support the analysis of leadership in sport organizations.

Using leaders of sport organizations as examples of toxic leaders, including Sepp Blatter (former FIFA President), Pat McQuaid (former UCI President), and Lamine Diack (former IAAF President), and as the first in a program of research about toxic leadership in sport, this paper discusses the applicability of the Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al, 2007) in the sport context, highlights the need for adaptations to the model in order to fit this new context and proposes a new version, the Management of Sport Organizations Toxic Triangle (MSOTT) model.