From Hero to Villain: Graham Henry, Rugby World Cup 2007 and the Perils of Hero Leadership

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Introduction
This research idea, still in its formative stages, concerns the failure of the All Blacks at the recent world Cup. In this submission, I introduce three interrelated concepts: hero leadership, the assumptions that underpin mainstream thinking on organisational change and the paradox of teamworking within elite sports organisations. I am interested in exploring these questions within an iconic New Zealand organisation, the New Zealand Rugby Union (and specifically, the All Blacks).

The All Blacks is an organisation well suited to a study of organisation, identity and locality. Hope (2002) argues that “an imagined sense of New Zealand-ness” (p.235) took shape in conjunction with the development of rugby and mass communication from the 1880s onwards. However, developments since the sport went professional in the mid 1990s make it a contested terrain of national identity formation. Increasingly, argues Hope, the All Blacks have become “global corporate property on loan to fee-paying customers in New Zealand” (p.252). Given the centrality of the All Blacks to our national identity, it provides a useful case for exploring popular conceptions of leadership and management and our how we attribute organisational success and failure.

The research question is: “What can we learn about leadership and organisational change in the New Zealand context from the failure of the All Blacks at Rugby World Cup 2007?”

The intention is to connect a series of literatures that have received comparatively little attention by critical management scholars: leadership, organisational change and sports management. Whilst critical approaches to the study of leadership are becoming more frequent (e.g. Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007; Collinson, 2005), leadership research has been described as “at best fragmented and at worst trivial” (Collinson & Grint, 2005, p.5). Together with organisational change, these topics have been dominated by the contributions of management gurus and consultants offering ‘diagnoses’ and ‘prescriptive remedies’ for a range of organisational ‘illnesses’.

If we accept Collinson and Grint’s assertion that “the intellectual integrity of leadership as a legitimate and important field of study has remained opened to question” (p.5) it is understandable that critical scholars have tended to ignore the topic. However, given the ascendancy of ‘leadership’ within popular management discourse (and an associated denigration of management, which I will come to later), leadership is an area in need of greater interrogation by critical scholars.

Studies of sports organisations are rare in the mainstream management studies literature (an exception being Amis et al, 2002) and even more so within critical management studies (Frisby, 2005). Critical scholars’ interest in issues such as control, domination and resistance make the factory and call centre more obvious sites for empirical study than elite sports organisations, where the ‘workers’ can take home salaries in the millions and often earn considerably more than the ‘bosses’.

Nevertheless, a study of an organisation such as the NZRFU can illuminate issues of interest to critical management scholars, such as commodification, managerialism and the imposition of a top-down model of organisational change. These issues have been the subject of extensive research in parts of the public sector, such as hospitals and...
universities, where the provision of a range of goods previously provided by non-market means have been subjected to a market logic. Much less research has been done on elite sport, yet organisations such as the NZRFU have undergone similar transformations. It is now commonplace to speak of the All Blacks as a ‘product’ and a ‘brand’ and even those New Zealanders disinterested in Rugby World Cup 2007 would have found it difficult to shelter themselves from the rampant commercialisation of every aspect of our national game.

In the following sections, I briefly introduce the three concepts which connect this research.

**Hero Leadership**

The conceptual starting point for this research is the notion of ‘hero leadership’, a tendency identified by Meindl et al (1985) to develop romanticized views of what leaders do and are able to accomplish which provides a simplistic yet reassuring means of understanding complex organizational phenomena. Put simply, when organisations perform well leaders are ‘heroes’ and when they perform badly they are ‘villains’ (Collinson, 2005).

This ‘hero’ or ‘villain’ construction of leadership is conceptually flawed for overplaying agency and underestimating the range of other social, political and cultural factors that contribute to organisational performance (Chen & Meindl, 1991). The construction of Graham Henry’s leadership as coach of the All Blacks would appear, from an outsider’s view, to be an exemplar of this dynamic. Before the World Cup, Paul (2007) wrote in glowing terms about Henry’s transformation of the organisation:

> The All Blacks did things a certain way for 100 years. Then Graham Henry came along and changed everything. Like all instigators of change, opinion is divided as to whether he is a revolutionary or a destroyer of traditions that should have been left alone.’

Extract from *The Reign Of King Henry*, by Gregor Paul, 2007

After the All Blacks’ failure at the World Cup, it was Henry’s leadership that was the centre of debate, overshadowing the mistakes by the referee and the quality of the performance of the opposition. While it could be argued that ‘hero leadership’ is a predominantly American construction, it has been deployed in the New Zealand context (Jackson & Parry, 2001), even though the authors argue that our ‘hero managers’ do not fit the popular image of “an individual with superhuman qualities” (p.228).

Yukl (1999) notes that in transformational and charismatic theories of leadership, which have dominated the literature since the 1980s, effective leadership is conceptualised as the ability to determine an appropriate vision and motivate others to follow it, “now how leaders encourage followers to challenge the leader’s vision or develop a better one” (p.292). This issue is also taken up by Senge (1999), who asks “why, in the age of empowerment, do we accept the power those in charge of organisations so unquestionably?” Senge concludes that our “cultural addiction to hero leadership” (p.11) results in organisations that experience a crisis having a tendency to put their faith in new leaders who advocate radical changes. This is a
risky approach because if those changes fail, the organisation can get caught in a 
vicious spiral of top-down large-scale change “leading eventually to new crises and 
yet more heroic leaders” (p.11).

Following the World Cup defeat in 2003, New Zealand rugby was facing a crisis. 
Graham Henry had a radical plan involving the resting, rotating and reconditioning of 
players and it seems that because of past failures at the World Cup, people felt 
compelled to buy into his vision. This is not to argue that Graham Henry’s innovative 
policies were the cause of the defeat, since that would be to fall into the trap of the 
hero leadership assumption. We will never get to see what would have happened if 
Graham Henry had not rested players from the Super 14 or put such an emphasis on 
rotation. What was of concern, however, was the general reluctance of people 
involved in rugby in New Zealand to openly question his strategy. It felt that if you 
did raise questions you were somehow being disloyal or you were hoping the All 
Blacks would lose. That is an unhealthy state for any organisation to be in and the 
danger is that as a result of the latest crisis of World Cup failure, New Zealand rugby 
will repeat the mistakes of the past and go in search of a new hero leader.

Assumptions about Organisational Change
Related to the phenomenon of the hero leader is a set of assumptions that pervade 
mainstream literature on organisation and management and which deserve scrutiny - 
that (paradoxically) change is the only constant, that change is inherently good and 
stability dangerous, that change will be embraced by all and will lead to success 
(Sturdy & Grey, 2003). These assumptions are evident in the diagram below, which 
is taken from the prescribed text for Management 101 at Victoria University.

![Diagram of Change vs Status Quo]

Source: Campling, J; Poole, D; Wiesner, R & Schermerhorn, J. (2006) Management – 2nd Asia-Pacific 

The diagram shares the assumptions mentioned earlier that underpin mainstream 
thinking on organizational change – essentially that change is good whereas 
maintaining the status quo is bad. In addition, there is a clear implication that 
leadership is ‘good’ and management is ‘bad’. This simplistic presentation could be 
laughed off if it were not for the fact that for many students, this is their only course
in management. Rather than being an isolated example, I would argue that this thinking is typical of mainstream thinking and is also a popular conception within practising managers.

**Team Working In Elite Sports Organisations**

Elite sports teams are often associated with top-down styles of management which draw heavily on the metaphor of war. In the study of Bolton Wanders Football Club, Gilmore and Gilson (2007) state that “the command and control environment…has been part of football culture for many years” (p.413). Monin and Monin (1997), in exploring the rhetoric of competition in New Zealand, highlight the root metaphor of warfare that is dominant in business and rugby.

It strikes me as paradoxical that we have elite sports teams that are increasingly using managerial concepts from the corporate sphere at the same time as concepts such as ‘team working’ are becoming popularised within that corporate sphere. It appears we are seeing a homogenisation of managerial approaches across organisations of various types. However, it does raise the question of what team working means in the commercialised, professionalised environment of the All Blacks? The All Blacks certainly presented a united face, although there have been rumours of resistance and discontent with Henry’s regime.

Of course, there is a critical take on team working and learning that should not be ignored. Barker (1992) for instance, notes how team working can act to ‘tighten the iron-cage’, whilst Contu et al (2003) show how it is possible to be ‘against learning’.

**Conclusion**

This research seeks to contribute to critical approaches to leadership and organisational change through the case study of the All Blacks. The empirical component of the study is still in its design stages. One option is to conduct research within the NZRFU, although it is anticipated that gaining access will be difficult. A second option is to explore the construction of the organisation’s leadership in the media, along the lines of Chen & Meindl (1991), who studied the presentation of a corporate executive in the popular press after successive periods of organisational success and failure. Any suggestions, in relation to either the conceptual approach or empirical investigation would be welcomed.
References:


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