



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
School of Economics and Management

# LEADERSHIP

PERCEIVED BY FORMER TOP-LEVEL ATHLETES IN THE  
ROLE OF BUSINESS MANAGER

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis, using interpretive approach, is to explore how former top-level athletes perceive leadership in their role as manager. Furthermore, how they perceive they transfer their experience in sport to their managerial role. We build our study on theories about leadership, followership, life skill development in sports and life skill transfer process. The fieldwork of this study included open semi-structured in-depth interviews with former top-level athletes who have experience working in managerial positions. The aim of the interviews was to examine managers perceived leadership. We construct the study on abductive approach. Our findings indicate a shared understanding of leadership among our managers and there are strong signs that extensive experience in sports does influence managers mindset on how their view leadership. In conclusion the study draws upon additional dimension that is provided to one's view on leadership.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Management, Life skills, Experience, Sports

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of leaders, or at least in a world where most people would like to be leaders. Most of us speak, hear or read about lives of great people such as Elon Musk in business, Stephen Hawking in science, Madonna in music, Pablo Picasso in art and Michael Jordan in sport. These individuals, are considered successful in their field and among the greatest leaders (influencers) of all time. These people have started their career at some point and by using their creativity, talents and leadership, they have achieved greatness. They have abilities in one or few particular fields, but what if these people would change professions? Would Musk be as good in music as in business? Would Madonna be able to pursue a career in art? There are many “if” questions we will never know the answers to, for example how big part genetics abilities play in leadership. However, there are aspects that are worth looking into. It can be interesting, and in some profession even important, to explore how experience in one profession can benefit a person in another profession. People often change their profession and the reasons can be various. Some want to take on new challenges, others need to earn a living, the reasons, as mentioned, can be very different. However, sometimes people are even “forced” to change professions, for example in sports.

Sports are considered to be competitive, demanding and physical, which leads to very short professional lives. Career in most sports lasts only around 15 years and the average age of retirement is at 35 (North & Lavalley, 2004). The career span can be even shorter as athletes suffer from a variety of injuries that can shorten their career. Therefore, most top-level athletes need, at some point, to consider changing focus and pursue a career in another domain. In its essence, sport is a domain of physical activity and competition while, at the same time, being one of the most popular hobbies around the world. About 50% of people in EU countries from the age of 15 are engaged in physical activities with some regularity (Statista, 2018). But to be a professional athlete and earn money in sports, one should have tremendous level of physical capabilities and/or other skills (mental and technical) to perform at the highest level. In this study we consider top-level athletes: *those who compete in highest divisions in any sport league or compete on an international level (football, bandy, handball, ice-hockey, athletics etc.) and train professionally (at least 5 days a week).*

In this study we are going to explore how top-level athletes who have changed their profession from sports to business management view leadership and how they perceive

their experience in sports can be transferred to their managerial roles. It is interesting to explore how former top-level athletes in managerial roles view leadership and, furthermore, important to discuss how experience in sports can be helpful in other domain e.g. due to their short professional lives. It is a fact that for athletes, it can be a challenge to find an employer who finds athletes' experience relevant and suitable for particular positions. Another unfavourable aspect is that athletes are mainly considered followers to coaches or managers in the sport teams, (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006). This makes it even harder to get the desired position. Thus, it is important to explore how experience in sport can be transferred to another profession.

Before we continue we need to define the concept of experience as this term can be very difficult to grasp and explanation can vary from one person to another. The definition used in this study, to decrease the ambiguity of the term, is provided by the Oxford dictionary (2018,1): "*The knowledge or skill acquired by a period of practical experience of something, especially that gained in a particular profession*". In this study we will relate this definition of experience to sports, by using studies of life skills development in sports discussed in further details in the next chapter.

Top-level athletes do have skills and capabilities to offer, even of leadership, which they have developed through sports (McCallister, Blinde & Weiss, 2000). There are studies that provide evidence that in sports, one can develop life skills and transfer them to other domains (Danish et al. 2004). Life skills are capabilities, characteristics and personal assets (Gould & Carson, 2008) that can help in other domains of life. Based on that, life skills can be relevant for employers and help athletes to be suitable for roles outside the sports domain. Skills that are developed in sports include; working under pressure, goal setting, teamwork, persistency and willingness to learn (Cronin & Allen, 2015, Gould et al., 2007, Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993). In addition to these skills, athletes can develop their leadership through formal and informal leader roles (Fransen et al., 2014). Some practitioners argue that the skills developed in sports could be helpful in a managerial role and may even shape one's leadership perspective (Ernst & Young, 2015).

Many people enjoy speaking about leadership and wish to become leaders (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), athletes are no exception. Because of the popularity of leadership and its broad and positive associations, many people want to be recognized

as leaders. To be recognized, one could aim for a career in field of management. In management positions, one is considered superior and more powerful than others. Therefore, it might attract those who strive for power, prestige (Maner & Mead, 2010), respect and wealth (Kellerman, 2012). However, that is not always the case, as being a manager can also be someone who considers himself gifted and goal-oriented (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Management and leadership are hard to separate as both terms are vague and often they overlap. Therefore, the exact skills and capabilities necessary to do both activities are not generally accepted. Managers in organizations perform many tasks and roles which include: following organizational goals, motivating subordinates, planning, coordinating, budgeting etc. (Sveningsson & Blom, 2011, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Another role of management which can be perceived as attractive is leadership, phenomena which has something to do with influencing other people (Yukl, 1989). This is a common view in management literature and managers feel that they are the ones who practice leadership in their roles (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). As discussed in more details in the next chapters, the distinction of management and leadership is not clear. Therefore, it is essential to explore how and in what context or situations managers act as leaders. Also, as leadership is a very broad term we approach the subject with an open-mind, without following any particular theories and ideologies, with the aim to interpret it as it is expressed by our respondents. Therefore, in this study, we explore how leadership is viewed by former top-level athletes in managerial roles.

### 1.1 RESEARCH GAP

We already mentioned several studies showing athletes' development of life skill in sports which can be useful and transferable to other domains. In a qualitative study, Hayball and Jones (2016), explored whether young individuals, believed they had transferred life skills from sports to another domain. Their results showed that participants talked about perceived life skills that they thought they had learned or developed in sports after their retirement. Skills that were mentioned included mental strength, positive attitude, conflict resolution, the ability to deal with stressful situations, the importance of good preparation, leadership, expectation management and social competence. Another qualitative study conducted by Camiré, Trudel and Forneris (2009), examined if respondents had learned life skills through their participation in various sports. This study identified a number of life skills that

participants perceived they had learned, such as, leadership, teamwork, communication skills and showing initiative. Those qualitative studies indicate that athletes perceive they have developed or learned various skills through their participation in sports. Nevertheless, they do not specifically show the transferability of skills from the sports domain to the business domain.

Using a quantitative survey Ernst & Young (2015) found that women executives claimed their background in sport had helped them to accelerate their working career and contributed in a positive way to their career success. They believed that they had developed several leadership skills in sports such as the ability to see projects through completion, motivational skills and team building skills. Same study shows that employers, perceive sports to have a positive influence on their work ethic, teamwork and decision making when they recruit employees. Even though this study indicates several leadership skills that can be transferred from sports to business domain, it does not give a deep understanding how respondents perceive and express leadership as the study is based on a quantitative data collection method.

Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) studied how managers in knowledge-intensive companies viewed leadership and if they had any integrated understanding of their leadership. The findings showed that managers had vague and disconnected ideas around leadership and that their leadership perspective was influenced from discourse on leadership by emphasizing vision, values and strategies. Our study is similar to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) research. However, to understand managers' leadership perspective they took the organizational context in consideration while we consider managers background from sports to understand their view on leadership. This, in our opinion, could add another dimension to their study. Thus, our contribution can drive other researchers to look at the concept of leadership from different angles and provide variety of viewpoints to it. With our research, we tend to give further insights into understanding and construction on leadership from one specific group of individuals. Through that we can enlarge the knowledge base about already ambiguous and broad theory of leadership.

## 1.2 RESEARCH PURPOSE

The aim of this study is to understand how former top-level athletes view leadership and how they perceive they transfer their experience in sport to their managerial role.

To get a clearer understanding of the subject, we will examine and interpret the viewpoint and perception of former top-level athletes who have worked as managers in different organizations outside the sport industry. With an interpretive study, we aim to add a different dimension to our topic, then previous studies on leadership. In this study we aim to answer a primary question and a secondary research questions.

Primary research question:

*How do former top-level athletes in managerial roles view leadership?*

To be able to answer our primary research question, we formulated a secondary research question:

*What former top-level athletes perceive they transfer from extensive experience in sports to their managerial role?*

To answer the above research questions, the respondents were asked numerous questions, further described in the methodology chapter.

The overall aim of the study is to enrich the understanding of the specific personal experience of former top-level athletes, now managers, in addition to views on leadership based on a more general leadership discourse. Furthermore, it is important to explore how experience in sports can be helpful in other professions.

### 1.3 OUTLINE OF THESIS

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter is an introductory chapter where we introduce the topic and discuss the aim of our study. In the second chapter, we discuss the theoretical framework that we build our research on while we also introduce other related researches that have been conducted. The research methodology is introduced in chapter three. There we explain the method used in our research and how we analysed gathered data. Furthermore, we will argue why we made those choices and discuss methodological limitations. Our findings will be discussed in chapter four where we summarize the empirical data we gathered from the interviews. In the chapter five we analyse empirical material, evaluate findings from the interviews relating them to the theoretical framework and finally in the last chapter the conclusion of study will be discussed.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, published literature related to our research questions, will be presented, starting with an introduction of the main literatures in the field of leadership, followed by a discussion on leadership and followership in sports as athletes are mainly considered followers to coaches or managers in sport teams (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006). We then explain life skills and how they are developed in sports, as we have already, in the introduction, defined experience as: “*The knowledge or skill acquired by a period of practical experience of something, especially that gained in a particular profession*”. Furthermore, the multidimensional model of life skills transfer will be addressed and subsequently we will assess if life skills are transferred when interaction between various, possibly similar, contexts take place.

### 2.1 MANAGERS DOING LEADERSHIP

Management in modern organizations is problematic and complex. Managers face many different tasks and challenges on a day-to-day basis (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). For managers to carry out their managerial job effectively, they need certain skills and abilities that can be developed and manifested in their performance. Katz (1974) states that managers require competence, based on three basic skills i.e. technical, conceptual and human. The technical skills involve special knowledge and analytical abilities demanded by the job. The conceptual skills require the managers to see the organization as whole and understand how different units of the organization are related and work together. The human skill refers to the manager’s ability to work in a group and unify the team that he or she leads. It involves e.g. management skills to guide, influence, develop, motivate and encourage their subordinates and understand their perspectives.

Managers perform a variety of tasks and roles in organizations and it is difficult to generalize what they do in their work (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). To explain fragmented managerial work, Mintzberg (1989) articulated ten managerial roles. One of those roles is leadership, where managers are expected to hire and coach employees, motivate their subordinates and get them to follow organizational goals.

Leadership is defined and discussed by many academics who have not agreed on any one specific definition (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), therefore diverse theories flourished throughout the years providing us with various

perspectives on the subject. Kouzes and Posner (2002) believe leadership is about relationship between those who dream to be leaders and those who choose to follow. Barker (2001) claims, that management is about maintaining stability, but leadership aims to create changes. Yukl (1989) claims that most definitions about leadership seem to have little in common, except process of influencing i.e. leader's ability to influence other people. Despite, manifold and different definitions of leadership, the literature has introduced several managerial leadership styles and theories. As leadership is a very broad term, we will not focus on one particular perspective or style. However, we introduce theories of several aspects that can be closely related to how managers view leadership. Those aspects are closely related to the human factor of Katz (1974) theory and Yukl (1989) theory on leader's ability to influence other people.

One of the earliest leadership theories is the trait-theory. The theory emphasizes certain personal traits and characteristics of effective and successful leader (Hersey and Blanchard (1982). Studies have introduced long list of traits or skill that are associated with good or strong leadership. Individual traits, such as responsibility, persistence, problem solving, self-esteem, adaptability, reliability and confidence are often related to good leaders. Other leadership skills frequently introduced are being creative, inspiring, goal-oriented, empathetic, confident to work under pressure, adaptable etc. (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Early studies on trait leadership focused on specific traits or skills that individuals were born with i.e. people would either have these qualities or not. However, these studies are flawed as they denied the leader ability to develop through experience or education (Iszatt-White & Saunders 2017). Contemporary leader trait theories show the qualities that they consider differentiate non-leaders from leaders are far ranging. The theories still involve personal attributes but they also take other factors into the consideration such as motives, values, cognitive abilities, problem solving and social skills (Zaccaro, 2007). These factors, together with leaders' social situation are considered to influence their leadership effectiveness. Therefore, a person with certain traits can be a leader in some circumstances but not necessarily in other (Iszatt-White & Saunders, 2017). According to Zaccaro (2007) this demands the leader's need to have the ability to adapt and change his or her behaviour as the situation changes. This harmonizes with situational leadership, that involves leaders to switch between leadership, styles to be effective depending on the situation. Hersey, Blanchard and Dewey (1996) believed that leadership relied on three

competencies that are: *diagnosing* - cognitive skill to understand complicated situations; *adapting* - behaviour ability to adapt and change behaviour according to current situation; *communicating* - The leader's process skill to get his/her message to employees. The focus here is that both the leaders and their followers can improve their ability through training and experience. According to Hersey and Blanchard (1982) leaders do need to use different leadership style depending on the maturity of the subordinates. A high mature subordinate may be able to solve tasks on their own and have confidence to execute tasks while low mature subordinates may lack skills and confidence. However, the main idea could be that, leaders should develop and build up skills among their subordinates, so they can become more independent and confident in their jobs (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) have criticised this approach as switching styles might cause confusion and inconsistency among the subordinates. Furthermore, they claim that few people are able to master a wide range of different leadership styles.

Studies on leadership perspective show evidence of multiple perspectives and no one leadership style is dominating among managers (Gagnon, 2012). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) studied how managers in knowledge-intensive companies viewed leadership and if they would have any integrated understanding of their leadership. Their findings showed that managers did have diverse and ambiguous understanding on their managerial tasks and leadership. They found that managers were strongly influenced by a discourse on leadership, by emphasizing values, visions and strategy. Managers associated themselves with leadership, that were considered positive and appropriate by co-workers and the industry they were working in. The findings of Alvesson and Sveningsson can be related to transformational leadership, that focuses on changing different aspects of organization and followers, including strategy and vision.

Leaders in this field are interested in change and its processes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Bass (1985) claims that, to achieve transformation, leaders need to convince followers about the value of a possible outcome for the organization and themselves. Also, they need to try to trigger followers' inner motivation, by showing their followers trust, include them in processes and build up their confidence. According to Bass and Avolio (2000), transformational leadership is characterized by four factors i.e. idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation

and individual consideration. *Idealized influence* involves that the leaders act and behave as role models for their followers and put their needs above their own. In accordance to that, leaders act and behave according to the mission, existing values and principles of the organization. Leaders are trusted and respected by their followers who identify themselves with the leaders (James & Collins, 2008). *Inspirational motivation* is considered key aspect of transformational leadership. It occurs when leaders through their charisma create team spirit and inspire their followers to put their own self-interest behind organizational interest (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). They are expected to emphasize commitment to goals and shared vision and act in ways that inspire and motivate their subordinates (James & Collins, 2008). The leaders are also considered to support followers' self-actualization and encourage them to grow in their field (Bass & Riggio, 2006). *Intellectual stimulation* involves transformational leaders to encourage their followers to be creative, approach problems in new ways and from different perspectives (Iszatt-White & Saunders, 2017). Leaders create working environment that does not criticize individual mistakes and ideas from all employees are appreciated, even though they do not harmonize with the leader's ideas (James & Collins, 2008). *Individual consideration* means that leaders treat their followers differently and pay attention to each follower's needs. They act as coaches who encourage their employees to develop and improve their skills in the interest of their jobs (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The communication style is two-way, the leader is expected to listen effectively and pay attention to if followers need additional support to improve their skills, without being intrusive (James & Collins, 2008). Individual consideration can be strongly related to another leadership style i.e. coaching leadership.

According to Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017), managers who act as coaches are expected to share responsibility, delegate and offer their followers challenging tasks in order to help them develop in their area of expertise. Important aspect of coaching is to communicate, listen and empathize with followers. As Korotov, Florent-Treacy and Vries (2007) state, listening and empathy are important skills for leaders to strengthen their relationship with their followers and build up trust. Listening does not involve only listen to spoken words, it also demands paying attention to the meaning of the words. Rogers (1980) claims, there are three factors that coaches have to emphasize to maintain strong relationship with their followers. Firstly, coaches must show their

followers empathy, by understanding their feelings and be able to see the world from another person's perspective. Secondly, the coach must have positive attitude towards his followers and show them respect and acceptance. Thirdly, they need to show consistency and be themselves.

## 2.2 LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP IN SPORTS

Through the years, leadership in sports has mainly focused on the coach as he or she is considered to be responsible for making the final decisions regarding several team issues (tactics, strategy, team players). Coaches have been considered as leaders and players as followers. However, recent studies have been focusing on the athletes and how they perform leadership in teams i.e. athlete leadership (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006). According to Loughead (2017, p. 58), athlete leadership can be defined as “*an athlete who occupies a formal or informal leadership role within the team and influences team members to achieve common objective*”. This definition shows that leadership roles can be divided and distributed among team members from whom two types of athlete leaders can be identified. Formal leaders are considered individuals in the team who are nominated as leaders (captains) by their coaches or team members. Informal leaders are players who emerge as leaders as a result of their experience and interaction with team members. Those individuals who do not take a role as formal or informal leaders can be seen as a non-leaders or followers (Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2017). Many studies demonstrate that effective athlete leadership can have several positive effects, e.g. on team confidence, team reliance and team performance. These studies also show that athlete leaders tend to ensure a strong work ethic, encourage positive team spirit, help to minimize conflicts, motivate their teammates and help their coaches to understand and improve the team (e.g. recruit new players) (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Camiré (2016) in his study, examined captains in the National Hockey League (NHL) and his main findings were that they need to be open to learnings, lead by example and act as communication link between the players and the staff of the club. Nevertheless, studies show that leaders and followers can have opposite effects on team cohesion, if they have wrong/negative attitude that undermine the team (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Fransen et al. (2014) found four different leadership roles that team members (formal and informal leaders) perform in the team i.e. task leader, motivational leader, social leader and external leader. The *task leader* is the one who is in charge on the pitch and helps the team to focus on goals and tactical

decision making. The *motivational leader* is the leading motivator on the field and encourages his or her's team members to push their limits and give everything they have. The *social leader* establishes good and trustworthy relationship with other players in the team and tries to encourage positive team spirit. This leader is a good listener and helps to solve arguments that can arise within the team. The *external leader* is the representative of the team and is a link between the team and the followers of a team (fans, media, sponsors). These different roles can lead to assumptions that formal and informal leaders can influence team members in various ways and their contribution has a great effect on team structure and functioning (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006). Based on these studies, athletes in sports can be leaders or followers, depending on their activities and status within the team, which is similar to business studies regarding followership.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle stated, “*only by training from youth may subjects grow to leadership*”, meaning that leaders need to gain experience and develop certain skills as followers to become leaders (Litzinger & Schaefer, 1982). However, in early writings on leadership, the followers have been seen as passive recipients of leadership influence. The main focus has been on leaders' traits and behaviour and how followers react to their will and actions (Iszatt-White & Saunders, 2017). In recent years, the role of followers and followership has been given more attention and interest by researchers, as followers are viewed as active co-producers of leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) addressed three perspectives on relationship between leaders and followers. The first perspective is considered to follow traditional view of the behaviour of the follower, where the leaders construct follower's perspective. Leader's personality and style are assumed to have influence on employee's behaviour and attitude. The followers are considered as passive actors who are depended on their leaders. The second perspective views followers as co-constructors of leadership. It focuses on followers (employees) traits, job tasks, role, characteristics and how they work with leaders. Howell and Shamir (2005) argue that followers need to be approached as active participants rather than being seen as receivers of leadership. Here, the leadership is explained as an outcome of different people jointly creating it and constructing relationship that is built on clear sense of roles, win-win situations and mutual trust. However, co-constructed leadership does not

mean full equality between the leaders and followers. In some situations, employees could decide to take a strong follower position (e.g. immature employee) and allows the leader to take a dominant position (e.g. manager with superior knowledge). The third view consider followers as constructors of leadership and focuses on situations where followers are the source of leadership relations. This can occur e.g. when followers identify themselves with certain social groups (companies, brands, sport clubs) or within organizations where followers have certain skills and knowledge that can make the “right” attribution (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Theories that explore leadership through followership include shared leadership (Carson, Tesluk & Marrone, 2007) and self-leadership (Lovelace, Manz & Alves, 2007). Similarly, to the field of sports, where in recent studies athletes are considered to have shared leadership or informal leadership roles in teams. *Self-leadership* has emerged from Manz (1986) who in his studies identified skills that were considered developed by followers; taking more responsibility, increased motivation and own direction at work. Lovelace, Manz & Alves (2007) added to the study by saying that these abilities can help followers to be their own leaders, at least to some level. *Shared leadership* is described as different individuals leading each other in variety of situations to achieve goals set by the team or organization (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Here, leadership may be distributed between members of the team or different teams themselves (Pearce, Yoo & Alavi, 2004; Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) and it could provide influence flow from various sources (Carson, Tesluk & Marrone, 2007). Carson, Tesluk and Marrone (2007) provided evidence that in shared leadership, team productivity is increased and there is no need for one particular leader.

Many researchers have tried to come up with various theories about followership, as expressed in this chapter, but there are some who have tried to understand what makes an “effective” or “good” follower. Kelley (1998) described positive attributes such as self-motivation, commitment to the group, credibility, honesty and the ability to solve problems on one’s own. These followers were considered as actively engaged in followership. Pastor, Mayo and Shamir (2007) in their study offers co-production of leadership process were followers are considered to help set goals, visions and attitudes towards reaching teams or organizational goals. Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien (2012) adds to it by positioning followers as those who negotiate, communicate and join leaders to influence groups’ understandings and affect outcomes of it. In regard to followership

in sports, athletes are considered to be co-constructs of leadership by following instructions of a coach and in the same time being open for improvisation on the field.

In this regard, followers can be considered as an important factor of leadership constructors, because there is a possibility that leadership happens on two levels (Van Wart, 2013). Horizontal leadership can be expressed through self-leading individuals and shared leadership within the team, where everybody are providing some sort of a leadership. This may seem similar to findings from leadership and followership theories of sport, where athletes are considered to do leadership within the teams. The second is vertical leadership, where a leader is superior (manager or coach), who can have formal or informal leadership role. Here, leadership is expressed from one source where others are considered only followers without any expression of leadership. But in this type of followership, followers should co-construct leadership as expressed in this chapter. On this note, followers are considered to have developed skills which can be helpful and similar to ones that are expressed doing leadership. These skills, as mentioned earlier, include goal-setting, commitment, self-starters, own direction, problem solving and honesty. According to earlier mentioned studies, followers can have different roles based on their activity level and involvement towards leadership. For example, at the right times they can act as followers or be leaders as could be seen in a managerial role, where they are leaders to employees and followers to the owners.

### 2.3 LIFE SKILLS

There are variety of definitions of life skills. According to Oxford dictionary (2018) a definition of life skills is “*a skill that is necessary or desirable for full participation in everyday life*”. Danish et al. (2004, p.40) definition of life skills is more detailed:

*“...those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live such as school, home and in their neighbourhoods. Life skills can be behavioural (communicating effectively with peers and adults) or cognitive (making effective decisions) and interpersonal (being assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals).”*

Life skills are described as only those skills that can be transferred from one domain to other (Danish et al. 2004) and are free from any context and content (Wiant, 1977). Therefore, skills that are only used in sports and cannot be carried over to other fields are not classified as life or transferable skills. Danish, Petitpas and Hale (1993) mention



more than 25 life skills, from which some of them are: perform under pressure, commitment, dedication, ability to learn, take risks, be flexible, set goals, be self-motivated among the others. In relevance to sport Gould and Carson (2008, p.60) defined life skills: “...*those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings*”. Based on these definitions we consider life skills to be actions, characteristics, interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities that can be reflected as an any type of an experience. In this study we examine what former top-level athletes perceive they have developed and transferred from sports and then we put emphasis on elaborating on managers presumed leadership perspective.

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#### 2.3.1 LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN SPORTS

Sports is one of the most popular hobbies in the world and kids’ train in sports on regular basis. In Sweden, sports are considered the most favoured activity among youngsters. Around 70% of all boys and every other girl in the age group 7-15 years are members of a sports club that are located throughout Sweden and organize sports activities for youngsters. Many individuals start to participate in organized sport activities at young age e.g. at sport clubs or at compulsory schools. In both places, they perform different kind of sport activities that claims to improve their physical and cognitive skills (Turner & Martinek, 1999).

Aim of teaching in sports is to encourage participants to stimulate different cognitive skills such as goal setting, planning, discipline, teamwork, communication, listening and attention. Sports clubs, through their activities aim to promote democracy, gender equality, fair play, good health and personal development (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2012). In physical education at schools, one of the objectives is learning to use a wide range of tactics and strategies to defeat opponents in a direct competition through team and individual sport e.g. football, badminton, tennis and basketball (Skolverket, 2011; Department of Education, 2014). At sport clubs, similarly as in schools, young players should be systematically taught skills such as team and individual goal setting, own responsibility, discipline, self-esteem, teamwork, cooperation, preparation, listening, competitiveness and empathy (Utbildningsplan Malmö FF Ungdom, 2013; IFK Norrköping, 2017)

There have been many sport-based life skills development programs promoted throughout the world. The programs are designed specially to foster life skills and personal development through physical activities in sports. One example of such program is SUPER (Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation) that has been implemented in different sport activities (Danish, Fornes & Wallace, 2005). Papacharisis et al. (2005) evaluated the effects of SUPER on volleyball and soccer players. One of their main findings was that those players who participated in the program had higher confidence in goal setting and possessed more positive thinking and higher problem-solving skills, than those players who were not involved in the program. Another study that explored the influence of the TSR (Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility) program, found that the program helped players to improve self-control, attitude and teamwork (Hellison & Walsh, 2002). In a case study, Camiré, Trudel and Bernard (2013) explored a high school sport program in Canada that was designed to teach life skills. The findings indicated that life skills implementation occurred in developmental classes of life skills, where students learned about goal setting and values (e.g. fairness, honesty and respect) and by letting students participate in volunteering work (e.g. altruism, respect and empathy). Furthermore, the findings showed that coaches taught life skills continuously and did take advantage of teachable moments to teach life skills. For example, one coach intervened in argument between two groups of players who disagreed about training intensity. The coach stepped into the situation and gave their players the speech that was considered to be inspirational about teamwork and the importance of encouragement.

Even though studies suggest that participation in sports, based on extracurricular participation or sports-based development programs, has positive influence on personal and life skills development, we cannot be certain about it as implementation can vary from place to place. The implementation is mainly in the hand of coaches and in recent years, coaches have become more aware of their responsibilities in promoting life skills development through their coaching (Gould et al. 2007). Some coaches believe the life skill development process occurs automatically through participation in sport and they do not need to focus on it specifically. More frequently, coaches who work with athletes think they have developed a number of strategies and techniques to develop players life skills. Gould et al. (2007), found that coaches use two different strategies to develop and implement life skills among their players i.e. through general coaching and by

player development strategies. General coaching strategies do involve working with players (respectful treatment, communication and being role models) and dealing with other parties (show officials respect, give tasks and listen to assistant coaches). The player development strategies involve coaches to help their players to set goals and teach them life skills directly e.g. by talking to them about how life skills are learned in sports and can be transferred to other fields. Furthermore, these findings highlighted that more experienced coaches did not view the development of life skills separately from other general coaching strategies that aim to improve their general sport skills.

Trottier and Robitaille (2014) interviewed coaches from individual and team sports. They came up with more than 30 life skills they felt they were teaching their training participants. Some of the skills included self-confidence, leadership, goal setting, respect, ability to work under pressure and emotional management. Gould et al. (2007) interviewed American football coaches that considered their players had learned various life skills through playing football and striving for excellence in their sport. The coaches highlighted skills, such as discipline, work ethic and emotional control. Though coaches emphasize many skills they think are being taught in sports, there is another perspective we are interested in - athletes, as they are those who should develop life skills.

Students claim that they have learned skills, such as goal setting, taking initiative, problem solving and time management through extracurricular activities (Cronin & Allen, 2015; Gould et al. 2007). Furthermore, Hansen, Larson and Dworkin (2003) stated that students participating in extracurricular activities (including sports), experienced that they have developed even more life skills such as identity exploration, reflection and teamwork, than they did in regular school classes. All above studies have claimed that they have found different life skills that are teach or developed in sports from perspectives of athletes, coaches and sport programs.

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### 2.3.2 LIFE SKILLS TRANSFER MODEL

We have already explored that sports could be one domain where life skills can be developed. To be more precise, life skills need to be transferred from occupation/training to another part of one's life to be considered valuable. Therefore, in this chapter we are describing how individuals may experience the process of skill transfer from sports to another domain.

Danish, Petitpas & Hale (1993) LDI (Life Development Intervention) was the first model which was drawn towards intentionally teaching life skills in context of sports and facilitate autonomous change for own future. In later stages, this model was used together with BNT (Basic Needs Theory) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to better explain skill transfer of each individual experience based on the environment, development competence and autonomy (Hodge, Danish & Martin, 2013). On the downside, the model provided positivist approach and did not consider the negativity or no life skill development through sport (Pierce, Gould & Camiré, 2017; Kendellen & Camiré, 2015). Therefore, we are going to explain transfer process with the model that we consider to be more holistic than two mentioned in this paragraph.

Multidimensional model of life skills transfer (Figure 1) presented by Pierce, Gould & Camiré, (2017) will be used to explain individuals possible transfer process from the field of sports. In this model, complexity of skill transfer is considered by including different types of influences and phases from development to implementation. There are various influences that shape an individual's development processes (Gould & Carson, 2008) and skill transfer outcomes, which include the individual learner and various learning contexts where sports is explained in detail.

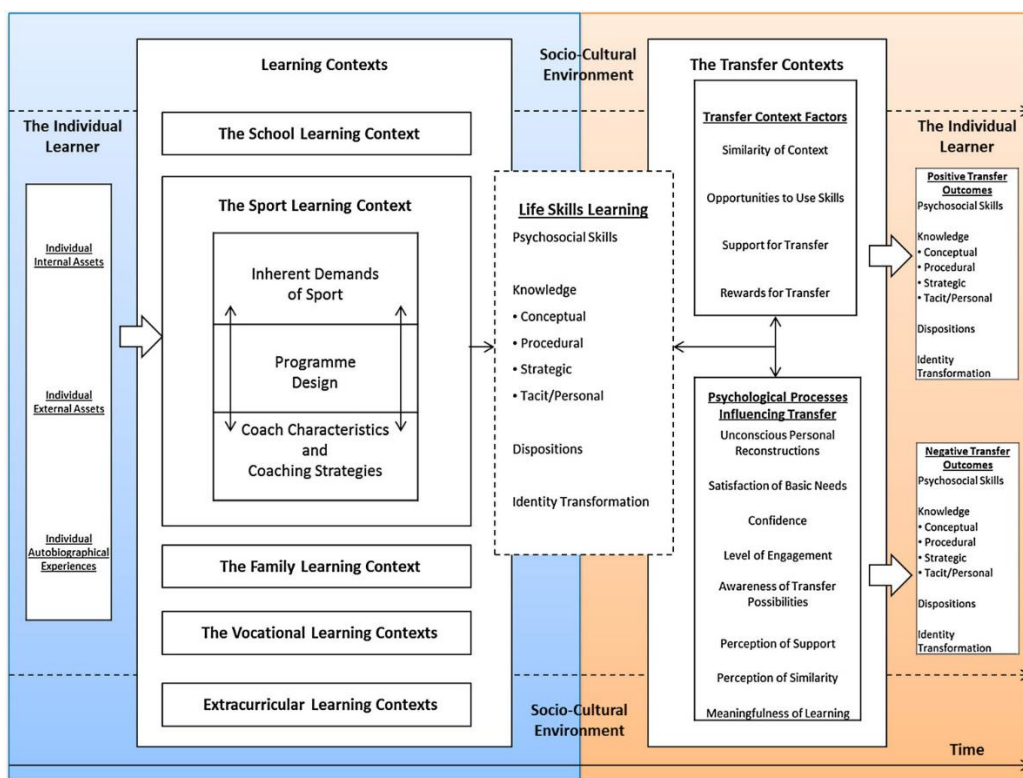


Figure 1. Life skill transfer model (Pierce, Gould & Camiré, 2017).

The sport learning context is only one of the contexts where individuals may learn life skills. In this context - coach characteristics, demands, sport types and its strategies can impact the transfer and development of life skills (Pierce, Gould & Camiré, 2017). Inherent demands consist of various social interactions, drive and competition inside and outside of the team, while a coach and other role models of sport can shape one's understanding and perception of particular situations and sport itself.

According to Pierce, Gould & Camiré (2017) model, coaches are considered to perform an important role in the life skill development process, because they can directly teach life skills or not do it at all, however it does not exclude the positive or negative learning of life skills in the sport (Lacroix, Camiré and Trudel, 2008). Many coaches try to create positive environment and social relationships within the training groups which has been identified as implicit influence towards developing life skills and transferring them to another domain (Turnnidge, Côté & Hancock, 2014). Coaches who are considered to be more successful than others and have done coaching in the highest divisions or national teams are considered to be more effective to approach and teach life skills and their philosophies to their players (Collins et al. 2009; Camiré, Trudel & Bernard, 2013). These coaches are considered to have an important role in our study, because our athletes have been competing at the top-level and can be strongly influenced by their philosophies.

In the end, it is up to an athlete, what he/she takes from the domain of sport and how a person perceives transferring these skills to the other fields of own life. Many studies have provided evidence of skill development through the sport, which include leadership and persistence (Camire and Trudel, 2013) goal setting and teamwork (Holt et al., 2008). Adding to that, researchers found that life skills such as leadership, teamwork and self-esteem are inevitably learned in sports and can be transferred to other fields (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014; Holt & Neely, 2011). These researches show that through tasks on and off the field, athletes can learn skills that could be important in other domains of their life. However, individuals learn life skills differently in sports and their development varies from each other. According to Larson, Walker & Pearce (2005) coaches and teachers are not the ones who can teach life skills if an athlete is not interested in learning them. Considering that one of the main goals of sports is focusing on teaching technical and tactical skills to win on the field (Turnnidge, Côté

& Hancock, 2014; Vierimaa et al. 2012), athletes need to be aware what skills they can develop and transfer from one domain to another.

Last but not least is the transfer context of the Pierce, Gould & Camiré (2017) model which could be of the most importance to our study. As stated by Schmidt and Lee (2005), to trigger the existing knowledge and skill transfer, performed tasks and climate need to be similar to the domain where the skill is learned (Burke & Hutchins, 2007). Another factor could be the time the individual has spent in the domain and can reflect to his own knowledge in both environments (Camiré, Trudel and Bernard, 2013). For example, doing the task given by a manager under a deadline could be seen similar to follow the tactics of the game which is instructed by the coach. As mentioned earlier, every individuals experience and skill transfer are considered unique and the model only provides illustration of the complex transfer process.

Regarding our study where participants have finished their sports careers a while ago, the study's focus is on macro-time, when events have passed, and perceptions crystallized in a longer time period (Lee & Martinek, 2013). Time is considered important in explaining skill transfer of an individual (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993) because experiences and life skills can be formed and identified differently in various times by an athlete.

Our main reflection from the model and its provided options of learning life skills is: life skills are considered learned and transferred when interaction between various, possibly similar, contexts take place. This may occur e.g. when demands of sports are influenced by individual characteristics and socio-cultural environment. In this situation the individual should understand reflect and analyse if any skills that have been developed in positive or negative way in sports, can help them in the present occupation to deal with a particular situation. Therefore, to transfer the skills to other domains, life skills should be internalized by the individual. According to Gould & Carson (2008), characteristics and skills mentioned as developed in sports include leadership, competitiveness, goal setting and decision making. Managers talk about significance of their experience in sports can help to look at their perceived influence on leadership in managerial role.

#### 2.4 SUMMARY

In our theoretical chapter, in order to answer our research questions, we focus on two aspects; leadership and life skill transfer. Our leadership approach is through similar perspective as Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) research, as we focus on how managers view leadership. Through interpretations of data we will interpret how former top-level athletes view leadership. There have been many theories that try to define leadership, but not one of them is primarily accepted. However, it is clear, that leadership has something to do with leaders influencing other people (followers). Leadership can be described as coaching, inspiring, communicating, managing, being humane, working with visions, motivations etc. With this study we do not define or shape the concept of “leadership”, instead we look at in what situations former top-level athletes now working as managers perceive themselves as leaders.

Athletes competing in sports, have learned skills which could help them in other domains. Sports can help them to produce positive or negative experiences that later could shape their own perceived view on things. Studies shows that many athletes, high-schools’ students and coaches perceive that skills learned in sports have helped them in other areas of life e.g. in professional occupation which can include management. These studies have not provided deep understanding how experience in sports is used in other domains. Therefore, we are doing qualitative study to explore what athletes perceive they transfer from their experience in sports to the field of management.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The principle aim of this study is to understand how former top-level athletes view leadership in their managerial role and how they perceive they transfer their experience in sport to their managerial role. In this chapter the research methodology will be discussed and explained, starting by looking at the methodological framework and research design leading to the analysis of empirical material and qualitative criteria.

#### 3.1 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to examine the leadership perspective of former top-level athletes we find it most suitable to use qualitative interpretive research method in our study. Qualitative approach is regarded suitable to explore and examine the subjective experience of individuals and their construction of the social world. Furthermore, it gives the researchers opportunity to observe how people create and interpret the social world they live in (Jones, 1983). The main objective of our study is to understand leadership through sense making, feelings and perceptions of respondents' reality (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). According to Prasad (2018) qualitative researchers are interested in individuals' ordinary lives in local situations. Researchers then try to understand "*social situations largely from the standpoint of the participants themselves*" (Prasad, 2018 p.23). In our study through in-depth interviews we examined and interpreted the viewpoint and perception of former top-level athletes who work in managerial positions.

We built our research on abductive approach, we started our research based on existing theories in the field of leadership and skills development in sports and their transferability to other domains. During our observation we reflected on our theories and adapted new ones based on empirical sources we have gathered. The abduction approach involved us to choose the best explanation from competing interpretations or explanation of the data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is related to the idea of a hermeneutic circle that was also suitable for us to follow when it came to interpretation of texts, as the hermeneutic circle involves an endless set of movement between text and context (Prasad, 2018). In our study it means a movement between empirical sources that we have gathered e.g. through interviews and existing theories and knowledge in the field of leadership and sports.



To answer our research questions, we use different studies on leadership to explore managers view on leadership. Leadership theories provide information regarding various skills, perspectives, actions and tasks that leaders face. As leadership is a very broad term, we are not focusing on one particular leadership perspective, style or discourse. Nevertheless, we introduce aspects of several theories that can be closely related to how managers view leadership such as transformational leadership, coaching leadership, trait-leadership, situational leadership, athlete leadership and followership. Furthermore, we will use similar studies on leadership perspective to give us insight and deeper understanding on the subject. Finally, because of the ambiguity between management and leadership we tried to address how and in what contexts or situations managers also act as leaders. Katz (1974) states that managers require competence, based on three basic skills i.e. technical, conceptual and human as addressed in the literature review. Our respondents all referred to the human skill when expressing their view on leadership, referring to the manager's ability to work in a group and unify the team that he or she leads. According to Katz it involves e.g. management skills to guide, influence, develop, motivate and encourage their subordinates and understand their perspectives. Mintzberg (1989) articulated ten managerial roles. One of those roles is leadership, where managers are expected to hire and coach employees, motivate their subordinates and get them to follow organizational goals. In those above situations our managers perceived they acted as leaders.

To explain how extensive experience in sports is perceived in managerial role we used theories of life skill development and transfer. We use studies of life skills development to show, how skills and abilities are developed in sports. These skills can enable individuals to succeed in different environments than sports, later in life. Researches of life skills development in sports, which we use to explain experience gained in sports, rely mostly on quantitative research methods. However, in recent years, more qualitative studies have been conducted, as mentioned in previous chapter. These studies, have identified many life skills that can be developed in sports and be transferred to other domains. With our secondary research question, we study what athletes perceive they transfer from sports to their managerial role. Therefore, we were interested to interview former top-level athletes who have been working as managers in business organizations. We are interested to explore specific segments in their live periods i.e. their past (sport career) and their present (managerial live) Through

interviews, we aimed to understand individual's perceptions, attitude and behaviour and how they might be influenced by actions or behaviour in a different time and place (Jones, 1983).

### 3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

In early stages when we were preparing our study, we set up some guidelines for suitable candidates for our research. For our interviews we were interested in finding individuals of both genders that had been competing at the top-level in sports and after their retirement from sports made a job career as managers in the field of business. We also wanted to include persons that did compete in different sports (e.g. football, basketball, bandy, handball, athletics, swimming or triathlon).

Based on these guidelines we started to look for and contact individuals that we considered would fulfil our criteria. We sent emails and made phone calls to sports clubs, sport federations, business organizations and requested them about suitable candidates for our research. We also made direct contact to potential participants through email, phone calls and social media. Some of the participants were referred by our respondents at the time of the interviews. Our searching efforts resulted in 10 potential candidates that replied our request and were willing to participate in our research.

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#### 3.2.1 PARTICIPANTS

All of our participants have similar backgrounds i.e. they have university degree, are all European, come from welfare states, and having at least 3 years' experience in management. Our respondents did not only serve a playing role in their team as many of them were nominated captains. Our respondents names have been changed to guarantee anonymity.

**Person A** was as a professional football player and played for one of the biggest clubs in Europe. He won the national championship and national cup number of times and one European Cup (today Championship League). Furthermore, he won the European Championship with his national team. Alongside his playing career, he studied physical education. He got offered a management position at a retail company when he retired from his professional athlete career.

**Person B** played professional handball at the highest level in his home country and played with U-21 national team. He was a captain in the teams he played for and inspired his teammates with hard work and efficiency. He finished Bachelor degree in Economics alongside his playing career and he also started his working career while still playing. After his retirement from sports he has worked as a human resource manager and manager in both small and big organizations. For the past years, he has run his own management consultancy firm.

**Person C** played professional football in his home country and abroad, where he became national champion several times. He played games in the Championship league and was a part of his national team squad, both at World Cup and Euro Cup. His career ended prematurely because of injuries but alongside his playing career he studied finance and accounting at university. Soon after his retirement, he got a job at a multinational organization where he has served in different managerial positions through the years.

**Person D** played bandy in his home country and for his national team. During his career, he became national champion several times and was chosen player of the year in his sport. He was a professional player but he finished university education in business and started his working career during his athlete career. He worked for a long time in a high-tech engineering company, when he was offered at a multinational organization. Within that organization he has served in different management positions.

**Person E** was a professional in triathlon and one of the best competitors in the world during his career. He competed individually and for his national team. He became national, European and World Champion while also winning a handful of other competitions. Before he became a professional athlete he finished studies in the field of banking. He decided to end his athlete career because of injuries and since then he has been working independently and as a manager a financial service company.

**Person F** was a professional athlete in pole vault. He competed in all major tournaments in athletics such as the World championship and the European Championship. Furthermore, he competed once at the Olympics and his personal best in pole vault is still a national record. Through the sport, he received a scholarship to study at university in USA and alongside his sport career he finished MBA in Business. He started his

business career while studying and for recent years he has been a market manager in a technology company.

**Person G** played professional football from the age of 20 in four different countries. He did manage to win on national championship with one of his teams and he played several games for his national team. He studied business at university while he was still playing but after his retirement he started to work in the tourist industry. For a while he has been working as a hotel executive manager.

**Person H** played professional football in her home country. She was signed by one the biggest clubs in her country where she became the team captain. She became national champion several times and won the national cup once. She played regularly for the national team that competed in the World cup, Euro cup and Olympics. She finished her university education in the field of real estate and she did start her managerial career as a recruitment manager. Today she is a regional manager in at one of the biggest real estate agency in her country.

**Person I** played handball at high level where he was a captain in his team. He retired from the sport when he started in university where he studied business administration. Soon after graduation he got a job in a bank where he has been working for almost three decades. There he has served different positions, including management.

**Person J** played football until he was 35 years old. He played for several teams at high level where he was regularly nominated to be a captain. Soon after his graduation from university where studied business he started to focus more on his working career. For the past 20 years, he has been working a multinational high-tech organization in different management positions.

In this study, we do not differentiate between team sports and individual sports as those who competed in individual sports did compete or train to large extent in teams during their career e.g. with their national team or track teams.

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### 3.2.2 INTERVIEWS

We did perform ten interviews, nine men and one woman mentioned above. All participants identified themselves as a manager/business leader and had been involved in the sports to some extent. Participants involvement in sports had been at the

significant level and all of them had competed in sports at the top-level (e.g. in one of the highest national leagues in their sport or at international level).

Most of the interviews took place at interviewee workplace or at other place that was convenient of the interviewee. Several interviews were performed via telephone or Messenger as some of our interviewees were located outside of Sweden. Even though telephone interviews are generally not considered better option than face-to-face interviews, they do have some advantages over the latter. They are less time-consuming as interviewers do not have to spend time, travelling between respondents. It also gives interviewers opportunity to interview individuals that are geographically distributed e.g. in other countries (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

By interviewing former top-level athletes, who have been working as business managers, we try to understand their leadership perspective and what they have taken with them from their experience in sports to their managerial role in business. In order to capture their knowledge and experience, we decided to conduct semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interview has open-ended questions that give participants significant control over the direction of the interview and opportunity to tell their own stories (Prasad, 2018). However, to get the most out of the interview, it is recommended to structure an interview guide that cover issues or topics that researches wish to cover (Thomas, 2013). Our interview guide, focused mainly on three time periods in the interviewees life i.e. the managerial life, the transition and the professional sports career and in each section, we asked interviewees several open-ended questions. Firstly, we asked interviewees to give us overview of their work career where we e.g. asked interviewees about their managerial roles and their view on leadership. Secondly, we asked them about the transition process from the sport to the business managerial life e.g. how they had prepared the transition and how they emotionally experienced it. Finally, we focused on their sport career, where we asked the managers to reflect on what they have perceived they had gained most from their sports career that have been useful for them in their managerial role. All questions in each section, were mainly used as guidelines as we did ask follow up questions and managers were allowed to express their view quite freely. Furthermore, during the interviews we did add some additional questions if we thought they were relevant to our subject.

All interviews were conducted in English which is neither researchers nor the interviewee's native language. The interviews took 40-70 minutes and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the beginning of each interview the participants expressed a positive attitude towards the research and at the end of the interviews they were interested to hear our findings

As stated earlier, our interviews with former top-level athletes were based on open-ended questions and discussion was planned to involve two-time periods of individuals life. From leadership perspective we asked about their view on leadership, how they perform leadership and what they think characterize a good manager/leader. Through the questions we tried to understand what they have transferred from sports to management and what type of similarities and differences they noticed as being a manager and being in sports. Being reflective and following this open-structure interviews created a flow starting with questions about managerial role and ending on questions and discussion from their sport career. However, periodically we needed to go back and forth between different time periods to get clarifications, examples and stories regarding specific answers.

### 3.3 ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

After each interview and transcription, we organized and codified the gathered data. According to Patterson and Williams (2002) it is ideal to analyse each interview immediately after it has been performed, to recognize insights that could help improve the structure of the next interview. Therefore, our interview guide did take some minor changes between the interviews as new questions were added or existing questions were rephrased.

Based on gathered data, research questions and theoretical framework, we systematically analysed the transcripts, grouped together comments on similar themes and sub-themes that were most relevant. When looking for themes we did follow Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggestions, how to identify themes in written text e.g. by searching for repetitions and analogies. The themes we looked for were related to our research question, including finding respondent's leadership perspective and similarities between sport and management. We identified several themes based on their leadership perspective i.e. vision and goal setting, team-building, coaching, environment, personal attribution, motivation and role model. The themes will be reflected in our findings

and discussion chapters. While presenting our findings, we use quotes from our interviewees, but all names of participants has been changed to guarantee the anonymity of our participants.

In doing data analysis we are aware of source critique and complexity of interpreting findings in correct and neutral way (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). The balance is necessary between what is said in interview and how these texts can be interpreted regarding respondents' experience and understanding of unclear phenomena such as leadership. Authors state that message and stories can be co-constructing at the time and interventions of the interviewers, therefore not receiving clear, unaffected information.

#### 3.4 QUALITATIVE CRITERIA

We can, admittedly pinpoint few limitations to our research. Firstly, there is a certain risk that our participants give their view on leadership through the sports lens, because of the selection process of our participants and when they were introduced our topic before the interview. To minimize that risk, we started our interviews with general questions about their professional work career and their view on leadership. Later in the interview we focused more on the sport dimension.

Secondly, the timeframe for the research was short and our target group was very narrowly defined. It was a time-consuming process to find individuals who fitted into our target group as we were looking for retired top-level athletes who had been in managerial role in business. We found that many retired athletes continued to work within the sport industry e.g. as coaches while others were working in other industries.

Thirdly, in social sciences, more than one type of evidence is often used, called triangulation (Thomas, 2013). In our research we only build our research method on interviews with former athletes who have worked as managers in business organization. Therefore, there is lack of triangulation as we do not interview any subordinates, neither we use other different research methods (observation, quantitative study) to test our results. This means, the outcome of the research is relied solely on participants' perceptions and if same methodology would be used on different subjects or social groups, the results would most likely be different. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that in social researches conclusive evidence of something will never be accomplished (Thomas, 2013).

Fourthly, even though telephone interviews offer certain advantages they do suffer limitations compared to face-to-face interviews. Telephone interviewers do not have the opportunity to observe how respondents react to questions, in terms of body language or how they attempt to clarify the meaning of the question (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In our case, the telephone interviews did also limit visual aids e.g. in cases where the interviewee wanted to explain the organizational structure within the organization they were working at.



## 4. FINDINGS

In this chapter, our main findings from our interviews are demonstrated. Our findings are introduced according to the themes described in the methodology chapter, where we focused on leadership perspective and perceived experience from sports that may be considered transferred through life skills as explained in the theoretical chapter. While analysing the interviews, we noticed variety of common understandings of leadership among our respondents but also some differences. While some focus on high dreams and aspirations others find it manipulative and try to promote expectations that are *down to earth*. Nevertheless, in their examples and views on leadership they mentioned similar skills and examples of perceived skills transferred from sports. Our analysis suggests several themes related to leadership perspective i.e. vision and goal setting, team-building, coaching, environment, personal attribution, motivation and role model. Some of the themes include various skills that the respondents perceive transferred from sports.

### 4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF GOAL SETTING AND VISION

Vision and goals are the dominant view in our interviews to express leadership. Most managers promoted the importance of creating positive working environment and make sure that all team members (subordinates) were heading in the same direction. They considered that, one of their main responsibilities as managers and leaders is to make a plan and inspire their employees to follow its organizations goals and vision. One respondent claimed leadership was first and foremost about setting goals:

*“First of all, setting goals, making clear what the vision what the direction is and motivating people to it and holding them accountable.”* - Person F

In this case, the manager mentions another popular leadership theme, motivation, that was often mentioned in our interviews in relation to vision and goal setting. When the managers were asked how they would motivate their subordinates to achieve goals, one respondent replied:

*“I would sit down with my employee and work with goals and vision, that we share the same vision and everyone are a part of that vision.”* - Person J

Other managers, who considered leadership to involve goal setting also mentioned other leadership themes as an important part of the goal setting:

*“I believe you need a plan to reach your goals and I think it values how to want to cope, how you treat each other. The most important thing for me and for every manager is communication. Because your opinion, your meaning, your goals, it is so important to make them clear to everybody. You need to make it clear for employees how important it is to reach the goals.” - Person A*

Leadership, also includes communication to inspire and convince members of the organization to follow common goals and making plans to achieve goals. Another respondent emphasized communication as an important factor to establish common understanding of goals:

*“I think one important factor is how we communicate because we are very dependent on every individual on the side to understand what is our goal, therefore it is important for everyone to know what is our goal and how are we going to achieve it.” - Person D*

In their answers, managers regularly pointed back to their athlete career. For many, goal setting had an important role during their athlete career. They explained how they used it for personal development e.g. to earn a spot in the starting line-up, get called up to the national team or become a world champion. The managers, also gave examples how they used goal setting in teams. In that context, one manager explained how he worked closely with his teammates and coaches, when they decided what should be the target for the European Cup tournament. One manager emphasized the importance of using goals, both in business and sports in the same context:

*“You are having your own goals for yourself. So, goals are very important but you need a tactic to reach your goals. You know what to do, it is all about discipline, your attitude has to be like a winner. Winner for me means to do everything you can to get the best out of yourself, to get best out of the team. The main thing is, to reach the best at the moment, no matter if you are playing a sport game or working at a shop selling or doing the logistics.” - Person A*

In other case, one manager stated how he used goals and targets to help to improve his own performance and reach top-level as an athlete as a manager:

*“You always want to rise to the top. I think that's a thing I have got from sports. You set goals and targets. I've always wanted to be closer to the top than the bottom so it was.” - Person F*

When managers were asked what skills they had developed in sports and how it affected them as managers, goals setting was mentioned a number of times:

*“Acting with my team and discuss what should be the targets for the team and the company, so basically it is target setting and make sure that you have realistic targets, that they are achievable and how you monitor them. This is something what we did a lot in the sport before the season started. We always talked about our aim for this year, same in the company, what is the next year's goal in the company and how do we achieve that goal? If you translate that into the sport team you can talk about what you have to do to achieve this.” - Person D*

In this case, manager explains how he used goal setting with his teammates in sports and how he perceived that experience benefitted him in a different domain later in life.

Athletes, like many organizations and individuals, use goals to help them to improve their performance. In sports one could set a target or a “benchmark” on what he or she is aiming for upcoming season e.g. score 20 goals, set a personal best or win a title. It is part of a development process and challenging oneself. In business the concept is similar, as employees need to reach organizational goals and be successful. Goal setting is a very common activity in business, but respondents express it with high importance to have success in management and leadership. Through their examples from sport they compare goal setting in business to sports and being the best in the domain. They relate to sport as effective goal setting helped them to be successful in that field. Now working as managers they are replicating goal setting since it can result in similar outcomes. Athletes, set goals for different purposes e.g. before competitions and personal improvements. However, one cannot be successful and achieve top-level depending entirely on vision and setting goals. Therefore, understanding strategies of different kind to goals is important.

#### 4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING A TEAM

Many managers expressed the importance for leaders to recruit and have the right people around them. In order to achieve organizational goals and objectives, managers

frequently talked about the importance of having employees that would *fit-in* their teams. Often, when managers were talking about their subordinates or their unit they referred to them as their team member or their team, using “we” form. The managers realized their success was not only depended on themselves, but also on their employees’ skills and abilities:

*“In team sports you are relying on your teammates and the same goes for the working environment. I am totally depended on different people as a manager, because if they do not understand what to do and how to do it, how can I get results? That is kind of my mind set and if you compare it and you think about it then it is very similar. It just a different objective and different way of execute. That is why it is so important to hire the right persons in the right positions, it is the same in sport teams if you are hiring for a defender you are not hiring a goalie. The team-building process is very similar.” - Person D*

Here, Person D emphasizes how important it is to select the right persons in their team building process. Person B shared this view with Person D and emphasized employees’ personality which could be considered more important than certain skills or working experience:

*“The most important thing is to recruit the right persons. Sometimes it is hard to develop specific behaviour, you can’t do it, but the key is to recruit people with the right attitude. Skills and capability can be easier to develop and train but if you do not have the right attitude, that is very hard to change within the team. If you have the ability and willingness to learn then it is much easier to shape that kind of employee or a player. I have experienced it many time in my sport life where the attitude is much more important, the willingness to train every day, instead of having the talent of being the biggest and shooting the hardest and so on.” - Person B*

In this case, the manager refers to his playing career regarding team building process but most managers who participated in team sports, felt they had developed skills in teamwork and team building through their participation in sports. One manager explained how he had to make compromises with his co-workers and follow their decisions, even though he had different opinions. The manager referred to his athlete career when he described this experience:

*“It is totally fine to say I do not agree, but if the majority of the members says; this is the way we will do it... you need to follow. Then you cannot go to your functions and do something opposite. We can see that in sports also, if you have agreed to play in a certain way and all of the sudden someone does not do that everything falls apart.” -*

Person G

Another manager perceived that he had learned skills to work in a team and respect people for who they are through his sport participation.

*“I learned how to be a part of and work in a team, you could see that some of the people were good, some were bad but you try to see them from the positive side. You respect how people are and you respect that they are trying to do their best. And what I learned from football is that there are very different people in each squad. You need to learn to take all the best from people. That is something you do in football as everybody play role in the team. I think that is something that I took in” -* Person J

Team sport is a domain where athletes work with different persons from one season to another or even between games. New players or coaches join the team and others leave. It puts demands on players to work with individuals, try to adapt to their skills and understand others perspective. The managers, recognized that their teammates were a diverse group of people with different personalities and different skill sets that they needed to respect and work with. Similarly, in individual sports, athletes train in the groups with different persons and hold the same opinion regarding the subject.

#### 4.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING THE ROLE OF A COACH

In sports, athletes look at their coaches as leaders and superiors, they listen to them and learn from them. During their careers, the managers did have some great coaches and sometimes the complete opposite. Working now as managers, many of our respondents experienced themselves in a coaching role, someone who can teach, develop and improve the ability of others. In our interviews, leadership was frequently related to coaching and personal development.

*“Leadership for me is take care off and develop the staff. You as a leader must be responsive and have the courage to change an organization so that individuals can develop in their areas.” -* Person H

When respondents were asked to describe themselves as managers and the methods they use, they emphasized how they encourage employee's personal development. One respondent based on his tasks and responsibilities at work, claimed that he looked at himself more as a coach than a manager. He explained that he always needs to be available when his subordinates need support and make sure that they are comfortable in their development plan:

*“For me that has been the development to move away from the operational part to more meetings, supporting people, meet people, talk to people, listen to people and represent the company and create network, which is an external role as well, but again it very similar to coach i.e. coaching, supporting, because people come to me when they have problems and they really do not know how to manage things, so there is a lot of coaching involved in guiding them. For me, as I have always been in different teams in my sport career, that is the natural way of doing things, but I also realize when I run into people that do not have that experience in the past, they do not know what it is all about, they are really more on individual, they think more on individual level.” - Person D*

In this case, the manager claims that he can notice a difference among his co-workers in how they approach their tasks depending on if they have experience from team sports or not. One manager, stressed that his main responsibility as a manager was to give his subordinates the right tools to develop their skills. Furthermore, they expressed how they enjoyed seeing their employees develop in their jobs:

*“As manager, I must make sure that everybody is better in what they are doing, that they are growing in their roles. As in the handball. You should not be afraid of having players that are that good that they are aiming to go out for a professional career outside of their country. Because that is something that could attract other players to the team. As in the professional environment, one should not be afraid of developing employees in a way that they become so good that they move on. So, creating better talents and develop talents is a crucial part of being a leader.” - Person B*

Here again, a manager explicitly refers to their athlete career when they speak about leadership theme. The pleasure to see their employees grow and develop was also expressed by one manager:

*“I want to evoke that people to develop. I think that also comes from sports that you love to see people to take the next step in their careers. It is only a job it is not the full life. To get people motivated and keep on learning. If they keep learning, then you are more likely to get results.” - Person J*

Both Person B and Person J do not consider it negative for their organization that employees move on when they become highly skilled. These two, among other managers, look at this transfer more as an opportunity, as it might attract other skilled individuals to their organization:

*“If you develop talents, what is going to happen is other talents will come to you, they want to work with you.” - Person C*

Leadership of respondents might be influenced by their experience in sports. During their athlete careers, their main goal was to develop their skills and get to the peak level. The aim was always to compete at a higher level and to move from one team to another was considered as a part of that process. Under such circumstances, a win-win situation exists. The player gets the opportunity to challenge his/her skills at a new club and former coaches receive positive reputation for their player development.

When managers were asked how they would train or improve skills of their employees, they mentioned being supportive, guiding, encouraging, they would listen to their subordinates' needs and have honest one on one conversations with them. Some managers organized training courses or hired specialists outside the company to help their employees to improve their competence:

*“When I took my job, I was not so impressed by all management meetings, because I think it was too many speakers, too busy slides, really difficult to take in. So we have been working with consultants to teach how to structure and present the material and train them how we talk, how do you walk, how do you look and how do you stand in front of audience. Because not everyone is confident with that. I can see a lot of improvement.” - Person G*

In sports there is always a coach who instructs the athletes, how to execute and provide the athletes with directions in different situations. It can be seen as followership, where an athlete is guided through exercises and trainings. In management, they perceive coaching as their role to develop others, for the benefit of the organizations, themselves

and the employees. It can be seen as an objective for people coming from sports background, at least within our respondents, to develop others in their occupations.

#### 4.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING AN ATTRACTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

In business and sports, it is important to create the right working environment for employees, as it can influence the mood, productivity and workplace in a positive or negative manner. In sports it is required that coaches encourage athletes to try new things and perform without worrying about the repercussion of making mistakes. The fear of doing mistakes can cause stress or anxiety, that can have negative effect on an athlete's performance and his/her team. Most respondents consider leadership involves creating a working environment that allowed themselves and others to do mistakes. They claimed, they would look at mistakes as an important part of learning process:

*"...part of it is just keeping the morale up and help people understand that it takes several failures before you get the success and you stick with them through those failures. There is a lot of coaching, more from anything I have learned from the coaches that I had. How to get people motivated and how to get people through the hard days. I use that a lot." - Person F*

One manager presumed, he would earn respect from his subordinates by admitting mistakes and encourage them to propose different solutions:

*"When you see that things are not working, you need to back off and try again in a different way. So as a leader you have to be humble, admit this did not work, ask why did it not work, can I try something different? You also have to say to the team, this was my idea, it did not work. What do you think we should do? I think then you earn respect." - Person I*

Both respondents feel the need to have *try again* attitude, where everyone is encouraged to try, but not always succeed. In business, managers have objectives which they need to meet and if a person is trying and not succeeding constantly, he/she may get fired. Therefore, we need to be aware of the circumstances and grandiosity of tasks they are allowed to fail. Several managers also expressed the importance for leaders to create a working environment where employees can develop and have autonomy to make their own decisions:



*“As a manager you need to be a leader. You could be a manager that is a part of the team but still you need to be the one who takes the final decision. Of course you can create a climate where the majority of the team takes all the decisions but to start with, you need to find a way of understanding the capability of the team. You have to understand that some part of the team will be able to take decisions by themselves. A very effective handball team, the best teams are the ones that really take the decisions on the court. Don’t have a coach that point out all the solutions. It is a creative climate where they can actually take the decisions in the final seconds of the game. So the leadership must create or develop employees that are capable to take an important decision. The leadership is then about to create an environment where employees can take their own decisions.”*

- Person B

In this case, Person B refers to his athlete career to take an example about the importance to creating an environment that encourages employees to make their own decisions, be spontaneous and creative, if it can lead to better results.

Being part of a *closely knitted group* of diverse people where cooperation is required, a certain environment in workplace is created.

*“Everything is shiny and decent but when the shit hits the fan that is when you protect your employees and you have to continue giving your team the respect and also the chance and the environment to make the mistake.”* - Person C

In this case, the manager emphasizes how important it is that managers stand by their employees through tough times and mistakes are considered part of work process. Trusting others and delegating tasks comes from the sports. In team sport every player knows his role and position on field and based on that performs as good as he can. Managers, through task delegation and trust shows interest of working similarly as in the team sport domain. But by doing that they could appear more as managers but not leaders, however they still see themselves as leaders through these actions:

*“Leadership for me, is to delegate and to trust people. I do not believe in this strict hierarchy approach, where you have one person who decides everything. I have always since I started tried to put a lot responsibility on the people I work with, to give them freedom and to be responsible for their areas, but with freedom*

*comes also trust so you need to act according to it and then more to have regular catch up meetings, maybe weekly where you talk about things that are important.”*

- Person D

In the comment above, Person D thinks of leadership in a way that it involves management, autonomy and showing empathy, but all these aspects reduce the role of leadership. However, trust between leaders and followers is necessary as it could lead to better performance and positive results. Through this, manager's express leadership with management tasks, therefore being ambiguous about differences between leadership and management.

Other managers stated that in a recruitment process it is important to learn what their employees and candidates stand for. The process of learning and studying employees can take time, but the results include improved trust and while the manager obtains knowledge of the individuals goals and motivation:

*“Trial and error. So it is learning about different co-workers. What drives them and what motivates them. Trying different tactics to make a difference.”*

- Person F

Through speaking, by being a psychologist and a friend of employees managers are earning trust and respect. By infrequently checking up on employees regarding their performance and goal expectations managers create an environment while still showing their superior role. One manager states supervision an important factor in his leadership:

*“The most common way is setting goals, and have some key performance indicators and checking-in to see, in frequent basis, not just once or twice a year, and on frequent basis having a dialogue.”*

- Person F

Overall, most of our respondents reflected back to their sport careers when expressing their thoughts regarding work environment. They talk about environment as important factor of their leadership. They consider productive environment where one can be trusted, works in a group, have a place to make mistakes and leadership is shared among team members.

#### 4.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL ATTRIBUTE

Being humane, showing trust, empathy and other characteristics that can impact emotions and feelings of other was frequently mentioned as leadership by managers. Experience from sports, where athletes need to deal with wins and losses, injuries, staff and players turnover in the team can have an impact on how a person thinks, communicates and approach others. With the help of detailed examples from sports we can identify the leadership perspective of our managers who are open-minded, reflexive and show a lot of empathy. Their perception of leadership is team based and they practice shared leadership, as they are familiarized to lose and win together:

*“Going back to football, if you are winning 3-0 and you let in a goal, then you can say, that was me, I made the mistake and everybody is calibrating anyway. But if you lose at the last peak and your friend makes mistake and you know that he is gonna be worse off because of that mistake. And when you tell him and everybody else, “Hey! part of that mistake was actually me, I apologize, we win together and we lose together. That is when you show you are a leader and you care about your team and your teammates. This is actually where I can refer back to my football career, that this is very much the same.” - Person C*

Several respondents referred to leadership when they spoke about the importance for managers to adapt to changing situations in their working environment.

*“A leader must have different a leadership in different situation and a different leadership for different individuals with different skill level, absolutely. And then there is some kind of base behaviour our general behaviour you need to treat everybody equal, but then in some situations you need to be more directive and in another situation you can bring up and be more flexible and know that if you have somebody more experienced you can let them perform more independent than someone else” - Person B*

In this case, Person B describes a leader as situational leader, that is demands the leaders ability to adapt and change behaviour depending on the situation. Person B maintained his talk about situational leadership by giving following example:

*“When we talk about situational leadership, you have to understand that some parts of the team will be able to take decisions by themselves. A very effective*

*handball team, the best teams are the one that really take the decisions on the court. You do not need to have a coach that point out all the solutions. It is a creative climate where they can actually take the decisions in the final seconds in the game” - Person B*

Being reflexive to situations in modern organizations can go a long way, as there is often need for fast decision making within organizations. Organizations might need to change or adapt quickly due to changes in their external environment. Similar circumstances come up occasionally in sports and they were highlighted by our respondents. One manager who was explaining how he had to adapt to fast changes in the high-tech environment referred to his sport experience how he acted in changing circumstances:

*“If you are from the sport world, in the team environment then you are used to that things can change quickly and you need to adapt, like in the football, suddenly you are playing with 10 people on the field.” - Person J*

The enjoyment of success or achieving goals, has driven and motivated athletes. The importance of celebrating success was frequently related to be a good leadership. One respondent who worked as a manager in the financial sector during the financial crisis reflected on the importance of celebrating when his employees achieved certain goals or milestones:

*“When I was the manager we had 10-15 minutes, where the one who was successful told the story to others about what he or she had accomplished, to inspire the other ones.” - Person E*

Another manager talks in the same veins when asked about how he perceived a good leader:

*“A good leader has to celebrate when you achieve your milestones or goals as a team, as a workplace. That could be a cake, a party, a bottle of wine to everyone. Every year we have a salary increase but that is different, that is individual. Sometime you have to focus on us as a group. We have achieved our goals, let's do something fun or drink something good or eat something nice. Because if you forget that, people will not be as keen to work hard to achieve the next extra mile”  
- Person I*

In this case, the celebration events has several meanings. It is a part of creating positive team spirit, team unity and even a motivation for employees to work harder.

Hard work and preparation were expressed in relation to leadership and being a good leader. The ability to work hard and being prepared for competitions in sports or for meetings with clients in business can be a crucial factor being to be successful in any field. Being involved in sports can give you the understanding of hard work in practice and preparing to be at your best when is most necessary. However, it is hard to connect *dots* if this skill is really learned in sports. Because if we look at successful people and their mindset in all sectors, they would say that the most work is being done behind closed doors, which is the same case here (from sports):

*“I have also been forced into a lot of presentations which is totally out of my comfort zone, normally. I do not like it at all (laugh). I do not think that I am specifically good at it. But I am used to that approach when it comes to consultant as it is same and in sports if you do not practice you do not perform, that is the reality.”* - Person D

In this case, Person D mentions the importance to work and perform under in unpleasant conditions in sport and in business, but that could be relevant to most of the people who have been gained success in their careers. It can be common between variety of managers, because to get to the top you need to work hard and always be prepared. Level of professionalism is expressed very good by Person F:

*“When you get to Olympic level, world championship level. You know everybody else there have been working hard and you really you know the last five or six years of my career I was competing against all professional people who were really dedicated to their sport.”* - Person F

If athletes have achieved relatively high level in sports, they think they have an understanding of what it takes to be successful in their discipline and how well they need to prepare to be at the top-level in any domain. When working as managers they use their experience from sports and try to achieve top-level, using the same approach that helped them in sports. However, it is necessity to have the passion and willingness to succeed in other domains to be good at it:

*“...get the customer in and do what it takes to get him in. I know I have to put a lot of amount of work before I can cash in. I could not just attend events and just jump in the order and hope for the best.”* Person E and the importance of preparation was followed by: *“I must know about the company [customer], I check LinkedIn and look at the company homepage. I have a checklist like a pilot. If i do not do the check list I might skip two or three parts that could be the difference between winning or losing, because I was less prepared than the other one.”* - Person E

In the interviews, respondents commonly related hard work and preparation to sport. The reason might be that sport was the prime domain where they trained and practiced the most and they realized what it needed to reach the top-level.

*“[About selling] I have to train hard also at work. Have a good preparation before a meeting and that is like training hard, be more prepared than my competitors in the field. It is like being a pro athlete.”* - Person E

All of our respondents had to have some talent to be at the top-level, but the summary of hard work in general context have been put by Person C:

*“In the end of the day, the one who practises the hardest, the chances of you being successful will increase”* - followed by: *“There are two ways of becoming the best. One is that you are the greatest talent on earth or you practise harder than anyone else. These are the two options and then there are combinations between them. The way I look at this and I was never the biggest talent so I had to practice harder than everyone else”*

According to research that are mentioned in literature review, hard work is a skill which is learned in conditions where one needs to compete and have different challenges on the road to the top. Domain of sport can be an influencer and provide conditions who stimulate hard work and preparation, because competition is fierce and at the end of the day there is only one winner on the pitch. In business the domain is similar. One needs to prepare to become successful. However, there be more can one winner, for example, many managers in one company. Based on our findings we can assume that managers with a strong background in sport have developed hard-working attitude and understand the importance of preparation in the domain of business.

Sport is a domain where athletes are expected to perform in any conditions and to do that. They need to prepare and work hard towards competition day in and day out. However, to become successful top-level athlete need to have mental toughness which helps them to thrive and perform under the pressure. Such skill can be very helpful in management position e.g. in stressful work environment or in situations where tough decisions need to be made.

*“First of all I think it everything to do with attitude. The main thing is that as an athlete you are used to work under pressure first of all.” - Person A*

Our respondents' claims, they know how to deal with stressful environment and act under pressure, as they are used to perform under such circumstances (based on their experience in sports). In team sports, teammates can cover each other's bad performances, and help their teammates to get back on the right track. In the same time in team sports, one can be under much pressure in crucial moments when everybody is counting on one penalty shot or saved goal. In this regard, individual sports perhaps are more demanding, as the athlete must count only on him/herself in all times. Athletes in all sports expose their ability of working under pressure which can reflect on their leadership in similar stressful situations. The ability to work under pressure can be seen necessary to be successful in business and arguably top-level athletes are those who can provide it.

*“I try to do my best every time and under pressure I am very good, I do not know how to explain but I know it. I know deep down I can succeed if it is important for me. Sometimes I have to train hard, also at work. For example, I have a good preparation before a meeting and that is like training hard, be more prepared than my competitors that is in the field. It is like being a pro athlete.” - Person E*

Our respondents understanding of leadership vary from person to person, but there are similar strategies on how they practice leadership. Practices involve developing others through coaching, being involved in team building process by finding individuals that fit-in their team and create a working environment that emphasize shared leadership and autonomy. They express their leadership through examples from their experience in sports. They practice leadership and management with methods which helped them to achieve top-level in the sport.

#### 4.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION AND INSPIRATION

To follow strategies and achieve goals, leaders need to motivate and encourage their employees. Inspiring and being a role model are themes that often were related to leadership by our respondents. Being inspirational and having influence on others is an important factor for almost every leader as it can improve commitment and increase efficiency of subordinates. Most managers considered leadership as being a motivator and a source of inspiration, in a way of doing rather than speaking:

*“I would say leadership it is the same as being captain in the sports team. By trying to show that you like what you are doing and try to influence by performing at the high level. Avoid telling people what they should do, try to inspire, show them what I think, what I am doing and that I like what I am doing and that is something people see.” - Person B*

To become successful in their sports, the managers had to work hard and make many sacrifices. That involved hard training sessions in difficult situations such as snow storm during the winter time. Setting example to others and doing things are not easy or fun can provide greater purpose for overall success. That is the way how athletes think of inspiring - through work and quality of tasks:

*“Leading by example, try to do my best and try to be honest in what you are doing. Don't say that you love things that you don't and try to be your best and also avoid things that you are not good at. That is easier to say, sometimes you need to do things that you don't like” - Person B*

In some ways inspiring is similar to sports and being a coach. In sport, athletes are focused on personal development which is achieved in cooperation with coaches and other athletes training side by side. Aspects that athletes in managerial roles feel important to carry over are: being a coach and help others to develop, transform and be involved in the system of the company. Adding to that, they provide subordinates with a purpose by being listener, friend and advisor in various situations. They try to get to the core of problems and even act as psychologists and ask subordinates to think and make decisions on their own:

*“I hope I am able to inspire people, but even more and more by asking people and questioning them, instead of telling them what to do. I don't believe in that,*



*just try to find out who somebody is and what he likes and what his ambitions are. What he really wants to achieve, the goals he wants to achieve in life, not just as a person but also maybe as an employee.” - Person A*

Respondents of this study express motivation and inspiration in different ways and one of them is being devoted to what one does, the organization and people one works with. Loyalty can increase trust, shape identity and bring importance of every piece of the organization and situation to achieve common goals. One of the managers' expressed the importance of being enthusiastic and loyal to motivate and inspire others:

*“I think real leaders inspire people, that means that they are very enthusiastic about the things they are doing. Feeling that they are important to reach the goals. Feeling that they are part of the company or the club. It is about loyalty and that is important. But inspiring leader must bring that energy to people” - Person A*

Overall inspiration and motivation by the managers takes various forms and situations. Commonly used form is inspiring by doing and working together with subordinates to achieve the goal. Even though managers mostly described themselves as people oriented, they inspire and motivate using task oriented actions and not through giving motivational speeches. Nevertheless, when we spoke about motivation with Person C, we could feel passion and enthusiasm in his voice and at one moment we felt like we were listening to motivational speech from a team captain or a coach:

*“...if you want to be good at something, then you have to be passionate about it. If you are not passionate about it then it is hard to be really good. That is at least my philosophy. You have to do what you have passion for. You are going to enjoy it and more so you are setting yourself up for more success. It is about the same being a good manager, if I do not enjoy what I am doing, how can I be an inspirational leader to others, how can I be a multiplier.” - Person C*

After these motivational words authors got caught for few seconds, thinking about their next steps in their career and considering where their passion lies.

All respondents addressed that they had enjoyed their professional career and agreed it was a good life period. All of them were in good shape, they got well paid for what they loved to and some of them got a lot of attention from the media. However, the professional life was not always a *walk in the park*. There were tough times where the

athletes had to deal with problems related to physical injuries or mental health issues, such as lack of confidence, self-doubts etc. However, managers did use this experience to inspire their employers as managers.

*“During my career I had a really bad spell, that kicked me out of the national team. I was really, really doubtful about myself and maybe I had a burnout. But with hard work and personal improvements I managed to come back and a year later I was part of two teams of winning European titles. In one year, I went from the feeling down and to feeling like the king. It just felt great to make so many people in my country happy by winning European championships. That gave me so much as a person. These twelve months, are so important in my life, they showed worthful. How do you get from depressive feeling, to the feeling you are all over the moon?. That you feel so confident. That drove me so much as a person. I like to share that experience and inspire other people with that story.” - Person A*

#### 4.7 THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING A ROLE MODEL

Most of the respondents considered it important for leaders to be role models for their followers. Being true to self and showing others how to do things and setting example by working longer harder than others makes these athletes unique in their own, individual way. They are working on what they believe and have motivation to show their own strengths. By being hard-working on what they think is important makes them unique as they are constructing their own professional identity and not trying to duplicate somebody else:

*“I show up early and leave late, work hard and don't always go the easy way. I think is overburdens others. While taking it easy with myself. So that's what I thought would have an effect.” - Person F*

Showing example to others and being a role models by *getting their hands dirty* are common motivation methods used by our respondents to motivate their subordinates and followers. These managers think they already know what is necessary to be successful from sports and do the same in their managerial role. Because of their higher position, others may look upon them as superiors or role models and might imitate their actions:

*“Can I come in the office at 10 o’clock in the morning and leave at 4 o’clock and at the same time expect my team to work ten hours a day? No. You have to come in before them and leave after them, to show them good example. Do not underestimate the quantity.”* - Person C

Top-level athletes know the values and good traits which helped them to be successful and earn respect in sports. When working in the business industry they want the same respect as managers. However, respect needs to be earned:

*“Leading by example you know, and to ensure that you are respected, but you’re also partner in everything and it really is a different approach. There are certain things, like culture, making sure that there is the right fit but then after that it gets pretty individualized.”* - Person F

Being a role model and showing exemplary behaviour to teammates, coaches and followers is an important factor for top-level athletes. Good habits and behaviour is something that is highly valued among athletes followers and the social community. Athletes, competing at the highest level are often hired by organizations to represent their image through advertisements and public relations. Furthermore, many athletes or their teams are really dependent on sponsors who expect professional behaviour from their clients. This is an experience which can be helpful in management.

When our respondents were asked how they have learned their leadership skills, they repeatedly mentioned their own previous role models or coaches and gave example how these individuals handled different situations. Even though they did not state, that they were followers, the willingness to follow others (former coaches or team captains), could be noticed in their answers:

*“Brian Clough, he was very special, he was one of a kind. I call him the friendliest dictator I have ever worked with. But you know, I like his clearness, he was so simple and he mentioned the right things you should do as a professional but also what he expected from you when you were on the pitch. He told everyone that they were a part of the tactics and he always used to say to me: I assigned you as a goalkeeper not as a manager, so you stop the balls and it is my job to manage.”*  
- Person A

Various times in many instances the respondents mentioned their previous coaches as their mentors, from whom they had learned various skills and they could be the source of their perceived leadership. They have described other people's (coaches) leadership in a detailed way and in the same time reflecting on their own leadership in comparison:

*"I had one coach in the national team. He was really good in inspiring the team and also to take responsibility in the game where we were unsure about the results [Against Soviet Union]. The coach was prepared, he had studied the team in very efficient way and when he described strategy and created instruction, everybody felt that we had control over this. It was a very directional leadership in that case. The other games the team was more or less decided themselves how to [win]. But he changed [leadership] during couple of games when we needed to step up which resulted in that we won the game. It was more situational leadership by that coach to change different hat in different situations."* - Person B

The coach mentioned above was one of managers' role models who actually claimed that he was manager who used situational leadership. That is just one example of many. As the managers spoke about variety of coaches, some of them were more influential and memorable than others, but most of top-level athletes have had many coaches through their careers. While they described only some of them to us, everyone could have influenced their mindset regarding leadership. They could be described as mentors on how to lead and coach. This influence can be detected in the managers' answers regarding their understanding of leadership.

*"The coach invited 6 players for dinner and talk about the past, the present and also the future and he asked you, if you were willing to support him when he would come back as a manager of Holland. From then, every game we played, we had a kind of a meeting with those 6 players and his staff just to talk about our upcoming opponent, about the atmosphere in the team, expectations and things like that. That kind of leadership style I prefer, I still do."* - Person A

In addition, in the interviews the managers expressed that they have developed many skills and how to deal with variety of situations in sports. Many of these findings have been described already in thesis and to some regard there are signs of followership. In sports, athletes are following the lead of the coach and the team captains in different

situations. Following goals of the teams, tactics of the game, trusting the changes made by team managers and coaches is a part of being a follower and a player in team sports.

However, even though our respondents identified many similarities between sports and management in organizations, they did also notice differences between those fields. One manager did notice obstacles to replace employees if their subordinates were not performing and meeting their expectation:

*”If you have a football players that is not really performing. You can always bench them. I can not do that here as manager, it is very difficult, I need everyone. At work there is never training, here it is always gametime as you always have a customer and the employee must be up for it. You have much more difficulties to change employees in your team than in sports to achieve your goal” - Person G*

One manager felt he could sense different atmosphere among team members in sports and organizations. He considered it more difficult and more challenging to get everyone at one organization move to the same direction and follow common goals:

*“One difference is you can not get the feeling in organization that you have within the team where everyone is trying to achieve the same goals. That feeling I think is extremely difficult to get in the same way in normal workplace. Here for example you have different age category, different genders, different ambitions, different education and people look at their daily jobs in different ways. Few young ones and older ones that are really interested in achieving, other people go to work because they need the salary. In sport team you have individuals coming together with same interest that aim to achieve a common goal“ - Person*

I

Another manager talked in the same vein when he explained the difference between sports and management. He claimed that being a business manager demanded more communication skills and interaction with other people on day-to-day basis than sports did:

*“In business it is even more important to talk to people and communicate, because if you look at the sports team you have people with similar mindset otherwise they would not be there. In the company you often have a larger group of people, with different background, different experience and skills, that demands it is even more important to communicate, motivate and understand people. In the sport team you have a lot of similar people but in the company you have a mix of different personalities also different nationalities.” - Person D*

Some managers did experience this composition of different individuals and personalities challenging and difficult to deal with for example in terms of motivation. One manager described how he faced barriers when he tried to motivate his subordinate.

*“In sports I was used to people who was very motivated and goals orientated. But soon after I started as manager in organization I realized people were different. In the beginning I thought it would be easier to get people motivated to do better and well, instead of just doing the minimum. I have always thought that leading by example is one way to motivate people. Sometimes it works but sometimes it does not.” - Person F*

This manager, like some others emphasized hard work and long working hours when asked what they meant by leading by an example. That action to motivate others was quite natural for our respondents as it had worked quite successfully in the field of sports. In business organization such behavior might influence and encourage some employees. However, it might also have opposite effect as it might increase stress and overburden some other employees in the workplace who do not appreciate or get motivated by such actions. Another manager considered hard work as an important factor for success:

*“It is hard for me to understand that people are going to work from 8-14 and then look at the clock. It is so far away from my kind of way of thinking. We need to have some results. I have always worked hard and get some good results.” - Person E*

In this case the manager had difficulties to understand the attitude of his subordinates who did not work long working hours. With his behaviour he tried to influence his employees to act in the same way as he did. Some employees might experience such behaviour as a pressure from their supervisor to work long hours that might lead to dissatisfaction at workplace if employees are not able or not willing to work long hours. In some cases this could also lead to extreme competition and negative atmosphere within the workplace where people who are not able to work long hours might not have same possibilities to get promoted as those who have the opportunity to work longer hours. Though the former athletes are used to work under pressure and work well under pressure then it is uncertain if their subordinates are able to thrive under such circumstances.

#### 4.8 SUMMARY

In this chapter, we present the findings from the interviews that we conducted. Our findings indicate that the managers share similar views on leadership, based on vision and goal setting, team-building, coaching, environment, personal attribution, motivation and being a role model. We could also identify several life skills that managers perceived they had developed in sports and transferred to management such as goals setting, teamwork, preparation, hard work and showing empathy. Our respondents repeatedly described their understanding of leadership through examples from sports. Furthermore, in many cases they practice leadership by acting in a similar way as they did in sports, where it helped them to reach top-level. However, skills and leadership behaviour that could be learned in sports can be problematic in business management as such behaviour might have negative influence on employees in some cases. Nevertheless, it can be argued that their mindset as managers is influenced by their experience of sports. It can even be argued that in their managerial position they duplicate the roles of a coach and team captain, something they are familiar with from sports. To get a better and deeper understanding of the leadership perspective and developed life skills of top-level athletes we will analyse their stories in the next chapter. Furthermore, we will elaborate on our findings, answering the research questions and discussing our study in relation to the existing literature.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter we present the analysis of our findings and discussion, where we relate our findings to existing theories. The aim of this study is to understand how former top-level athletes view leadership and how they perceive they transfer their experience in sport to their managerial role. To get a deeper understanding of our subject, we examined the viewpoint and perception of former top-level athletes who have worked as managers in business organizations.

### 5.1 A SHARED VIEW AND UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERSHIP

As mentioned previously then there isn't a clear line between management and leadership as both terms are vague and sometimes they overlap (Sveningsson & Blom, 2011, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Our study suggests that our managers try to act as leaders in situations and context where they try to influence, develop, motivate and encourage their subordinates in their jobs (Yukl, 1989, Katz, 1974). Our findings indicate that our interviewees have a shared view and understanding about leadership. Their shared leadership behaviour that appears in vision and goal setting, team building, taking a role of a coach, creating an attractive working environment, motivation, inspiration and being a role model. Constant references to their sport career in their talks about leadership, indicate that extensive experience in sports does influence how our respondents perceive leadership. They generally consider their leadership behaviour having positive effects on their subordinates, nevertheless there are signs that their behaviour can also have negative effects. In the next sub-chapters their shared view and understanding on leadership will be discussed in more details, taking the positive and negative sites of it into the consideration.

#### GOALS AND VISION

All managers expressed that leadership would first and foremost involve vision and goal setting. They considered their main responsibility as managers to convince their subordinates to follow organizational goals and vision. The goal setting process had a clear meaning for them as managers. They considered leadership as a tool to improve organizational performance and to strengthen boundaries between themselves and the subordinates, i.e. working together to achieve common goals. Their view on vision and goal setting can be drawn upon theories of transformational leadership as it emphasizes goals and vision (Bass & Avolio, 2002). The managers' perception of goal setting was in line with the theory of Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017), as they expressed to



provide common vision towards organizational goals to their subordinates. When discussing goal setting, the managers made constant references to their sports career. In their mind, goal setting was an important factor to their success in sports and they used this goal setting mindset in their current career. Because the managers strongly relate goal setting to success in sports, we get an impression they attempt to use it in their managerial role to achieve similar results. However, in organizations employees do not always share same vision and they sometimes have different mindsets and goals. In sports our respondents are used to work in an environment where everyone within their team are heading in the same direction towards common goals. Thus, one of the challenges of managers with top-level athlete background is getting their subordinates on board to reach certain common goals or vision that the organization has set.

#### TEAM BUILDING

One of the practices that managers expressed in similar ways regarding leadership was their view on team building. When organizations look for potential employees they mostly search for individuals that have specific experience, expertise or skills (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). In our study, managers emphasized divergent aspects that they considered more important than skills and experience when looking for the “right-fit” in particular occupation. Managers claimed that in team building they were more focused on individual attitude - their willingness to learn and develop, their potential to work in a team and dedication to provided tasks. These abilities were considered by managers to be more important than specific experience or skills related to certain position (vacancy). In their mind, it is easier to train or develop certain skills than to change one’s personal attitude or personality. When managers discussed team building they frequently referred to their sport career. They considered their experience from variety of situations influenced team chemistry and success. This indicates that their view on team-building can be related to their background in sports and that great potential or skills do not guarantee success. According to our manager’s view, having the right attitude can affect team performance as individuals with an unsuitable attitude can have negative influence on team chemistry. However, having a perception of what is considered the right attitude, can have a negative effect in team building in an organizational context. Hiring a person with perceived “right” attitude can thus not be in line with the organizational context and could create an opposite effect on team cohesion (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). The “right” attitude that is perceived by managers

is in line with the study of Trottier and Robitaille (2014), who found that in sports one can develop hard work, constant improvement, preparation, positive attitude and determination to succeed. According to this research, managers could be looking to hire persons with attitudes that can be identified among top-level athletes. This could lead to homogenous workforce were managers hire people based in their own ideas for “right” fit. This perspective could increase the risk that managers hire “yes people” who only tell the managers what they want to hear instead of having open critical discussion.

#### ROLE OF A COACH

Most managers viewed leadership as coaching and developing their subordinates. They consider it is their responsibility as managers to train their employees personally or create a working environment for them to develop. In one case, one manager actually perceived himself as a coach rather than a manager. The managers expressed how much it would please them to see their subordinates develop and grow in their area. This concurs with Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) view that managers act as coaches by sharing responsibility, delegation and improving their subordinates’ skills. When discussing personal development and coaching, managers often referred to sports. They took examples of their former sport team coaches. In addition, they explained in detail, how their coaches performed and what type of results these coaches achieved in various situations. To us, this seems like the managers are re-creating leadership that was practiced by their coaches in sports. Because how they explained their coaches’ leadership in a detailed way, we got the impression that their coaching style was difficult to forget. As the managers explained their coaches’ leadership in such a detailed way, we consider these coaches as influential. We get the impression that their former coaches had strong personalities and leadership styles, therefore it could have affected the athletes’ attitude and behaviour (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). This indicates, that their perceived leadership could have been strongly influenced by their coaches’ leadership style. In some cases, the role of the coach could be problematic for our managers, considering the organizational context. In some organizations and in various situation there might be need for different kind of leadership style than coaching approach (Hersey, Blanchard & Dewey,1996). For example, in critical circumstances where managers need to react quickly, the possibility to coach or train employees might not be an option as the process is time and cost consuming. For various reasons in the organizational environment, managers might

need to hire new employees regularly or lay-off employees frequently that might do it difficult for coaching leaders to work in.

#### AN ATTRACTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Another leadership practice which we needed to analyse is the managers approach to the working environment. Our managers claimed that they create and shape their work environment together with their co-workers. They consider it important to create a working environment that stimulates confidence, trust, autonomy and personal development among their subordinates. This can be related to transformational leadership as their view concurs with research by Bass and Avolio (2000). These researchers claim that transformational leaders try to create a working environment where employees are given autonomy, trust and individual mistakes are not criticized. However, by creating this kind of environment they perhaps unintentionally decrease their own leadership influence. Providing people with trust, autonomy and teamwork, managers establish an environment where shared leadership is appreciated and fostered. We can argue that this can be seen as coming from the sports as according to Loughead (2017) shared leadership is commonly used in sports. In sports, athletes are considered to follow the tactics of the coach, but in the same time be creative and make their own decisions when competing. Therefore, managers' experience in sports may influence their view on what they think is successful or good working environment. However, it can be problematic to replicate a sport environment into organizations as the latter are different from the former e.g. in terms of structure, culture and context. For example, shared leadership might not be a beneficial option for low mature subordinates that do not have confidence or skills to execute task on their own (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982).

#### MOTIVATION, INSPIRATION AND BEING A ROLE MODEL

Being inspirational and a role model was strongly linked to good leadership by our managers. Through communication, inspirational talk and more often by showing good example our managers tried to motivate their subordinates. Managers perceived themselves as role models because of their work ethic, which involved hard work, long working hours and intensive preparation. Other aspects included; being unique, true to oneself and showing exemplary behaviour in the workplace. We got the impression that being a role model could be quite natural to them, as they referred often to sports, when expressing what being a role model meant to them. Through the same aspects they

expressed being an inspiration to others. According to Bass and Avolio (2000) transformational leaders do behave as role models and act according to their organizational values or principle. Our managers perceive themselves as role models. However, they seem to have strong opinions on how role models should act and behave. In some cases, their opinions might not go along with existing organizational values or principles. As an example, strong work ethic, that involves long working hours can inspire some employees. However, long working hours could also have negative effect, both mentally and physically on the manager himself and his/her subordinates. In addition, they compared being a role model to a captain in a team. Managers, in relations to their sports career, mentioned all of these aspects (hard work, intensive preparation, strong work ethic) as they consider them to have helped achieve the top-level in sports. This can mean that they are holding some kind of understanding of how role models and inspirational people should be seen. Based on this understanding they perceive themselves as role models.

Nevertheless, through their quotes and understanding of being motivator, a leader must show strong work ethic and exemplary behaviour. In their minds such behaviour, should encourage and motivate their subordinates. But in the workplace such behaviour or action is not always the best and the right way for a leader. Subordinates could perceive their managers as being bossy, competitive and always on the edge. It could feel like never ending competition, which could lead to stressful, not family-friendly and competitive workplace and thus demotivate some part of employees as the goals in business are different than in sports. We can assume that people from top-level sports can thrive under pressure and probably work well with high-achievers and careerists, but they may struggle with employees who does not have the ambition to always be the best. It may seem that managers with sports background are making competitive, sometimes even harsh environment, where one need to be successful while following the “tactics” of a manager. This type of leadership can diminish the creativity of employees and for some even cause stress and unwillingness to work.

## 5.2 TRANSFERRED LIFE SKILLS AND FOLLOWERSHIP

Our main findings indicate that managers in our study, share similar view on leadership in terms of vision, goal setting, team building, taking a role of a coach, creating an attractive working environment, motivation, inspiration and being a role model.

Throughout the interviews, when speaking about leadership, managers used above examples as skill acquired from their practical experience in sport.

Previous studies on life skills development and life skill transfer have not focused on the transfer process from sports to business management i.e. how perceived life-skill in sports can be transferred to managerial role. All managers in our research mentioned perceived life skills that they had developed through their participation in sports. In our study, we identified several life-skills that our respondents had transferred from sports to their managerial role i.e. goal setting, teamwork, ability to work under pressure, preparation, hard work, empathy and leading by example. These perceived life skills which our managers mention as learned in sports, are in line with studies of life skill development in sport (Hayball and Jones, 2015; Camiré, Trudel & Forneris, 2009).

Developing life skills in sport and transferring them to management can be tricky, because there are other domains in our respondents life where they can have developed life skills (Pierce et al., 2017). Based on the life skill transfer model these domains can be educational, family, vocational contexts, where one can develop these skills. Our findings suggests that former top-level athletes have developed certain life skills through sports. However, it is difficult to assert what skills are learned and transferred from sport and what skills are adopted in other domains. Nevertheless, we can argue that there are strong signs that extensive experience in sports does influence our managers mindset on how their view leadership.

Our findings suggest, that our managers perceived they gained vast experience and developed various skills through followership in sports. Studies show that retired athletes perceive they learn and develop various skills through their sports participation (Camiré, Trudel and Forneris, 2009; Hayball & Jones, 2016). In our interviews, the managers emphasized several personal attributes that they considered important to their view on leadership such as; hard-work ethic, being prepared, show trust and empathy. They considered these skills important for leadership for several reasons e.g. to motivate subordinates, create trust and earn respect. Our managers did have different opinions on which skills were the most important. One manager explained how he needed to be highly skilled in several areas as he considered himself as situational leader. Therefore, he would need to use various skills in different situations. With an example from sports, he explained how he aimed to develop and build up skills among

his subordinates to increase their independence, which concurs with Kerr & Jermier (1978) view on followers. Participants of this study considered earlier mentioned perceived life skills were developed in sports and transferred to their managerial positions in one way or another. We assume they consider at these skills as unique and positive, therefore they transferred them to new environment - their managerial role. Nevertheless, gains from sports and being a follower in sports are strongly related to their view on leadership, neither being good or bad. Life skills learned in sports through followership are seen by our managers as an asset and mostly used in positive way. However, in the eyes of others e.g. their subordinates, these skills can be seen in a negative light. Even though there are some similarities between business management and sport, there are many differences between them as well. Skills that might have been developed in sports and helped our managers to be successful in that domain, might not work as well in business management. Personal attributes and skills such as hard work ethic or competitiveness among managers might not been appreciated by their subordinates who might feel it difficult to thrive under the pressure and the expectation from their managers. Nevertheless, it is not possible to claim in what situation or in what kind of organization these skills are most useful, each time it depends on the organizational culture and context.

### 5.3 SUMMARY

To summarise, in this chapter we discussed our findings and compared them to the existing theories in the field of leadership and life-skills developments. Our findings indicate that the respondents had a shared view and understanding of leadership. Those shared views include goals and vision, team building, role of a coach, an attractive working environment, motivation, inspiration and being a role model. However, the respondents did not agree which aspect was the most important and even though the respondents mostly saw these shared views in a positive way there are some negative sides to them. In our study, we identified several life-skills that our respondents believed they had transferred from sports to their managerial role. However, it is difficult to assert what skills are learned and transferred from sport and what skills are adopted in other domains. Nevertheless, we can argue that there are strong signs that extensive experience in sports does influence our managers mindset on how they view leadership.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, we conclude our study by addressing our research objective, explaining our research findings and answering our research questions. Moreover, we provide practical implications and future research.

### 6.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

In this study we explored how top-level athletes who have changed their profession from sports to business management view leadership and if their experience in sports can be transferred to their managerial roles. It is both interesting and important to explore how former top-level athletes in managerial roles view leadership and how experience in sports can be helpful in another domain e.g. due to athlete's short professional lives. It is a fact that for athletes, it can be a challenge to find an employer who finds athletes' experience relevant and suitable for particular positions. Thus, it is important to explore how and if experience in sport can be transferred to another profession.

As discussed in this essay, the distinction between management and leadership is not clear. Therefore, it is essential to explore how and in what context or situations our managers acted as leaders. Our findings indicate a shared understanding of leadership among our managers that include: *vision, goal setting, team building, taking a role of a coach, creating an attractive working environment, personal attribution, motivation, inspiration and being a role model*. Our findings, furthermore, suggests that former top-level athletes developed these mentioned life skills through sports. However, it is difficult to assert what skills are developed and transferred from sport and what skills are adopted in other domains. Nevertheless, we can argue that there are strong signs that extensive experience in sports does influence our managers mindset on how they view leadership. When our managers referred to leadership and in what situation they acted as leaders it was based on a mindset developed in their previous career in sports.

Thus, we argue a new dimension to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) findings that indicated that managers in knowledge intensive firms were influenced by a discourse on leadership, by emphasizing values, visions and strategy. We argue that former top-level athletes have developed a strong idea of what is needed to become successful and they practice leadership based on an idea what they perceive is a good leadership. Through their extensive experience in sports they have developed certain mindset

(idea), which is expressed in their leadership perspective. There are strong signs, that they attempt to create similar patterns and environment in their organizations as they experienced as successful in their sport domain. The managers focus on building a team in their organizations, based on their understanding how effective sport team are constructed. They have strong ideas on how to build up their teams and what kind of employees they want to have on board. They structure their units as sport teams, where they divide subordinates in specific positions (roles). They hire people with the right attitude (in their view) within suitable positions. Furthermore, they try to achieve results and motivate others by hard work, exemplary behaviour and extensive preparations like they did during their sport career.

Despite the findings of this study, we need to be aware that due to the dependence on the context of qualitative research our findings cannot be generalized (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Based on the design of this study, we cannot draw general conclusions about leadership perspective of athletes, former athletes or managers or how they perceive leadership from extensive experience in sports. We can only look at the answers of our respondents and interpret their understanding.

Based on our findings to our research questions, we can address that the managers' leadership perspective is influenced by their extensive experience in sports. They perceive leadership through their extensive experience in sports and use it to describe their leadership practice. We suggest that an extensive experience in one domain can create a mindset that can influence the perception of leadership. We consider our study has a contribution to the field of leadership as it provides few insights regarding view on leadership and its dimensions. Our study shows that an extensive experience in the field of sports can influence one's leadership perspective in another domain. Based on that we are contributing to academic community.

## 6.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In our consideration alongside academic implications, this study can have practical implication for athletes and organizations. We believe this study can have a reasonable contribution to current top-level athletes and individuals who are training and competing in sports on regular basis as they might recognize that sport participation can have effect in their future working career e.g. in business or management. Additionally, we believe our study can help employers when they are considering



recruiting former athletes who have extensive experience in sports as it may seem to be valuable to their organization.

We will end this study by provide possible implication for further research. We think that the particular subject regarding top-level athletes' perspective on leadership in business environment could be expanded by additional dimensions. We also realized that ones' extensive experience in specific domain could provide interesting findings regarding leadership phenomena in the field of organizational and management studies. More specifically athletes' perspective on leadership could be studied in longitudinal research regarding where their perceptions would be studied once during their athlete career and occasionally after their retirement.

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