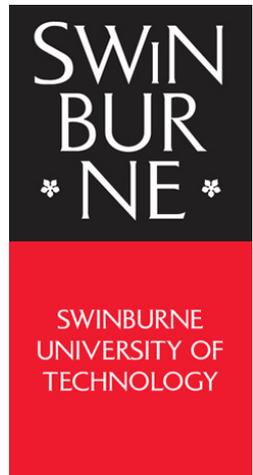


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**Leadership in the AFL and the supplements scandal at
Essendon Football Club**

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Introduction: the use of drugs at Essendon Football Club

In February of this year it came to light that Essendon Football Club was being investigated by the Australian Crime Commission and by ASADA, The Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority, for a supplements program it had implemented the previous year. The supplements, intended to improve players' post match recovery, were either banned or not approved for human consumption. According to media reports, these banned substances were injected into players on numerous occasions.

Today I will be discussing competence in leadership in Australian Football League (AFL) football clubs. Based on research I am doing with Tim Marjoribanks, I will put forward a framework for understanding how club leaders come to be seen as competent. I will argue that competence is the outcome of within-club leadership contests around knowledge and power in a context of increasing professionalisation and regulation. I will also argue that in AFL football, having football experience is an important aspect of competence.

After I present the framework I will use it to try to understand how Essendon, an old, successful and well-regarded club, became entangled in controversy over its supplements program.

Professionalisation

In the last 20 or so years, Australian football in all its codes has become increasingly professionalised. Whereas in the 1970s and 80s players and coaches were often working part-time, since the 1990s and the introduction of the national league, AFL clubs have developed professionalised internal structures.

AFL clubs are typically member-based not-for-profit organisations run by a voluntary board, which is headed by a president or chair. In many clubs the board is elected by club members with voting rights. The day to day club operations are run by a professional administration made up of a CEO and a range of departments such as marketing, finance, membership, communication and most importantly, football. Historically, the board ran the day-to-day operations of the club, however since the move to professionalisation they are now generally boards of governance which are concerned with strategy rather than day-to-day operations.

The broader context of professional sport

AFL clubs are operating in a very competitive environment where they are all looking for an extra edge. They are regulated by the AFL Commission which enforces a number of measures that aim to ensure that the competition is fairly equal. Such measures include a salary cap, which ensures that no one club can raise funds to purchase the services of all of the best players, as well as a draft linked to club performance. It also determines the rules of the game and enforces a number of policies including an anti-drugs policy. So in this competitive environment clubs are all trying to identify a strategy that will give them an advantage. Many are turning to sports science to provide solutions to injury, recovery time, and on field strategy.

The key players

The key leaders in a modern football club are the president or the chairman of the board, the CEO, and the coach/football department. The board is the entity ultimately responsible for the club. The CEO of the club reports to the board and is meant to manage day-to-day operations of the various departments, including the football department. The football department is the most important department and is responsible for the on field activities and recruitment and management of players. The key leaders in the football department are the coach, responsible for the team and its performance, and the football manager, who is in charge of the administration of the football department.

A few years ago, Tim Marjoribanks and Ann Capling ran an Australian Research Council funded research project into the operations of AFL football clubs. Tim and Ann interviewed at least three people at all of the then 16 football clubs, most often the president, CEO and football manager. The theoretical framework about leadership that Tim and I are putting forward is based on these interviews. Disclaimer: all of the interview data has been de-identified so I do not know which quotes come from which club.

Competence and knowledge in sport leadership

There has been a lot of research in the sport management field about the factors that make a competent manager and effective leader. The literature indicates that competent managers need to have a number of key competencies such as in the areas of financial management, human resource management, and communication skills. Although useful, this literature tends to produce somewhat static and individualised lists of competencies. It does not explain how competence is constructed in particular organisational contexts, or which specific skills and knowledge are considered to constitute competence.

Sociological research suggests that competence is fundamentally a social construction involving organisational relationships and linked to the issue of organisational power. According to Good (1998:205) it is: "an essentially contested domain". The people who win these contests are the successful leaders. Hence, competence in leadership is political; it is embedded in power and other social relations.

Our research has particularly focused on the role of the CEO, but we believe that the lessons we draw from this analysis applied to other departments as well. The power of the CEO to lead a club is directly related to how clubs construct competence, and the CEO's personal background and qualities. In the case of Essendon, we will see that the CEO said he was not aware of the supplements program, indicating a lack on internal power vis a vis the football department.

Football clubs are, fundamentally, sports organisations that seek to do well on the field. Historically, the leaders of the football club have always had football backgrounds. As the clubs professionalised, they have hired CEOs and other managers from different backgrounds ranging from teaching through accounting to sports management. Our research has found that CEOs are expected to have a breadth of skills. These skills include managing the day-to-day operations of the club, creating a positive and productive culture, and providing strategic direction to the club.

However, also important was knowledge of football. As one CEO put it:

If you don't have any knowledge of football, I think you're in the wrong industry, I think you would really struggle to come to grips with what's required to get a team that's capable of winning games and then at some stage winning the Premiership. (CEO15)

In football clubs, having a football background is understood both to be a key foundation for organisational credibility and to be a way for a manager to establish their managerial competence. Such credibility and competence is heightened if the individual has performed at the highest level.

Leaders in football clubs also need to cope with boundaries within the club. The leaders that were interviewed identified successful clubs as having "the right" football director, coach, CEO and president (President3), highlighting that these are the key leadership positions within clubs. However the scope of the influence of each of these positions is contested. In some clubs the board is still involved in day-to-day operations, while in others the board has shifted to be a board of governance. The CEO "sits between the board and the senior management" (CEO23). And there are tussles between the CEO, the board and the football department.

The coach is a key figure in the football club, often a source of inspiration and always subject to intense expectations. Many coaches have earned great respect and influence due to their achievements either on the field or as winning coaches. For example, Kevin Sheedy, former coach of Essendon and current coach of Greater Western Sydney, has had a solid career as a player and an outstanding career as a premiership-winning coach. This type of externally validated respect situates such coaches in powerful positions within their football club. It also raises significant challenges for the CEO and board relative to the coach around who a coach is accountable to and who is able to make decisions about the football department.

For example, the football department might not tell the CEO or the president who has been selected for the team. For example, they might also not disclose which players are injured. And they may not disclose strategies that they may be employing, such as a supplements program, which they hope will give them a competitive edge.

As one Football Manager said:

... we are a little more clandestine than some other parts of the footy club, for all the obvious reasons, we've got a week to week war, if you like, against 15 [now 17] other clubs wanting to win games of footy that if we have to keep information in the organisation then that's fine. (FM8)

An important difference between football clubs and other types of organisations is the passion involved. One of our participants said:

if you've got the right people you can run as a business, it's challenging, but not impossible. When you inject this other thing called football passion and irrationality, at all levels from the board to the boot-studder inside the club and across the community from the media to the members to the supporters to the sponsors, that's the hard part. (CEO13)

Perhaps this is one of the things that led to the incredible support received by James Hird, even when it was clear that some poor decisions around the use of supplements had been made at Essendon.

Our participants suggested that love of the team and respect for hands-on football experience have worked to give the coach a particularly important position and undermine some of the professionalisation practices that clubs were trying to implement. For example, board members might contact the coach directly and try to influence things. CEOs were trying to subvert this, moving the board to be a board of governance rather than a board of management. However long-standing practices of board members to be involved in everyday running of the organisations undermined this goal.

The autonomy of the football department and its relationship with the rest of the football club was a source of struggle in all clubs. Several CEOs wanted to be more involved in the football department. One CEO said:

I actually sit on top of our [organisational structure] and I have a fairly heavy involvement in football, because from our perspective, this football club is driven by one thing and one thing only, success from the football side. If I don't know what's happening there that I reckon I'm only doing half the job. I mean I don't interfere but last week for example – and I do it once a month – I go and sit in selection. I don't say "pick him or do that", I'm probably more interested in the process. (CEO27)

How able a CEO was to do that kind of thing depended on which club they were at. In some clubs it would have been impossible.

In contrast, Football Managers sought a balance between autonomy and being able to seek advice from the CEO and president when needed. CEOs were most likely to be consulted when they had extensive football experience. This highlights the importance of having football experience.

CEOs who did not have extensive football experience were frequently considered not competent to be involved in football department decisions and were subsequently frozen out of them. As one CEO put it: "I think if the CEO hasn't got a strong football background, the Football Manager is more likely to play a stronger role [than the CEO]" (CEO38).

Where the CEO did not have a strong football background, any role for the CEO was considered problematic by the football department because the CEO was not considered to have the appropriate knowledge to act with competence.

This construction of competence as necessarily involving a football background constitutes a profound challenge to the organisational position of the CEO and also possibly of the president.

To summarise, to understand leadership of a football club, the club needs to be analysed in its particular context. Different clubs have different leadership contexts based on their structures, histories and, importantly, their particular personnel.

CEOs with football experience are more likely to be more highly valued leaders and able to influence the football department than CEOs without that experience. The importance of a football background in the context of the football club remains paramount.

The construction of competence in leadership is the outcome of boundary contests within football clubs. In these contexts, people with a strong football background have an advantage. This framework suggests that to understand leadership decisions within AFL football clubs we need to take into account who has relevant football experience. We predict that leaders with well-regarded football careers will have more power within football clubs than leaders without extensive either playing or coaching football experience. Note that this is not necessary for the board members who, as one of our CEO said: "... are really just football supporters, and that's their primary reason for being here" (CEO13).

'Doping' at Essendon Football Club

I now turn to talking about the recent supplements issues at Essendon football club. As I said before, all clubs are trying to gain a competitive edge. One of the key issues that football clubs face is injury and how to ensure players heal quickly. Clubs are increasingly turning to sport science for solutions. Things like specialised training programs, hyperbaric chambers, ice baths, and other interventions meant to improve performance. Many are also turning to restorative drug use and other restorative therapies.

There are three types of drug use in sport:

- performance enhancing: drugs that make you perform better on field
- recreational: drugs used for recreational purposes, not usually performance enhancing
- restorative: drugs that make you return more quickly from injury.

All three types are regulated. In fact, ASADA has an extensive list of drugs that cannot be used. Athletes and other interested parties who would like to know if a particular substance is allowed in their sport can actually search the ASADA website to check.

In August 2011 Essendon appointed Dean Robinson, a.k.a. "The Weapon", To the position of high-performance coach and in September 2011 they appointed Stephen Dank as sports scientist. Robinson and Dank were hired to give Essendon their competitive edge. They implemented a restorative drugs supplements program for the 2012 season.

Essendon had a terrific start to the 2012 season but became bogged down by injury and ended the season with seven consecutive defeats. During the 2012 season it appears that Essendon, had implemented a supplements regime for all players. In particular, players were given banned anti-obesity drug AOD-9604 among other things. According to the Herald Sun, Essendon players each received as many as 40 injections in 2012 season. It is clear that players were expected to participate in the supplements regime. It is also clear that the club leadership was aware that the drugs were not exactly legal.

The Essendon drugs scandal was investigated this year by ASADA and the AFL and the actions taken by the club were found to contravene the rules. In their statement, the AFL said that Essendon had either allowed players to be given illegal drugs or that they couldn't tell whether players were administered prohibited substances The club was fined \$2 million, James Hird was banned from coaching for 12 months, and the club has lost key draft picks for the next two years.

This case raises all sorts of questions about leadership. Who was in charge? On the one hand we have the coach, James Hird and his staff Stephen Dank and Dean Robinson. Also under the auspices of the football department was the club doctor, Reid, who was reported to be an absolute fan of James Hird. On the other hand we have the Chairman, David Evans, who seems to have been in the dark about the supplements program. Given what we know about the division between football departments and the rest of their football clubs, this is plausible. There is also the then-CEO, Ian Robson, who claimed not to know about the supplements. Robson resigned in May because as CEO he was accountable for everything that happened at the club, even if he didn't know about it. He said,

We let down our players and their families. How seriously we let them down is still a matter under investigation but I sit here today saying that our club let those people down and there is no excuse in not knowing. (source: 'Essendon drugs scandal: the story so far', Herald Sun, 27 August 2013, www.heraldsun.com.au/sport/afl/essendon-scandal-the-story-so-far/story-fni4f6kv-1226635922954).

Not everyone at Essendon was supportive of the supplements regime. In a January 2012 letter to James Hird and the football manager at the time, Paul Hamilton, the club doctor, Bruce Reid, expressed his concerns over the drugs they should be given. In a letter he names the drugs and notes that:

... I think we are playing at the edge and this would read extremely badly in the press for our club and for the benefits and also for the side-effects that are not known in the long-term, I have trouble with all these drugs.

Interestingly, as an aside, the supplements seem to not have worked: in 2012 the Bombers had an enormous run of injury.

Leadership contests: the football department, the chairman, the CEO

James Hird is a legend of the game. A Brownlow medallist and premiership winning captain at Essendon, he is a favourite son of the club. Indeed, the club lured him out of retirement to take over the coaching position even though he had minimal coaching experience.

To support him they also brought in another favourite son, Mark "Bomber" Thompson. Thompson, unlike Hird, had extensive coaching experience having been a dual premiership winning coach of the Geelong Football Club (in 2007 and 2009) as well having been a premiership winning captain at Essendon.

Along with Hird and Thompson, Paul Hamilton also had key football experience having been a successful player at Essendon in the 1990s but also had coaching experience at a variety of other football clubs. Under their leadership, the football credentials of the football department were impeccable. Having such well-regarded coaches gave the football department a great deal of clout and scope for action. Thompson had also previously utilised sports scientists as coach of Geelong.

The sports science/high-performance team that they hired of Dean Robinson and Stephen Dank were able to implement an untested supplements regime on the players even though the club doctor, Bruce Reid, did not support it. Reid was completely separated from this regime. He apparently did not administer any of the supplements. Both Robinson and Dank have said that the coaching staff were aware of the supplements program. Dank was also reported as saying that Hird took the supplements himself.

What we see here is the emergence of high-performance coaches and sports scientists as new experts in football clubs. Their perceived expertise is highly valued by the clubs, valued above the seemingly old-fashioned expertise of the club doctor. In the context of professionalisation, these new experts are providing state-of-the-art support to players. Their involvement is meant to give the club a competitive edge over the other teams.

Former CEO Ian Robson also had football credentials but his work was on the management/administration side, rather than the coaching side. Prior to coming to Essendon he had been a football administrator at an NRL club, the Warriors, and then at Hawthorn Football Club. Since leaving Essendon he has become the CEO of the Melbourne Victory, a professional soccer club. So his experience did not necessarily give him clout in engaging with the football department. Indeed, the football department appears to have kept the supplements program secret from the other departments, suggesting that in the internal club hierarchy the football club is above the CEO.

The Chairman, David Evans, is a businessman. As our research found, the board is frequently kept in the dark about football department operations so it is not surprising that he was unaware of the supplements program. It was reported by Fox Sports that he reported the club to the AFL and ASADA and asked for the

allegations to be investigated (<http://www.foxsports.com.au/afl/afl-premiership/asada-told-andrew-demetriou-contacted-essendon-president-david-evans-before-club-self-reported/story-e6frf3e3-1226684647626>).

Conclusion

The case of drugs at Essendon highlights the importance of internal contests for leadership competence in football clubs. Leadership competence is a contested domain and the Essendon case shows the shifting boundaries around competence. For example, the expertise of the sports science and high performance staff were very much valued at Essendon, a context where there was a relatively inexperienced coach and a team that had not been performing particularly well.

The leadership contests at Essendon Football Club were clearly won by the Football Department to the detriment of the club. Even with the scandal, Hird has not been completely dismissed. Indeed his contract has been renewed and he will return to coaching the club in 12 months. The separation of the Football Department from the rest of the club enabled it to implement a controversial and potentially dangerous drug supplements regime without the knowledge of the rest of the club. The high regard that everyone around Essendon placed in James Hird and, to a lesser extent his assistant coach, Bomber Thompson, may have prevented the Department from being properly scrutinised.