



Sporting Governance in an Accelerating World:

emotion, physiology and the evolution of decision making

Dr Alan Watkins • Essays in sports governance series: I

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Foreword

This series of essays aims to provide a deeper dive into topics of interest and relevance to the Sports Governance Academy community. Authored by experts in particular disciplines and by practitioners in sports governance and management, they will give the reader a closer look at current themes, best practices and initiatives in the sector.

By inviting authors to present their topics in essay form, we want to give them the scope and freedom to explore more deeply areas of governance affecting sports organisations, predominantly in the UK, but drawing on comparative international examples where appropriate. The approach taken will vary from essay to essay. Some will provide a case study to help the community get to grips with developments in the sports governance landscape. Others will present the results of original ongoing research. Others still will offer intriguing perspectives on governance debates, approaching familiar topics from a different angle.

We hope that you find plenty in the series to get you thinking and to help you and your organisations in your approach to governance and in facing the challenges ahead of us.

Through the SGA website you can access further essays in the series as they are released. There you will also find our knowledge base, a library of trusted, free resources to help you get to grips with governance and start to develop good practice. Visit <https://sportsgovernanceacademy.org.uk/>.

In this essay, the first in the series, Dr Alan Watkins shares his thoughts on decision making drawn from his experience both as a physician and neuroscientist and as a leadership development consultant.

Alan looks at the impact on decision making of two factors that usually go unrecognised or that are often at best under-valued – emotion and physiology – considering how these affect our decisions and performance. It may come as a surprise to some that our thoughts and decisions are often tailored to these forces, even as we think that we have excluded them in favour of hard logic. The imperative for improved emotional literacy that this realisation produces should be clear from Alan's argument.

He then turns to the evolution of decision making in groups, be they societies, governments or organisations. Alan offers a series of stages of development against which readers can assess their own organisations and decision-making forums. These present an opportunity to reflect on the sorts of systems we work within on a daily basis, to consider where decision-making power lies and how decisions are arrived at. In doing so, the reader should be honest in considering how this works in practice; often, the reality on the ground tells a different story to an organisational chart or formal statement of responsibilities.

Taken together, the two parts of Alan's essay give plenty for organisations and leaders to think about in terms of their decision-making processes, both as individuals and as a collective.

Craig Beeston
Sports Governance Academy
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About the author

Dr Alan Watkins is recognised as a global thought leader on human performance, complexity and well-being. Drawing on his background as a physician and neuroscientist, he integrates into his work a deep understanding of human consciousness, psychology and neurophysiology, combined with commercial acumen.

Prior to founding Complete Coherence, a data-driven leadership development consultancy where he is CEO, Alan worked as a physician for 11 years in the health care system in the USA, UK, and Australia. He has published a wide variety of scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals, contributed many book chapters and wrote his first book, *Mind Body Medicine*, in 1997.

Over the last 24 years, Alan has been a coach and confidant to many global business leaders. He has worked with professional athletes and coaches in Premier League football, the coach of the England football team and the Rugby Union Premiership as well as with UK Sport to design their elite coaching three-year development programme. Alan also worked with the GB Olympic squad ahead of the 2012 and 2016 Games.

Selected titles by Dr Alan Watkins:

Step Change: The Leader's Journey (Routledge Nov 2021)

Coherence: The Science of Exceptional Leadership (Kogan Page 2nd edition Sept 2021)

Innovation Sucks: Time to think differently (Routledge Mar 2021)

HR (R)Evolution: Change the Workplace, Change the World (Routledge Jan 2020)

4D Leadership: Competitive advantage through vertical leadership development (Kogan Page Feb 2019)

Crowdocracy: The End of Politics (Urbane Publications Mar 2016)

Wicked & Wise: How to solve the world's toughest problems (Urbane Publications Aug 2015)

Mind Body Medicine: A clinician's guide to Psychoneuroimmunology (Churchill Livingstone Aug 1997)

<https://complete-coherence.com/>

Sporting governance in an accelerating world: emotion, physiology and the evolution of decision making

Part I

Over the last 25 years, I've had the privilege of coaching and advising thousands of leaders from sporting, corporate, educational, and non-profit organisations all over the world. When the subject of governance comes up, most claim that they have a whole range of structures and processes in place that helps them ensure that people are accountable, operate with transparency, are responsive to issues as they arise, and deliver inclusive broad-based participation. However, the reality rarely matches the narrative. What we often find are a lot of 'governance committees' but very little real governance. When you investigate what these committees are doing, they're often ensuring the organisation is compliant with regulatory or legal frameworks. Or they are engaged in operational oversight, making sure people are doing what they're meant to be doing.

Compliance is vital, and both this and making sure your organisation is working as it was intended are important activities, but they alone are not governance. Ultimately, governance is about 'who decides who decides'.

For more on compliance visit, our SGA knowledge base section on 'Relevant legislation and ensuring compliance' [here](#).

In most organisations, thousands of decisions are being made by individuals, teams, or committees. But what's rarely debated is whether the right people are involved in the decision-making process and what is even less talked about is why they may be the right people. Since this debate about 'who decides who decides' rarely happens, decisions end up being made by people without the permission or sanction of the organisation itself. In practice, this often means either the most senior one of two people make all the decisions, or the decisions get made randomly by whoever realises that one needs making.

The consequence is that, in most organisations, there's little clarity about who makes the decisions and how those decisions are made. More importantly, most people in the organisation are unclear how they could change any of the decisions made even when it's obvious those decisions are making matters worse or impairing performance.

For information on the role played by governance professionals or governance leads, visit our SGA knowledge base section [here](#).

This lack of clarity and poor governance is one of the greatest reasons why so many organisations struggle to adapt to a complex and rapidly accelerating world and why leaders continue to make poor quality decisions. The governance problem is further compounded by a lack of understanding of how decisions are made by individuals and by collectives. Let's examine both phenomena.

The neuroscience of decision making

If we summarise fifty years of neuroscientific research on how individuals make decisions, we could encapsulate the entire literature with a single phrase: 'all decisions are feelings justified by logic'.

This comes as a surprise to many, particularly scientists, who are bought into the idea that their approach is 'evidence based'. What many people may not appreciate is that they make value judgements about the validity and legitimacy of the evidence they co-opt to justify what they feel is correct. The evaluation of legitimacy is a feeling, not a fact.

For centuries we have been socialised to believe we are rational beings, and our decisions are a matter of simple logic. Emotions have been dismissed as weak and, misogynistically, as female. But even the most hard-bitten neuroscientist would now concede that logic doesn't exist in the absence of emotions. We are emotional beings, not logical beings. We don't analyse the data and make a choice independent of our emotions. This is not how the human mind works. To make any decision, we must first have a feeling about what the correct answer is. Then we look around for data or a line of logic or reasoning to justify what we feel is correct.

Our understanding of how individuals make decisions all started with Phineas Gage. Gage was a railway construction foreman in the United States in the 1840s and an explosives expert. His job involved drilling a hole in the rock, half-filling it with gunpowder, inserting a fuse and filling the rest of the hole with sand. The sand would be 'tamped down' very carefully with a tamping rod to pack the sand and explosive in place before finally lighting the fuse. Unfortunately, on 13 September 1848, the 25-year-old Gage started tamping before the sand was packed in and a spark from the tamping rod ignited the gunpowder, sending the six-foot-long iron rod straight through his brain, landing 80 feet away. Amazingly Gage survived, and he was conscious and talking just a few minutes after the accident.

One of the world's leading neuroscientists, Professor Antonio Damasio, has written extensively on the consequences of Gage's injury and its implications for decision making.

Based on medical records at the time and brain reconstructions, Damasio suggests that the iron pole cut through his brain and disconnected the logic centres located in his frontal cortex from the emotional centres such as the amygdala and anterior cingulate cortex, located further back in his brain. Prior to the accident, the railway company that employed Gage considered him one of the most capable men in their business. However, after the accident, his character changed. Although he could answer basic logic problems, he was unable to make decisions, or he would make decisions and abandon them almost immediately.

Gage's inability to make effective decisions led neuroscientists to realise that decision making requires emotion. If emotion doesn't reach our pre-frontal cortex, it becomes impossible to evaluate the quality and validity of any data, and this immobilises our ability to make a decision.

To decide on anything, we must tune into our emotions, not dismiss them as irrelevant or weak. Emotions are part of what makes us human. They are critical to our performance. We must rehabilitate the whole idea of emotions if we want to improve governance in any domain, including sport. Emotions are not strange obstacles to decision making; they are central to effective decision making. Excluding emotions is neuroscientifically impossible and rather than trying to 'keep the emotions out of it' we must understand emotions and use them effectively.

Decision making by individuals - The five levels of the human system

Let's look at how the human system really works, so we can understand how emotions work, how they affect cognitive processes and how any of us can improve our personal decision-making capability.

We can see the five levels of the human system affect each other at virtually every sporting event in the world. Sport is a fantastic context for seeing how emotions and cognition interact to impair both decision making and performance.

For example, golf's Jordan Spieth won The Masters in 2015. He was 21 years old. His return to Augusta the following year looked promising. Despite not playing his best golf, he was leading the field at the 10th hole on the final day. What followed was more a disaster class than a master class. He carded back-to-back bogeys, a quadruple bogey, and a pitch in the water. Danny Willett won.

Normally when something like this happens, which is reasonably frequently in golf, one of the commentators will lament, 'Ahhh. It's a funny old game, golf' as though it is a complete mystery why these things happen. But Spieth has some spectacular company in the meltdown department. In 2013 in the first edition of my book *Coherence*, I opened with the almost identical story of Sergio Garcia, who gave the exact same disaster class in the 2006 and 2007 Open plus the 2008 PGA Championship, losing on the last day despite playing blistering golf all week. Further back, Greg Norman was on course to win the 1996 Masters but didn't, and Jean van de Velde famously blew a three-stroke lead on the 18th at Carnoustie in the 1999 Open. Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson both had shockers during the 2006 US Open. These, and Rory McIlroy's final round at the 2011 Masters or Adam Scott's spectacular demise at the 2012 British Open, all testify to the fact that most are skilled at giving a disaster class on their day every bit as easily as they may provide a master class.

Of course, this drop in performance is not unique to golf; it happens in all sports and in business. People consistently underperform in all walks of life, making poor or sub-optimal decisions so often that sometimes it's a wonder we make any progress at all. Disaster classes in business can have massive financial repercussions for the organisation and for society too – we just don't normally hear about them or get the opportunity to witness them in real-time as we do in sport.

But contrary to most sports commentators' wisdom, there is nothing mysterious about the sudden loss of form, the precipitous failure, the calamitous shareholder or directors' meeting, or the disastrous media interview. The reason it happens, on the golf course or in the office, is that we simply don't understand what's really driving performance in the first place.

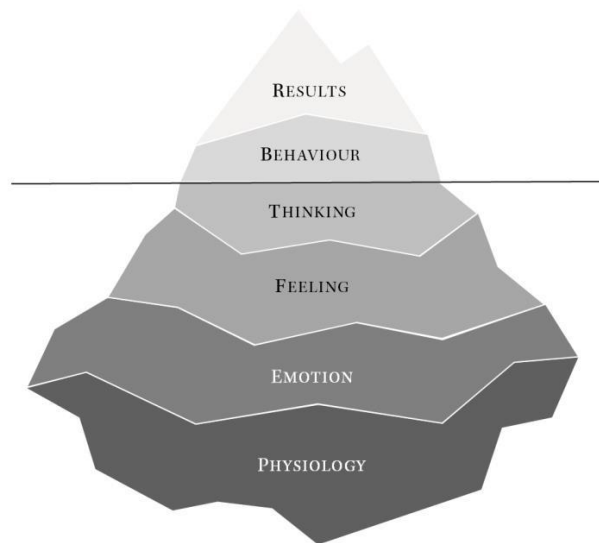
In sports (and in business), it's all about results. Results are how we measure success. To be successful, we must make good decisions. To make good decisions, we must understand how our system works, make the right choices and do the right things. That sounds easy in theory, but how can we ensure we do the right things in practice?

The start point is behaviour. Behaviour is the final common pathway to improving results. If we can change behaviour or what we and others are doing, then we will change the outcome. And this is true whether we're talking about sporting results, improved governance, increased financial performance in business or better academic results in school. This is why many organisations are obsessed with leadership behaviour, or why in society we debate anti-social behaviour. In sports, we talk about what we need to do to win.

But focusing on behaviour and behaviour alone will not deliver sustainable improvements in results. Every manager already understands that knowing what needs to be done does not mean that it will get done. The answer to elevated performance does not, therefore, lie in behaviour alone. Suppose we really want to improve performance and crank out our A-game every single day. In that case, we need to look deeper into what's happening on the 'inside' of us and not just focus on the 'outside' or the visible surface behaviours (see Figure 1).

There is no mystery to performance: our effectiveness and the results we achieve start with something much deeper in the human system than behaviour – our physiology.

Figure 1: The five levels of the human system



If we want to guarantee that people actually do the right things to deliver the desired results, we need to understand what really drives their behaviour. In order to answer that question, we need to peel back each layer of the human system, one by one, to understand the deeper drivers of performance.

Firstly, what drives behaviour is thinking. What we think determines what we do. Our thoughts determine our actions and our choices. If I'm coaching an Olympic athlete and she thinks I'm an idiot or that what I'm saying is rubbish, she's not going to do what I suggest. Why would she? As far as she is concerned, I'm an idiot talking rubbish! So, I'll fail to persuade her to do anything differently. And if she doesn't change her thinking, she won't change her behaviour, and she won't get different results. But even if I manage to change what she thinks, that's still not enough. We need to go deeper beyond mindsets, cognitive processes, and psychology. We must peel back another layer.

Most athletes and coaches and certainly many of the golfers mentioned earlier now work with sports psychologists to help them with their thinking or mindset. Most business leaders have employed some sort of psychometric testing to measure reasoning or analytic skills. Or they have commissioned psychology-based coaching to help try and improve the quality of their thinking and that of their senior management team. But getting to grips with thinking isn't enough to change the outcome. Why? Because what we think or how well we think is determined by something more fundamental in the human system, and that's how we *feel*. How we feel has a very direct impact on what we think.

There is, of course, a reciprocal relationship between thinking and feeling. How we think affects how we feel, and how we feel affects how we think. But if thinking and feeling engaged in an arm wrestle, feeling would win every time. This is why feeling, rather than thinking, is really the primary determinant of what we do.

When Jordan Spieth started to drop shots, his feelings took over, and no amount of thinking or sports psychology work on his mindset could halt or reverse that process. It's not easy to overwrite a feeling with a thought, whereas a feeling of 'worry' or 'stress' can dominate an individual's thinking all day.

So, if we want to change what people think, to ensure they change what they do or how they behave and improve their performance to achieve better results, we must change the way they feel. But let's imagine you could change how people feel. It still wouldn't be enough to consistently change the game. Why? Because how we feel is determined by something even deeper in the human system, and that is raw emotion, or more accurately *e-motion* (energy in motion).

The reason it's so hard to control or change the way we feel is because of the raw emotion that is coursing through our body without us necessarily realising it. And this raw energy is our physiology.

What's driving our behaviour is our thinking, which is largely determined by our feelings. Feelings are the awareness in our mind of our raw emotions. Emotions are nothing more than the composite physiological signals from every bodily system. And this is the real reason Spieth lost. His physiology changed; his emotions became turbulent, and he didn't realise it. He couldn't feel it, but this physiological shift, this shift in his internal conditions, meant that he was unable to 'read the external conditions', the wind, the curve of the fairway, the lie of his ball or the break on the greens. This led to impaired thinking and poor decisions that ultimately cost him back-to-back green jackets. There is no mystery. There was just a human being not functioning at his best because he didn't understand and didn't control the myriad internal signals and processes that need to be balanced to consistently perform at his best. He didn't understand the five levels of the human system and how they interacted to impair his decision making and his behaviour.

So, if all success starts with physiology, what is physiology? Physiology is just data or information streams that each bodily system generates all the time. As you read these words, your body is taking care of a million little details that keep you alive – there is constant activity. Vast streams of data are being sent and received from one body system to another in the form of electrical signals, electromagnetic signals, chemical signals, pressure waves, sound waves and heat-waves.

If we add all these physiological signals together, then we have an emotion. An emotion is simply all of this 'energy-in-motion'. Every single second of every single day every human being has an *e-motion*. Why? Because our heart is always beating, creating electrical data, pressure data and so on. At the same time, our lungs are expanding and contracting as we breathe in and out, our gut is digesting, our muscles are moving. Our emotions are aggregations of all this data.

But we don't all have a feeling. A feeling is the awareness in our mind of all this energy-in-motion. The emotion is always there, but the feeling may not be. If we are unaware of our energy, if we feel nothing, then the emotional turbulence in our system will affect our cognition without us realising it. Emotion will affect two aspects of our cognition – what we think and how well we think it. This is what stopped Spieth from winning. The content and quality of his cognition were impaired, and he didn't know that because he wasn't feeling the energy-in-motion.

Our ability to make good decisions is impacted by our biology.

The first step in improving the quality of our thinking and, therefore, our decision making is to sense our physiology and feel our *e-motion*. This is called 'interoception'. If our interoception is poor, our emotional awareness will be poor. This is likely to lead to poor emotional regulation, and that's what impairs decision making. It's not the fact that an emotion is present; it's unregulated emotions that impair decision making.

To improve decision making, we must understand our emotions and develop the ability to manage them rather than 'take the emotion out' entirely.

Emotions and governance

If governance is about 'who decides who decides' and the person deciding is angry or frustrated, then the quality of their thinking will be impaired by the turbulence of their emotion, and their decisions are likely to be sub-optimal. Emotions are absolutely critical to the decision-making process. But when organisations debate governance or try to improve governance, they rarely, if ever, consider the subject of emotions, let alone emotional regulation, as a way to improve governance.

Poorly regulated emotions don't just impair the decision making of a single individual. They also impair the decision making of boards, committees, and teams. This is why groups of people under pressure often make poor decisions, or the governance in organisations with a fear or bullying culture is very poor. It is all traceable back to the inability to regulate emotions.

Cultivating an awareness of our emotions and our biology is an essential step in improving our decision making. Performance – on the field of play or in the boardroom – depends on controlling the bottom three levels of Figure 1. One simple way to do that is through precise breathing techniques – not deep breathing but rhythmic breathing. This helps to stabilise your physiology, improving the quality of the signals being sent to the brain. From there, emotional regulation takes practice to develop the ability to respond to a challenge or crisis rather than just reacting in the moment. Such 'response-ability' necessitates the development of emotional awareness, emotional literacy, and self-regulation. There is a whole range of skills that can help you do this, and these are described in detail elsewhere.¹

Until human beings develop much higher levels of emotional regulation, governance will continue to be sub-optimal. But improving governance doesn't just require us to develop our emotional and social intelligence as explained above. It also requires us to develop the way we reach a decision when we work together in governance committees.

To watch Dr Alan Watkins' session on energy and resilience at the SGA Conference in June 2021, click [here](#).

¹ These themes and techniques for addressing them are explored further in two of my books: *Coherence: the science of exceptional leadership and performance*, 2nd edition, (London, 2021) and *Innovation Sucks! Time to think differently*, (London, 2021).

Part II

The evolution of decision making in groups

Today, most committees, teams or groups of people operate with two types of decision-making processes, neither of which they are usually aware of. Some collectives debate issues, and then the leader over-rules, adjudicates or personally makes a call. Less frequently, when collectives are unable to reach a decision, the committee decides to vote on it. But if we pull back and look at the evolution of decision-making processes over history, we can see that as society became more complex, so did the way that groups made decisions. Societies basically step-changed the sophistication of their decision-making processes to handle the increasing complexity they were dealing with.

It can be instructive to identify which of these decision-making mechanisms are still operating in teams and committee rooms today – a useful exercise for all readers when considering their own organisations. Characteristics from different mechanisms and different stages of development can be present in your organisations, boardrooms and teams – and even across different parts of these. Recognising the characteristics can help in understanding what the next level of development should be for those collectives.

Let's start at the beginning when the human race was grubbing around in the dirt. Back then, life was simple. It was just a matter of survival. People lived hand-to-mouth, and all decisions were driven by a need to survive. Hunter-gatherer societies were largely anarchic, with little organisational structure. Frequent battles would break out, and only the fittest lived to fight another day.

Thankfully, we've evolved a little, and most societies have moved beyond anarchy as a way of operating. But it's still possible to find hand-to-mouth existence in developed nations. The homeless often exist at this level of development, as do many people with mental health problems or substance dependencies. This stage of development is also where the long-term unemployed or the recently bankrupt operate. Individuals can only contemplate their own needs in their decision making and getting through each day is the priority. Decision making at this level is not complicated, and there are few variables to deal with. All that matters is the personal survival needs of right now; there is no need for future planning. Time horizons are extremely short. The needs of others don't really factor into decision-making. The inability to deal with the future, other people, and anything other than issues to do with personal survival means that people at this level simply can't handle any degree of complexity.

At some point, it may start to occur to the individuals in the grip of this daily battle that they would do better if they ganged together. Thus, anarchy eventually evolves, and groups of individuals start to come together to form tribes.

The emergence of the tribe

This evolutionary step and the shift in focus from self-interest to collective survival requires a profound change in the way decisions are made because people now have to partially consider the needs of others if they want to survive. Individuals can no longer impose their will on other members of the 'community'. With the emergence of tribes comes the realisation that the collective is more powerful than any single individual.

The first version of tribal decision making is mob rule. Small cliques emerge within the collective and will operate as a single 'alpha' unit, imposing their will of the rest of the tribe.

Mob rule is often violent, and it is certainly unpredictable. Cliques are inherently unstable, and allegiances can shift rapidly. Subtle changes in the pecking order could easily descend into a more primitive survival-driven decision making and shows of strength. Eventually, the people making the decisions for the tribe realise that stability of leadership is better for everyone than perpetual in-fighting.

Mob rule often leads to poor quality emotion-fuelled decisions. Over time the collective pondered how to stabilise the decision-making process, and gradually traditions emerged. In many tribes, tradition honoured the decision-making prowess of the elders. This was a functional way of making decisions, particularly if the elders regularly made the right call. But no one is infallible, and this system is always going to fail eventually, especially when the elders lack the capability or sophistication to make decisions around increasingly complex issues.

The primary dynamic in mob rule is an 'us versus them' mentality. If an individual is part of the 'in-crowd' then they will survive. Ongoing survival depends to a great extent on reinforcing membership of that elite group and polarising opinion against any outsiders. This manoeuvre creates stronger bonds between those who currently remain 'in favour' and protects the individual from rejection. However, cliques, mobs and gangs are inherently unstable, and people at this level of development live in perpetual fear of being usurped or rejected. This is one of the reasons they often have highly tuned instincts on where threats, be they competitive, financial, or physical, may be coming from.

Tribalistic decision-making governance is still common in most developed organisations. It can manifest as aversion to inclusivity and even as discrimination, including sexism or racism. A great deal of the conflict we see comes from such 'tribal war'. The security of one tribe requires the demonisation of the other tribe.

If the mob, gang, or tribe survives long enough, then a small degree of consistency often emerges, and this is a stabilising force. But at this level of development, there is still little real appreciation for how the world works, and while conventions may start to appear, decision making often comes down to strength in numbers, traditions, rituals, or superstitions. The inherent instability and the lack of a consistent direction eventually force the emergence of one of the most common decision-making methods in the world today in politics, business, and sport – autocracy.

The need for strong leadership

The failure of the tribe or gang to make real progress is an important evolutionary stimulus. The lack of progress aggravates some tribal members to such a degree that they feel compelled to step forward and grab the reins. With the emergence of this developmental level, the pendulum swings back from collective mob rule to a single individual who asserts themselves over the mob or tribe and controls its destiny.

This developmental jump signifies the emergence of what most people would recognise as leadership: a single individual taking charge and providing direction to accelerate progress. This is the emergence of autocracy. Of course, there have been autocrats since our hunter-gatherer days, but modern-day autocracy is a subtler version of its primitive ancestor. Indeed, autocracy is alive and well in virtually every nation on earth and in every sphere where organisation exists, be that sports, government, business, or society in general.

One of the great benefits of autocratic leaders is they make things happen. Such individuals succeed because they are much more sophisticated than their primitive aggressive, autocratic ancestors. In hunter-gatherer days, autocratic leaders asserted their control

through violence, but over the centuries most learnt that the threat of violence was more effective and much less messy. Gradually, intimidation became the currency rather than physical violence. The type of intimidation utilised by autocrats evolved. Today, for example, it may be the threat of the removal of sponsorship or patronage that autocrats use to maintain their power base and control others. A protective and loyal inner circle keeps such dominant figures in power. Usually, such loyalty is bought with fear, protection of sycophancy or mediocrity or the potential of succession. In their more primitive form, autocracies can be brutal and easily degrade into bullying. There have been plenty of examples of this across all sectors in recent years. And sport has not been immune.

But strong leaders at this level of development are not all bullies. This level of leadership development has been a source of progress in many walks of life. One of the primary benefits of autocracy is the speed of decision making. Power rests exclusively in one person who calls the shots. Such decisiveness is in fact extremely helpful in many situations. For example, in critical situations such as combat, when decisions often have to be made quickly, there simply isn't time for consultation.

Autocrats tend to run a 'hub and spoke' leadership model with individual meetings with each member of their inner circle. There is little interest or investment in the team. In fact, many autocrats would see the team simply as something that slows them down.

Many people, particularly at lower levels of development, find the simplistic polarised clarity offered by autocrats refreshing. Meetings with ten people when all the power rests with one forceful leader are at least straightforward - effectively creating a one versus nine decision-making process. However, as the world speeds up and becomes more complicated, command and control approaches often fail. They fail either because of their inability to handle complexity or to understand the changing conditions.

The autocrats are not interested in succession or sustainability to any great degree; in fact, they often take pride in how their system struggles once they have gone because this proves, in their mind at least, their indispensability. Much has been written on some of the less positive personality traits of autocratic individuals. Bookshelves are full of such biographies.

Despite the massive benefits of strong leadership and its accelerating nature on society, it's often the excesses of the all-powerful leader that trigger their overthrow and puts power back in the hands of the collective. The downside of any developmental stage always provides the evolutionary impulse for the emergence of the next stage in development – in this case, coalition.

Coalition – two heads are better than one

In the early days of the developmental move away from the absolute power vested in one autocratic individual several forms of power-sharing emerged. When a society is mismanaged for long enough by a single individual, eventually the collective creates a mechanism to curtail their powers or at least share some of their powers with others. Some of the earliest sovereigns ruled as autocrats, but eventually the power was diffused across the King and the Queen. When threatened with complete removal of decision-making power, it would be a relatively short step to acquiesce to power-sharing with a spouse because at least you keep it in the family or 'firm', as some royal families refer to themselves.

The decision-making power being vested in the King and the Queen was a very early form of coalition or co-leadership. But this evolutionary step from autocracy to coalition was a very significant change in the history of decision-making dynamics. It represented the shift away

from having one individual with absolute decision-making power, and it established the principle that sharing power may actually produce better results than restricting power to one person. Such dilution of power from the one to the two can take some time to become established in any system.

Coalitions, of course, create their own unique dynamics. Monarchy coalitions create a 'court' with an increasing number of people vying for favour and patronage by either the King or the Queen or preferably both. When there are two decision-makers in play reaching a conclusion becomes much more complicated, particularly when there is a surrounding 'court' of advisers and influencers on both sides. The benefit, however, of a decision-making coalition is that two heads are invariably better than one, and most 'pairs' can embrace a greater degree of complexity than any one individual. This greater ability to navigate complexity is possible because two people will have different life experiences and can bring different perspectives to the same issue. It enables any problem to be seen from more than one vantage point, and this can generate a more accurate view of reality, thereby increasing the chances of a more effective decision.

The emergence of coalitions with their ability to handle greater levels of complexity reflected and supported the increasing complexity of society. The basic dynamic of the earliest coalitions shifted the decision-making mechanism from the one versus nine vote seen in autocracy to a two versus eight vote in co-leadership coalitions. In the modern world, most people have experienced the upside and the downside of this form of decision-making system with their parents. This is the rule of 'mum and dad' (assuming you were brought up with both, otherwise it was most likely autocracy). While there are real advantages of such a process compared to the dangers of dominator autocratic hierarchies, there are also problems with co-led coalitions.

Coalitions do establish the principle of power-sharing, but they also plant the seeds of divisiveness. There are now two powerful views present in the debate, which can lead to divided loyalties. In fact, setting up a system that is 'parented' by two individuals who hold the decision-making power creates dependants or 'children' of the other possible stakeholders. As a result, one of the unintended consequences of such a system is that it can foster increased levels of immaturity. It also sows the seed of political manoeuvring as immature stakeholders seek to play one decision-maker off against the other, drive a wedge between the two or position themselves with the other 'children' in the system to create greater leverage on one of the coalition decision-makers. Coalitions can only work if people remain loyal to their side. Coalition, by definition, establishes the importance of political affiliation and the role of the court or lobby.

While the society and the decisions required within that society remain relatively simple, the power of the lobby or court is not that great. However, as society evolves and the number and complexity of issues increase, the sovereign decision-makers will invariably find themselves out of their depth – both in terms of time to address the issues and in comprehending the issues themselves. These twin challenges often spawned the advent of 'special advisers'. Those in charge, initially the King and the Queen and subsequently the head of each coalition party, cannot be seen to lack knowledge and so would need to be 'briefed'. Of course, the quality of specialist advisers varies significantly. If the decision-makers themselves lacked maturity, then the specialist advisers are often no more than cronies or 'yes' men and women who fluff up their ego and source or commission reports that simply validate the decision makers' original opinion.

As the range of issues that needed to be decided upon increased, rules had to be established to guide how decisions were reached and the role of the 'court' in those decisions. In the very early forms of coalition the rules around participation were often seen as more important than the decision itself.

There are plenty of examples of healthy coalitions that work well in the modern world where two titular heads drive the system forward. In business, this can be the CEO and CFO or in sport, the Performance Director and the Head Coach. In government, it could be the Prime Minister and the Chancellor.

The common denominator for all these decision-making variants is the realisation that power must be shared by an elite and rules must be in place to prevent autocratic dominator hierarchies from developing. However, some of the less evolved versions of this level of development are often held together by exactly that – an autocrat or dominating figure to whom the coalition have acquiesced. But even these examples will eventually mature as the collective gradually wrestle more power away from the autocrat and vest it in the coalition. One great advantage of the focus on rules is that it brings a degree of stability and sustainability. Change now requires not just a change in the opinion of the autocrat but a change to the rules and a change of the opinions of the members of the coalition.

The step-change in stability and sustainability compared to autocracies meant that political systems at this level of development lasted centuries. Many countries are still largely operating from this level of development, albeit a slightly updated version. The primary learning from this level is that rules work. Over the years, such rule-based systems gradually developed by creating more and more rules to address the increasing complexity of the societies they are trying to govern. This resulted in the emergence of bureaucracies.

Bureaucracies, like any new level of development, provide significant advantages over the previous level, which is why they survive. But they also come with a new set of problems. As with every level, it's the problems of that level that provide the evolutionary stimulus for the emergence of a new form of government. The next level of governance was perhaps the most dramatic leap forward in the evolution of decision making that the world had ever seen: democracy.

The rise of democracy, freedom and the final frontier?

Most of us in the West have grown up with a story about democracy and how it is the most sophisticated governance system on the planet - the 'final frontier' and the ultimate form of governance. The narrative we have been fed is that all societies, as they evolve, will inevitably become capitalist, multi-party democracies, where all people vote and are 'free' to decide their own destiny along with many other untold benefits. Like all great stories, this narrative has some truth to it.

Democracy has delivered many wonderful things to the world, including freedom in many dimensions, equality (at least in part) and improved civil rights. It's almost impossible to overstate the benefits that democracy has brought to societies that have embraced this level of development. Democracy certainly allows a more sophisticated decision-making process than was available at the previous level of co-led coalition and its many variants.

The narrative concludes that any nation – or organisation – that has not yet realised that democracy is the answer has simply not yet seen the light. The advocates of democracy have sought to export it to the world over the last 60 years. This campaign has, in fact, been incredibly successful. The story became a best seller. As a result, the number of 'democracies' on the planet increased from 45 in 1970 to 115 in 2010. At its peak in 2000, 63% of the world had bought the democracy story.

Since 2000 democracy has been losing some of its lustre. Even in its stronghold in the West, the narrative is looking increasingly outdated. Western democracy is looking increasingly

synonymous with corruption, debt, and dysfunction. Democracy is also guilty by association with its similarly tarnished sibling – capitalism, itself increasingly under the spotlight and in urgent need of reinvention.

The danger in all this is that as the democratic narrative collapses globally, we revert to ethnocentric divisions and all the problems that they create. Given the crisis, a number of authors have advocated that we need to look again at the conditions necessary for democracy to properly take root, or alternatively, we need to ‘reboot’ or ‘rethink’ democracy in some way.

If we understand the healthy precursors to democracy and make sure that when democracy starts to emerge, we don’t erode the infrastructures or deregulate the rules that provide societal or system stability, then democracy is likely to sustain. If we also encourage meritocracy, greater pragmatism, and inclusion, then we may create the conditions for democracy to not only succeed but to create a platform for the next developmental leap beyond democracy – social democracy or sociocracy.

Social democracy and sociocracy

The failures of democracy and its fall from grace need not result in a regression to an earlier form of governance and decision-making and all the problems that this would bring. Instead, the failures of democracy could spawn a step forward into the next evolutionary stage.

At least, this is true in principle, but history has already shown us that the next stage of sophistication beyond democracy can itself be problematic and become entrenched in slow decision making and stalled progress. This ‘failure’ can further reinforce the belief that we need to reinvent democracy because it may be the best available option we will ever find. However, take heart: a quantum leap forward awaits those that are prepared to look beyond democracy and its more sophisticated sister social democracy or sociocracy.

Social democracy or sociocracy emerges out of the dysfunction of democracy. Democracy is a system that can be gamed. In such a system, the currency often becomes Machiavellian manipulation and manoeuvring. There is a belief that the end always justifies the means. Anyone who disagrees with this ‘do whatever it takes to win’ philosophy is either accused of being ‘out of touch with reality’, ‘not a winner’ or champion.

Elitism abounds in democracy because there is now a malleable system that can be bent to the will of the few who know how to ‘play the game’. Arguments are leveraged to make a case for control to be in the hands of the few so they can achieve their own personal objectives, and the goals of the participants are usually money, power, or possessions.

Sociocracy emerges, in part, to address all the inequities that democracy fosters. One of the driving forces for social democracy is the increasing abhorrence of the marginalisation of large sections of society and a realisation that if we continue to privilege the tiny minority excessively, then ultimately, this will destabilise the whole of society. There is a wealth of data to suggest that societies with greater levels of inequality do badly on a whole raft of measures, including educational attainment, infant mortality, adult health and happiness. Negative outcomes can similarly be identified in organisations with inequalities of representation and insufficient regard to diversity and inclusion. The reader will no doubt be able to think of a number of examples.

The main challenge slowing a more widespread evolution to social democracy is that those countries operating under social democracy have not produced results significantly better than democracy, and so there is no compelling incentive to provoke a rethink of the

democracy narrative. For most observers and commentators, the kind of system that emerges at this level is also not clearly distinguishable from what already existed. Despite its potential, sociocracy has not really produced a step-change in the sophistication of decision making and has not created a new system more capable of embracing the increased complexity of the planet.

In theory, successful sociocracies should create a mature coalition of forces that proactively seek to take a more pluralistic approach. The social coalitions that are created at this level of development are more complex and nuanced than the coalition seen at the earlier level of development, and they should be able to embrace greater complexity.

The reason that many attempts at sociocracy fail to deliver on their potential is that they often get bogged down in the swamp of consensus. A desire for inclusivity starts an endless debate to reach agreement but with no one able to drive integration of diverse opinion. As a result, discussions become circular with each party stating and restating their perspective in the hope that the other side will capitulate. Since there is often an implicit understanding that such capitulation would not be a good outcome, the conversation gets stuck. Part of the problem is that the protagonists are often insufficiently mature to appreciate that compromise normally means one side effectively imposes its view on the other side and they just surrender. Such a 'win-lose' dynamic ultimately results in a 'lose-lose' outcome. The side that surrenders never fully engages with the outcome and often secretly plots against it, so the imposed outcome rarely comes to pass anyway. Both sides lose.

Social democracy can go one of two ways. It can collapse back and reinforce the validity of the narrative that democracy is the best we can hope for, or it can set the stage for a monumental leap forward in the sophistication of decision making. A level of sophistication that is both disruptive and transformational in equal measure. A system that, when installed effectively, can literally help reinvent governance and organisations. This system is Holacracy.

Holacratic governance

Holacracy itself is a term coined in the US. It has been described as a 'comprehensive practice for structuring, governing, and running an organisation. It replaces today's top-down predict-and-control paradigm with a new way of distributing power and achieving control'. It is a new operating system which instils rapid evolution in the core processes of an organisation.'

At the core, holacratic process requires an organisation to change the way it approaches decision making and governance. Holacracy seeks to clearly define where all the key decisions get made and delegate the decision-making authority as close to the action as possible. To handle the level of complexity that exists in government and business, there are several key principles that make holacracy a more sophisticated system that can provide a step-change in sports governance in an accelerating world.

Principles of holacratic governance:

- Must move from 'predict and control' to 'sense and response' to enable speed and agility.
- Appreciate that we can change any decision at any time.
- Solutions only need to be 'good enough for now' (not perfect).
- Change the way we see 'problems'. People can 'hold tensions' on behalf of the team and organisation. A problem is not seen as 'Bob's problem', rather Bob senses a

tension within the system. Thus, tensions get channelled into organisational learning and a change in how things are done (organisational development).

- Appreciate that the integration of multiple perspectives is not the same as forced inclusivity.

One of the core holacratic processes that facilitate faster, more sophisticated decision-making is 'integrative decision-making' (IDM). The value of IDM is that it transcends democratic process, which often produces a six versus four vote. The goal of the IDM process is to create complete alignment within a team and generate a ten versus zero vote. This is achieved without getting stuck in the consensual spiral of sociocracy. Being able to rapidly reach a genuinely collective, mutually agreed upon ten versus zero decision within a board, a governance committee or any team saves a huge amount of time and energy. It's no longer necessary to neutralise the effects of the minority that are unhappy with the decision because no one must 'tow the party line' and plot against the outcome.

The downside of holacracy is that it can be quite complex and difficult to implement on a large scale. While it can be implemented within a governance committee and can drive profound benefits for all those within the system, the decision-making power is still held by a few individuals.

Crowdocracy transcends this and genuinely gives decision-making power to all the people.

Crowdocracy

Crowdocracy includes the upside of holacracy while also honouring the benefits of all previous decision-making approaches from autocracy to democracy to holacracy. All these approaches can still be utilised when appropriate and still exist in crowdocratic systems. But crowdocracy aims to take us from the ten versus zero holacratic outcome to very high levels of alignment on a much greater scale. It taps into the wisdom of the crowd and avoids decision making by an elite, a self-selected few, be they autocrats, democrats or any sort of 'representatives' - elected or otherwise. It offers us a new model for rapid decision making on the wicked problems we face. But if we are to embrace crowdocracy and all the immense potential it brings, we must, as with all previous levels of development, understand the conditions that must be in place to make it work so it can deliver on its promise. A failure to do so runs the risk of crowdocracy going the same way as democracy. Like all governance systems, crowdocracy cannot be imposed; it must be embraced.

Conclusion

If we want to bring sporting governance into the modern age, we must understand how decisions are made at an individual and collective level. To do that, we must understand both the role emotion plays in the decision-making process and the evolution of decision making within collectives.

What is often seen as a loss of form – be that on the field or in a business context – is fluctuation in those factors ‘below the line’ in Figure 1 affecting our thinking and our actions which in turn produce results. Developing emotional literacy helps us to regain control of these processes. More effective emotional regulation will deliver more mature and balanced individuals who can work more effectively within their boards and committees and make better decisions. Understanding the processes at work also contributes to improved energy management, a crucial skill vital to performance, dynamism and the ability to respond effectively to situations. As complexity in the world increases and the challenges facing individuals and organisations grow, the need for this becomes more pressing. Recent times have demonstrated this clearly.

Collectively, a board or committee that understands its own developmental level and can embrace a more sophisticated decision-making process from anarchy to crowdocracy can transform its own fortunes. Such a transformation will establish more capable, nuanced leadership that will deliver success well into the future. Anything less and sporting governance will fail to adequately deal with an accelerating world.

It behoves leaders of organisations and those with governance responsibilities to make an honest appraisal of where they lie in terms of their development, to assess how they make decisions and to establish a fuller understanding of what is really at play when we are faced with decisions. ‘Deciding who decides’ is one step; a crucial investment is to then equip them to make the best decisions they can.

About the SGA

The Sports Governance Academy is the governance support hub for the sports and physical activity sector. A partnership between The Chartered Governance Institute UK & Ireland and Sport England, we champion good governance because we are passionate about the role it plays in enabling the success of individual organisations and the sector as a whole.

Our goal is to improve the standard of governance in sport and physical activity organisations by supporting, developing and connecting the people in the sector who work with, and have an interest in governance. Our services are designed to meet the diverse needs of an audience that includes governance professionals, those with governance responsibilities as part of their role, chief executives, board members and everyone who has an interest in improving the way their organisation operates.

We provide:

Resources

A trusted set of free resources that support all areas of governance activity. Our guidance, templates, checklists, webinars and blogs are designed to help you get to grips with governance and drive success in your organisation.

Learning

Our practical training will build your governance skills and confidence. We currently offer sports governance courses at introductory and intermediate levels, as well as training for chairs.

Community

Our community is an active network of people who are facing similar governance challenges in the sports sector. Being part of it provides you with the support and experience of others and creates new opportunities for collaboration.

Find out more by visiting <https://sportsgovernanceacademy.org.uk/>