

MATTHEW SYED

## Golden girls prove the key to success lies in delegation

Sports Journalist of the Year

**Matthew Syed**

August 31 2016, 12:01am, The Times

The Olympic hockey champions benefited greatly from empowering everyone in the squad

DAVID DAVIES/PA

Share

In his seminal account of how the tide turned in the battle against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) between 2005 and 2008, General Stanley A McChrystal talks about the power of delegation. The commander of Joint Special Operations ripped up the rigid hierarchical structure of the forces combatting the insurgency and took what seemed like a high-risk decision: he pushed authority down the chain of command.

“[I realised that] the role of a senior leader is no longer that of controlling puppet master, but that of a crafter of culture,” McChrystal would later say. “When you give people responsibility, more often than not, they step up.”

Footballers behave like idiots for that is how they are treated

The turnaround had many components. The US forces on the ground had real-time information that the leaders back at base couldn’t possibility keep pace with. Allowing people to take decisions without going up and down the command enhanced agility and speed. AQI, small in number but fleet of foot, suddenly found a previously sluggish opponent right on its heels.

Something else happened, too. As the level of responsibility increased, so the troops became more responsible. Instead of requesting or, worse, hogging crucial assets (like unmanned aerial vehicles), they started to share. They realised, as McChrystal put it in his book, *Team of Teams*, that “it would be used in a context even more critical than their current situation”. They were already working gruelling hours, but found renewed energy, too. Slowly, the tide began to turn.

I was thinking of all this in the context of a fascinating hour on Monday spent in the company of Helen and Kate Richardson-Walsh. They are not just outstanding athletes who helped Team GB hockey to gold in Rio, but deep thinkers too. Kate, the captain, is almost certainly a future head coach. Helen, who is doing a psychology degree, reads copiously on strategy and leadership.

# THE TIMES



Perhaps their most startling insight was the extent to which Danny Kerry, the outstanding coach, delegated authority “down the chain of command”. The players decide when they do their daily training. They determine the written rules and behaviours against which they are held to account. They choose the captain via a vote. For some, this must sound like anarchy. In fact, the chain of command became stronger.

“If you give people responsibility, if you bring them into the decision-making, they take ownership. They become more committed. The entire dynamic changes,” Kate said. “Even the younger players step up. Why would you wish to break a code you helped to create? There have to be well-defined limits, of course. We all understand that many key decisions are taken by the coach. But it isn’t weakness to delegate; it is a sign of strength.”

Richardson-Walsh’s insights tally with rigorous research into corporations. The psychologists, Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo, found that empowerment improved employee satisfaction. Kenneth Thomas and Betty Velthouse, two management academics, found that “the decentralisation of authority created intrinsic motivation”. As McChrystal put it: “People who make the decision are more invested in it.”

Football, however, typically adopts the opposite model. Authority, both de jure and de facto, is centralised in the manager. He takes all the decisions. The players are (all too often) conceptualised as lazy, unintelligent and mutinous. They receive instructions like labourers and are expected to mutely carry them out. Motivation is of the crudest carrot-and-stick variety.

When they play badly, players are shouted at. I have seen pre-match team talks that have consisted of little more than ranting. Managers are so wary of allowing players to think for themselves that they wave wildly from the touchline. Treated like infants, players become infantilised. They start to misbehave. Incipient leadership qualities are crushed. Initiative is obliterated. Players opt out of decisions even when it comes to their own personal lives, delegating to often duplicitous agents. After all, how is an infant to make a judgment call for himself?

You can trace this, as surely as night follows day, to the way England play in major competitions. As the pressure intensifies, the more they look around. When they are required to step up, as against Iceland, the more they retreat into institutionalised insecurity. The more the coach gesticulates, the more they quiver at the very prospect of taking responsibility on the pitch.

This hints, too, at the competitive advantage of Germany. Football, there, is positioned as an intelligent game. Players are brought into decision-making on training, development and rehabilitation. They are encouraged to take further education. The class divide (gaffer-manager against player-labourer) is seen for the sordid anachronism it is. This is why their national teams are so imbued with leadership qualities on the field of play when it matters most.

Sir Dave Brailsford, the architect behind the success of Team GB cycling and Team Sky, deploys a model very similar to British hockey. He calls it CORE, an acronym for Commitment, Ownership, Responsibility, Excellence. “When you give cyclists responsibility,

# THE TIMES



you empower them,” he said. “Bringing riders into decision-making, while retaining ultimate authority, has been one of the most important cultural changes we have made.”

That doesn’t mean that coaches never speak sharply. Shane Sutton resigned as technical director for British Cycling after allegations of bullying, which he denies. But it is vital to realise that there is, psychologically speaking, all the difference in the world between being chastised for breaking rules that you yourself created, as opposed to rules dictated from above. Many of the most successful riders in Rio thanked Sutton for reminding them, sometimes forcefully, when they flouted the code they had personally authored.

Some readers will doubtless say that footballers should be treated like idiots for that is how they behave. This is to get things the wrong way around. They behave like idiots for that is how they are treated. There are limits to rational delegation, to be sure, and it takes true leadership to define and enforce them. But without meaningful delegation, you lose an irreplaceable resource: the initiative and resolve of the most important people of all — those on the front line.

When American forces left Iraq, AQI started to grow again, but the turnaround between 2005 and 2008 was nothing less than spectacular. When McChrystal tried to improve performance without delegation, the number of raids increased from 10 to 18. When he judiciously delegated, this figure “sky-rocketed” to 600. “These raids were more successful, too,” he has said. “They were eliminating a higher percentage of their targets.”

The McChrystal gambit remains one of the most influential events in recent military history, but it has implications that extend way beyond modern warfare. Football, please, take note.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/treat-people-like-idiots-and-thats-how-they-behave-wk5m0sgl7>