

Leadership is a Major Constraint to Athletic Success in Kenya

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Abstract

Kenyan sport faces unprecedented leadership challenges despite notable global success in middle and distance running. In the recent past, there have been all sorts of media highlights including players sleeping on the floor at an International Airport while on transit for a crucial match; suspension of Athletics officials, player protests, arrest of officials, among others. In addition, researchers and ad hoc task forces document reports of corruption, nepotism, incompetency and poor leadership at Institutional, Federation, National Governing Organizations and Ministry levels. This article seeks to shed some light on how leadership is a constraint to sporting success in Kenya. The central argument is that leadership has not kept in step with the advances in athletic performance on the field. There is need for leaders in the sport industry to scale up their skills, ambitions and operations to transform their areas of jurisdiction. Change starts with individual leaders and this is the moment to shift gears to position the athletes and their performance at the center of organizations ahead of individual administrative aspirations.

Keywords: Athletics, Kenya, Olympic Games, National Governing Organizations, Leadership, Sport

Introduction

Kenya has earned a great reputation as an athletics powerhouse. This was quite evident in the World Athletics Championships in 2015 when against all odds, Kenya emerged as the number one nation ahead of the US, Jamaica, Great Britain, Germany and Russia, among others (BBC 2015). This exemplary performance was followed by great success at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games as well as the 2017 and 2019 World Athletics Championships. Despite these great accomplishments by Kenyan athletes, there is poor leadership as evidenced by the following media coverage:

1. Stranded Gor Mahia players sleep on airport floor hours to big game. Also Kenya Prisons Service Women's Volleyball Team was stranded in Egypt over lack of funds. Similarly, in November 2019, Harambee Stars, the National Soccer Team for Kenya were almost kicked out of their Hotel room for nonpayment. However, the hosts came to

their rescue moments before playing an African Cup of Nations Qualifier on November 7, 2019 (Kennedy 2019)

2. Kenya's Paralympics team on May 6th, 2019 resolved to protest at State House after futile attempts to get their wages. The team was earlier kicked out of a Nairobi hotel they were staying in due to unsettled bills. The government had failed to pay them their dues despite having won 42 medals when they represented the country in Morocco for qualifiers to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.
3. Leadership crises before, during and after the 2016 Rio Olympics. Ahead of the Rio Olympics, Kenya was constantly in the news for all the wrong reasons as the target of a media campaign to expose alleged doping in Kenyan training camps. As if that was not bad enough, two Kenyan officials were expelled from Rio Olympics amid a new anti-doping controversy followed by allegations of stolen kit meant for athletes (Njororai, 2016, 2017a; Omulo, 2016).
4. Senior Rugby players boycotted playing for the national sevens' team to protest reduction in their salaries (Jones, 2019).
5. Immediately following the 2015 World Athletics Championship three senior athletics officials from Kenya, including the late Isaiah Kiplagat, David Okeyo and Joseph Kinyua, were provisionally suspended by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), accused of subverting anti-doping processes and potentially diverting sponsorship funds from Nike (Gibson, 2015; Phillips 2018).
6. Kenya continues to be among the prolific exporters of track and field athletes.
7. Supersport pulled out of bankrolling the operations of FKF/Kenya Premier League in 2017.
8. Universities' WhatsApp sport groups are dominated by themes pertaining to abuse of eligibility rules for participants, funding shortfalls, failure of teams and Officers to confirm and show up on time for events. Additionally, complaints are voiced regarding leaders' abuse of power and failure to adhere to the constitution, selfishness evidenced by leaders attending global events

without student representation and constant personality differences at the expense of student athletes.

It is absolutely challenging to develop sport and achieve great results on a sustainable basis in international competitions in an environment characterized by the fiascos referred to above. However, Kenyan athletes have showed a strong resilience, determination and focus to continue shining despite the poor leadership. Some of the recent positive endeavors include:

1. Kenya successfully hosted under 18 world athletics championships in 2017.
2. Kenyan team at Rio Olympics won 13 medals and individual runners continue to excel especially in City Marathons. Eliud Kipchoge, for example, became the first human to run a marathon in less than two minutes (1:59:40) in 2019, while Brigid Kosgei broke the women's world record in marathon that had stood for 16 years in 2019 (Butler, 2019; Keh, 2019).
3. Kenya won 5 gold, 2 silver and 4 bronze at last World Athletics Championships to rank second behind the USA.
4. Kenya qualified for AFCON 2019 after a 15-year absence.
5. Nairobi, Kenya to host 2020 IAAF World U-20 Championships.
6. Kenya has vibrant sporting programs in most institutions especially schools, colleges and universities as well as State Corporations.
7. Physical Education, PA and Recreation are part of curriculum in schools.
8. KU, UON, MMUST, etc produce graduates in Sports related fields.
9. Kenya is competitive in world competitions in team sports such as Sevens Rugby, Women's Volleyball, Cricket, etc.
10. Kenyan women now out-medal male athletes in some world events.
11. There is a growing body of research and data on Kenyan sport.

Although this list is not exhaustive, it shows that with better leadership, Kenya can enhance its brand as a sporting powerhouse. Currently, success in various international events especially the dominance in track and field by Kenyan athletes hides inefficiencies and errors by those charged with the responsibility of administering and leading the country's sports programs (Njororai, 2003, 2004, 2007a, b, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017a, b; Omulo, 2016). Leftie and Olilo (2016), captured Kenya's leadership deficiencies at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, thus:

“A veteran coach expelled from the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro for impersonating an athlete has exposed the shameful depths of mismanagement that has seen the Kenyan team hurtle from one crisis to another. This emerged as the Sunday Nation (Kenya) on Saturday learnt that morale at the Team Kenya camp in the Brazilian city is at its lowest after weeks of problems including chaotic travel arrangements, inadequate training kit, questionable allocation of slots in the Olympic Village and doping-related bribery allegations against a top official”. (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/The-scandal-of-Kenya-s-Rio-Olympics/1056-3343980-kvao27z/index.html>).

Despite the shambolic plans for traveling to and from the 2016 Olympic Games, the Kenyan athletes excelled in their events especially on the track and field. Some of the key manifestations of failed leadership include the following, in no particular order:

1. Poor leadership structure that allows the same people retain a grip on their leadership positions. Recycling the same leaders for too long makes it difficult to new entrants with fresh ideas to make inroads into the organization. This cuts out new and fresh ideas to propel the sport forward.
2. Prevalence of accusations of corruption and partiality in selecting athletes for international assignments.
3. Lack of proactive action on doping control and education. This has seen many athletes failing drug tests or failing to appear for testing.
4. Absence of a proper monetary compensation structure for athletes who represent the country in international competitions. The reward system is ad hoc, erratic, and therefore unpredictable from one event to the next. This makes it hard for athletes to plan around it.
5. Instability or even absence of National Federations' secretariats. A secretariat is the nerve center for any successful sport organization.
6. Poor management of sponsorship contracts and the resources meant for developing the sport. Indeed, stealing of athletes' training and competition kit is common, while sponsorship money has been diverted to personal use.

7. Lack of coordination and direct linkage between organizations that identify, nurture and provide the young talent such as schools, colleges and universities and the national federations (Njororai, 2003, 2016; 2017a, b).

Perception by Sports Science Graduates on Leadership in Kenyan Sports

A pop question in June 2019 to University Sport Leaders, who are graduates of Physical Education/Sport Science via a WhatsApp Group on what ails Kenyan sport elicited the following responses:

- a. Sports Federations: Lack of Visionary leadership, lack of merit in personnel appointments and player selections, no secretariats for some organizations, lack of or limited personnel to run secretariats for Federations, nepotism in hiring and athlete selection, scarce expertise, corruption. Federation officials were also said to focus more on self- survival, were greedy, reward selves and kin, overstay in office, and acquire poor quality kit for teams. It is also apparent that there is an absence of governing structures in organizations which has led to a low or no fan base for many sports in the country. Poor attendance at competition venues for national sports, together with lack of expertise and corruption tendencies, contribute to the inability to secure corporate sponsorships. The absence of proper governing structures and effective secretariats have constrained the federations in developing and promoting their respective sport brands. This makes it difficult to effectively promote, market and secure meaningful sponsorship from the commercial sector.
- b. Sports Ministry: Other responses pointed out the inadequacy of budgetary allocations for Sports ministry due to poor projections from the Federations and Sports Ministry itself. They also pointed out absence of capacity development for employees and volunteers. One aspect that stood out was the fact that top Ministry Officials are unreachable unless there is a crisis. Most people running sports lack requisite competencies, and one person alluded to the fact that an animal that best captures the ministry is either chameleon or headless animal. This is because of the constant changes in the way they handle issues from various teams. There is no consistence which reflects their lack of

expertise and ignorance even when leading teams abroad.

- c. County Governments have now emulated the National Government by their failure to invest appropriately in sport development as well as enforcing the provisions of the 2013 Sports Act.
- d. At institutions, sport is vibrant. However, the funding is minimal, and the sport function is hampered by corruption, misuse of funds and poor leadership.

Nurturing and Sustaining Athletic Talent and Hard Work

Kenya is one of the countries where sport is highly regarded and when the summer Olympic Games begin, Kenyans watch with great interest. It is also during these Games that the nation puts away its persistent political bickering to root for her sports men and women on Olympic duty. Before departure for the games, the President of the nation hosts the team delegation and officially hands to them the official national flag as a way of commissioning them to embark on an enormous patriotic mission to represent the nation with honor. It is a patriotic duty! Over the years, the athletes have lifted the name of Kenya high and her national anthem is heard regularly, with pride, around various track and field host stadiums around the world. However, even as the athletic success has earned a positive image for Kenya, as individuals, athletes have also earned reasonable compensation from their sweat. It is therefore not easy for Kenya to lose its reputation as the source of athletic talent as many aspiring athletes grow up knowing that they can make a decent living out of their athletic endeavors. This burning desire to escape from poverty and the rewards that the emerging athletes earn from their effort, combine to ensure that the pipeline of talent will continue to bring to the fore many other potentially successful athletes (Njororai 2003, 2004, 2007a, b, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017a, b). However, one of the major challenges to Kenya's talent producing pipeline and athletics reputation is the incompetency among the leaders of the various sporting organizations. Despite the popularity and widespread participation in Kenyan sport, the administration of the various sports suffers from multiple problems including weak financial management and poor leadership, poor governance and failure to invest in long-term talent and personnel development. For example, Otieno in Nyanjom (2010) captures the endemic leadership problems in Kenyan soccer by stating that:

In the last decade, Kenya's football administration has drawn significant negative global interest as a result of poor governance

and corruption. Public wrangles for power, widespread mismanagement, ethnic antagonism and political intrigue have typified football in Kenya, leaving many industry players and the public disillusioned. More importantly, corruption and negligence in the management of football robs Kenya's youth of valuable and sorely needed opportunities and hampers socio-economic growth.

It is, therefore, obvious that as much as there is huge expectation from the Kenyan citizenry as well as athletic potential that can spur success, there exist serious organizational factors of the sport that require investigation, analysis and intervention if the situation is to change for the better (Njororai 2017b). What makes the situation intriguing is that continued dominance of middle and distance running by Kenyan athletes in spite of the organizational deficiencies within the country.

Sport Performance Factors

To succeed in sport, a country must have the necessary political, sociocultural, economic, personnel, infrastructural and institutional frameworks that provide a decent environment for sports persons to excel in training and competition (Njororai 2003, 2010, 2016; Njororai et al., 2006). Indeed, there must be a culture that supports elite performance. Fletcher and Arnold (2011) interviewed national performance directors about their perceptions of best practice for leading and managing teams in preparation for Olympic competition. The results of their study highlighted the multifaceted nature of orchestrating elite performance, involving the development of a vision, the management of operations, the leadership of people and the creation of a culture. Thus, the whole sporting structure has to be well solidified leading to involvement in sport at local, regional, institutional and national levels, both recreationally and competitively so as to be ready for global challenges (Njororai 2017b).

The performance of individual athletes, clubs and national teams in training and competitions can be conceptualized in terms of the factors that influence performance outcome (Njororai 2000, 2003, 2010, 2016, 2017b). These factors affecting sports performance can be grouped into two, namely internal and external ones. The internal or inner factors are individual based and include one's disposition in terms of physical abilities, technique, physique, tactics and psychological orientation (Njororai 2000, 2003, 2010, 2016, 2017b). These factors are, to a large extent, amenable to training except for their age and height

that are outside the hands of coaches. Sport coaches try in their day-to-day engagements to improve or modify these individual-based factors so that they can produce winners. In addition to the internal factors, there are the external ones which include funding (finances), facilities, equipment, incentives, technical and administrative personnel, policies, officials, sport structure at national, regional and global level, among others (Arnold et al., 2012, Njororai 2000, 2003, 2010, 2016, 2017b). Kunath in Singh (1982) argued that 'sports performance in international competitions and tournaments not only denotes the high level of efficiency of an individual sports person but also gives expression to the overall efficiency of a nation, "society and culture"'. The countries that produce medal winners at major international competitions also have political, economic, social and cultural conditions which are indispensable for producing world champions. The absence of conditions which act as a medium in which sports training can be effectively carried out minimizes the achievements at a high-level sports competition. In athletics, for example, world champions produced by the former East Germany and Russia were not only the product of their coaches but as much of the societies, cultures and political systems to which they belonged at the time (Njororai 2000, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2016, 2017b; Singh 1982).

The search for success has compelled many governments and national sports organizations (NSOs) to continue to invest heavily in supporting their participation in international sporting competitions. These investments typically focus on preparing a comprehensive bid to become a host nation and/or adopting a systematic, strategic approach to the development of elite athletes (De Bosscher et al., 2008) and to broaden the level of participation at the grassroots. According to De Bosscher et al., (2006, 2008 and 2011) the sport policy factors leading to international sporting success can be classified under the following nine 'pillars': financial support, integrated approach to policy development, foundation and participation, talent identification and development system, athletic and post-career support, training facilities, coaching provision and coach development, national and international competition and scientific research.

Although these are important 'pillars', Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) argued that 'these policy and strategic level developments alone will not guarantee international success; to attain and sustain successful outcomes such initiatives need to be inspirationally led, effectively managed and competently executed'. Hence, if nations wish to maximize the likelihood of success at the international level, they must not only

design and develop effective elite sport policies but must also have the right personnel in place to lead and manage their national sports programmes, competently respond to and address issues, and create, optimize and maintain a high-performance environment (Njororai 2017b). To better understand why some athletes, excel and others flounder in international competitions, the United States Olympic Committee commissioned a large-scale evaluative research project designed to discern the positive and negative factors that influence Olympic performance (Gould et al., 2002). Out of the many findings, it was consistently clear that the management of organizational related issues is a significant distinguishing factor in achieving Olympic success.

It is therefore imperative that for Kenya to sustain her excellent athletic success on the track and field, as well as elevating standards in other sports, there is need for sound leadership. The sports sector is crying out for leaders who can engage in these five practices of exemplary leadership (Kouzes and Posner 2007, pp. 14-23)):

1. Model the way: According to Kouzes and Posner (2007), exemplary leaders know that if they want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, they must be models of the behavior they expect of others.
2. Inspire a shared vision: Every organization, including sporting ones, start with a dream. Leaders in Kenya need to have visions for

their respective organizations and effectively share with the rank and file including athletes and the corporate sector if Kenya is to stand out as a sporting power.

3. Challenge the process: Leaders interrogate the status quo and come up with innovative ways of moving forward. Progress cannot be achieved by keeping things the same. Indeed, Kenya is crying out for sports leaders who can seek opportunities to innovate, grow and improve their respective sports disciplines and team performances locally, nationally and internationally.
4. Enable others to act: The success of organizations does not depend on only the efforts of one person. According to Kouzes and Posner (2007, p. 20), Grand dreams don't become significant realities through the actions of a single person. It requires a team effort. It requires solid trust and strong relationships. It requires deep competence and cool confidence. It requires group collaboration and individual accountability. To get extraordinary things done in organizations, leaders enable others to act.
5. Encourage the Heart: When pursuing dreams, there is going to be frustration, fatigue, discouragement and disenchantment. In all these, great leaders encourage their constituents. In sport, leaders need to stand behind their teams when they falter.

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