

**This case study investigates the role of the Olympic Federation in the transformational and authentic leadership of young people.**

The Olympic Federation stands firm in its guiding principles of the Olympic Charter: 'The practice of sport is a human right'. Everyone should be able to play sport 'without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.' (Pierre de Coubertin, Founder of the Modern Olympic Games).

De Coubertin was an educationalist, and believed that sport could contribute to the development of a better world, promote fair play, and serve as a means to educate and build the character of those that participated in it.

We can readily call on a wide range of beneficial humanitarian and education projects developed by the Federation for examples of how the organisation stands firm in its values; for example, via partnerships with the United Nations, rehabilitative programmes in war-torn regions, and a multitude of educational programmes.

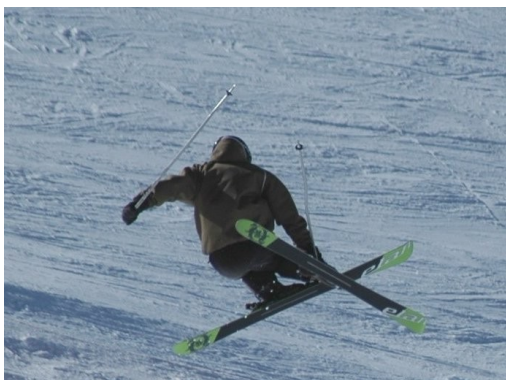


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We can further observe the heroic, positive acts of athletes that set the foundations for a thousand dreams in the hearts and minds of a young audience. The sporting records, performances and achievements of the fastest and strongest athletes in the world inspire our youth of today and tomorrow to become athletes, to excel in every area of their life, and to make positive choices.

Olympism therefore offers a powerful platform to motivate and inspire young people to be the best that they can be; to make healthy choices and to perform beyond expectations. Such a concept shares striking similarities with the most dominant paradigm in modern-day leadership studies; *transformational leadership*.

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Bass and Avolio (1994) state that transformational leadership occurs when leaders no semi-colon stimulate others to see new perspectives; articulate the vision of the organisation; develop others to higher levels of ability; and motivate others to put organisational interests before self interests. A strong morality must also be possessed by the transformational leader. The demonstration of transformational behaviours and morality in a leader is statistically correlated with superior levels of performance across a range of industries (business, education, religion, sport) and continents. The existence of morality as a defining factor for success has strongly affected the development of the newest and most dominant paradigm in current leadership theory, authentic leadership that requires authenticity, honesty and integrity from the leader for successful leadership outcomes to occur.

### ***Authentic Leadership***

Proponents of Authentic Leadership argue for higher standards of leadership behaviour and call for greater congruence between a leaders' message and their actual actions. In Australia, Bhindi and Duignan (1997) called for greater authenticity in leadership to counterbalance toxic influences such as rampant corporate managerialism and the increasing dehumanizing, political expediency, subterfuge and hypocrisy people experience in their workplaces and private lives (see also Duignan and Bhindi, 1997). The authors place a central focus of ethical behaviour and spirituality.



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### ***Authenticity Issues***

When one observes the Olympic Charter, and the many Olympic initiatives promoting peace and solidarity, one might conclude that the Olympic Federation offers an interesting and valuable example of transformational and authentic leadership. After all, the organisation works alongside the United Nations, provides developmental opportunities and funding to third world countries, and inspires youngsters all over the world to choose a healthier way of living, to chase their dreams, to play fair and to be the best they can be.

However, some people have questioned the authenticity of the Olympic Federation in terms of its demonstrated coherence between the Olympic Spirit and its actions. A brief sprint through the 1900's shows us why such questioning might have emerged. One might consider, for example, the way in which the Olympic Federation expelled Gold-medal winning US athletes Tommy Smith and John Carlos from the Olympic Villages, following their now iconic Black Power Salute (Mexico, 1968).

Another famous example was the decision taken by the Olympic Federation to award the Games to Nazi Germany, a move that assisted the legitimisation of Hitler's Third Reich. Evidence of human rights abuses directed at Jews existed at the time, but was ignored by the Federation, and Hitler was to go on to successfully utilise the Olympic Games as propaganda tool, largely via the commissioning of the Leni Riefenstahl docu-film *Olympia*.

### ***Use of Riefenstahl Footage in the Vancouver 2010 Games***

This example actually re-emerged during the recent Vancouver 2010 Games. The Olympic Federation took the decision to use 22 seconds of footage from the Reni Liefenstahl film *Olympia* as the opener for a major Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics promotional video. Use of this 22 seconds required the editing out of Swastika's in order to include it in the Vancouver 2010 video in an acceptable way. Such a decision has caused some parts of society to question the authenticity of the Olympic Federation in terms of conforming to its own principles (that sport should be practised without discrimination).



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### ***Authenticity and Big Business***

It should be remembered that the Olympic Federation is a corporation, one that has developed an extremely successful and powerful brand. This brand is built on a powerful image that expounds the virtues of the Olympic spirit, that carries notable political clout and that seeks brand loyalty, profit generation and market share above all else. One must not lose sight of this fact when considering the authenticity of any organisation; that it operates under the auspices of capitalism and that its bottom line, above all else, is the generation of income. This is not necessarily a bad thing!- but it does raise an interesting question as to whether Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives are in general really authentic, or simply used as a tool to promote the brand (a concept as applicable to any organisation as it is to the Olympic Federation).

### ***Summary***

Is the concept of the Olympic spirit simply a brilliant marketing tool used to sustain market share and build profit, or does the organisation actually believe in these principles? If the former is taken to be true, then we should fairly expect to see significant levels of authenticity demonstrated by the Federation. Some people believe this to be very much the case; others do not.

### ***The case for authenticity:***

The Olympic Federation have inspired young people across the world to choose sport; athletes have provided us with incredible role models, and numerous educational and social initiatives have allowed the Olympic Federation to help individuals across the world to lead a better life. Work with the United Nations provides a testament to this, and the concept of the Olympic Truce is a lovely example of the promotion of peace. When viewing these concepts one could easily argue for authentic leadership within the Olympic Federation.

### ***The case against authenticity:***

It is possible to argue that the Olympic Federation lacks authenticity, based on the many instances of corruption and questionable human rights-related decisions that the Federation has been responsible for. According to some (e.g. those demonstrating against the awarding of the Games to China), it is possible to argue that the founding principles and *modus operandi* of the Olympic Federation appear to lack coherence, and that the only positive messages to really arise from the Games are generated by the athletes (something that the athletes achieve in any competition that they compete in). A potential concern might be that some young people become disenfranchised from the inspiring message of the Olympic spirit, based on their knowledge of the student protests before the Mexico Games (when many lost their lives), the treatment of Tommie Smith and John Carlos after their Black Power Salute, the treatment of the Black September situation at the Munich Games, the controversies of the torch relay of the Beijing Games, the awarding of the Games to

Hitler's Germany or the use of the Riefenstahl film to promote the Vancouver Games.

**START THE DISCUSSION**

- What is transformational leadership?
- What is authentic leadership?
- Why are morals and ethics viewed as being so central to both leadership models?
- Some detractors believe that the Olympic Federation helped legitimise Hitler's Third Reich by awarding the 1936 Games to Germany. Do you think that this criticism is fair, or that sport and politics really do not, and should not, mix?
- How do you feel about the use of Riefenstahl footage in the Vancouver promotional materials?
- Higher morals = maximised profit is not a message we are used to hearing. Why do you think this is the case?
- Do you feel that the Olympic Federation is an authentic organisation?
- Debate: Form two teams and debate the following motion: *This house believes that the Olympic Federation is an authentic organisation.*
- Do you think it is the athletes, the Federation, or both, that are responsible for creating the inspirational messages that are generated by the Games?

**FIND OUT MORE**

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***CREDITS***

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