

## **SPORTS AND LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: LESSONS FROM RUTH BEITIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses the subject of female leadership in sports. In this paper we will focus on the figure of Spanish athlete Ruth Beitia, a retired high jumper who is the reigning Olympic champion in women's high jump since 2016, being the first Spanish female gold medal in athletics.

First, we will provide a theoretical background reviewing the literature about women leadership in sports, addressing the new shift in visibility women have finally managed to achieve in this field. Female sports leadership literature focuses mostly on the importance of networking, mentoring, childhood experiences and the role of parents and coaches when shaping female leader figures in sports, including a section on the transformational style of leadership that has also been identified as characteristic of many female sports leaders. We will also address the more negative side of sports life: retirement, and the importance coaches have when preparing athletes to this change. Then, we will analyze the case of Ruth Beitia to see if these studies can be applied to her leadership style, focusing not only on her individual work but also on her support group and the strong influence of her coach, who has also taught her the importance of open, two-way communication. We will finish by offering recommendations for organizations' leaders based on Beitia's example.

### **KEYWORDS**

Leadership; sports; two-way communication; Beitia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in sports has increased, but there has been a decline in the number of women leaders in sport (Miner, 1993; Brown & Light, 2012; Klenke, 2017). As Klenke states, "the glass ceiling for women may be lower in sports than in any other industry" (2017, p. 257), and even though many organizations have made announcements about the need to improve this situation still little has been done. Besides, there is limited coverage of women's sports in the media (Miner, 1993; Klenke, 2017), and when media covers female athletes they are "subjected to objectification and invisibility" (Klenke, 2017, p. 270).

Amongst the different explanations for this situation, one of the most investigated is the patriarchal structure that seems to dominate sport and that might explain the difficulty to accept women as leaders (Miner, 1993), as traditionally sport was considered "a rite of passage into manhood that teaches competitiveness, self-discipline, sacrifice, teamwork, and dedication – values that will allow for independence and success" (Miner, 1993, p. 45).

There are many studies focusing on the importance of changing attitudes and beliefs regarding women leadership in sports, focusing on advocacy based on "networking, mentoring, systematic planning, creating and taking opportunities, and specialized training" (Depaw et al., 1991, p. 33). Networking is fundamental as it's a way to "share information, to provide support, and to inform and educate" (Miner, 1993, p. 48), as well as a possible predictor of future career success and a way of enhancing reputation (Wells & Hancock, 2017). Besides, "[s]haring power, influence, and expertise with other women through networking can help overcome traditional barriers in the male dominance of sport" (Depaw et al., 1991, p. 33). Women being willing to mentor other young women are essential (Miner, 1993; Depaw et al., 1991), as mentoring amongst other benefits "offers possibilities for career development, growth, and advancement" (Wells and Hancock, 2017, p. 139). In conclusion, having the right support group is essential, as according to Burton & Leberman (2017), "Individual leaders, in sport or any industry, cannot be 'successful' on their own. Leaders need the support of followers and the systems that underpin their organization" (2017, p. 7).

This progressive change in beliefs has produced an increase in women representation in leadership positions, especially in the business sectors, which has been attributed by many women to their participation in sports (Schull, 2017; Klenke, 2017), as this is "often believed to contribute to the development of leadership skills, and it is widely assumed and accepted that leadership skills developed through sport participation can serve former athletes well in their selected careers" (Schull, 2017, p. 111). These former athlete leaders serve as role models, which together with formal training and development programs will help shape future female leaders advancing into leadership positions (Depaw et al., 1991). The importance of having female role models in sports has been widely documented, as Klenke states:

*most influential women in sports should be celebrated for their ability to overcome many obstacles to break barriers and rise to positions of power*

*while also serving as role models for millions of women aspiring to reach great heights not just in sports, but all aspects in life. (2017, p. 257)*

Following these ideas women practice "leading by example" (Brown & Light, 2012, p. 192), as part of the more task-oriented approach to leadership.

The relationship between success, business and sports has been of interest for scholars, who wonder "Are successful women born competitive and drawn to athletics in their youth or do sports ignite a drive in women and teach them lessons applicable to business?" (Jones, quoted in Klenke, 2017, p. 259). This relationship might influence the kind of leadership women show (both in business and sports), which has been studied from different angles.

From the context of research on gender equity in leadership there has been an interest on the gender specific ways women lead. Per Brown and Light (2012), in the business sector there have been identified feminine approaches to leadership that show more democratic and transformational leadership styles, although this has not been the focus in sport leadership, where little attention has been paid to the different ways that women lead. Brown and Light's (2012) results show that women leadership places the emphasis on collaborative decision-making, with a team-oriented approach, encouragement of open dialogue, developing trusting relationships and leading by example (thus acting as role models). Their results also show that women leaders suggested that their current approaches to leadership were shaped by childhood experiences, including the relationship with their parents and having the support of a male mentor. Another aspect to be taken into account is the importance of gender role beliefs, which are transferred intergenerationally through socialization though different agents like "parents, peers, teachers, coaches, clergy, and the media" (Miner, 1993, p. 45).

The study of discursive constructions of leadership by women has found that they put a stronger emphasis in the importance of "open communication, working as part of a team, seeking consensus and including all points of view" (Brown & Light, 2012, p. 187), where women have a moral discourse of leadership that is grounded in "open, honest, collaborative behavior and an ethic of care" (Fine, quoted in Brown & Light, 2012, p. 187). This importance of ethics is related to Schull's (2017) idea that women peer leaders usually show a stronger work ethic and offer more positive feedback and motivation.

Transformational leadership is "empowering and inspirational; it elevates leaders and followers to higher-level needs of self-esteem and self-actualization" (Hackman & Johnson, 2013, p. 101). Most of the studies regarding transformational leadership applied to sports have focused on coach leadership and the influence of parents and peers, which has a result improved performance, enhancement of motivation and of perception of competence, self-efficacy, peak performance and consistency, amongst others (Álvarez et al., 2016). The influence and importance of coaches has also been linked to manager performance. In general, transformational leadership in sports "was positive associated with task orientation, learning beliefs, social affiliation and recognition orientation, and negatively related to capacity beliefs" (Álvarez et al., 2016, p. 322).

Finally, even though most of the studies focus on the positive outcomes of the relationship between sports and leadership, there are studies that identify the challenges of devoting your life to sports and the importance of coaches in this journey. Vargas Velázquez (2017) states how many sportspeople only dedicate their lives to professional sports, without working or studying. This has as a consequence that when their sport careers end, they are not prepared to transition into retirement and take the leap into other professional careers outside sports. In preparing athletes to life after retirement Vargas Velázquez identifies the importance of coaches acting as leaders, helping athletes be prepared to transition into retirement and especially keeping communicating with them after they leave their sports careers.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Spanish athlete Ruth Beitia is a retired high jumper (in October 18, 2017) who is the reigning Olympic champion in women's high jump since 2016, being the first Spanish female gold medal in high jump. She has participated in four Olympic Games (Athens, Beijing, London and Rio de Janeiro) and retired at the age of 38 with 16 medals in her possession, including winning two Olympic medals (bronze in London, 2012, and gold in Rio, 2016) and two consecutive Diamond Leagues. She has been awarded the "Spanish Sportswoman of the Year 2017" Award on a ceremony that took place on April 7, 2018, and named *Cántabra del año* on April 13, 2018. After her retirement, Beitia was an athletics lecturer in the Universidad del Atlántico Norte and the director of the Olympic Studies Centre in Cantabria, where she wants to apply the values that have guided her through her sports career (DM, 2018). She is also part of the Board of the Spanish Athletics Federation (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018). From leadership in sports Beitia made the jump to politics, and in 2011 she was duly elected as First Parliamentary Secretary for the Partido Popular (PP) in the Parliament of Cantabria managing the sports section, one of the Autonomous Communities Spain is divided into. Even though the PP lost the absolute majority in Cantabria in the 2015 election, Beitia was re-elected. She abandoned the politics sphere in 2019.

We have selected Ruth Beitia not only because she is a referent figure in sports, but also because how she has managed all her career. R. Beitia does not consider herself as a sportswoman or female in sports, but simply as "athlete", representing her country like any other person (personal communication, April 6, 2018).

We will focus on Beitia to see how she reflects the different kinds of leadership applied to sports resumed above. We'll analyze the importance of having the right support group, and if she adheres to Brown and Light's results that identified developing trusting relationships and leading by example as aspects of women leadership. We'll also see the importance of open dialogue and two-way communication and the importance of childhood experiences in shaping future leaders. Finally, we will also see if the role of her coach was influential in shaping her current leadership style and in helping her transitioning into sports retirement. In order to do so, we will analyze press articles to see how this is reflected on the news, as well as personal communications with both her and her psychotherapist.

## 3. RESULTS

Beitia defines herself as an organization, and as such she considers one person cannot do it all alone and needs the help of those surrounding her, from her trainer to her psychologist or her nutritionist (quoted in Navarra Capital, 2016). In this way Beitia has the perfect support group who helps her achieve success through collaboration, which aligns with Brown and Light's (2012) results. Beitia retired for a while after the London Olympic Games of 2012, where she finished 4th. As she says, "Life has given me a second opportunity" (quoted in Barreira, 2016), which she took to finally win the gold medal in Rio.

She considers her success is the result of having a multidisciplinary team ("Achieving a Dream", 2016) and blending this multidisciplinary team with family and effort. She includes in this group her coach, her psychologist, her manager, her massage therapist, her physiotherapist and her physical trainer, whom she considers a big family, being friends even after retirement (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018), which proves Burton and Leberman's statement that "Individual leaders, in sport or any industry, cannot be 'successful' on their own" (2017, p. 7). She considers this team a gift, something that makes her feel privileged, as they were there supporting and motivating her especially after she came back from her first retirement of four months (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018). This team has helped her improve all aspects of her life, for example her psychologist has given her mind wings to fly and given her the necessary tools to thrive in life, her massage therapist has helped her recover being there every week and her coach has been there every step in the way (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

She is also a role model for young athletic promises, mentoring them, which aligns with Miner (1993) and Depaw et al. (1991) suggestions to improve female leadership in sports. Saleta Fernández, one of the athletes she mentors, states that "she is a fighter, she does whatever necessary for colleagues and family" (quoted in Barreira, 2016). She is driven by passion and illusion, and she serves as role model also through her behavior, as when facing adversity, she states that "falling is not bad, on the contrary, you learn from your mistakes and you stand up again" (Beitia, quoted in Navarra Capital, 2016). Beitia leads by example (Brown & Light, 2012), and her rituals before jumping, like talking to the bar, smiling at it, raising her right arm and moving her fingers (Martínez, 2016) are widely recognized, something which she does unconsciously ("Achieving a Dream", 2016). According to her coach Beitia is "very methodic. Since she goes to bed the day before [a competition] until the competition is over, she has everything controlled, all calculated" (Torralbo, quoted in Barreira, 2016).

Beitia is also an example of the importance of childhood experiences shaping her leadership career, which aligns with the results of Álvarez et al. (2016). Beitia is the younger of five siblings, all dedicated to sports, and she says she spent her childhood in the athletic field (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018). Her father was the first in the family to participate in the Olympic games (Barcelona, 1992) as an athletics referee, and for Beitia dedication to sports was normal and encouraged from her parents, who also taught her family values through sports.

Her family has taught her sports values, sport was part of her education and all five siblings were encouraged to share sport as a family throughout childhood (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

Finally, we will see if the role of her coach was influential in shaping her current leadership style and in helping her transitioning into sports retirement as the sport leadership literature seen in the first section suggests. Ramón Torralbo, her coach, has also retired. He says that coaches also dream of achieving goals, like sportspeople, and that in athletics the greatest goal is to get a medal in an Olympic game. As a coach, what he is most proud is of his trainees finishing their studies, including Beitia who holds a Physiotherapy Degree ("Achieving a Dream", 2016). For him, Ruth achieved her dream because she had both the physical conditions and the psychical ones, because she did not put excuses, never gave up, and because she is a very positive person, always looking to achieve all her goals. Torralbo believes that as a coach he has passion for what he does, and he has clear realistic objectives. He considers work has to be done from a will to succeed and learning from your own mistakes. For Torralbo, Beitia follows her dreams and when an obstacle appears she has to overcome it in any way possible, never stopping or giving up. For Torralbo, it is in the hard moments when leaders appear ("Achieving a Dream", 2016). For Beitia the secret is motivation, as her coach and the other team members complemented each other when one of the members faltered (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

Torralbo has been more than a strong positive influence for Beitia. He has been her coach since she was 11, and she defines him as her 50%, someone who has helped her not only prepare for retirement but who has also acted as counsellor (she never took any step without asking him and her parents first), a fundamental figure for her (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018). Even after retirement Beitia considers Torralbo as a friend and part of her family, together with his wife and two kids (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

Torralbo has helped her throughout the way in her sports career but he has also taught her the importance of open dialogue and two-way communication. For her the secret is that:

*we have never argued, we have confidence in each other and he gives me balance. He takes into account my opinion, during training, about technique, we are guided by sensations, he lets me talk first and tells me if I'm wrong [...] He stopped being my coach long ago. I'm a Torralbo in his family, and he is another Beitia in mine". (Beitia, quoted in Martínez, 2016)*

Never arguing does not mean never disagreeing, but always reaching consensus. According to Beitia their communicative style was based on open, two-way communication. They both gave their point of view but they always looked for consensus, they have always been driven by sensations, maybe sometimes he was wrong, others she was wrong, but he always helped her find the way to truth through consensus (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018). For Beitia many sports people do not trust the people they have near them, they change their coach, their psychologist, their physiotherapist... Without realizing that maybe the problem is not outside, but inside them as they do not trust their team. She

believes the secret for her success is also the trust she had in her coach and her multidisciplinary team, trust built from the beginning when she started and grew into success, trust to have confidence and work together, learning to rise after falling and learning how to reinvent themselves so everything went fine at the end (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

Finally, Beitia shows the characteristics of transformational leadership, for her excellence is achieved through sacrifice and perseverance, she believes "high personal standards are the first step to leadership" and "sport forges values, the same values any organization has" (quoted in Navarra Capital, 2016). Like we've seen before, by acting as a role model and acting as a mentor she empowers her team members and the younger generations. She is a leader who trusts her multidisciplinary team, a trust she has not broken in the 23 years of her sport career. She applied everything she had learned after her first retirement when she returned to sports and took a new approach to her career, enjoying the journey and letting go of the "stones in her backpack" ("Achieving a Dream", 2016). She says that she values more the hug she gave her coach after winning the medal than the medal itself ("Achieving a Dream", 2016), proving the importance of team work and sharing success as transformational leadership qualities.

Beitia says that her coach thinks that "only her had that spirit of sacrifice, the perseverance, the self-exigency to achieve what I am today, an Olympic winner. Undoubtedly, self-exigency is the first step to leadership" (quoted in Navarra Capital, 2016). For her, these learnings can be applied to the business setting as business excellence is hard work, sacrifice, perseverance, learning to fall down, raise, and keep working (Beitia, quoted in Navarra Capital, 2016). For Beitia a great leader has taken the time to learn life lessons throughout the way –in her case the values she has learned from sport– and applied these learnings to life; the lessons she has learned are spirit of sacrifice, perseverance, to know how to win and how to lose, respecting rivals and respecting ourselves, which makes us improve in every aspect of life (R. Beitia, personal communication, April 6, 2018). Based on these findings, in the next section we will offer recommendations for organizations based on the leadership style and life lessons learned from Ruth Beitia.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: LEADERSHIP PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

The relationship between sports performance and business practice specifically applied to the business sector has been identified by many scholars, some of which focus on the lessons that can be learned from coaches, like LeMenager who states that "Managers can learn many things from coaches –how to bounce back from defeat; how to stay on top; how to maximize limited resources; and how best to communicate with their teams, to name just four" (2017, p. 86). Based on the lessons learned from Ruth Beitia after our analysis, we will offer some recommendations to organizations.

For Torralbo, Beitia has the following characteristics that have made her succeed: "Will to succeed, perseverance, dedication, spirit of sacrifice, motivation, self-esteem,

trust in herself, never give up, and age was not a barrier" ("Achieving a Dream", 2016). Leaders in organizations can learn that resilience is fundamental for their careers, and that besides the main characteristics of transformational leadership –being creative, interactive, visionary, empowering and passionate (Hackman & Johnson, 2013)– other characteristics like self-esteem and perseverance can take them a long way.

Besides organizational values, leaders should learn and encourage in their followers other general values, values that we've learned Beitia believes are forged by sport and that can be applied to businesses: spirit of sacrifice, perseverance, knowing how to win and lose, sharing, respect for rivals, friendship and determination (Navarra Capital, 2016).

As Hackman and Johnson state "descriptions of the ideal leader show a high degree of consistency, no matter the setting" (p. 352). Aspects like altruism, which "makes concern for others the ultimate ethical standards" (p- 356) are part of an ethical approach to leadership, and sports' values include ethics. Beitia is considered an altruistic person, according to her physiotherapist "she is heart, all heart" (A. Hernández, personal communication, March 23, 2018) and this helps her becoming a role model for younger generations. Leaders should aim to become role models for their followers, not only as successful leaders in their organizations but as people with strong values in real life, being consistent both in the professional setting and in the personal one.

Successful organizational communication includes open, two-way communication (Hackman & Johnson, 2013) as a way to build trust. Beitia's example proves the importance of this type of communication and the importance of trusting your team members. Organizational leaders can learn to select and surround themselves with the best people, trusting them even when things are not going well, as rotating team members out of personal insecurities will not be beneficial in the long turn.

Finally, we've learned that success came in Beitia's case when she let go of the "stones in her backpack" and began enjoying what she does, without pressure (quoted in Barreira, 2016). Organizational leaders can learn to let go of past failures and enjoy second opportunities, focusing on enjoying what they do best as leaders, letting go of the pressure and focusing on achieving realistic goals with the support and trust of their teams, which will be beneficial in the long-term.

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