



# THE BLUESTONE REVIEW

A review of culture and leadership in Australian Olympic Swimming



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This report is an abridged version of the Bluestone Review submitted to Swimming Australia on 30th January 2013.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Culture is a complex, multi-faceted and multi-layered phenomenon that is socially learned and transmitted between people. It is about behaviours, beliefs, symbols, norms and expectations. It grows over time and can be directed and shaped with strong leadership and sound methodologies.

The findings of this review were that cultural factors did play a significant role in the 'unpleasant' experience that many Australian swimmers, coaches and staff had at the London Olympics in 2012 and the culture did not appear to assist or support high-level performance for most people.

Realistically there was no single *headline* problem and no single '*bad apple*' in London. Neither did things just 'fall apart' all of a sudden in London. It seems instead there was a confluence of circumstances that built up over a couple of years and were not adequately foreseen or addressed by the leadership at Swimming Australia. The result was that in the midst of an Olympic Games that was widely regarded as excellent, the Australian swim team were considered underperformers and culturally questionable.

It seems that the most significant issue in swimming was the quietly growing lack of focus on people across the board. Participants reported that in the zealous and streamlined attempts to obtain gold medals, the delicate management of motivation, communication and collaboration were lost. The 'science' of winning appeared to whitewash the 'art' of leadership. Winning was viewed too mechanistically and the value of quality relationships, respect and shared experience was underrated.

There were some specific events and circumstances that brought issues to a head in London, many of which speak to the greater underlying themes on culture and leadership within swimming.

There had been a greater priority placed on individual preparation schedules for swimmers at the athletes' and coaches' requests and the head coach's agreement. This was seen as a response to both the rigid structures previously experienced, where an all-group schedule did not necessarily allow optimal high performance programs for each competitor across different event disciplines, and also some feelings of being tired, bored and over-saturated with meetings, regimens and the 'all in' camp style. Both athletes and coaches wanted and needed something fresh and this came in the form of increased flexibility to run individual or small group preparations in different locations and at different times. This strategy had many upsides for the individuals, but also many downsides for the team.

Some review respondents have suggested that instead of resulting in increased independence, the outcome was an increase in individualism, and in turn a diminished sense of responsibility or connectedness to the team.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED

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There were also a series of decisions and circumstances that meant that the opportunities to get together in the lead up to the Olympics were foreclosed (including the whooping cough outbreak at the AIS). Even when the team did get together at the staging camp in Manchester, there was only a five-day allocation.

The opportunity-cost of not being together as a group was high; the group never really morphed into a team. The individual nature of the sport, the lack of physical reliance on other athletes for personal performance (outside of the relay events), and the necessity of a narrow focus as the big event approached, meant that it was easy for swimmers to stick with what and who they already knew.

The formation of sub-groups was already likely in a team of this size, but fragmentation was compounded in the absence of familiarity and sufficient opportunities to connect formally and socially. Greater cohesion as a team would have needed to be intentional and cultivated by design.

The Olympic village environment, described as 'mayhem' and 'a candy shop of distractions' added to the dispersion of people and their attentions. There was also no low-key place to hangout, such as a team room, rehabilitation centre or medical room, which can often provide a hub of contact for athletes at events, and between athletes and support staff, a calm sanctuary that represents 'our place' rather than 'my room' or 'everyone's meals area'.

The London Olympics saw 24 of the 47-strong squad as first time Olympians, and it has been suggested that there was not enough induction. Many of the support staff who had worked together for years could communicate and reinforce roles, responsibilities, protocols, systems on the job and in situ. Culture and leadership expectations for these 'old hands' were defined and clear and expressed – such as ensuring that they held a manner and tone of coping, resilience and positivity around each other and the athletes. These were things that were talked about and agreed collectively. This was not so with the athletes and coaches. They worked it out as they went along, and collective team culture and expectations were not well navigated, but left to take shape organically.

It seems that much was left to chance and trust rather than design and deliberate action.

Expectations of podium success for the swimmers were high and have been for many years; Australia seems to expect a continuous, forever golden age from the swim team. They have been seen as the sure and true medal contenders within the Australian Olympic team since the dizzying heights achieved in 2000 on home ground. Perhaps because of the long and

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intimate history between Australia and England, there was a heightened expectation that Australia would again produce something special in 2012 on 'extended' home ground. Some people have described this expectation as hopeful rather than calculated however, particularly in the face of what has been described by some participants as 'soft entry times' for some swimmers to qualify, a young and transitioning squad, and the vast improvements across international competitors.

In the absence of a leadership voice from Swimming Australia to dampen the expectations that things would naturally be the same for the team as they had been for the last few Olympic competitions, the media reported, even bolstered expectations of the medal haul and overshot the mark.

Medals were almost considered guaranteed by the media consumers. There were attempts to tone some of the hype down, but mostly after the fact and once losses began to become visible, and it seems still there was no edict to change public and media expectations.

London was the first Olympic Games where the ubiquity of media, particularly social media, played such an influential role. The information landscape had changed dramatically since the Beijing Olympics and Australian swimming had not kept up.

There were 50 or 60 media personnel in the village before the Games began, and once the events started, the interest in swimming meant that there was a separate daily media conference for swimming attended by more than 250 journalists and reporters.

The media environment is possibly one of the most competitive at the Games, with content being consumed more rapidly than authentic stories of sport performance can replace, and thus the search for more 'colour' becoming ever wider and broader, creating heroes and villains along the way and stories that can sell weeklies as well as sports columns. In a sense, the lens has widened to show more of the human element than in previous Olympics. The public get to see other sides to the athletes such as social opinions, self-interest, relationships, egos and vanity that fly in the face of traditional notions of elite athletes as single-minded individuals dedicated to winning for their country. For some, the deeper exposure may have translated as a view of the swimmers as 'not caring' or emotionally detached from their duty to the taxpayers funding their dreams.

The media search for controversy is nothing new, but London was the first Games where the influence of social media was so dramatic. A news item that would previously have had a 24-hour lifecycle was instantaneously live and could be cycled and recycled for four or five days, which exacerbated the scrutiny that has long been a part of elite sport. The owners of

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commentary were also different, and there was no filter between the athlete and anyone who wanted to have an opinion on their performance, and that commentary did not need to be shaped with journalistic skill and experience, nor did it have any boundaries. Some athletes engaged deeply in public debate on what they were doing, how they were doing, and even on who they actually were as individuals. This served to fuel emotions, good and bad, at a time where calmness, intensive focus and consistency should have prevailed. Social media also allowed already disconnected athletes to seek support from sources external to the team, which again diminished the reliance on a unified team.

There was a perception that SAL was only interested in presenting the 'big boys and girls', the celebrity swimmers, to the media. In one 30-minute interview, 25 minutes were spent on one swimmer who had not yet raced. Some review respondents felt like this attitude was not only contrary to the spirit of the Olympics, but that it also drew more public thirst for spectacular entertainment that was then keenly unquenched. The Olympics is certainly about the best of the best, but the unchecked celebrity hype did nothing to amortize the risks of being perceived as failures if things did not go well. In addition, the glorification of a few was seen somewhere between embarrassing and irritating to other team members and added to a growing notion that the rest of the athletes were not really valued. One person said he felt that it was not really about whether you swam your heart out, it was about whether you could sell your heart out.

It seems there was some disconnection on the definition of success between SAL and the swimmers themselves. Some people felt that the emphasis in London was only on the results rather than the endeavour, and success was defined too narrowly as a gold medal in a team with so many of their number as first time Olympians. As the first week unfolded and scrutiny mounted, there was an increasingly desperate emphasis on gold and nothing less across popular and social media channels. One young swimmer described this focus as like looking at the sun – something you had to turn away from after a while. The perceived expectation that success could only be defined by a certain time, position or medal seems to have created an anxiety that some athletes did not tolerate well. It seems that individually derived markers and expectations became the antidote to public markers and expectations. Some made their own deals; a personal best was good enough, or the same as my previous time was good enough.

There were some comments among review respondents that a number of swimmers felt that being an Olympian was abundant success enough; they had no further expectation than being there and competing. Making the team earlier in the year was the win; the rest was a bonus, an experience to savour rather than a job to complete. As one participant stated, 'winning was a wish, not a want'.

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It seems that morale began to drop once the team started to lose in the first few days. Athletes reported that there was either praise for a win, or silence. There was not much else than winning to hang on to. People felt the failure very keenly while they were still in the midst of performance. It was a contagious feeling that had a high impact on the mood. Some athletes let their emotion play out as bravado, withdrawal, disinterest and sulking. People started to be less willing to truly reveal themselves. This tension was not nipped in the bud or reframed, indeed it was heightened with 'scuttlebutt' and assumptions and diagnoses of doom from the media and the pool deck; 'things aren't going well'. In the absence of psychological 'recovery work', emotional volatility was high. At the Games was too late to start learning how to cope with all eventualities.

Many participants talked about the Olympics being like no other competition on earth and the difference is something you need to hear about, prepare for and anticipate. One person noted that the Games are kind of like the Melbourne Cup horse race – anything can come from left field, anything can happen. The Olympic history is a history of glorious surprises and shock disappointments. The collective focus on responding in situ to many possible eventualities was perhaps not sharp enough for the swim team. 'Things were quiet and weird when someone lost. You just sort of went to your room and got out of the way.'

There seemed like there was no 'plan B' in terms of management tactics if medal success was not forthcoming. This was heightened further by the strong SAL and media emphasis placed on two events in which most people on the team would not compete.

Swimmers described these Games as the 'Lonely Olympics' and the 'Individual Olympics'. There was not much connection between groups of athletes, or between athletes, staff and coaches other than what was engineered reactively. There was no collective voice back to the media on behalf of the swimmers on either performance or personal issues, and as the first week unravelled, the swimmers felt undefended, alone, alienated and that no one 'had their backs' this year. They did not feel part of a galvanized community or that they were in partnership. They felt confused and unsupported by their own team in some cases and not supported well enough by SAL, even from the stands.

There was not enough emphasis on welcome or efforts towards inclusion that were considered and executed in partnership between staff, coaches and swimmers. In some cases people even missed out on sessions (such as the 'team building' basketball game) because of numbers and difficult logistics. The reasons for exclusion were not well enough communicated, and assumptions and impressions filled the gap where factual information and reasoning should have been. One swimmer said that he 'didn't know

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how to belong, it was the biggest moment in my life as a performer, and I felt uneasy and unsure how to be'. Swimmers seemed to have missed the power of a shared experience, and critically, of friendship. In simplest terms this meant it was a lot less enjoyable than they expected. It is plausible that emotional tension in the group built to disharmony and sometimes became exclusion and, in the rare extreme, animosity between athletes.

Some older athletes saw the storm brewing and attempted to intervene, but without a supported forum these attempts were seen by others as harking back to 'good old days', or as being negative and criticising. In the most part, such comments seemed to play out privately or through the media, rather than in safe, unified environments where experiences could be shared.

The consequence was an undertone of divisions, now and then, us and them, men and women, the best and the rest. Poor behaviour and disrespect within the team were not regulated or resisted strongly by other team members, and it was left unchecked or without consequence by staff and coaches on a number of occasions. Some individual incidents of unkindness, peer intimidation, hazing and just 'bad form' as a team member that were escalated to personal coaches were not addressed and had no further consequence. One athlete reported that 'I felt awkward, felt weird; I just kept my head down. I didn't know how to handle it; I just avoided it'.

It was noted that no one had the role in this team of 'running interference' to slow, manage or stop negative group dynamics. There were no influential 'eyes and ears on the ground' or 'go to' leaders, and therefore informal power brokers became critical, people with whom you need to stay onside with or out of the way of. It seems that there was a lack of authority (including moral authority) within the group, which occasionally peaked in a mood where the boldest took centre stage. At its least attractive, the team dynamic became like a schoolyard clamour for attention and influence.

Standards, discipline and accountabilities for the swim team at the London Olympics were too loose. Situations were left to bleed with not enough follow through for fear of disrupting preparation for competition. Although few situations relating to London reported through this review were truly grave in nature, they compounded in significance as no one reigned in control. There were enough culturally toxic incidents across enough team members that breached agreements (such as getting drunk, misuse of prescription drugs, breaching curfews, deceit, bullying) to warrant a strong, collective leadership response that included coaches, staff and the swimmers. No such collective action was taken.

Sometimes consequences for poor behaviour or for shortfalls on expectations and standards were not seen as being applied consistently, especially on petty boundary infringements such as missing meetings or

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED

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not turning up to support a team mate from the stands, and this left a bitter taste in people's mouths and became perceived as favouritism in the absence of explanations. Communication was at the athletes, about the athletes, but perhaps not often enough with the athletes.

There was a convoluted pathway to raise an issue with some athletes taking issues to their own coaches, rather than the head coach. The head coach and some support staff did not hear about the majority of the now reported incidents until they were back on Australian soil. Athletes felt disconnected from the head coach, and their sense of duty was localised. Things were 'managed quietly' rather than brought to a head, and several examples of coaches passing over the responsibility for hard conversations were given. It was noted that the individual coaches were intently focused on performance, and some had little interest in 'policing the culture or counselling swimmers'.

Some respondents regarded the staff team as highly under-resourced. Task-based issues around logistics, media, stakeholders, pool-performance, and team management took priority over team leadership from the top. Everyone just 'got on with it and got through it', resulting in a lack of focus on the team at a decision making level and possibly less space for 'the art' of coaching, leading, inspiring or relating. One respondent reflected that 'the essential stuff actually got missed in favour of the urgent stuff'.

Although there were world-class centralised psychology services provided at the London Olympics for the whole Australian team, there was no sport psychologist on the swim team. The sport psychologists had previously 'connected the layers' within the team and observed and intervened in the dynamics between people to ensure they remained functional if not positive. The psychologist also provided a safe and trusted environment for athletes, coaches and staff to manage issues (personal and performance) as they arose. This was sorely missed in the last few competitions.

The day after the Olympics finished, a review of the team's disappointing performance was announced before due consultation with either the board or the people at the coalface, which was seen as perfectly reflecting the mood of individual decisions as opposed to partnerships.

Very many participants in this review, not least the swimmers, were positive and passionate about the future of swimming, open to partnership and committed to progress. They want to inspire others and they want to be inspired themselves. Participants described their sense and understanding of what happened as something they realised retrospectively. People were enmeshed in the experience rather than mindful observers of their own and others' actions, and it is only with a rear-view mirror that facts and feelings have collided to create this 'truth'. What is clear, however, is that SAL must make it their intentional objective to avoid similar 'truths' about culture and leadership in the future.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### On standards and accountability

Improvements in processes and communication on standards and accountabilities should be addressed as a priority and embedded prior to the next major competition.

In order to effectively lift standards, SAL will need to start with establishing a shared view across athletes, coaches and the organisation on what the standards, rules and expectations should be, create methodologies for ensuring adherence and manageability, and critically, invest strongly in making sure people know what is expected, who it is expected of and who is accountable, and why.

The following steps are recommended:

- Create an 'ethical framework' for the SAL organisation from the board to the swim team using a thorough consultative process. An ethical framework is a stated position about what the organisation, team and individuals within it will stand for and what they will not stand for. It requires stakeholders to work through to a shared position on and enunciate what they believe they are there for, what their stated goals and ambitions are, and what underpins and guides their behaviour in terms of beliefs, values and principles. An ethical framework sits as a 'higher order' document for the sport, under which rules, codes of conduct, protocols etc fit.
- Update and refresh relevant internal codes of conduct for swimmers, coaches and staff, and team rules specific to camps and events. These should be aligned to the ethical framework.
- Design clear processes for managing issues around standards and expectations (particularly things that go wrong) that consider all relevant stakeholders. These processes can include decision making models, crisis management plans, communicating to the public and disciplinary concerns. Process owners should be nominated for each area.
- Ensure that the 'what, why and who' of standards and accountabilities is shared fully with those people who are affected by them. Initially a quality communication plan for disseminating and discussing outcomes of this review, the ethical framework process and the revised codes / rules should be undertaken. Communication on standards and accountabilities is an ongoing process however, and it should remain a priority focus at each camp and event in future, even as the culture matures.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

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- Create best-practice reinforcement processes within SAL including holistic program and person reviews, 360-degree feedback, opportunities to raise issues, concerns and ideas, and clear, agreed and measurable targets.
- Invest in benchmarking performance, culture and leadership standards within and across sports and measure SAL and the team against them. Such benchmarking acts as 'live research' and allows SAL to have a comparative 'dashboard' of their performance.

### On brand and communication

SAL need to wrest back ownership of the 'story of swimming' from grass roots to Olympic level. This involves brand, PR and media but importantly it also involves a considered strategy for connecting the many layers of the swimming community within a complex operation environment.

The following steps are recommended:

- Develop and implement a brand strategy in line with the ethical framework. This involves sharing and using the emphasis on the culture of swimming as part of authentic public positioning. As the culture strengthens, it becomes part of the swimming brand. If the ethical framework says that you believe that no single person is bigger than the team, then that directs the organisation's marketing and brand choices.
- Consider activating the swimming brand using many characters, not just the usual suspects, with broad ranging and regular social content about the sport generally and the lives of athletes as well as performance content. Consider utilising relevant and interesting content from other sources than Australian swimming.
- Ensure rigorous social media and other media policies are developed and updated in conjunction with regulatory bodies and subject matter experts. Wherever possible, athletes should be involved in developing or offering feedback on the development and utility of these policies. All athletes should receive comprehensive education on policies.
- Provide ongoing, regular forums for developing knowledge and competencies on how to engage with social media as well as traditional media with external subject matter experts. This includes providing guidance and support to internal users on best use, dos and don'ts and best narratives.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

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- Ensure that swimming's social media channels are actively managed within SAL. This means maximising and updating the available technologies to communicate with the swimming community and general public, recruiting and encouraging swimmers to communicate through SAL social media channels directly on swimming related issues.
- Invest in a specialist resource to manage public relations and brand that sits outside of the general media remit.
- Develop a multi-faceted communications plan that specifies stakeholder communication as a key business strategy for the next four years. This should consider how you tell the story of change around culture and leadership, how this is making a difference, what works and what is left to address. In order to gain momentum and buy-in, the narrative on change needs to be an authentic leadership narrative, something that is deliberately planned and spoken by the board, CEO, coach and athlete-leaders.

### On community and connectedness

To overcome the current fragmentation across the layers of the sport, between the various groups and stakeholders within the sport, within the Olympic team and between the sport and the interested public, SAL will need to make intentional connections. This cannot be left to take shape organically; it should be designed and deliberate.

The following steps are recommended:

- Develop innovative, realistic and well-planned team-building strategies for swimmers, coaches and staff between now and the next Olympics that have both a performance and social focus. Ensure that there is adequate time allowed for people to actually get to know each other before you expect them to be a team. This can be bolstered with good communications from SAL about who is who and what is new in between meetings. Consider utilising different methodologies for team-building, rather than just face-to-face, time intensive strategies. Engage with swimmers, coaches, staff and subject matter experts in the design.
- Get clear about the consequences for people (swimmers, coaches, staff, the board) who undermine the internal community through disruptive and unacceptable behaviour that is contrary to the ethical framework, codes of conduct and rules and be prepared to follow through with those consequences without exception.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

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- Review and invest in the strategic partnership position with the ASA. This involves repositioning them as a shareholder of the sport and an ally. The traditional rationale for such a partnership is to ensure fair and equitable representation of the swimmers in negotiations and discussions around their collective and individual rights as elite athletes. However, in addition to this, opportunity exists to partner with the ASA more fully in providing best practice programs on swimmer well-being, development, and transitions in and out of the sport, a world class alumni program using former swimmers as mentors and knowledge-sources, and community partnerships that involve the broader group of swimmers.
- Reinvest in partnership forums with internal community stakeholders such as ASCTA and sports science committees that have recently lapsed. This serves as a feedback loop, a source of credible expertise for the sport's progress, and a conduit for embedding right culture across the board. The coaches and support staff are very influential at the coalface of the sport.
- Consider creating and leveraging a best-practice community development program in partnership with a commercial sponsor, the ASA, the ASC and / or local councils that connects elite level swimmers with swimmers and their families at the grass roots participation level. Such a program may focus on specific themes such as health or water safety, and specific values such as team work, determination, anti-bullying or inclusion. A best practice model would include multiple or tiered opportunities for swimmers to be involved which included paid ambassadorial roles. Athlete managers should be consulted in the design of such a program.

### On leadership

There is a dire need to develop and enable leadership throughout swimming, and to orient people to consider leadership as personal, not just functional. Without consideration and design, leadership at the team level can be something that is tasked to the best in-pool performers, biggest names or most experienced campaigners in sport. First and foremost, the leadership of swimming should be in the hands of those people who are most effective and most competent *at leadership*. In no small measure, leadership involves the ability to inspire and influence others. The art of leadership cannot be lost to the mechanics of management for coaches and staff, particularly where your outputs are the results of human talent, effort and motivation.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

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The following steps are recommended:

- Introduction of multi-faceted, relevant and tiered leadership development programs for athletes that are competency based. These programs need to be real-time and situationally based but also involve other learning components, formal and informal, such as mentoring, topic coaches, modules, digital content and other resources. There should be discernment between programs aimed at established leaders and emerging leaders. Credible subject matter experts should deliver program content and consideration should be given to partnerships with formal learning institutions. Programs should have specific internal SAL 'custodians' with recognised responsibility for following through on delivery and quality.
- Invest in an intensive coach-the-coach leadership program for the head coach. The coaching assignment should be of three to six months minimum duration with an industry expert and commenced in the immediate future.
- In association with ASCTA and relevant learning institutions / industry experts, design a multi-modal professional development program for coaches and support staff with a focus on collaborative leadership. The program should include intensive blocks of face-to-face learning where groups participate together as well as independent elements such as mentoring and digital content.
- Enable the board of SAL to deepen their skills in ethical decision making and leadership through a focused and intensive board development program as part of an ongoing investment in good governance.
- Decide and communicate those leadership competencies that you believe are non-negotiable for SAL. Design a system of leadership accountabilities in-house and link these to learning and development programs, performance reviews and rewards for staff, coaches, the board and swimmers.
- Appoint leaders at all levels of the organisation based on leadership competency as well as experience.

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## WHO IS BLUESTONE EDGE

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Bluestone Edge is a consultancy business committed primarily to helping sports people and organisations flourish. We believe great people build sound cultures.

Our working models are based on good ethical thinking, optimal organisational performance and active leadership.

At Bluestone Edge we believe in building the capacity of organisations and people to be their best and give their best.

This means an authentic investment in people and a continued effort to make sport all it can be to society.

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