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LEADERSHIP DIAGNOSTIC PLAYBOOK · OPERATOR SERIES · VOL. 06

# The Martin Johnson Playbook — *what business leaders can take from how he actually ran it*

WITNESS: MARTIN JOHNSON    REFERENCE ENVIRONMENT: LIONS '97 · ENGLAND '03

OPERATING FRAME: SENIOR PEER GOVERNANCE UNDER A SPECIFIC LEADER

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This is not a tribute. It is an extraction. The reference environment is Martin Johnson's operating life as captain of the 1997 British and Irish Lions and the 2003 England squad — two systems that produced the only results their respective sports record as definitive in those years, against opposition that was, on paper, better resourced and more decorated.

What follows are nine operating principles his system ran on. Eight are drawn from Johnson's own account of how the team worked. The ninth is drawn from the moment one

of his coaches, Andy Keast, interrupted him at the end of the session to push back on his own framing. That correction is doing real work in this document, and it changes how the previous eight principles should be read.

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— PRINCIPLE 01

## The senior group runs the team. *The leader authorises the speed.*

Johnson walked into the 1997 Lions camp as a 27-year-old who was not captain of his club and not captain of his country. The room contained the captains of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. If any of those men had treated the captaincy as a status contest, the tour would have been lost in week one. They did not. The senior group conceded authority to the captain and then immediately got on with running the team alongside him.

Johnson's role was not to make every call. It was to make sure the right people were making them, and to authorise the speed at which they got made. The captain set direction. The senior peers held standard. Decisions on the field were made by whoever was closest to the moment.

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FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"It was about us trying to win, trying to be successful as a group and what do we need to do... I felt responsible to them more than the coach in a way."*

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FOR THE OPERATOR

The senior team either runs the company alongside you or you run it alone. There is no third option. If your senior people are treating their seats as status rather than as operational ownership, your organisation has a CEO and an audience. That works in good weather. It collapses under load.

The test is simple: when you are out of the room, do decisions still get made at speed and to standard, or does the building wait for you to come back.

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— PRINCIPLE 02

# Standard is set sideways. *Nottop-down.*

Twelve hours after winning the first Test in Cape Town in 1997, the players who had played the Test were back on the training field at 8am, in horizontal rain, holding tackle bags for the midweek team that had to play the Orange Free State 36 hours later. The call to be there did not come from the head coach. It came from Scott Gibbs, a peer.

That detail is the entire system in one moment. The most senior players setting the standard of the most unglamorous job, for the benefit of the players who had to do the next job. The standard was held by the people who would be on the field next to you, not by the people who would be in the stands.

## FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"You've got to go out in the rain, hold the bags for the midweek guys, because that's the job, that's the next job, everyone's got to do their role, might not be the role you want to do, but you've got to do it."*

## FOR THE OPERATOR

A standard the CEO has to enforce is a standard the senior team has already declined to hold. If your senior people will not call each other on the standard, you do not have a culture. You have a hierarchy of escalation.

The senior person doing the unglamorous job, in front of the rest of the organisation, the day after the major win — that is the most expensive and most effective standard-setting move available to you. It cannot be delegated. It cannot be communicated. It has to be done.

## — PRINCIPLE 03

# Decisions are made closest to the point of impact. *Including the ones that decide the outcome.*

The final passage of the 2003 World Cup final ran through three decisions made by people who were not the captain. Matt Dawson made the spontaneous break that put England in range. Ben Kay called the line-out that the inexperienced hooker did not want to throw. Steve Thompson threw the ball anyway. Johnson's role in that last minute was to back the call, run the support line, and not drop the ball when it came to him.

The captain was not the decision-maker on the move. The captain was the conditions in which other decisions could be made at speed by the people closest to the moment.

FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"I didn't have to make the calls most of the time. I didn't do it. Guys would see it, feel it, and they'd do it. That team could adapt and play in different ways, which I think is a sign of a very, very good team."*

FOR THE OPERATOR

The decisions that determine your quarter are not made in your office. They are made on calls with customers, in product reviews, in pricing conversations, in hiring rooms. If those decisions are being routed back to you for validation, you have built a system that asks the person furthest from the moment to make the most consequential call. That is not leadership. That is latency.

The test for whether your people can make the call is whether they already are. If they have stopped, you taught them to stop.

— PRINCIPLE 04

## The volatile interval has a protocol. *Not a performance.*

The 2003 England squad had a defined half-time routine. Nobody spoke as the team gathered. The first instruction was to look at where people were, what state they were in, before any words were used. The most emotionally charged interval in the operating cycle was the most heavily structured.

The same discipline produced the most telling moment of the World Cup final. At the end of normal time, with the game tied and extra time about to start, the head coach said nothing to the team. He trusted that the structure was in place and the senior players had it. He spoke privately to the goalkicker. The squad got on with running their own protocol.

FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"We had a way of dealing with half-time... instead of everyone coming in and shouting, we had a way of doing, you know, just a routine of how it worked. So no one spoke as we got*

together. And I thought before anyone says anything, let's just look at people, look where they are."

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#### FOR THE OPERATOR

Your business has volatile intervals — the bad quarter, the failed launch, the senior departure, the public misstep, the board challenge. The strongest senior teams have defined protocols for these moments. The weakest improvise emotion in front of an audience that will not forgive the improvisation.

Write down what your team does in the first thirty minutes of a confirmed bad result. If you cannot write it down, you do not have a protocol. You have a hope.

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#### — PRINCIPLE 05

## The plan is light. *The adaptive capability is heavy.*

Johnson refers to England 2003 as having operated with a "light game plan." The squad knew the plan was a starting position, not a contract. The famous military line — no plan survives first contact with the enemy — was treated as the basic assumption, not the failure mode. The capability they invested in was not the plan. It was the speed at which they could discard it.

This is rare in elite operating environments. Most senior teams over-invest in plan quality and under-invest in deviation capability. When the plan fails — and it does — they freeze, because their identity is in the plan rather than in the response.

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#### FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"You go out, we have all these detailed plans. The coaches love it more and more. It doesn't always happen like that. It changes. The referee is different. They're different. The weather. You've got to be able to adapt. That team could change."*

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#### FOR THE OPERATOR

The quality of your annual plan is not the differentiator. The speed at which your senior team can identify that the plan no longer fits the conditions, and the discipline with which they can replace it without ceremony, is the differentiator.

If your strategy off-site produced a 60-page deck, the deck is not the asset. The willingness to throw it out in week five is the asset. Most senior teams are not willing. That is the gap.

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— PRINCIPLE 06

## Past performance is information. *Not an argument.*

England 2003 beat the All Blacks and Australia in consecutive weeks. The senior players' response was to meet the coaches and tell them training had to change because it was getting routine. The coaches' instinct was to point at the two wins as evidence that the existing approach was working. Will Greenwood's line — *you have to lose it before you change* — broke the conversation open. The coaches adjusted. The next week the team played better.

This is the rarest behaviour in elite environments. A senior team forcing change after the wins, not after the losses. The wins were treated as a closing window for improvement, not as a defence of the status quo.

FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"They'd just beaten the All Blacks and Australia consecutive weeks. And told them, training's got to change because it was getting a bit dull. It was getting a bit routine... Will Greenwood said to them, I'll never forget it, he said, you have to lose it before you change."*

FOR THE OPERATOR

The most dangerous quarter is the one after the good one. The conversations that need to happen are easier to defer, the standard is easier to relax, the change that was urgent six weeks ago is now contested by results that no longer apply.

The senior team that forces the difficult conversation after the win is the senior team that does not lose the next quarter. The senior team that uses the win to defer the conversation has already started losing the one after that.

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— PRINCIPLE 07

# Selection is operational. *Not personal.*

Nearly every senior figure in the 2003 squad had been dropped at some point in their international career. Johnson had been dropped. Back had been dropped. Lawrence had been dropped. The system survived because the people inside it accepted the terms: being dropped was a piece of information about that week, not a verdict on the individual.

This is structural. A senior team that cannot move people in and out of roles without political fallout is a team that has already lost the ability to select on operational fit. The people in the seats are the people who happen to be in the seats, regardless of what the moment requires.

## FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"Everyone's ego gets dented at some point in that process. Coaches' egos. But you've got to take it as part of it. We want to be successful. It's never going to be the smooth ride for everyone."*

## FOR THE OPERATOR

If moving a senior person off a role requires a six-month political operation, you do not have selection. You have inertia. The cost of that inertia is paid by the rest of the senior team, who learn that the seat is more durable than the standard.

The operational test is not whether you can hire well. It is whether you can move someone off a role for fit reasons without the rest of the organisation flinching. If they flinch, the standard is already negotiable.

## — PRINCIPLE 08

# The leader is least visible at the highest-pressure moment. *That is the design.*

End of normal time, 2003 World Cup final. The most senior moment available in the sport. The head coach did not address the team. He had a quiet word with the goalkicker and let the squad run its own protocol. Johnson did not deliver a speech. He looked at where people were, said almost nothing, and the team got on with it.

This is the inversion that breaks most senior leaders. The instinct under maximum pressure is to lead more visibly. To speak. To intervene. To be seen leading. The discipline is the opposite: to recede, because the system has been built to not require you in that moment, and any intervention at this point is a tell that you do not believe what you built.

FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

*"At the end of normal time in the World Cup, Clive didn't address the team. You imagine, the coach, the manager, that's his moment isn't it?... He thought the boys had got it. He spoke to Johnny privately. But he let the boys have got this."*

FOR THE OPERATOR

You will be most tempted to perform leadership at the moments when your system is most exposed. That temptation is the signal to stop. The leaders who can be quiet at the pressure point have a system. The leaders who cannot, do not.

But — and this is where Principle 09 begins — being quiet at the pressure point only works if the leader has already done specific, irreplaceable work everywhere else. The system that allows the leader to be quiet at the end is a system the leader had to build, in person, over years.

— PRINCIPLE 09 · THE COACH'S CORRECTION

The system was distributed. *The leader was not optional.*

At the end of the session, Johnson made an honest statement about his own captaincy. He said the team would have been just as good if they had hired the captain that night at seventeen, because everyone would have had to do their jobs in the same way. It is consistent with everything else he said about distributed authority and senior peer governance. It is also, on the evidence of the people who worked alongside him, not true.

Andy Keast — one of the coaches — was in the room. He pushed back, on the record, twice. The first pushback was operational. The second was sharper.

ANDY KEAST — FIRST CORRECTION

*"The decisions are made closer to the forwards in 99% of the time. So you don't really want to reduce that reaction time to the ref. But Martin, you know, he's too humble to say. He's unique."*

ANDY KEAST · COACH

ANDY KEAST — SECOND CORRECTION

*"From a management side, you led from the front. Where Lawrence and the like may well have been coaching — sorry, captain ability — but it was bigger than that. It was a leadership on and off. And everyone said it, that they will talk for talking sake in some respect. The point is, you spoke. When you spoke, people listened. And the rest is history."*

ANDY KEAST · COACH

Read the second one carefully. Keast is making a structural claim, not a personal one. He is saying: there were other people in that squad who could talk. Several of them talked a lot. The difference was that when this specific captain spoke, the room calibrated to him. That is not interchangeable. That is not a function of role. That is a function of who held the role.

Both things are true at the same time:

The team did the jobs. Distributed authority was real. Senior peers ran the operating system. Decisions were made at the edge. The standard was held sideways. None of this required Johnson to be in the room every minute.

The captain made the system work. The room conceded authority to him in 1997 in part because of who he specifically was. The forwards made decisions at the line-out in part because they were anchored by the second row he was running. The team played without speeches in the World Cup final in part because of what his presence had already established. Replacing him with a different captain who held the same role would not have produced the same outcome.

The reason this matters is that senior operators routinely make one of two errors with this kind of architecture. The first error is to under-build the system and rely on personal authority — heroic leadership that does not survive the leader. The second error is to over-build the system and pretend the leader is interchangeable — distributed leadership theatre that quietly transfers the cost of the leader's absence onto the senior team.

Johnson's environment was the third position, and it is the hardest one to hold. The system was real. The leader was also real. Neither was an alternative to the other.

Two questions to hold against your own organisation, in order.

First: if you were replaced tomorrow with another competent senior leader of similar background, would the system you have built continue to deliver the same standard for the next two quarters. If the answer is yes, you have built something. If the answer is no, you have built dependency.

Second: when you speak in your senior room, does the room calibrate. Not because of the title. Because of who you specifically are. If the answer is no, the senior team is operating around you, not with you, and the system you have built is doing more work than it should have to.

The aspiration is not to be interchangeable. The aspiration is to build a system robust enough to function in your absence, while remaining the person whose presence makes it function at its best when you are there. Most leaders pick one and lose the other.

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COLD CLOSE

*Distributed leadership is not the absence of a leader.*

*It is what a specific leader, in person, over years, makes possible.*

*The captain was not optional. The captain was the work that allowed everyone else to be necessary.*