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Article

“After All, No One Is Superhuman Here”: An Analysis of the Perceived Effects of Managerial Athleticism

Harri Raisio ^{1,*} , Tero Kuorikoski ², Tero Rantala ³  and Mikko Rask ⁴ 

¹ School of Management, University of Vaasa, 65101 Vaasa, Finland

² Pajulahti Olympic and Paralympic Training Center, 15560 Nastola, Finland; tero.kuorikoski@pajulahti.com

³ School of Engineering Science, LUT-University, 15210 Lahti, Finland; tero.rantala@lut.fi

⁴ Consumer Society Research Centre, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland; mikko.rask@helsinki.fi

* Correspondence: harri.raisio@uwasa.fi

Abstract: Executive duties have long been described as becoming more intensive and demanding. One contributing factor is a perceived increase in the complexity of the operating environment. A high level of physical fitness has been suggested to support responses to those demands. This study aims to contribute to the topic by producing a holistic view informed by asking how physically active executive-level leaders perceive the impact (whether positive or negative) of managerial athleticism on the level of the individual, organization, and society. Twenty physically active high-level leaders were interviewed for the study. The sample was almost equally split by gender, represented a diverse range of societal sectors, and engaged in many different forms of exercise. The results support previous research; however, this study provides a more nuanced view of the topic. Although the interviewees saw many good aspects of physical exercise, such as providing physical, affective, cognitive, and social resources, they were also able to think critically about their personal relationship with exercising and their attitudes toward others taking physical exercise. The study highlights the role of balancing the harmonious and obsessive aspects of the relationship with exercising. Instead of a disproportionate study of extreme cases, we conclude that it would be worthwhile studying leaders with a harmonious relationship with exercise to ensure results do not become biased and physically active leaders are not stereotyped.

Keywords: physical fitness; leadership; well-being; organizational performance; managerial athleticism



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1. Introduction

The requirement for a high level of physical fitness is generally associated with professional athletes; however, the same requirement is increasingly being linked to other populations, such as tactical populations among whom performance at work necessitates demanding physical training. That group would include large proportions of firefighters, police officers, and military personnel (Maupin et al. 2019). This is a theme explored through the concept of a *tactical athlete* (Scofield and Kardouni 2015). While high-level physical fitness is not as critical on the management side, it has been mooted that a certain athleticism is valuable to managers too: A theory supported by concepts such as the *corporate athlete* (Loehr and Schwartz 2001) and—more critically—*managerial athleticism* (Johansson et al. 2017).

The growing interest in leaders' physical activity is to some extent explained by the fact that executive duties are viewed as becoming more intensive and demanding (see, e.g., Neck and Cooper 2000; Quick et al. 2000; Burton et al. 2012; Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015; Donaldson-Feilder et al. 2019; Reitz et al. 2020). That view is a result of, among other things, high levels of work pressure and stress, long working hours, the number of meetings, the always-on culture, constant media, and social media scrutiny, the need for global travel, and, more generally, the complexity, volatility, and uncertainty of the operating environment. A high level of physical fitness is then seen as contributing to the

ability of leaders to meet the growing demands of leadership tasks (see [Neck et al. 2000](#)). Physically fit leaders are assumed to be more resilient in challenging times (see [Lovelace et al. 2007](#)). Being in good physical condition is important for leaders, but their fitness could also indirectly benefit the organizations they lead and society more broadly ([Neck et al. 2000](#); [Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015](#)).

The literature on physically active leaders appears to be divided into two research streams. The first is quantitatively oriented and seeks to find positive connections between physical activity and managerial performance: That stream has already produced interesting preliminary results (e.g., [McDowell-Larsen et al. 2002](#); [Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015](#); [Burton et al. 2012](#); [Dong et al. 2019](#)). The second is qualitatively oriented and approaches the theme more critically, for example, by scrutinizing masculine connotations and heroic individualism as they relate to managerial athleticism (e.g., [Meriläinen et al. 2015](#); [Johansson et al. 2017](#); [Ghin 2019](#); [Johansson and Edwards 2021](#); [Bardon et al. 2021](#)).

In this article, these tensions within the field of study of managerial athleticism are unveiled using the lens of the lived experience of 20 physically active executive-level leaders (e.g., cabinet ministers and CEOs). The aim is to address the theme holistically, aiming to outline both the positively and negatively perceived aspects of managerial athleticism. The objective is also served because the interviewees represent a diverse range of societal sectors (public, private, and third sector) and sports (e.g., triathlon, yoga, golf, and weightlifting). The interview data elicited were analyzed to address the following research question: *How do physically active executive-level leaders perceive the impact—both positive and negative—of managerial athleticism on the level of the individual, organization, and society?* Specifically, this study comprehensively addresses the outcomes of being a physically active executive-level leader and reveals how being a physically active leader is in many ways a balancing act and not just black and white issue.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with a review of literature related to managerial athleticism. Thereafter, the data and methods are described in more detail before the study moves on to analyze interviewees' perspectives on the effects of managerial athleticism. Finally, a discussion section binds these results to the theoretical framework of the article, and the conclusion section highlights the limitations of the study and outlines potential research questions.

2. Defining Managerial Athleticism

Literature on physically active leaders began to appear from the early 2000s. Relevant early publications include [Neck et al. \(2000\)](#), [Neck and Cooper \(2000\)](#), and [Quick et al. \(2000\)](#). [Loehr and Schwartz \(2001\)](#) at that time defined the concept of a corporate athlete. The concept suggests that to perform at a high level over the long term, leaders should learn from the training of professional athletes. Similar to professional athletes and tactical athletes, leaders should then practice not only their context-relevant technical and tactical skills (T/TSs) but also improve their general physical preparedness (GPP), the latter referring to an “all-encompassing state of physical fitness whereby cardiorespiratory endurance, anaerobic endurance, muscle strength, power, flexibility, and mobility are developed and maintained” ([Scofield and Kardouni 2015](#), p. 2). These various dimensions of GPP can be understood as supportive competencies for T/TSs or primary skills, which in the leadership context include public speaking, relationship building, goal setting, and negotiating ([Loehr and Schwartz 2001](#)).

However, the concept of a corporate athlete does not imply that leaders could not perform successfully if they are not fit or that only physical capacity is important (*ibid.*). The argument instead is that if leaders do not take care of their physical well-being in the long term, they will not perform at their full capacity or without cost to themselves, their families, or to their employing organization. Furthermore, the concept embraces the idea that in addition to physical capacity, emotional health, mental acuity, and a sense of purpose are also important. It is also worth noting that the literature makes a key distinction between professional athletes and tactical or corporate athletes (see [Loehr and Schwartz](#)

2001; Scofield and Kardouni 2015); that being that where competitive sports are most often associated with a long off-season, tactical and corporate athletes must always be on standby to respond to various unpredictable highly stressful situations, thus highlighting the role of GPP.

Empirical data derived from an organizational context on the benefits of a leader's physical fitness are accumulating, although they remain limited. McDowell-Larsen et al. (2002) examined observer scores to assess the relationship between regular exercise and the performance of business leaders. The study's preliminary results suggest that the performance of leaders who exercise regularly is rated more positively than that of non-exercisers. In terms of causality, evaluating the results proved challenging. As the researchers reflected: "Do executives lead better when they exercise because exercise leads to being less stressed, more energetic, and feeling better about themselves, or do they exercise because they are less stressed, more energetic and feel better about themselves?" (ibid., pp. 321–22).

Limbach and Sonnenburg (2015) addressed the question of whether a CEO's fitness, measured by participation in marathons, has an impact on a firm's value. The study, using a panel of S&P 1500 companies, offered evidence that the effect would exist and would be positive. Similarly, Dong et al. (2019) used a large global panel of 94,496 firm-year observations from 14,328 firms, finding that the previous athletic experience of board directors (i.e., having been a professional or collegiate level athlete), had a positive effect on firm performance. The effect was found to be more significant when a board director had competed in team or confrontational sports. Additionally, Burton et al. (2012) provide interesting evidence that moderate levels of physical exercise can mitigate instances of abusive behavior by supervisors directed toward their subordinates and thus have a positive effect on well-being at work.

The explanatory factors behind the above research findings are generally consistent. First, physical exercise is considered to foster *physical resources* such as fitness, improved health, and sleep (see Calderwood et al. 2021; Neck et al. 2000; McDowell-Larsen et al. 2002). Physically active leaders would then have an elevated level of physical resilience, that is, they would be less likely to become physically exhausted due to intensifying job demands and be able to prevent and withstand various health stressors (Lovelace et al. 2007). Secondly, physical exercise is seen to provide various psychological benefits or *affective resources*, such as positive affect, self-esteem, and mental resilience (Calderwood et al. 2021; Dong et al. 2019; see also Goldsby et al. 2019; Goldsby et al. 2021). Physical exercise could then help, for example, leaders to manage pressure and to combat the harmful effects of work-related stress by serving as a buffer against those ill effects (Burton et al. 2012). Thirdly, physical exercise is associated with enhanced *cognitive resources*, such as attention, memory, and reaction time (see Calderwood et al. 2021; Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015; Dong et al. 2019). As a result, leaders who exercise regularly might benefit from, for example, improved information processing, error recognition, executive function, and decision-making.

Nevertheless, the resources generated by physical exercise depend in part, on how the leader approaches exercising (Vallerand and Houlfort 2019; Clohessy et al. 2020; see also Costas et al. 2016; Pullen and Malcolm 2018). When the relationship with exercising is *obsessively* passionate, the leader is controlled by the physical activity and, for example, feels guilty if he or she is unable to exercise as planned or might continue to exercise despite illness or injury. Such activity may generate maladaptive outcomes, such as burnout. If the relationship is *harmoniously* passionate, the leader can stop the physical activity at any time, and exercising is flexible and in harmony with other aspects of life. Clohessy et al. (2020) showed that such harmonious passion (for cycling and on an employee level) was positively related to work performance and work innovativeness. In essence, the key is finding the optimal threshold extent of exercising; one that improves leadership performance rather than reducing it (McDowell-Larsen et al. 2002; Calderwood et al. 2021).

Recently, qualitative research has highlighted the possible pitfalls associated with physically active leaders in both the organizational and societal contexts. This is exemplified

in the concept of managerial athleticism, defined by [Johansson et al. \(2017, p. 1142\)](#) as “a regulative regime that provides norms that define the legitimate bodily identities that can be enacted in particular contexts.” As such, the concept has wider organizational and societal implications than the aforementioned concept of the corporate athlete. The norms structuring managerial athleticism are seen, for example, to reinforce masculine connotations of leadership, such as competitiveness and achievement, and to prevent certain (physically non-fit) people from taking leadership positions (see e.g., [Meriläinen et al. 2015](#); [Johansson et al. 2017](#); [Ghin 2019](#); [Bardon et al. 2021](#); see also [Devine et al. 2021](#)). As [Ghin](#) stated (2019, p. 95), “the fit body has become an object of idealization, paving the way for an increasing preoccupation with physical athleticism as a marker of modern leadership identity.” This criticism is also related to the concept of governmentality, as described by [Bardon et al. \(2021, p. 14\)](#): “The managers we interviewed are of interest partly because they had apparently accepted (largely unquestioningly) a governmentality that coerced them to engage in time-consuming, and often physically painful activities. This was, after all, a demanding regime of governmentality that obliged them to train exhaustively, monitor and strive to improve their performances, regulate their diet, compete in organized events, and to encourage others to become members of the competitive endurance sports community.”

Additionally, [Thanem \(2013\)](#) writes of monstrously transgressive leadership in the context of the promotion of health at work (see also [Costas et al. 2016](#); [Johansson and Edwards 2021](#)). The study exemplifies how a leader’s overly passionate relationship with physical fitness may have negative effects in the organization such as finger-pointing and employees feeling discouraged and de-motivated. Statements and actions relating to health and fitness by leaders, such as commenting on eating habits, are then perceived as exceeding the bounds of their leadership role. A similar kind of critique is directed at the *quantified self in the workplace* movement, which concerns organizations governing employees through quantification, for example, by using wearable activity and health trackers (see [Esmonde 2021](#)).

Previous research literature seems then to be, at least to some extent, reductionist in nature. First, the more optimistic quantitative research (e.g., [Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015](#); [Dong et al. 2019](#)) overlooks the negatively perceived effects of corporate athletes on the organization and society, such as the excessive idealization of the fit body and the implications of that idealization. Second, the critical leadership studies related to managerial athleticism (e.g., [Thanem 2013](#); [Johansson et al. 2017](#); [Johansson and Edwards 2021](#); [Bardon et al. 2021](#)) appear to highlight extreme cases, where a leader’s relationship with exercising is more obsessively than harmoniously passionate (see [Clohessy et al. 2020](#)), and consequently, for the most part, neglect to acknowledge the possible benefits of balanced and healthy exercise for the leader and the organization.

In this article, the concept of managerial athleticism is thus understood as a strongly context-dependent construction, the actual effect (the positive and the negative) of which on the leader him/herself and the organization and also on society depends especially on the nature of the relationship the leader has with physical fitness and exercise. As [Johansson et al. \(2017, p. 1162\)](#) reflect, “extremism is always potentially dangerous.”

3. Data and Methods

This article is part of a two-year (2021–2022) *Fit Leader in a Complex Operating Environment* research project. The project analyzes the perceived effects of physical fitness on the performance of leaders and, more indirectly, on managed organizations and work communities, and on society (many interviewees are prominent figures in Finnish society). Another article (in review) focuses on the relationship leaders have with physical exercise, while in this article, the analysis extends to including the effects at the organizational and societal levels.

During the winter of 2020 and spring of 2021, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the project. Purposive sampling was used to select interviewees (see

Campbell et al. 2020) who held (or had recently held) top leadership positions and who maintained high levels of physical exercise. Diversity was sought in terms of gender, the form of physical activity, and the sector represented (public, private, or third sector).

Due to the high status of the interviewees, the interviews can be interpreted as elite interviews (see Empson 2018). The background of the interviewees is described here in as much detail as possible while safeguarding their anonymity. All but one of the interviewees had served as a leader at the highest level of their organization. Their number included, for example, CEOs, cabinet ministers, a mayor, and a brigade commander. Of those interviewed, seven held or had recently held leadership positions in the public sector, 12 in the private sector, and one in the third sector. One of the organizations represented was small in size in terms of the number of employees (fewer than 50 employees). Seven of the organizations were medium-sized (50–249 employees) and 12 were large (more than 250 employees). Seven of the large organizations had more than 1000 employees; two of which had around 10,000 employees.

All interviewees were Finns. There were 11 men and nine women interviewed. The youngest of the interviewees was 43 years old and the oldest 64 years old (mean age 51 years). The physical activity of the interviewees was very diverse. The current main form of exercising was triathlon for six interviewees, yoga/meditation for three interviewees, running for three interviewees, and golf for two interviewees. For six interviewees, the main form of exercising was skiing, orienteering, badminton, partner acrobatics, hockey, or weightlifting. Yoga and weightlifting were particularly emphasized as complementary forms of physical activity. The interviewees exercised almost daily, with an average amount of exercise of about 7 to 12 h per week. For two interviewees who performed yoga and partner acrobatics, the amount of exercise increased to more than 20 h a week. The interviewed leaders mainly had a long history as active exercisers and had been physically active in childhood and youth, playing sports at various levels and trying several different sports. Only three interviewees had started exercising extensively only later in life.

The interviews included three sections (see Appendix A). The first section dealt with the interviewee's relationship with exercise. The second section asked about the interviewee's relationship with management work and the perceived effects of physical activity on a leader's career path, leadership style, and job performance. The questions in the third section related to organizational and societal impacts. The interviews were conducted, except for one interview, remotely owing to the restrictions in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and mainly via Zoom. The interviews lasted between 29 and 76 minutes; the average duration being 54 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and eventually, 369 pages of text were available for analysis.

The data were analyzed with an abductive approach to content analysis that encourages moving back and forth between the inductive and deductive approaches during the process of analysis (see Graneheim et al. 2017). The analysis began with familiarization with the data, involving reading all the transcribed interviews several times. The material was then coded using NVivo. Third-level categories were formed inductively, while the first- and second-level categories were formed more closely in relation to the theory. For example, the third-level categories *attention*, *clarity of thinking*, and *goal setting* formed the second-level category of cognitive resources. Correspondingly, the second-level categories *cognitive resources*, *affective resources*, *physical resources*, and *social resources* (an inductively elicited category) formed the first-level category of *resources produced by physical activity*. The authors of the article acted as *critical friends* in the process (see, Sparkes and Smith 2014), encouraging each other to consider alternative perspectives and interpretations of the results.

4. Results

The results of the analysis are presented in the following three subsections. The first subsection focuses on the level of the individual leader. The second subsection looks at the perceived organizational-level effects. The third subsection draws attention to possible

societal impacts. Anonymized direct quotations (#1–#20) translated from Finnish to English are used in the presentation of results.

4.1. The Individual Level

4.1.1. From Physical to Social Resources

Interviewees perceived that physical exercise provided four types of resources, that is, physical, affective, cognitive, and social resources. In terms of *physical resources*, one key motivation behind taking exercise was the desire to remain healthy in the present and in the future. Exercise was seen to counterbalance the negative effects of sedentary work, considered to have been exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions: *“This sitting is a dreadful bane for me, both mentally and physically, so exercise brings balance to it. All this sitting would kill a person otherwise . . . If your general fitness is better, then you will cope with everything else better”* (#18). The importance of physical exercise was also linked to the age of the interviewees. Interviewees suggested that, with aging, they could no longer recover from the working day in the same way as before. Exercising and having a good general fitness were then seen (regardless of age) to help cope better both in everyday life and at work: *“Well, I will soon be 47 years old and of course I recognize the need for exercise and the need for overall fitness and the importance of sleep and nutrition”* (#16). Related to this, exercise was considered to increase physical resilience if a person became ill: *“ . . . but first you have to be in decent shape so that you can afford to get sick”* (#6).

The perceived change in the operating environment was also seen as emphasizing the importance of health and good general fitness: *“I think that you are not capable of doing this, being a leader, anymore, if you are not in good shape”* (#14). Current working life was described as demanding and the pace of working life intense. For example, a strictly scheduled work trip abroad was compared in terms of physical requirements to competing in a sports event. The complexity of the operating environment and the associated escalation in the rate of change, the real-time nature of management work, and global interdependence were seen to have contributed to increasing the physical and mental strength required of leaders: *“Increased complexity means that more and more people need to be in the best possible condition, both physically and mentally, and to understand this and to find the means by which you will recover so that you do not burn out . . . so that your performance as a leader does not deteriorate”* (#10).

In addition to its effect on physical well-being, exercise was also perceived to have significant benefits for mental well-being in the form of producing *affective resources* and particularly promoting mental endurance and increased mental alertness. Exercise was described, for example, as a lifeline, a way to relieve stress, and as a method to *“reset the brains”* (#18). Exercise provided interviewees with more content for life than just work, helping them to forget work matters, at least briefly. In addition, the joy and fun involved in exercising were considered important for mental well-being: *“Everything that has been talked about sounds kind of calculative in that you have to live a certain way to be able to give your best at work and so on. Then you could start asking where the fun is. But then if you think again about the relationship with exercising, I think exercising is a pretty big source of joy”* (#17).

For some of the interviewees, the well-being associated with physical exercise was further enhanced by the beauty of the environment they exercised in: *“Golf courses are like gardens, that is, well-kept gardens, one more beautiful than the other, so yeah, the mind rests then”* (#12). The mental side of physical exercise was also connected to exercising alone. Management work was seen as a social team sport, with exercise correspondingly providing leaders with their own time. Interviewees thus emphasized that exercise is *“a kind of moment to be alone and calm down and relax”* (#10). Partly for this reason, some interviewees said that they had specifically chosen individual sports as a form of exercise.

Physical exercise was also perceived to have a positive effect on interviewees' self-confidence. Interviewees described how being in good physical condition or being able to hold challenging yoga poses, for example, produced mental strength, self-efficacy, and even courage: *“It feels good when you know you are in decent shape. I think it brings self-confidence*

to this and it is part of who you are" (#17). In addition, exercise was seen to increase the leaders' mental resilience in a crisis. In particular, interviewees with a competitive sports background described how demanding training and competition have increased their toughness, and ability to tolerate disappointment: *"In sports, you learn that you get beaten over and over again, but then you always bounce back. Somehow I think this is such a trait that is very common to people who exercise a lot"* (#8).

In terms of cognitive resources, although physical exercise was seen to help leaders to forget work-related issues for a time, exercise also helped them to free their thinking for work, that is, to organize their thoughts and solve work-related problems, for example, in the manner of movement meditation. Exercise can then ideally increase the clarity of thinking and develop the ability to generate novel ideas: *"I have got all my best ideas on the jogging track"* (#4), *"I have made many big decisions while running, or many things have become clear to me while running or cycling"* (#17).

Physical exercise was also perceived to improve attentiveness and concentration, which confer, for example, an ability to focus on what is essential. Similarly, exercise could also contribute to improving goal setting, particularly when combined with a competitive sports background. Goal setting, and the related measurability, was seen as a key feature in physical activity, and especially in sports, which would be then also reflected in management work: *"There always has to be some goal to be achieved, and this trait does come from a sporting background"* (#4). Goal setting was also associated with the analysis of results and the subsequent learning and improvement: *"[It is a] typical [trait] of good leaders . . . that they always want to improve and learn from mistakes. I think this [is part of] my DNA from my sports background."* (#10).

Finally, although the interviewees mainly practiced individual sports and enjoyed exercising alone, their physical activities also involved significant social features and related social resources. First, exercising was seen to increase open-mindedness: *"So maybe it also adds to the open-mindedness that you have a population of different ages and backgrounds in your sports hobbies because otherwise, it is pretty easy to be among your peers"* (#11). The interviewed leaders related how they had met a wide variety of people through their hobbies who they would probably never have met otherwise. This experience was perceived to have increased the ability to deal with others and enlarged *"antennae to take into account the diversity of different people"* (#15).

Physical exercise was also seen to promote interaction and build community in the leaders' own reference group. For example, competing in triathlons had opened up new networks relevant to management work. However, in these networks, it was seen as important that exercise always comes first: *"There is no need to worry about being the subject of aggressive sales pitches or something like that in these networks"* (#17). Moreover, in work-related situations, the shared interest in physical activity and sports helped build a good atmosphere for conversations as well as a confidential relationship: *"Even though we have really difficult issues on the table, when we start by discussing sports, we get that good vibe for the following discussions"* (#16). Two female interviewees also pondered if having success in sports had helped them become more accepted and valued in male-dominated industries.

4.1.2. Balancing the Harmonious and Obsessive Passion for Physical Exercise

In addition to the positive aspects described above, the interviewees also highlighted challenges related to managerial athleticism at the level of the individual leader. In particular, the research data revealed the fragile border between harmonious and obsessive passion for physical exercise, which the interviewed leaders attempted to balance: *"I would like to say that the relationship with exercise is moderate and healthy, but maybe then, at the end of the day, it is passionate and partly a bit obsessive . . . a way of life"* (#7). This was reflected, for example, in how the interviewees broadly described the consequences of not being able to exercise as planned. Immobility was seen to cause, among other things, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, a sense of stagnation, and a feeling of softness. Immobility was particularly associated with mental discomfort: *"If I cannot move because of the flu or*

something else, I will become restless and a kind of feeling of being unwell grows incessantly” (#6) and as another informant put it, “I can be without exercising for a while, of course, but I will probably get mentally ill in some way if I do not exercise” (#8).

Immobility also caused the interviewees stress, as was the case, for example, when the interviewees had not been able to complete their scheduled workouts, for example, owing to work commitments. One interviewee referred to such disruption as causing a *“moral hangover”* (#2) but the interviewed leaders recognized the danger that exercising might become too obsessive, which could occur if their goal-orientation or the competitive spirit of exercise took precedence over their well-being. The interviews suggested the obsession with physical exercise could manifest in an inability to set aside a rest day or have a lighter training week when needed: *“Even when the mind and body tell you that you should take a day off, this competitive individual then reads the exercise program and wonders, if there is some exercise that should still be done”* (#19).

Nevertheless, the interviewees also highlighted several factors that have contributed positively to the pursuit of balance. One such was how aging had imposed some limits on exercising, in that the interviewees described how aging had enhanced their attention to muscle care and recovery. In addition, for a few interviewees, a very active stage of competitive sports or exercise had been followed by a kind of quieter phase. This means that the importance of goal-orientation and competitiveness has diminished, and the focus has shifted more to taking care of one’s own well-being: *“Now I am grateful to have learned a different kind of enjoyment of sports or exercise”* (#4); *“my competitive drive has somehow leveled off a bit here with age”* (#20). One of the factors considered to promote the healthiness of exercise was the many options available. Interviewees spoke openly about their past injuries and saw the diversity of exercise as one key factor in preventing future injuries: *“Weightlifting does good for a person at this age. It keeps mobility good, and knees fit. My knees would probably need surgery if I had not started weightlifting”* (#2).

4.2. The Organization Level

4.2.1. Influencing Employee Well-Being at Work

When asked about the effects of leaders’ physical activity at the organizational level (e.g., its direct/indirect impact on the organization’s performance), the interviewees discussed the issue almost entirely from the perspective of employee well-being at work. For example, the indirect impact of leadership style was highlighted in this section of the interview to only a limited extent, and was mainly related to a coaching leadership approach learned through a sports background and also to the aforementioned focus on goal setting: *“Yes, a sports background has indirect, not direct, but indirect effects on the performance of the organization, because I have managed to be enthusiastic and committed to long-term goals. This has been affected by my own well-being and the physical exercise behind it”* (#2).

In the interviews, leaders for the most part highlighted how their emphasis on physical fitness has directly or indirectly affected the degree of physical activity of their employees and consequently influenced the performance of the organization. Interviewees mentioned numerous ways in which they had promoted physical activity among employees, including providing vouchers discounting sports activities, providing access to a variety of wellness methods such as break/exercise applications and wearable technology, organizing work well-being days related to exercise, permitting staff to take exercise during working hours, challenging employees to undertake specific physical exercises (e.g., doing a number of pull-ups or a cycling challenge), engaging employees in collective workplace exercise (e.g., a broomstick exercise program), and encouraging walking meetings.

Questioned about whether a leader has any responsibility for the well-being of employees, especially with regard to physical exercise, the interviewees emphasized the roles of enabler and supporter. The main responsibility for physical exercise lies with the employee, but the leader/employer should support the process in various ways: *“If my employer said to me that you should run every morning at five, then I probably would not run. . . .*

It is, of course, good for the employer to enable and support physical exercise, but it's not sustainable if the desire to exercise does not arise from the employee him/herself" (#4).

Most clearly, the interviewed leaders emphasized the importance of setting an example: *"Setting an example also plays a really big role. If your supervisor clearly invests in these things (i.e., physical exercise), it creates an understanding in the organization that this is how it should be, that everyone takes care of their fitness for work" (#9).* Interviewees gave many examples of how their employees were inspired to exercise through their own example. Employees came to ask interviewed leaders for tips on exercising and the interviewees reported how some employees were motivated by seeing their leader exercising despite their busy schedules. However, an alternative perspective was that if the leader was not well, then he or she could not inspire or help others: *"It is my duty to take care of myself so I can help others. It is a wise thing, as instructed on a plane, to put on one's own oxygen mask first before helping others with theirs" (#12).*

Concern over the level of physical activity of employees was justified by the interviewees, first, by the fact that, on the individual level, physical activity was perceived to have a positive effect on employees' physical and mental well-being. Second, exercise was considered a good counterbalance to office work, as already mentioned above, with regard to the leaders themselves. Moreover, the importance of physical activity among employees was considered something that would grow in the future. For example, expert work was seen as becoming more sedentary, and the probable increase in retirement age was also seen as part of the challenge. On the level of the organization, justifications included statements regarding better productivity, cost savings, and the organizational climate: *"When it comes to creating an organizational culture that values physical well-being and encourages employees to exercise, I think it has a very direct link to well-being at work, and well-being at work has a direct link to success through the fact that, if you think about it financially, workplace absenteeism is a significant cost factor" (#19).*

4.2.2. Avoiding Going to Extremes

However, these effects at the organizational level were not seen as completely unproblematic. For example, the interviewees saw a significant challenge in how to inspire those employees who do not usually exercise. An issue identified was that leaders' attempts to improve the workplace fitness culture, often led to an increase in the amount of physical activity of those who were already active exercisers: *"I don't think these workplace challenges such as who walks the most during the summer work. Those employees who already exercise participate. In turn, those employees who really need the exercise, they will not participate" (#1).*

Just as the interviewees balanced the harmonious and obsessive relationship toward physical exercise, the same balancing act was also reflected in how they responded to the exercise habits of others. It is clear from the interviews that the interviewed leaders valued sporty employees: *"Physically active people are also resilient and often cheerful and thus they feel better and the whole organization feels better" (#2).* However, interviewees struggled particularly over what is the appropriate extent to encourage employees to exercise so that the employees did not start to feel like the leaders were imposing their own exercise-related values on them. One interviewee, for example, described how he strives to remember that workplaces are workplaces and not hobby groups or sports teams and that no one should be excluded by reason of exercise: *"I see this as a risk in my own actions and it is something I am actively trying to pay attention to" (#17).*

Although the interviewed leaders demanded a lot from themselves in terms of physical exercise, they were keen to dispel the idea that everyone should act the same way. Indeed, the interviewees emphasized that they did not want to play their part in promoting an overly performance-oriented fitness culture in their organizations: *"... and I do not want the organization I lead to become the kind of organization where neon sportswear shines and you are accepted as a leader only when your fat percentage is below some level" (#5).* One interviewee related how he makes fun of his being sporty because he does not want anyone to have a

bad conscience or feel pressured by the fact that the leader of the organization is highly sporty.

Although the interviewees valued the physical activity of their employees, the attitude toward the exercise habits of others was more moderate than that to their own exercise. Interviewees highlighted the importance of everyone finding the right sport for them and considered that all forms of exercise should be seen as valuable: *“The key is to find a form of exercise that suits you, even walking for 10 minutes every day”* (#10). In addition, the interviewees emphasized that the amount of exercise also depends on the employees’ life situation and that physical exercise is not the only hobby option: *“It is terribly important that people are forgiving of themselves, that there are times in life where this type of exercise what I do at the moment . . . that it is just not possible if you have toddlers, you are building a career, and so on”* (#7). Another remarked, *“It must be remembered that different people value different things, and everyone must remember to respect each other. That the way I act is by no means the only right one, but that there are different ways to act”* (#17).

4.3. The Societal Level

4.3.1. Reduced Public Health Costs and the Exemplary Effect

The interviewees were not able to describe the effects at the societal level as clearly as the effects at the organizational level, let alone the individual level. However, a few potential direct and indirect societal impacts emerged from the interviews. The first related to societal resources, that is, how the promotion of physical activity at the organizational level has societal effects, for example, in terms of decreased social and health care costs: *“After all, it is pretty clear if you look at the data, musculoskeletal disorders and diabetes and others, it is going to be a huge public health cost . . . I think employers and leaders should be even more concerned about this and really do even more than is currently being done”* (#2).

The second impact is connected to the exemplary effect described above but on a societal level. Most of the interviewees had mentioned their physical activity in various magazines and newspaper interviews, as well as on social media, for example. However, the interviewees were cautious about how significant they rated the impact to be. The views varied from a statement that *“I am a small drop in the ocean”* (#18) to the following comment: *“The best feedback I have ever received, both inside and outside the organization, are the hundreds if not thousands of messages I have received. ‘Hi, I looked at your way of life and decided that if you have time, so will I, and here I stand 30 kilograms lighter’”* (#7). Additionally, some of the interviewees served on the boards of sports organizations and exerted a positive influence through that particular role.

4.3.2. Challenging Stereotypes

Here the interviewees saw the danger of physically active leaders being branded in public as overachievers or as superhuman. This was identified as an issue in social media discussions, newspaper articles, and also previous research. Such stereotyping was only perceived to create a confrontation between people who exercise and people who do not: *“One [piece of] research tried to represent a prototype of a leader as ‘a hunting dog,’ which I think is dangerous, which I would like to avoid here so as not to give the impression that the leader must be an overachiever”* (#10); *“After all, no one is superhuman here. Adversity affects everyone”* (#20). Some leaders sought to weaken that perception, for example, by presenting their physical exercise in public in a moderate, not success- or performance-focused manner: *“I now choose not to post my results on social media. So, I do not post that ‘I skied 50 kilometers today and the clock stopped at 2.38,’ but rather that ‘it was a great weather to ski’ or something like that”* (#8).

5. Discussion

The research data paint a multifaceted picture of the impact of managerial athleticism—both positive and negative—on the level of the individual, organization, and society. The perceived effects at the individual level were most clearly highlighted in the results. The finding was to be expected, as it is easiest to express an opinion about effects on oneself. The

research results support the results of the previous research, (e.g., [Neck et al. 2000](#); [Goldsby et al. 2005](#); [Burton et al. 2012](#); [Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015](#); [Dong et al. 2019](#); [Goldsby et al. 2019](#); [Calderwood et al. 2021](#)) indicating exercise can provide leaders (and employees) with physical, affective, and cognitive resources. In addition to these, interviewed leaders also highlighted the social resources produced by exercise. The resources provided were then significantly more than just, for example, “impression management” ([Ghin 2019](#)).

Although previous studies suggest these individual-level effects have a positive impact at the organizational level (see, [Limbach and Sonnenburg 2015](#); [Dong et al. 2019](#)), the interviewees highlighted the organizational-level effect of their physical activity mostly in terms of employee well-being rather than directly on organizational success. Nevertheless, the leaders tended to believe this increased well-being among employees would have a direct impact on the organization’s performance. Regarding a positive impact at the societal level, the interviewees were cautiously positive. In particular, the exemplary effect was seen to have more or less impact outside the organization as well.

Despite their positive views, the interviewed leaders were not naive to the risks associated with being physically active leaders. The interview data clearly show how they constantly reviewed their relationship with exercise to maintain a healthy balance. They spoke openly of their illnesses, injuries, and weaknesses, and did not seek to create an image of being superhumans or heroic leaders, and even sought in different ways to counter such an impression being formed (cf. [Bardon et al. 2021](#)). The interviewees also seemed to be aware of their limitations and of when the exercise was going too far. This is likely to be related somewhat to the age of the interviewees and the experience it confers (the mean age being 51). It could then be cautiously concluded that the interviewed leaders’ relationship with physical exercise then leans more toward the harmonious rather than the obsessive side. It should still also be noted that in passionate people, similar to the interviewed leaders, both harmonious and obsessive passions are likely to coexist ([Clohessy et al. 2020](#)).

The interviewed leaders were also concerned about how they perceived the exercise habits of other people and especially those of their employees. While they saw the positive impact of increasing employees’ physical activity on employees themselves as well as on the organization and society, they were cautious not to impose their own values on others but preferred to encourage and inspire others to exercise, that is, to act as an enabler, rather than as a coercer (see also, [Caperchione et al. 2016](#)). The informants also emphasized that others should not feel any obligation to be as enthusiastic about physical exercise as they themselves were. In a sense, the leaders’ sporty lifestyle is then meant to inspire the employees, which is not to say that employees should imitate leaders, but that the leader’s sporty lifestyle is more akin to “a symbol that should motivate employees to be healthy as in active, self-controlling, and fit for work” ([Maravelias 2015](#), p. 283).

The case with managerial athleticism is then not as black and white or dichotomous as prior research might suggest. This is an ambiguous, complex, and strongly context-sensitive phenomenon. Nevertheless, this study does not dispute the results of previous studies but seeks to combine different views to present a more holistic picture of the issue. The intention was not to downplay the risks of a dedication to exercise, and as highlighted in the interviews, the interviewed leaders shared the same concerns about extreme cases as reported in some of the previous studies (e.g., [Thanem 2013](#); [Johansson et al. 2017](#); [Johansson and Edwards 2021](#); [Bardon et al. 2021](#)). However, while any form of extremism is always dangerous, there is also a danger in lending too much weight to individual extreme cases. At worst, it creates a distorted picture of reality, leading to stereotyping of physically active leaders, which only increases conflict between people, as the interviewed leaders acknowledge.

Finally, one important contradiction emerging from this study is that around excessive managerial athleticism having various disadvantages, such as, in some cases, preventing certain (physically non-fit) people from taking leadership positions (see [Ghin 2019](#)), but on the other hand, the interviewed leaders stated that without physical fitness they would

struggle to manage the demands of their current working life. Is the solution thus to try to highlight the negative aspects of managerial athleticism and physical fitness, or is the problem more *structural*, that is, should we address why so much is expected of leaders today?

6. Conclusions

Instead of encouraging the conflict between different research streams, there is a need for unifying research seeking to unveil the positive aspects of physical exercise, without overlooking the critical aspects of the debate. Above all, in this search for positive aspects and criticism, it should not be forgotten that, in essence, as the interviews revealed, exercise is a major source of joy for people (see also [Hämäläinen 2008](#)). Physical exercise should then not be reduced to a merely *instrumental* value, as it also has significant *intrinsic* value. The leaders interviewed in this study clearly enjoyed exercise, and for most, physical exercise was a lifestyle choice made at an early age, making exercise part of who they are. Moreover, the joy associated with exercising appeared to be innate, which contributes to a harmonious relationship with exercise (see [Clohessy et al. 2020](#); [Calderwood et al. 2021](#); cf. [Bardon et al. 2021](#)).

The results of this study indicate that more attention should be directed to understanding managerial athleticism from a balancing perspective. Broadening theoretical discussion with the balancing element can provide insightful theoretical avenues for management scholars. The main theoretical implication of this study is therefore to highlight the role of balancing the harmonious and obsessive relationships with exercising. The hypothesis is that leaders enjoying a harmonious relationship with both their exercise regimen and that chosen by others would reduce the perceived negative effects of managerial athleticism. While negative effects cannot be eliminated, and since this study does not find the enthusiasm for exercise among leaders diminishing, reducing negative effects is an appropriate future ambition. Fundamentally, the question is how physically active leaders can share the positive effects of their form/s of exercise through their own organization and society at large, but in a way that does not instigate an overly results-oriented fitness culture and discourage people who are not physically active.

In terms of practical implications, this study creates a kind of consolatory picture of reality. While leaders feel they reap significant benefits from exercise, they also struggle with media portrayals of them as superhuman, for example. Moreover, the leaders interviewed did not generally seek to convey their exercise regimen as one encapsulated by the description blood, sweat, and tears. They tended to be aware that they are imperfect individuals looking to improve coping mechanisms and find balance by doing something genuinely meaningful. Accordingly, this study encourages leaders to find the optimal threshold extent of exercising that delivers the full benefits of physical exercise but cautions that they should remain wary of those benefits being overshadowed by negative consequences. Finally, although different forms of exercise have to some extent different effects (e.g., triathlon vs. yoga), it is important not to overemphasize the differences between sports. The most important thing is that leaders find forms of exercise they enjoy and restore their personal resources. Ideally, those positive effects will then extend to the leader's environment.

Limitations of the Study and Further Research Questions

Although the scope of this study is broad, in that it adopts a holistic approach to address a wide range of positively and negatively perceived impacts on different levels as they affect a diverse set of physically active leaders, it does have limitations, which should be viewed as offering opportunities for further research. It would be, for example, useful to study younger leaders and those leaders who are not physically active. First, it may be that the predominantly harmonious relationship to exercise of the interviewed leaders was somewhat influenced by the fact that they were already in their fifties on average and had a lengthy experience of exercising. It is also worth remembering that this study solely highlights the perspective of physically active leaders. It would thus be

interesting to harvest the experiences of leaders who are not physically active (see also, McDowell-Larsen et al. 2002). Do they feel that a lack of exercise and physical fitness hinders their ability to cope as leaders? Further, are there some other activities than sports (like culture or spending time outdoors) outside of management work that provide them with the recourses to act as leaders? Similarly, the study only presented the views of leaders on the organizational and societal impacts of exercise. Further research might investigate whether the views of employees or, more broadly, citizens are in line with these experiences of physically active leaders.

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Appendix A. The Interview Form

PART 1. Exercising

1. Briefly describe your exercise background.
2. How would you describe your relationship with physical exercise?
3. What positive things do you associate with your physical exercise regimen on a general level?
4. What negative things do you associate with your physical exercise regimen on a general level?
5. Has your exercise background affected your personality?

PART 2. Leadership

6. Briefly describe your background as a leader.
7. How would you describe your relationship with management work?
8. Do you feel that the complexity of the operating environment has increased during your career as a leader? Give reasons for your answer.
9. How might your exercise background have affected your career path?
10. How might your active exercise background have affected your leadership style?
11. Has physical exercise provided you with resources to support working as a leader?
12. Do you feel that the roles of *physically active person* and *leader* are an integral part of your identity, or do you try to keep them separate from each other?
13. How do you balance work, exercise, and other key areas of life?
14. Do you feel that gender has any role to play in being a physically active leader?
15. In the context of this study, do you think there are significant specific aspects with your chosen form/s of exercise?

PART 3. Impact on Organization/Society

16. Do you feel that your exercise background has direct or indirect effects:
 - On the success of your organization?
 - On the values of your organization?
 - On the organizational culture?
 - On well-being at work in your organization?
17. What meaning do you think the well-being of employees in terms of physical exercise has to the organization?

18. In what ways do you seek to nurture the well-being of your employees, especially with regard to physical exercise?
19. What do you think is the leader's/employer's responsibility in terms of employee well-being, especially with regard to physical exercise?
20. Do you feel that your exercise background has direct or indirect effects on Finnish society as a whole?

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