



Develop the People Who Set the Standard

A steering document for staff performance support in elite sport

Elite organisations already know how to protect and develop the people at the centre of their performance system. This document sets out how the same rigour can be extended to the staff who surround those athletes, with a pathway of approaches that range from changes a department can make this month to the creation of a dedicated leadership role.

PREPARED BY

Simon Thomas

Founder, ST Performance Global

COMPANION PIECE

The Team Behind the Team

Evidence and examples in full

INTENDED FOR

Performance and executive leadership

Any elite sport organisation

01

Purpose of This Document

This document sets out a practical pathway for any elite sport organisation that wants to extend the rigour it applies to athletes to the staff who support them. It draws on the evidence gathered in The Team Behind the Team and translates that evidence into a set of approaches that run from changes a department can make with its existing resources through to a dedicated leadership role, so each organisation can choose a starting point that fits its scale, budget and ambition.

ST Performance Global has developed and evidenced these approaches through two decades of embedded work across professional rugby union and baseball, with the document intended as a steering tool for leadership conversations about where to begin.

02

The Need

Elite organisations have built sophisticated systems for tracking what matters in their athletes, from load and readiness to sleep and recovery, responding with precision whenever an indicator moves the wrong way. Workloads are adjusted, programmes are modified and long term durability is protected without giving up short term output, which reflects a deliberate investment in the science of how people absorb stress and adapt.

The principles behind those systems apply with equal force to the coaches delivering instruction, the clinicians managing return to play, the analysts making evaluations and the leaders making decisions across a season. Very few organisations measure or manage the readiness of those people with any consistency, which leaves a performance gap that sits upstream of every athlete outcome the organisation cares about.

THE CORE PARALLEL

When an athlete's output dips across several data points the programme is modified, when a workload threshold approaches the athlete is protected and when signs of overreaching appear the staff create space for adaptation. The question this document asks is whether the same rigour should extend to the people running that system, given that the physiology governing their capacity is identical and their state shapes the support every athlete receives.



The foundational principle

When Minor League Baseball ratified its first collective agreement for minor league players in 2023, minimum salaries rose substantially and housing became mandatory, removing barriers that had drawn attention away from development. With those barriers gone and new support structures in place, players could give far more of their focus to the work that improves them. This document applies the same lens one layer out, to the staff wrapped around the player system, because every improvement in their environment multiplies the environment and support each player receives.

03

The Evidence in Brief

The companion article sets out the evidence in full, while the table below summarises the findings that carry the most weight for this document alongside the implication each one holds for the design of a performance department.

FINDING	SOURCE	IMPLICATION
Stress plus rest equals growth, while too little recovery leads to burnout	Stulberg and Magness (2017)	Design recovery for staff into the calendar
Accumulated partial sleep loss impairs performance more than short total loss	Pilcher and Huffcutt (1996)	Treat seasonal staff fatigue as a decision risk
Challenge stressors help performance while hindrance stressors harm it	LePine et al. (2005)	Keep the challenge and remove the hindrances
Flexibility and support raised satisfaction and reduced burnout in a randomised trial	Moen et al. (2016)	Offer flexibility within clear expectations
Psychological safety predicts team learning and led the Project Aristotle findings	Edmondson (1999); Google	Build structures and visible behaviour for candour
Poor communication between medical staff and the head coach links to higher injury burden	Ekstrand et al. (2019)	Treat staff relationships as an availability variable
Organisational change can undo years of practice within months	Wagstaff et al. (2015)	Embed practices so they outlast leadership change
Distributed support teams need leaders who work across disciplines	Stewart et al. (2024)	Create a coordinating leadership function
Only six of roughly 150 clubs in five major leagues have a role built to develop staff	ST Performance Global benchmark (2026)	Early movers can still define the standard
Managers account for most of the variance in team engagement	Gallup	Prioritise leader development

04

Precedent

Organisations across sport have already moved in this direction through three models, which this document ranks by how reliably they deliver the conditions set out in the companion article. The ultimate model is a hybrid lead that combines an organisational audit, a driving philosophy and a targeted role at performance level connected to people and culture. The second is a dedicated staff development role inside the club, while the third is a system held by everyone that becomes the strongest of all once the culture to support it exists.

Model one: the hybrid lead

McLaren Racing advertised this model in 2026 with a Head of People Engineering for its endurance racing and business performance functions, a Woking based role that partners around 200 staff as a trusted strategic partner to their leaders. McLaren is explicit that the role sits outside traditional HR, describing it as hands on collaboration and people engineering that connects people initiatives directly to car performance. It invites candidates from performance psychology, coaching and sport based people development. Its brief spans organisational design, change, workforce planning and talent management, all delivered through a local people plan built on stakeholder engagement and without a team of direct reports to manage.

THE THREE ELEMENTS OF THE HYBRID

—

An organisational audit that maps how people, structures and decision rights currently shape performance before any initiative is designed

—

A clearly stated philosophy that connects every people initiative to the performance outcome the organisation competes for

—

A targeted role at performance level that works with leaders day to day while holding a direct line into people and culture

Model two: a dedicated development role

The second best option is the dedicated staff development role. A 2026 ST Performance Global benchmark of roughly 150 clubs across the five major North American leagues identified six club roles built specifically to recruit, develop and retain the staff who surround the players, with the Arizona Cardinals the only one at vice president level.

CLUB	ROLE	YEAR	WHERE IT SITS
Arizona Cardinals NFL	Vice President, Organizational Performance	2024	People function, reporting to the Chief People Officer
Pittsburgh Pirates MLB	Director, Talent Development	2026	Baseball Operations, partnered with People and Culture
Tampa Bay Rays MLB	Assistant Director, Staff Development and Research	2024	Baseball Operations
Boston Celtics NBA	Director, Organizational Growth and Team Development	Not public	Basketball operations
Tennessee Titans NFL	Director of Talent and Development	Not public	People and Culture
Green Bay Packers NFL	Director of Organizational Development	2023	Business side, announced by the President and CEO

These roles sit in one of two homes, with the Cardinals, Titans and Packers anchoring the function in the people or business side of the club while the Celtics, Rays and Pirates build it inside basketball or baseball operations. Roles anchored in the people function bring the methods of organisational development although they rarely reach coaches and performance staff in season, whereas roles anchored in the sporting department reach those staff daily without always carrying tools such as succession planning or programme evaluation. The Packers role, created in 2023 to lead learning and development for staff, also shows how exposed the function becomes when it depends on one person, since it lasted two seasons before its holder moved on with no successor publicly confirmed. None of the six yet combines both homes, which is the combination the hybrid model is built around.

Model three: a system held by everyone

The shared model is in many ways the strongest, because a standard held by every coach, practitioner and manager is far harder to lose than one held by a single appointment. Its limitation lies in the starting point, since it relies on a cultural norm that many organisations do not yet have and that never appears simply because it has been identified, stated and encouraged. The organisations below show the model working where that culture already existed or was deliberately rebuilt.

ORGANISATION	WHAT THEY BUILT
Crusaders	Coaching quality built as a system output across several generations, producing the best record in Super Rugby history
All Blacks	A cultural rebuild after 2004 built on better people making better All Blacks, followed by World Cup titles in 2011 and 2015
UK high performance system	A 2025 UK Sport and University of Bath study of wellbeing and burnout among athlete support personnel
Scuderia Ferrari HP	A 2026 WHOOP partnership extending sleep, stress and recovery insight across the team

05

Approaches From Partial to Full

The five approaches below run from the lightest touch to the most complete commitment, with each designed so it can stand alone or be combined with the others in whatever sequence suits the organisation. The first three build the shared model into the existing system, the fourth brings in hybrid leadership capacity on a fractional basis and the fifth establishes the hybrid lead as a permanent role, which is the ultimate expression of this work.

A. Staff Performance Rhythm

PARTIAL | INTERNAL

Designing recovery, reflection and decision rights into the existing calendar

The first approach uses the resources a department already has to build the five conditions into the working year. Leaders map the annual calendar to locate predictable peaks in staff workload, protect recovery windows between the major phases of the year and introduce structured debriefs at the close of each phase as standard practice. Decision rights are clarified so staff know which choices sit with them, while a short and regular pulse survey gives the leadership group an early read on workload, recovery and psychological safety. Because it relies on leadership behaviour more than technology, this approach also builds the habits that every other option depends on.

WHAT IT INVOLVES

- A staff calendar audit with recovery windows agreed and protected well in advance
- Phase debriefs and an annual retrospective run in a consistent format
- A decision rights map for each role that removes unnecessary approval layers
- A fortnightly or monthly pulse on workload, recovery and psychological safety

Best suited to organisations that want to start immediately at minimal cost or need to establish a baseline before investing further.

B. Staff Readiness Monitoring

PARTIAL | PILOT *Extending wearable readiness data to a voluntary staff cohort*

The second approach extends the monitoring logic already applied to athletes to a defined group of staff who choose to take part. Scuderia Ferrari HP offers the clearest recent precedent, having partnered with WHOOP from the 2026 season to provide devices to members of the team while its medical staff work with the WHOOP performance science group on sleep, stress and recovery.

A pilot would run for a full competitive phase with a voluntary cohort, establishing baseline readiness profiles and identifying patterns around travel, compressed fixtures and major decision windows. The results would be shared with the group as anonymised trends that inform calendar and workload planning, with each participant also receiving their own data back alongside simple guidance on how to use it.

WHAT IT INVOLVES

- A voluntary cohort drawn from coaching, medical and performance staff
- Consent, privacy and data ownership terms agreed before launch
- Anonymised group reporting linked to calendar planning decisions
- A review at the end of the phase to decide whether to extend the programme

Best suited to organisations with an established athlete monitoring culture that want objective data on staff load.

C. Embedded Year Round Staff Performance System

PARTIAL TO FULL | EXTERNAL SYSTEM *A structured external system built for the team behind the team*

The third approach introduces a dedicated system designed around the organisational stressors that affect support staff in elite sport. Altara is one example of this model, describing itself as a year round embedded system that uses regular pulse checks to identify declining capacity well before it becomes a crisis and to monitor what staff sacrifice outside work when organisational pressure builds. Individual staff see their own trends privately and leaders receive anonymised patterns with early warning signals, so the organisation gains the visibility it needs to act without compromising individual autonomy.

Systems of this kind work at the level where the problem sits, since the research consistently locates staff strain in organisational conditions that individual resilience training cannot change on its own. An external partner can also bring comparison insight from other environments that a single organisation would struggle to generate for itself. Used well, that external view also strengthens the shared model by giving every leader the same honest picture of how their staff are coping across the calendar.

WHAT IT INVOLVES

- A diagnostic conversation to confirm fit with the structure and calendar of the organisation
- Year round pulse checks with private individual views and anonymised leadership reporting
- Early warning thresholds agreed in advance with the leadership group
- Integration with the internal rhythm described in the first approach
- A shared review with the leadership group at the end of each major phase of the year

Best suited to organisations that want continuous insight across multiple sites without building the system themselves.

D. Fractional Organisational Growth Lead

FULL | FRACTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Senior design and leadership capacity on a part time basis

The fourth approach places an experienced practitioner inside the organisation on a fractional basis to design and lead the staff performance agenda. The lead would build the rhythm described in the first approach, oversee any monitoring or external system, develop the leaders who carry the work day to day and set the measures that show whether it is working. This option gives an organisation senior capability without the commitment of a full time appointment while also serving as a proving ground for the permanent hybrid lead in the fifth approach.

A fractional lead is particularly valuable during periods of transition, such as a change of head coach or a restructure of the performance department, because an experienced voice from outside the reporting line can protect established practices while new leadership settles in and forms its own view of the environment. It also gives incoming leaders an informed partner who already understands the people and the history of the department.

WHAT IT INVOLVES

- An agreed number of days each month across the season, with time on site at key phases
- A twelve month design and implementation plan agreed with the leadership group
- Leadership development for department heads and site leads
- Regular reporting to the executive sponsor against the agreed measures
- A handover plan that embeds the system in structures able to outlast any individual

Best suited to organisations that want experienced leadership now with a clear decision point on a permanent role within a year.

E. Head of People Performance

FULL | HYBRID LEAD

The ultimate approach, combining audit, philosophy and a targeted role at performance level

The fifth approach is the ultimate expression of this work, establishing a permanent hybrid lead who sits at performance level while holding a direct connection to people and culture. The clearest model is McLaren Racing's Head of People Engineering, a role McLaren describes as sitting outside traditional HR and connecting people initiatives directly to car performance. The role proposed here applies the same philosophy to sport, beginning with an organisational audit and a clearly stated driving philosophy so that the organisation understands why the role exists and what it is expected to change.

The dedicated staff development roles now found at the Arizona Cardinals, Pittsburgh Pirates and Tampa Bay Rays remain a strong second option where the full hybrid is not yet realistic, although each sits in either the people function or the sporting department and so rarely carries both the rigour of organisational development and the in season reach that the hybrid combines.

WHAT IT INVOLVES

- An organisational audit and a stated philosophy that anchor the role before any programme begins
- A coordinating function across disciplines, which Stewart and colleagues identify as central to distributed support teams
- Staff development pathways and leadership development across the performance department
- Ownership of the staff performance measures described in this document
- Protection of institutional knowledge through leadership and structural change
- A reporting line agreed at the outset that gives the role reach into the sporting departments in season

Best suited to larger or distributed organisations that are ready to treat staff performance as a permanent strategic function.

Comparing the Approaches

The table below sets the five approaches side by side so a leadership group can weigh scope, investment and speed against what each option requires of the organisation. Relative investment is described in broad terms because the real figure depends on the size of the staff group, the number of sites involved and the partners chosen.

APPROACH	SCOPE	RELATIVE INVESTMENT	FIRST SIGNAL	WHAT IT NEEDS
A. Rhythm	Department wide	Low	Within one phase	Leadership time and commitment
B. Monitoring	Voluntary cohort	Low to moderate	Within weeks	Consent framework and a technology partner
C. Embedded system	All staff across sites	Moderate	Within a quarter	Partner onboarding and leadership reporting
D. Fractional lead	Organisation wide design	Moderate	Within a quarter	Executive sponsorship and site access
E. Hybrid lead	Permanent and organisation wide	Higher	Six to twelve months	Headcount, reporting line and a clear mandate

The approaches are cumulative in practice, since the rhythm in the first approach gives any monitoring system something to act on and gives any leadership role a foundation to build from. They also mirror the ranking in the precedent section, with the hybrid lead as the ultimate destination and the earlier approaches building the conditions that allow it to succeed.

Guardrails

Staff performance support only works when staff trust it, so several principles should hold regardless of the approach chosen. Participation in any monitoring should be voluntary and based on informed consent, with individual data belonging to the individual and leadership reporting anonymised at a level that protects identities. Staff should also be able to leave any monitoring programme at any point without explanation or consequence.

The work should sit alongside existing clinical and wellbeing services and refer into them where needed, since performance support and clinical care serve different purposes. Measures should be used to improve the environment around staff and never to evaluate or discipline individuals, because the moment data is used against people the honesty that makes it valuable disappears. Clear communication about how data will be used and the ways it will never be used should come before any programme begins. Whichever approach is chosen, the work should also be embedded in structures and shared measures that outlast any individual appointment, since the benchmark shows how quickly a function built around one person can disappear.

A hybrid lead also needs protection from drifting into routine administration, because the value of the role lies in its reach into the performance environment. Keeping it close to coaches, clinicians and analysts during the season and measuring it against performance outcomes is what stops it becoming a conventional people role under a different title. Its independence from any single department matters as well, since the role must be able to raise uncomfortable findings from the audit without those findings being filtered on their way to the leadership group.

Measuring Progress

Each approach should be judged against a small set of measures agreed at the outset and reviewed at the close of each major phase of the year, since a short set that is reviewed consistently is worth far more than a long list that nobody has time to discuss. The indicators below combine people measures with performance measures so the leadership group can see the effect on staff and on the athletes they support in the same review. Where a hybrid lead is in place these measures become the core of how that role is judged, keeping it anchored to performance in the same way every other investment in the programme is assessed.

INDICATOR	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Voluntary turnover and tenure	Whether continuity and institutional knowledge are being protected
Pulse scores	Whether workload, recovery and psychological safety are present as staff experience them
Recovery windows honoured	Whether the calendar in practice reflects the intent of the organisation
Decision latency	Whether decision rights on routine performance matters have been clarified and trusted
Communication quality	Whether integration between staff groups is improving
Internal progression	Whether staff are growing into the next generation of leaders from inside the organisation
Audit follow through	Whether the conditions identified in the opening organisational audit are improving over time
Athlete availability	Whether improvements for staff are reaching the athletes they support

A Sensible Sequence

Most organisations will be best served by starting with the staff performance rhythm in the first ninety days, since it costs little and builds the baseline every other option depends on. A readiness pilot or an embedded system can then be added for the next competitive phase, with a formal review at around six months to judge what the data and the pulse measures are showing. That review is the natural point to decide whether the organisation needs dedicated leadership capacity and whether a fractional lead or a permanent head of people performance would best fit its scale and ambition. Keeping each stage short and reviewed also allows the leadership group to adjust course quickly if early results point in a different direction.

For organisations that decide the hybrid lead is the right destination, a fractional lead can carry out the organisational audit, articulate the driving philosophy and shape the permanent role before it is recruited. That sequence means the permanent appointment arrives into an environment that already understands its purpose, which gives the role the best possible chance of lasting beyond any one person who holds it. The same review points then continue once the role is in place, so the leadership group can see whether the investment is delivering what the audit said it should.

First ninety days	Next competitive phase	Six month review	Twelve months
Build the rhythm, map the calendar and establish the pulse measures	Add a readiness pilot or an embedded staff performance system	Decide on fractional or dedicated leadership capacity	Establish the permanent hybrid lead where the review supports it

How ST Performance Can Support This

ST Performance Global works with organisations at whichever point on this pathway makes sense for them. That support can take the form of a diagnostic review of the current environment, the design and facilitation of the staff performance rhythm, guidance on selecting and integrating monitoring or embedded systems, a fractional organisational growth lead or help scoping and recruiting a permanent head of people performance. The shape of that support is always agreed with the leadership group first, so it matches the pace and priorities of the organisation.

Every engagement is built on the three values that guide the practice, People First, Meaning Over Status and Rigour is Respect, with each one designed to leave the organisation more capable and less dependent on outside support than it was when the work began.

Most engagements begin with a short diagnostic phase that combines conversations with staff at every level, a review of the calendar and existing structures and a set of agreed measures, which gives the leadership group an honest picture of where the organisation currently stands before any investment decision is made. From there the work follows whichever approach the leadership group chooses, with the same measures used throughout so progress can be judged consistently. Every approach in this document is also written so that an organisation can pursue it independently if it prefers, with ST Performance available at whatever level of involvement proves useful.

Questions to Guide the Decision

A steering document is most useful when it sharpens the conversation a leadership group needs to have, so the questions below are offered as a starting point for that discussion. They work best when the answers are tested against the experience of staff at every site and level of the department, since the view from the leadership table and the view from a satellite site can differ considerably.

FOR THE LEADERSHIP GROUP

- 01 Which of the five conditions of rest, downtime, flexibility, autonomy and psychological safety is weakest in our environment today?
- 02 Who currently owns the performance of our staff and is that ownership explicit or simply assumed?
- 03 What would we need to see after six months to justify moving further along the pathway?
- 04 How will staff be involved in designing the approach so that it earns their trust from the outset?
- 05 Where would the loss of one experienced person expose the most institutional knowledge in our system?
- 06 Where should staff development sit in our structure and how will it reach the people who work furthest from that home?

Build the system that sustains the people.

Athletes have never been better supported than they are today, while the people who design and deliver that support are still too often left to manage their own capacity across a relentless calendar. The organisations that extend the same care and rigour to their staff will set the standard that the rest of sport eventually follows, with the evidence suggesting they will be rewarded for having the conviction to move first.



SIMON THOMAS | ST PERFORMANCE GLOBAL