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CULTURA ORGANIZACIONAL DAS ASSOCIAÇÕES DESPORTIVAS: PERCEÇÃO DA LIDERANÇA, TRANSPARÊNCIA E TOMADA DE DECISÃO

SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS' ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: LEADERSHIP, TRANSPARENCY, AND DECISION-MAKING PERCEPTION

CULTURA ORGANIZACIONAL DE LAS ASOCIACIONES DEPORTIVAS: PERCEPCIÓN DEL LIDERAZGO, TRANSPARENCIA Y TOMA DE DECISIONES

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RESUMO

Introdução: As organizações bem-sucedidas adotam mecanismos operacionais que promovem eficiência, inovação e alinhamento estratégico.

Objetivo: Analisar a percepção dos agentes desportivos acerca da cultura organizacional das associações desportivas e respetiva influência na liderança, transparência e tomada de decisão.

Métodos: Entrevista semiestruturada, aplicada a cinco dirigentes com poder efetivo de decisão de associações de futebol portuguesas.

Resultados: Os testemunhos colhidos revelaram diferenças contextuais nos modelos de gestão das associações distritais: as estruturas mais abertas à comunicação digital demonstram maior proximidade com os clubes; a escassez de recursos é um desafio comum; lideranças participativas favorecem a confiança e o envolvimento, enquanto estilos centralizados tendem a limitar a inovação e a eficácia organizacional.

Conclusão: O investimento contínuo na formação de dirigentes, aliado ao acompanhamento sistemático dos efeitos das decisões estratégicas, constitui uma abordagem essencial para fomentar uma gestão mais profissional, eficiente e sustentável. Concomitantemente, urge promover práticas que garantam a ampla participação e o acesso transparente à informação em todos os níveis da gestão do futebol distrital português. Tais medidas não apenas fortalecem a capacidade institucional das associações, como também contribuem para a consolidação de um ambiente desportivo mais equitativo, inovador e alinhado com os desafios contemporâneos do futebol a nível local e regional.

Palavras-chave: cultura organizacional; gestão desportiva; liderança; mecanismos de transparência; organizações desportivas

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Successful organizations adopt operational mechanisms that foster efficiency, innovation, and strategic alignment.

Objective: To analyze sports agents' perceptions regarding the organizational culture of sports associations and its influence on leadership, transparency, and decision-making.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five decision-makers from Portuguese football associations.

Results: The collected testimonies revealed contextual differences in management models across district associations: structures open to digital communication were found to have closer ties with clubs; resource scarcity emerged as a common challenge; participative leadership styles promoted trust and engagement, while centralized approaches tended to limit innovation and organizational effectiveness.

Conclusion: Continuous investment in administrators' training, combined with systematic monitoring of strategic decisions' effects, constitutes an essential approach to fostering a more professional, efficient, and sustainable management of district football. At the same time, it is imperative to promote practices that ensure broad participation and transparent access to information at all levels of governance. These measures not only strengthen the association's institutional capacity but also contribute to the development of a more equitable, innovative, and resilient sporting environment, capable of effectively addressing the contemporary challenges of local and regional football.

Keywords: leadership; organizational culture; sports management; sports organizations; transparency mechanisms

RESUMEN

Introducción: Las organizaciones exitosas adoptan mecanismos operacionales que fomentan la eficiencia, la innovación y el alineamiento estratégico.

Objetivo: Analizar la percepción de los agentes deportivos sobre la cultura organizacional de las asociaciones deportivas y su influencia en el liderazgo, la transparencia y la toma de decisiones.

Métodos: Entrevistas semiestructuradas a cinco dirigentes con poder de decisión en asociaciones de fútbol portuguesas.

Resultados: Los testimonios obtenidos revelaron diferencias contextuales en los modelos de gestión de las asociaciones distritales: las estructuras más abiertas a la comunicación digital mostraron una mayor cercanía con los clubes; la escasez de recursos es un desafío común; los estilos de liderazgo participativos favorecen la confianza y el compromiso, mientras que los enfoques centralizados tienden a limitar la innovación y la eficacia organizacional.

Conclusión: La inversión continua en la formación de dirigentes, junto con el seguimiento sistemático de los efectos de las decisiones estratégicas, constituye un enfoque esencial para fomentar una gestión más profesional, eficiente y sostenible. Es urgente promover prácticas que garanticen una amplia participación y un acceso transparente a la información en todos los niveles de la gestión del fútbol distrital portugués. Estas medidas no solo fortalecen la capacidad institucional de las asociaciones, sino que también contribuyen a consolidar un entorno deportivo más equitativo, innovador y alineado con los desafíos contemporáneos del fútbol a nivel local y regional.

Palabras clave: cultura organizacional; gestión deportiva; liderazgo; mecanismos de transparencia; organizaciones deportivas

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the key pillars that drives organizations toward success. A solid structure enables processes' systematization and establishes internal control mechanisms, clearly defining the role of sports stakeholders, focusing on their ability to exert positive influence, and fostering a culture aligned with the organization's core values and strategic vision. Indeed, effective leadership promotes a culture and strategy that converge to uphold institutional sustainability (Garmano et al., 2024; Maitland et al., 2015).

Among the most frequently cited principles in the literature on sports leadership, transparency, accountability, democracy, and responsibility stand out. Each of these principles plays a vital role in promoting a good practices culture and consolidating sports organizations' credibility in the eyes of society (Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004; Khudari et al., 2024).

According to Verschuuren (2021), transparency is related to procedures and decision-making processes' clarity, ensuring that sports organizations' actions are open to public scrutiny. This allows all stakeholders (including athletes, sponsors, and fans) to understand how decisions are made, how resources are applied, and what criteria are used to implement projects. Transparency, therefore, fosters a culture of trust and accountability (Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004; Marques & Costa, 2016; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

Accountability, in turn, requires that leaders, managers, and other responsible individuals justify their actions and decisions regarding the use and allocation of resources to those who invest in or place their trust in the organization. Although resistance may sometimes arise due to the principle of autonomy in sport, accountability goes beyond financial aspects, encompassing the overall policies, procedures, and outcomes monitoring (Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004; Marques & Costa, 2016; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

Creating an ethical conduct code is crucial to strengthening accountability. This code should include behavior rules, define protocols for managing conflicts of interest, and establish clear procedures for submitting complaints and applying sanctions. By promoting such mechanisms, sports organizations demonstrate their commitment to integrity and ethics (Coutinho, 2022; Haas, 2019; Marques & Costa, 2016; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

In the sports context, democracy is closely linked to selection processes and maintaining leadership within organizations. Elections must be free, transparent, and unobstructed, allowing any internal stakeholder who meets the necessary requirements to participate in the electoral process. This type of mechanism encourages leadership renewal, idea pluralism, and open debate around sports development proposals. In this way, democracy reinforces the elected leaders' legitimacy and ensures broader participation in decision-making (Coutinho, 2022; Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004).

Responsibility, in the sports leadership context, encompasses response to current social and ethical challenges, comprehending the organization's context positioning and the inherent field results' achievement. This requires a conscious and sustainable management approach, oriented toward benefiting the community and preserving sport's core values. Sports organizations must deal with sensitive and complex issues such as combating doping, illegal betting, and match-fixing (Verschuuren, 2021). Furthermore, they must face issues such as sexual harassment, racism, and other forms of discrimination, while actively promoting gender equality and inclusion.

At the same time, responsibility demands increasing concern for environmental sustainability through the implementation of practices that respect ecological balance and reduce the environmental impact of sporting activities. Assuming this responsibility goes beyond the internal management of the organization, requiring a positive interaction with society. By implementing measures that protect sport's integrity and meet societal expectations, sports entities strengthen their credibility and relevance, contributing to the sector's ethical and sustainable progress (Coutinho, 2022; Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004; Marques & Costa, 2016; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

Transparency serves as a prerequisite for effective accountability; hence, both underpin genuine democratic mechanisms. These three elements consolidate integrated responsible practice (Král & Cuskelly, 2018).

When framed within the context of football associations, especially regarding transparency and decision-making, the topic has gained increasing relevance in both academic and practical fields. However, despite its importance recognition, gaps remain in existing literature. Most studies focus on elite clubs and international federations as an alternative to smaller or regional associations. These organizations play a fundamental role in football's development at the local level, in youth training, and in promoting inclusive practices, yet they face unique challenges related to limited resources, managing and maintaining ethical standards, and achieving strategic objectives (Cazotto et al., 2022; CIES Sports Intelligence, 2025; Haas, 2019; Marques & Costa, 2016; Moreira, 2024).

Despite the recognized importance of governance in sports, existing literature presents limitations that require reflection, as most studies have focused predominantly on international federations (e.g., FIFA, UEFA), high-performance national confederations, or elite professional clubs (Cazotto et al., 2022; Roitman, 2022). This shifts the focus away from district associations, which serve as the backbone of grassroots and local development football. These organizations operate under specific constraints (scarce financial resources, reliance on volunteering, and often informal management structures) that differ from the corporate models

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of the large entities studied. Consequently, practices identified in the literature may not be transferable or adequate to the reality of Portuguese district football.

Additionally, variables remain insufficiently explored in the context of local associations (Haas, 2019; Marques & Costa, 2016), such as: a) the influence of leadership on organizational culture – few studies investigate how these styles manifest and are perceived in a mixed associative management context (volunteers and professionals), where formal authority is limited by the association's democratic nature; b) the operationalization of transparency – transparency is often equated merely with financial accountability, revealing a lack of research on proactive transparency mechanisms (availability of information, internal codes of conduct) and how these affect the trust of affiliated clubs on a daily basis; c) the interconnection between decision-making and innovation – it remains unclear whether the centralization or decentralization of decision-making processes in district associations facilitates or hinders the adoption of new practices and the ability to respond to external challenges.

In this sense, the present study contributes to addressing these gaps by adopting a qualitative approach focused specifically on the ecosystem of Portuguese district associations, analyzing the direct perceptions of leaders with actual decision-making power. Its relevance lies in its potential to improve football associations' effectiveness by promoting a balance between sporting, financial, and social demands. Analyzing these structures can help identify models that support organizational integrity, economic sustainability, and the trust of various stakeholders, such as sponsors, fans, and athletes (Haas, 2019; Marques & Costa, 2016).

In a context where football continues to grow as one of the most influential industries in the world, transparency and decision-making quality are fundamental elements for maintaining associations' credibility. The adoption of good practices can mitigate poor management risks while increasing competitiveness, attracting investment, and strengthening community engagement. For football associations, often pressured by multiple interests, aligning ethical principles with operational strategies is vital to ensuring their relevance and impact in the sports landscape (Coutinho, 2022; Haas, 2019; Marques & Costa, 2016; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

Within the previous lines of thought, this study aims to analyze the understanding of sports management in the Portuguese football associations' context, by examining its stakeholders' perceptions regarding how their organizations' leadership structure influences transparency and decision-making processes, based on the adopted practices. To this end, three specific objectives were defined: (i) identify the adopted leadership practices by district football associations; (ii) analyze leadership's and intrinsic organizational culture influence on the adopted levels and transparency mechanisms, on institutional alignment, and on relationships with stakeholders; (iii) analyze the quality of strategic decisions' influence on long-term planning.

1. METHODS

The choice of a qualitative approach was grounded in its suitability for exploring complex phenomena of perception and organizational culture, where subjective and contextual meanings are central (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike quantitative approaches that prioritize statistical generalization, the qualitative paradigm enables a deep understanding of relational and decision-making processes occurring within associations. This epistemological choice aligns with previous investigations into sports governance that have employed interpretive methods to capture institutional nuances (Coutinho, 2022; Nazi & Amboni, 2020). The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, assuming that organizational reality is socially constructed through the perceptions and meanings attributed by sports agents (Denzin et al., 2023). This qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the objectives of deeply understanding complex leadership and governance phenomena, which require contextualized analysis and cannot be reduced to isolated quantifiable variables (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

1.1 Participants

The study group consisted of sports professionals from five Portuguese football associations (Table 1), with one participant representing each association. All participants were male and held leadership roles in different district football associations in Portugal, with direct responsibility for governance, such as president, general director, and/or technical coordinator. Participant selection followed predefined inclusion criteria: holding a decision-making position; relevant experience in association management processes; and direct involvement in defining or implementing mechanisms for institutional transparency and accountability.

The sample included representatives from associations located in the country's north, center, and south, ensuring territorial and administrative diversity. This broad scope enabled access to different organizational models and leadership practices, reflecting a variety of realities within the associative context. At the same time, it was essential to understand how governance structures influence transparency, decision-making, and the challenges faced by district football associations in Portugal.

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Table 1 - Participants' characterization

Participant code	Current role in association	Geographic region	Management experience (years)	The interview's main focus
FA1	President	North	>10	Pedagogical leadership, technical planning, and internal communication
FA2	General Manager	Central	5-10	Participative management, digitized financial transparency, and the club-president relationship
FA3	Technical Coordinator	South	5-10	Communicational proximity, transparent purchasing processes, and technical validation
FA4	President	North	>15	Human resources selection, delegation, and alignment with the federation's regulations
FA5	General Manager	South	5-10	Institutional integrity, democratic participation in assembly, procedural justice

1.2 Instruments

To meet the predefined objectives, a semi-structured interview was used as the primary data collection instrument, given its potential to balance question structure with the necessary flexibility to delve into relevant topics as they arise in conversation (Reis, 2024). This approach allowed access to contextualized information grounded in the participants' concrete experiences. The interview guide was developed based on specialized literature in the fields of management, leadership, and sports policies and was later subjected to a peer-validation process, consisting of a group of three academic experts with relevant scientific experience in this field, to ensure its intelligibility, comprehension, as well as methodological relevance and coherence.

The interview guide was constructed based on theoretical frameworks on sports governance (Coutinho, 2022; Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004) and instruments validated in previous research on organizational leadership (Rosado, 2019; Sesinando, 2021). Instrument validation occurred through a peer-review process with three academics specialized in sports management, who assessed clarity, methodological relevance, and coherence of the questions. Following this phase, minor changes were introduced in the formulation of two questions related to financial transparency, aiming for greater conceptual precision.

The interviews were structured around the previously mentioned dimensions: (i) governance structure, which aimed to analyze the associations' internal bodies' organizational mechanisms and their inherent roles' distribution; (ii) challenges and improvement strategies, which allowed the identification of internal limitations and the gathering of suggestions to strengthen institutional effectiveness and integrity.

1.3 Procedures

Interviewees' initial contact was made through phone call and email, to introduce the research objectives, clarify any questions, and schedule the interviews according to the participants' availability. The interviews were conducted individually, either in person or online (when the interviewee was unavailable), respecting the preferences and conditions of each participant, with an approximate duration of 40 minutes.

Before the interviews began, the participants were asked for permission to record the audio (ensuring compliance with ethical standards in scientific research). This procedure proved particularly effective in capturing internal perspectives and governance practices that are often not formalized in institutional documents, providing an essential contribution to the study's phenomenon qualitative analysis. Confidentiality was ensured throughout the study. Participants were aware that the collected information would be used exclusively for academic purposes, with their data remaining anonymous.

The recordings were fully transcribed, ensuring an accurate reflection of the responses provided. The entire process was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines applicable to social sciences, promoting respect for the participants, integrity of the information collected, and, as previously stated, safeguarding their identity. Consequently, the interviewees were designated with the following abbreviations: "FA1," "FA2," "FA3," "FA4," and "FA5."

Content analysis then served as a data processing technique to analyze the information collected from the interviews. It helped the researcher describe and interpret the interviewees' narratives, focusing on key points related to the study's topic, and it was conducted following the model proposed by Bardin (2015), which consists of three phases: pre-analysis, content exploration, and results' treatment. The categories were initially derived from the study objectives but allowed for emergent adjustments during the analysis. The coding process involved the complete reading of the transcripts, identification of meaning units, and grouping into thematic categories. To ensure reliability, an intercoder verification process was carried out with two independent researchers (Hill et al., 2005), and to safeguard methodological rigor, the strategies proposed by Shenton (2004) were also applied: (i) source triangulation by comparing participants' accounts with available public institutional documents; (ii) detailed record of the decision-making process during analysis in a field journal; (iii) procedures' external audit by an independent researcher. Additionally, member checking was employed, submitting preliminary summaries to two participants to validate the interpretation of their accounts. These procedures strengthen the findings' reliability within this qualitative design.

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2. RESULTS

As participants' interview results were analyzed across the main categories, Table 2 summarizes a thematic categorization to provide a more systematic overview of the conducted analysis.

Table 2 - Categories and interview inferences

Main category	Subcategory / Specific theme	Frequency	Key findings
1. Leadership Styles and Organizational Culture	Participatory and horizontal leadership	High (FA2, FA3, FA5)	Focus on active listening, negotiation, and viewing clubs as partners ("extract the good from each one").
	Centralized/vertical leadership	Medium/Low (FA1, FA4)	Decisions are concentrated in the presidency with limited delegation.
	Communication as a strategic tool	High	Communication is seen as a pillar of motivation; its absence generates distance and mistrust.
	Talent development and delegation	Medium	Emphasis on people's correct selection and the growth of collaborators.
2. Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms	Formal financial disclosure	Very High (All)	Presentation of reports at General Assemblies (mandatory by law/culture).
	Digital/proactive transparency	Variable (High in FA2, FA3; Low in FA1, FA4, FA5)	Continuous availability on the website vs. access only upon reactive request.
	Conduct code(s) and ethics	Low/Medium	Absence of internal codes in several associations (exclusive dependence on PFF).
	Transparent procurement processes	Medium	Request to ensure competitiveness.
3. Decision-Making Processes	Hierarchical validation	High	Most technical decisions require final approval from the governing board.
	Club participation (deliberative)	Variable (High in FA2, FA5)	Clubs have voting rights on budgets/plans or regular consultation.
	Prior consultation without binding vote	Medium (FA4)	Meetings with clubs to hear opinions, but the final decision remains with the management.
	Limited technical autonomy	High	Technicians propose, but political validation is the final bottleneck in the process.
4. Structural Challenges and Opportunities	Resource scarcity	Very High (Universal)	Common conflict identified by all five participants.
	Need for digital Modernization	Medium/High	Lack of digital platforms for systematic management of financial data.
	Individual dependence on the leader	Medium	Sustainability risk when the organization depends excessively on a charismatic figure.

Leadership and Organizational Culture

Leadership in district football associations emerges as a key factor in how these organizations are structured, how they relate to clubs, and how they face internal challenges. The interviewees' discourse revealed a notion of leadership that is close, participative, and adaptive, distanced from authoritarian models and leaning towards a logic of listening and collective involvement.

FA1's representative conveyed an image of close and pedagogical leadership, aiming to balance authority with sensitivity. He acknowledged: *"...my leadership adaptation has to do with that; sometimes I want to be stricter, but I take it slow, [...] in the end, I hold a meeting with them to understand what the objectives were..."*. The described leadership style seems to prioritize direct involvement and trust building, opting for an approach based on listening and guidance rather than imposition, aligning with transformational leadership, which is based on individual motivation and goal orientation, valuing coaches' relationships and athlete development.

FA2's leadership appears to be understood as a process of broad management, where balance between people and resources is considered essential. The interviewee emphasized: *"Leadership today can't just be about arriving, ordering, and doing [...] it must also be based on others' opinions, listening to everyone, being able to extract the good from what each person says, and trying to grow together..."*. The statement dismantles excessive verticality logic, suggesting a more horizontal view in which clubs are partners, not merely decisions' executors. Concern with relational management is clear: *"...an effective leader must be a good people manager and a good financial manager, to understand each club's reality..."*. It summarizes the idea that leading in the associative context requires empathy, negotiation skills, and deep knowledge of on-the-ground limitations.

In the FA3 account, proximity and communicative clarity logic is further reinforced, considering that: *"...good leadership is that which is communicated and participatory [...] the less communication, the more distance there is, and the harder it becomes in terms of motivation..."*. Communication is highlighted as a motivation and organizational effectiveness pillar, establishing a bridge between strategic objectives and daily work. This constant connection allows staff to better understand their role, reinforcing their sense of belonging. Furthermore, it underlines the importance of active presence: *"...an effective leader must maintain ongoing communication with the various staff members, the [...] be (in field) present to oversee execution [...] and try to anticipate*

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the next steps...". The leader's figure is not office-confined but extends to the ability to be present and to anticipate challenges, which reinforces authority through proximity.

FA4's leadership is strongly associated with human resources' selection and appreciation. The interviewee explained: *"...the main characteristics are, first, selecting adequately, choosing the right people. I think that's fundamental."* The team's quality is seen as leadership's direct reflection, which must be sensitive enough to surround itself with the right people. Additionally, it was mentioned: *"...my leadership's approach is to delegate, and above all, to help those who work with us to grow..."* Delegation appears as a deliberate strategy to develop internal competencies, betting on the collaborators' autonomy. There is also a clear sense of institutional representation, as evidenced: *"...we represent all the clubs, we don't represent 'our own' club..."*. Collective role and institutional responsibility awareness strengthen a leadership ethical vision, anchored in service and impartiality.

FA5 presented a leadership concept based on clarity, integrity, and fairness. The interviewee emphasized: *"...when leadership communicates clear goals, it contributes to the mission values among the technical and administrative team..."*. Objectives' transparency reinforces motivation and supports the team's efforts. An active listening attitude was also highlighted: *"...leadership adopts an active listening posture and establishes involvement with clubs..."* It infers leadership action sensitive to external dynamics and not entirely centered on internal decisions. Institutional trust is reinforced through accountability practices: *"...leadership that communicates clearly, provides accountability, and keeps clubs informed generates trust and loyalty..."*. Finally, justice's role was emphasized as authority's foundation: *"...leadership that fairly applies rules and without favoritism preserves clubs' respect and the institution's credibility."* Ethical leadership is emphasized, which upholds equality principles and reinforces power legitimacy.

Transparency Mechanisms

Transparency is widely recognized as one of the core pillars of good governance, especially in organizations that manage public or community resources, such as district football associations. The testimonies gathered revealed varying degrees of commitment to this principle, both in financial disclosure and in document availability and accountability practices.

FA1 links its commitment to formal moments' transparency in the institutional calendar: *"...at the season's beginning or end, the financial report is always presented at a general assembly [...] with all affiliated clubs."* This collective gathering and evaluation moment allows clubs to become aware of the association's financial movements. However, nuances were noted regarding continuous information channels' availability, admitting: *"...access requests will be granted quickly and as soon as possible..."*. This suggests a more reactive than proactive approach. Similarly, limitations were acknowledged in internal processes handling, such as disciplinary procedures, which: *"...take a long time to be resolved..."*. It raises concerns about procedural efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, the absence of a dedicated conduct code was also noted as the interviewee stated: *"Yes, we still don't have a conduct code..."*, which represents a substantial gap in the organization's ethical alignment.

FA2's transparency practice was described in greater detail and regularity, with the interviewee emphasizing: *"...all these expenses are added to the financial statement, and at the end of each season, in the General Assembly, it is presented to the clubs, who then vote for or against it..."* Here, beyond the formal presentation, there is also a continuous effort to make information available: *"...the financial reports and other data are available on the official website, [...] they've been published there for several years."* It is an approach that allows for easy and democratic access to information without relying on direct requests. The internal perception is clear: *"Because our association it's small, everything we do is transparent to the clubs [...] and everything is itemized in detail."* Clubs' proximity seems to foster a trustworthy environment and legitimacy in decision-making.

FA3 highlighted a set of practices aimed at ensuring integrity and fairness in procedures. One of the most concrete examples is the procurement process, where: *"...when there's a need to acquire something, we request three quotes from different companies, in order to find the most competitive offer [...] there's that concern, to increase transparency in decision-making..."*. Preventive action such as this not only encourages competition but also reinforces the institution's credibility. The association also makes key documents available on its website: *"...the financial report and activity plan are available on our official website, [...] any member or interested party can consult them..."*. Such openness facilitates public scrutiny and allows information to circulate beyond the restricted circle of affiliated clubs.

FA4's transparency is strongly anchored in the Portuguese Football Federation's (FPF) regulations. The interviewee stated: *"...transparency begins with the fact that we are not allowed to hold positions in clubs, [...] we must operate in an exclusive regime."* Roles' separation aims to eliminate conflicts of interest and protect impartial decision-making. It was also noted that: *"...we follow the transparency and integrity principles set by the Federation..."*, indicating adherence to an externally regulated ethical culture. However, it was acknowledged that public communication channels are limited, as the information disclosed is essentially: *"...on social media and the website..."*. This limitation reduces information's reach and accessibility. Additionally, the association does not yet possess its own conduct code, relying solely on that of the FPF: *"The applied conduct code is the Federation's, [...] the association doesn't yet have a code of its own."*

Finally, FA5 showed a more formalized structure, with an opportunity for growth and improvement. The association publishes online the board's and its main bodies' composition, and: *"...members vote on the budget, financial report, and activity plan in the General Assembly."* These formal moments provide legitimacy for decisions and promote participation. Nevertheless: *"...there is*

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currently no digital platform dedicated to the systematic disclosure of financial or strategic information...". The access to continuous and organized information continues to be restricted. Holding assemblies and publicly presenting documents was valued: *"FA [...] holds General Assemblies with broad participation from clubs, where activity and financial reports are presented and approved,"* yet the absence of digital tools reveals a concrete opportunity for modernization.

Decision-Making Processes

The way decisions are made within district football associations reveals their leadership model, the openness to club participation, and the balance between technical autonomy and managerial control. The interviews' analysis highlighted different practices and levels of stakeholder involvement, ranging from participatory models to more centralized structures.

Decision-making in FA1 was described as a coordinated process, although dependent on the board. According to its interview, it was mentioned that *"The season planning is done between the board and me, so I plan the activities, create the competition calendars, [...] in terms of budgeting, I discuss it with the board, particularly with the President."* Opening for technical initiative is suggested, but within a hierarchical validation framework. Balance between proposal and approval is maintained through a direct relationship with the executive leadership. This dynamic was reinforced: *"...the decision goes through there, and strategic planning is done by the President and me..."*, clearly indicating that the main action areas are defined by at least two people, in a process that is more informal than institutional.

FA2's decision-making structure takes on a more direct form. The responsible explained: *"...I present the ideas, and then the board votes whether they agree or not, [...] we prepare everything and then it's taken to the board..."*. There is a functional division between those who propose and those who decide, as the logic of submitting to a formal vote grants greater legitimacy to decisions, while structuring roles in a more institutionalized way. The relationship with the clubs was also valued in this process, through regular meetings: *"...we hold quarterly meetings with the clubs, [...] then I write up a report on that meeting, [...] from these reports, the board gives its final decision."* These meetings serve as consultative forums, allowing input to be gathered before a formal stance is taken.

FA3 adopts a similar model, based on coordination between the technical bodies and the board. The interviewee mentioned that *"...all the decisions made by the technical structures always require board approval..."*. The board's oversight indicates that, despite having technical autonomy to plan and think ahead, final decisions remain in the leadership's hands. Strategic planning was described as a shared process: *"...sometimes there are challenges proposed by the Portuguese Football Federation, such as Walking Football, [...] but the paths to follow are always decided in coordination between the board and the general management of the association..."*. Coordination with FPF reinforces the idea that, beyond the internal structure, there are external factors shaping the decision-making process.

In the case of FA4, the decision-making logic starts within the office but quickly transitions to the board. The interviewee clarified: *"...any changes to competition formats or the implementation of projects, [...] must always be approved by the board and then communicated to the clubs..."*. Club's role, although consultative, is acknowledged in the preliminary phase: *"...whenever we have new ideas, we bring clubs alongside with the board to hear their views before deciding..."*. This approach indicates an attempt at involvement but keeps the final decision within the governing bodies. Technical specificity was also considered: *"...if it's technical-related issues, we discuss them with the respective age groups' coordinators and coaches."* The distinction between technical and structural matters allows the decision-making process to be adjusted to the nature of the addressed issues.

FA5 was presented as participatory and based on a representative logic. The interviewee summarized: *"...the decision-making process is characterized by a participatory and structured approach, involving both the board and the clubs."* Annual plans development, as well as budget definition, follow: *"...the sports season's planning. Budget preparation is carried out by the board and submitted for approval by the affiliated clubs in the General Assembly."* Validation through the Assembly gives decisions' formal legitimacy while setting clear limits on the board's power. The clubs' vote importance was also emphasized: *"...clubs have voting rights and actively participate in the activity plans and annual budgets approval..."*, signaling a more democratic model in which decisions are not limited to the board alone.

3. DISCUSSION

Leadership and Organizational Culture

Regarding how leadership is exercised within the analyzed district football associations, significant differences emerged between these structures in terms of organization, communication, and relationships with affiliated clubs. While all acknowledge the importance of responsible leadership, the adopted styles varied between more participatory, development-oriented approaches and others that were more centralized and dependent on a leader figure.

FA2, FA3, and FA5 attempted to promote open and shared leadership. Rather than relying on authoritarian models, these structures emphasize the proximity to clubs, clear goals, communication, and people's values. Leadership, in these specific cases, is understood as a relational process in which the leader seeks to involve different stakeholders, motivate teams, and foster an environment of trust and mutual responsibility (López & Fernández, 2015). This approach aligns with the literature that supports

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transformational and adaptive leadership models, capable of allying values, generating commitment, and responding with flexible ability to organizational challenges (Molero et al., 2007; Seginando, 2021; Valvassori et al., 2008).

FA2 posture emphasized the importance of directly involving clubs in decision-making and the need for leadership that is closely connected to the local reality. FA3, in turn, reinforced the role of continuous communication as a key tool to maintain motivation and strategic alignment, while FA5 highlighted the importance of institutional fairness and coherence, recognizing that leadership involves setting an example and being accountable.

In disparity, FA1 and FA4 exhibited more traditional and centralized leadership styles. Although there is an effort to maintain proximity and direct oversight, FA1's leadership remains heavily reliant on its individual actions, with no structured mechanisms for participation or shared decision-making. The described model showed close supervision but was primarily based on personal leadership style, which may limit active team involvement and organizational culture development (Hernández, 2005; Rosado, 2019). FA4's leadership emphasized human resources' selection and appreciation. While there is an intention to delegate responsibilities and foster internal growth, the structure remains centralized, who's president plays a dominant role in decision making. Despite openness to delegation, the absence of formal participation channels may reduce the internal contributions flow and restrict the development of collaborative solutions, making the organization excessively dependent on individual leadership, and consequently less prepared for renewal and sustained innovation (Cairney et al., 2024; Seginando, 2021; Valvassori et al., 2008).

In line with the above, the contrasting ideologies expressed by the interviewees revealed that organizations adopting a more participatory leadership style (FA2, FA3, and FA5) show greater alignment with contemporary leadership models advocated in literature. These associations understand that leadership is not only about decision-making but also about effective communication, motivation, and building a shared sense of mission. Thus, associations maintaining a centralized and individualized model (FA1 and FA4) appear more distant from collaborative practices, which may impact internal cohesion and decision legitimacy (Hernández, 2005; Seginando, 2021).

These inferences reinforce the theoretical arguments of authors such as Molero et al. (2007) and Rosado (2019), who argue that effective leadership in sport should be adaptive, communicative, and oriented toward collective growth. Leadership isn't merely a control function, but a relational process that should inspire, listen, and ensure that good governance principles are implemented in the institutions' daily life (Garcia et al., 2021). Associations that succeed in making this transition will be better prepared to face the challenges of district football, promote ethical practices, and foster more resilient and representative organizations.

Transparency Mechanisms

Testimonies' analysis revealed that transparency, as an essential principle of good governance, is valued by all FA, although there is considerable variation in how this value is put into practice. While some associations adopt regular and systematic information disclosure practices, others continue to rely on more reactive and occasional processes, limiting stakeholders' access to relevant and up-to-date information (Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004).

Transparency functions as a consistent and operational practice in both FA2 and FA3. FA2's expenses are recorded in financial spreadsheets, and financial reports are submitted for clubs' approval at the General Assembly, in addition to being made available on the official website. The regular and easy access demonstrate strong commitment to accountability and public disclosure (Coutinho, 2022; Valeev, 2023). FA3 adopts similar practices, reinforced by preventive procedures that ensure greater rigor and impartiality, such as the requirement to obtain three quotes for any purchase. This measure not only promotes efficiency but also embodies the principle of integrity, protecting the association from accusations of favoritism or mismanagement (Marques & Costa, 2016; Urdaneta et al., 2021).

On the other hand, although there is an intention to share information with clubs, the formal transparency mechanisms in FA1 and FA4 appeared to be weaker. FA1's financial reports are presented only at General Assemblies, and access to information depends on a direct request, reflecting a more reactive than preventive stance. A similar pattern was observed in FA4, where information is mainly shared through its website and social media. In both cases, the absence of internal conduct codes (relying solely on those of the FPFs) represents an opportunity to strengthen internal transparency and the organization's ethical culture (Cazotto et al., 2022; López-Gajardo et al., 2021; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

FA5 presented a hybrid model. Despite organizing assemblies with strong club participation, during which financial reports and activity plans are discussed and approved, promoting a participatory and deliberative logic, it acknowledges the lack of a dedicated digital platform for regular and systematic financial and strategic data disclosure. This gap compromises information's accessibility and its continuity, driving the model overly reliant on physical attendance and formal assembly moments (Rodrigues, 2021).

Examining FA2 and FA3's governance principles' alignment, such practices tend to approximate Henry and Lee (2004), Haas (2019), and Hoyer and Cuskelly's (2007) main thoughts, who emphasize the importance of clarity, equitable access to information, and continuous accountability. The existence of updated digital channels and internal procedures that promote integrity are concrete example of robust transparency mechanisms (Kráľ & Cuskelly, 2018). In contrast, the remaining associations still face challenges in consolidating practices that allow for a more fluid and systematic flow of information across different organizational levels and stakeholders.

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Internal conduct codes' creation, like the ones shaped by FA4 and that are currently absent in FA1, is a recommended measure by the specialized literature (Coutinho, 2022; Nazi & Amboni, 2021). These codes not only establish clear behavioral rules but also reinforce institutional credibility and contribute to a more ethical and predictable organizational culture (Court of Arbitration for Sport, 2025). The lack of structured digital platforms, as identified by FA5, also raises questions about management and communication processes' modernization. Stakeholders expect immediate and transparent access to information, then digitalization becomes a practical and ethical requirement (Union of European Football Associations - UEFA, 2024).

Strengthening transparency may involve institutionalizing practices of decisions, evaluation criteria and reports' continuous and accessible disclosure. Creating digital repositories with regulated and organized financial data that remains permanently accessible would represent a significant advancement (Rodrigues, 2021; UEFA, 2024). Concurrently, implementing formal channels for collecting suggestions and whistleblowing, as proposed by FA5, would strengthen trust among clubs, managers, and other sports agents, at the same time contributing to greater internal integrity.

In this regard, transparency goes beyond mere accounts' presentation at the General Assembly, requiring accessible, consistent, and proactive information disclosure mechanisms, as well as a clear commitment to ethical conduct. Associations that adopt such practices (namely FA2 and FA3) demonstrated greater institutional maturity and that are more aligned with good governance principles. Those that continue to operate under more traditional logics face context adapting challenges that demand increasing openness, clarity, and accountability (Haas, 2019; Nazi & Amboni, 2021; UEFA, 2024).

Decision-Making Processes

Decision-making procedures prove to be one of the most sensitive and strategic areas in these district football associations' way to operate, reflecting not only how decisions are technically constructed but also who participates in them, how they are validated, and to what extent they embody the principles of sharing, listening, and responsibility (Haas, 2019; Henry & Lee, 2004).

The interviews showed that, although all FAs maintain the board as a final deliberative body, there are significant differences regarding the process' directness and stakeholder's integration. FA1 and FA3 presented predominantly vertical logic, where technical structures formulate proposals, but these only proceed with the approval of the board. As noted by FA1, "season planning is planned between me and the board...". This direct articulation with the top hierarchical level ensures strategic alignment but also limits the broader involvement of the technical team or even external clubs. The same applies to FA3, where dependence on political validation is clearly expressed: "...there must always be the board's approval for anything to happen.". This structure may be effective in maintaining institutional coherence but tends to hinder innovation and responsibilities' horizontal sharing, reducing the technical teams' contributory potential (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007).

FA2 and FA5 described more participatory and formalized processes. In FA2, decisions are preceded by technical proposals that are voted on by the board and complemented by quarterly meetings with the clubs. This practice strengthens dialogue and transparency, ensuring that decisions reflect the reality and sports agents' concerns. FA5 bases its decisions on a structured participation model where clubs have voting rights and approve, in assembly, the activity plans and budgets. Such approach aligns with the democracy and accountability premises advocated by Henry and Lee (2004) and Haas (2019), fostering an environment of greater institutional legitimacy and members' effective involvement.

FA4 occupied an intermediate position. Although it recognizes the importance of consulting clubs, decisions remain within the board's domain. It holds meetings with clubs to hear coaches and coordinators' thoughts before making more structural decisions. However, these conferences do not appear to be binding, functioning more as informal moments of opinion gathering. As such, despite recognizing the effort to involve stakeholders, the logic remains centered on the board as the sole entity with full authority over decisions (Marques & Costa, 2016).

From a theoretical standpoint, good sports governance practices are based on creating participation mechanisms that go beyond symbolic consultation. For participation to be effective, it must occur at key moments in the decision-making process, having a real impact on final choices (Hums & MacLean, 2017). The models adopted by FA2 and FA5 illustrate this principle by promoting deliberative assemblies, active listening, and shared responsibilities. These processes also align with UEFA's recommendations (2024), which value representative participation as a way to strengthen cohesion and trust between managers and clubs.

More centralized associations, such as FA1, FA3, and FA4, could benefit from introducing mechanisms that more actively involve agents in planning and decision-making. A practical way to make more informed and fairer decisions would be to create working groups composed of technicians and club representatives, allowing them to give their input before the board's final decision. Such a measure could help expand the support base and make grounded and adjusted decisions. Similarly, it supports a shared responsibility principle, mitigating the risk of unilateral decisions detached from the clubs' needs (Coutinho, 2022; Nazi & Amboni, 2021).

In summary, decision-making processes continue, in many cases, to be conducted in a centralized manner, with a discreet sharing of power. However, FA2 and FA5's experiences demonstrate that it is possible to adopt more participatory models capable of combining efficiency with legitimacy. Strengthening technicians and clubs' inclusion in decisions, clarifying participation channels, and giving real weight to collected opinions are essential steps to develop a more transparent and effective governance, aligned with internal democracy and institutional co-responsibility principles (CIES Sports Intelligence, 2025; Haas, 2019; UEFA, 2024).

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CONCLUSION

Highlighting leadership and organizational culture as analysis' central elements, associations with leadership styles that are open to dialogue and stakeholder involvement tend to exhibit better outcomes in terms of internal motivation and external trust. Regarding the relationship between organizational structure and transparency, more participatory associations demonstrated greater clarity in public communication and resource management. The use of digital platforms, documents' dissemination, and the existence of clear operating rules are elements that contribute to a culture of increased accountability.

The quality of strategic decision-making tends to be higher when responsibilities are more widely shared among managers, technicians, and clubs. Indeed, more participatory models generate decisions that are better informed and adapted to the local reality. Conversely, overly centralized structures that excessively rely on the leader's individual capacity, can compromise continuity and innovation.

In terms of practical implications, this study suggests that district associations should institutionalize formal mechanisms for club participation in strategic decisions, particularly through the creation of regular advisory councils. Furthermore, the adoption of specific codes of conduct for each association could strengthen the internal ethical culture, alongside the implementation of continuous training programs on transparency and accountability for district leaders. The aim is to enrich leadership in local sports organizations by empirically demonstrating the relationship between participative styles and institutional trust (Hums, 2017).

Considering the limitation posed by the small number of associations involved, as well as the fact that not all provided sufficient public documents to allow a comprehensive triangulation of information, these factors prevent full generalization of the results. At the same time, the findings reflect a specific reality at a given time and may evolve with future changes in leadership or legislation.

It is suggested that future research involves applying the research instrument at multiple points in time to verify the consistency of responses over time, thereby increasing the robustness of participants' perceptions. Similarly, expanding the geographical scope of the study is recommended, as each environment has its own dynamics and characteristics. Therefore, replicating the study in different demographic contexts is essential to validate the applicability of the conclusions.

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Conceptualization, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; data curation, D.M. and A.A.; formal analysis, A.A. and P.E.; funding acquisition, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; investigation, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; methodology, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; project administration, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; resources, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; supervision, A.A. and P.E.; validation, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; visualization, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; writing – original draft, D.M., A.A. and P.E.; writing – review & editing, A.A. and P.E.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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