Good morning
Thanks for inviting me to participate in today's assembly celebrating past captains of sport here at Christ church. It's with some regret that I never really aspired to be a sports captain in my time at school because, since stepping into the AFL system 15 years ago, I've certainly come to appreciate the profound impact of leadership and leaders in driving team culture and performance. And so it's with these themes of leadership and sport in mind that I thought it would be of some interest to you if I shared some of the prevailing ideologies pertaining to leadership and team dynamics in the AFL and more specifically at the FFC.

I guess when you think of leaders in football most would envisage an autocratic style of leader who rules with an iron fist. A captain who enunciates with fiery rhetoric certain values or principles that he feels should define the group and the way they play footy. Or a coach who can deliver a vitriolic spray and dispenses draconian physical punishments for those that step out of line. This type of leader or leadership is still largely prevalent in the AFL in some circles but new philosophies and strategies are fast emerging.

A paradigm shift occurred in the early 2000s where we saw a departure from this autocratic model to that of leadership groups where the responsibilities were disseminated amongst 456 or 10 players. The leadership group concept seemed to appear almost overnight in the AFL when suddenly every club was talking about them.

So we at Fremantle embraced the changing tide and elected the clubs inaugural leadership group back in 2005 of which I was a member. And what's been interesting to observe over the many years is how this group, which initially had little influence and for all intents and purposes was a mere formality, has evolved to become a powerful tool for driving team culture and performance.

And in more recent years with the senior coach playing more of a facilitator type role in empowering the leaders to essentially hold the reins- has lead to significant growth and change into what is now a high performance team. Rigorous peer-to-peer feedback using team principles as our road map has now become the norm in which was often solely the role of the coach or captain. What is particularly important in the giving of this feedback is the language that is used. We are coached in this. It must be firm yet respectful, specific, dispassionate and never personal. You can't accuse someone of being a selfish, arrogant or lazy player but rather we would say; “you need to stick to our game-plan, or- “you needed to give greater effort in that contest.” You see it's the behavior that's being addressed not the character that’s being attacked.

Coupled with this new rigorous peer feedback system is team selection
If a player is given direct feedback over a period of time and fails to adjust his behavior to align with the collective will of the group, his position in the team becomes untenable. Indeed this integrity to team selection is a vital feature of the whole process.

I’m sure you could imagine if coaches or leaders ignored or didn’t really value the process and instead turned a blind eye to poor behaviors on and off the field in favor of talent, the trust within the team would be broken. And once trust is lost, resentment, uncertainty and indifference emerge. And these are not qualities conducive to team success.

And so our culture has gradually shifted. Every training session, every game and every meeting is now an opportunity for feedback and growth and over time the feedback has become sharper, the language has become stronger and the message has become clearer. If you don’t buy-in to the team you find yourself on the outer and being left behind. Enormous talent doesn’t guarantee you a position on the field as it used to.

Fremantle is certainly on the right track in regards to our leadership models and team philosophies. But so are many other teams in this highly competitive industry and we will have to continue to grow through honest feedback, hard work and of course strong leadership if we are to again challenge those sitting on top of the mountain.

I hope you gleaned something from that very brief summary of the inner workings of an AFL club. I feel these concepts on leadership and team dynamics can easily be adopted into other industries or environments if they haven’t been already. But the wonderful and unique thing about team sport is that immediate connection between words and action. There is nowhere to hide. But to give your self over to the team in pursuit of a higher aim together, there’s nothing more rewarding. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors and thanks again for the invitation to speak with you.