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Hays-Forum: Leadership and Teamwork; Management Learnings from the World of Football

There is no easier way to explain football: You've got to put the ball in the back of the net. Perhaps this simplicity is why, football – a game where two teams compete to control one ball – has long since become a global phenomenon.

The answer, however, to the question of whether the ball's path into the goal – much like a roulette ball's movement on a roulette table – depends solely on chance, is much more complex. Does, for instance, good management – the people who work to win each game for their team through the most skilful and efficient use of their personnel – also play a decisive role in a team's success?

Anyone who assumes leadership of a football club must create an atmosphere in which optimising the team's performance is everyone's priority. Such leaders must act as role models and set an example for others by implementing and enforcing this fundamental outlook and attitude. It is necessary, on the one hand, to accept the characteristics of the football team as mentioned above. On the other hand, however, management must accept the basic characteristics of the game – the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the football – without giving up their own responsibility and power to act in a way that benefits both the game and its exponents. Those who manage to pull off this balancing act are in a position to manage and develop a football club rationally and in the interests of their colleagues and stakeholders, even when emotions run high, as is all too often the case in this business.

With consistency and resilience, such leaders can overcome the unpredictability of the game and the hysteria often endemic to the environment and thus demonstrate reliability and credibility. They come to see themselves as bearing the highest responsibility for the club, which gives them the legitimacy and strength to make decisions that are essential for the clubs continued existence and further development. These are decisions that affect individuals, but ultimately serve the goal of promoting cooperation and thus strengthening the group – the team and the club as a whole.

Unlike in rowing, a football team develops its particular strengths in that its members, as individuals with different talents, come together in unequal roles to work together towards a common goal. The obvious differences in the roles and tasks of the individual team members make individual performance stand out alongside that of the team.

With the commercialisation and media penetration surrounding football, the performance of individual team members has become even more important. In addition to the team's overall results, how individuals perform is also subject to public scrutiny. This can determine the player's position in the internal and external hierarchy and influence his salary. Moreover, it can also determine the significance of the individual as a footballer in the media and ultimately also the "market value" of a player, i.e. his individual chances of achieving his or her own personal career goals.

This presents a challenge to the club's team spirit, which is absolutely essential for the functioning of the team and which results from the awareness that the primary task of the individual team members is to contribute to the best interests of the whole. If this awareness is weakened or even lost entirely (i.e. the team's collective insight into their common goals), the special power of team cooperation is also lost. This, in turn, endangers the success of the team.

If, according to the truism of football, the better team wins against a team of better individuals, then football confirms the thesis that the strength of a team cannot be determined mathematically by the addition of individual performances, but rather that it consists of the best possible combination of talents, competencies, roles and temperaments.

The experience and insights gained in football can thus be transferred to any person with management responsibilities: namely, a team's composition is an absolute core task for management. It is important for managers not to be afraid of adding strong personalities and successful individuals to their teams. Strong leaders do not see the diversity of their group and the strengths of their individual team members as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to lead the team. They seek to establish direct human contact with their team members without blurring the division of their individual roles. They must develop the ability to address the individual as well as the group as a whole. They strengthen the team and the individual team members in their self-confidence by trusting them, which in the end also means letting this cooperation run its course without constantly intervening.

By applying human, trust-based and credible leadership, which the club or company leadership must exemplify, not only is self-motivation, self-confidence and self-commitment created at all levels, but at the same time the employees are deprived of the excuse that, in the event of poor personal performance, this can be attributed to the unfortunate actions or mistakes of others. This prevents the individual from learning from his mistakes. Strong leadership leaves no room for excuses, because it does not distance itself from individuals and situations, but consciously accepts a share of responsibility for failures. It makes itself part of the team's actions and activities, but maintains its role as the external optimiser by focusing on the group's common goals and placing the interests of the team above those of the individuals. In such a culture and atmosphere a trust-based and enjoyable cooperation can develop, without which – as has already been stated – the success of a team becomes the exception rather than the rule.

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