

Football managers: does it take one to know one or can you learn?

By Amanda Goodall, Cass Business School, for the League Managers Association

In a world where football managers go from winning everything and hero worship, to losing and being pushed out in a matter of weeks, how is it possible to know who has real leadership ability? This is not just a problem in football of course. All leaders go through exactly the same cycle of being loved by the board one day, thrown out the door the next. The cause of this pattern may have very little to do with a manager's actual talent, because there are so many other factors involved: physical and mental fitness of the team, availability of players, intensity of games played, interference by the Chairman, and so on.

You may have noticed that there are thousands of leadership books on the market. However, the truth is it is extremely difficult to know exactly what good leadership looks like in most cases. In my research I try to identify as closely as I can a link between the performance of a leader, and the performance of their team or organization. Sport is a great setting to analyse leadership because we can identify the characteristics of managers over time, and there are clear performance outputs - wins. In many settings, outputs are unclear or may be easy to manipulate; for example, banks were apparently doing famously well right up until they suddenly crashed into our tax-payer laps.

The question I ask in my research is 'how much core business knowledge should our leaders have?' If a CEO is successful in one setting, can we transpose them into a completely different environment and expect them to succeed? I have looked at this in a number of situations, but I will just mention three: football, basketball and Formula 1 Championships. In Formula 1 (F1) we examined leaders over the entire history of the sport – nearly 60 years. Ganna Pognebna and I found that the most successful F1 team leaders were former racing drivers. Ten years driving experience was equal to a 16% higher probability that the leader's team gained a podium position (1-3).

In basketball we found the same result. We found a strong relationship between brilliance as a basketball player and the (much later) winning percentage and playoff success of that person as a basketball coach. Indeed, we found that the better the player (All-Stars), the better their performance as a coach.

So what about football? If we look at the 92 club managers in the English football league we find that the average number of years played in senior clubs is 16. Alex Ferguson, arguably Britain's best football manager, who played for both club and country, had an average scoring success of 1 goal every second game in his professional career. On average, most club managers coach teams that are close to the same quality at which they played; so, if you played Premier League or Championship, on average that is where you will manage.

Of course not all professional players with long careers make good managers. Similarly, not everyone who wants to be a manager will have played to a high standard. In a study with Sue Bridgewater and Larry Kahn, we found that money is important. If a club is wealthy then the playing talent of the manager appears to be less important (as with Chelsea and Arsenal for example). However, with clubs that are lower in the league, player ability seems to matter more. So what is it that former players might be able to pass on to non-player managers?

In its simplest form we might view leadership as having two key components that are located in different places. The first is strategy. Developing strategy requires one to look at the big picture, over time by standing back. The second major component is encouraging the team to follow that strategy in order to achieve good performance. One's proximity is different. Closeness is important, in fact putting ourselves in others' boots often helps us to understand how best to motivate 'followers'. Managers who have played themselves might find this comes more naturally; similarly, former players may have a better understanding of the appropriate training schedule or work environment required by other players to coach good performance.

Non-players may be able to teach themselves to think like players by trying to understand their motivation. Working closely with former players as co-managers may be more important for non-players. Some arts organisations are jointly run by an artistic director and an administrator. Power should be somewhat equally distributed so that each person feels they can express themselves openly and act without reprisal.

I spoke at an event on Formula 1 a few days ago. Panel members included the most experienced F1 experts. New people, and money, are always being sought in F1. Gary Anderson, the BBC's F1 technical analyst, said one often-heard statement he deplores is 'F1 is just like any other business'. Inevitably, there will be differences between all industries. This doesn't make switches among top personnel impossible but it does require humility. It means you have to know what you don't know, and, importantly, try to understand what it feels like to be in the know – an expert or in this case a player.