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What business can learn from professional football

A conversation in an airport lounge reveals parallels between talent management in professional football and in the corporate world.

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By [Alexander Thiel](#)

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TALENT | LEADERSHIP | RECRUITMENT

September 9, 2019 - Though it may seem difficult to find similarities in the career arcs of a management consultant and professional football team, they do in fact exist. Recently, I confirmed that suspicion after bumping into a well-known football manager with years of championship-level experience. After striking up a conversation in the otherwise empty airport lounge, we found remarkable parallels between talent management in professional football and in the corporate world.

Both football triumph and business prosperity require keen organizational focus on strong leadership and the appropriate blend of skills throughout your team. Well-organized football clubs, for example, hold a clear view of their style of play and understand the skills needed in each individual position to contribute to that strategy.

And just as a football victory is often the culmination of a long journey that is years in the making, so too is business success the result of a long-term strategic vision.

Based on my airport lounge conversation, I identified four best practices critical to corporate success exemplified within a winning football club.

- 1. Define exact talent needs for each position.** From FC Barcelona's probing passing game to Liverpool's aggressive, free-form attack, there are near limitless ways to play football, just as there are dozens of successful business strategies. However, great teams like FC Barcelona know their style and the exact requirements of each position. Consequently, they look for and train players to exactly execute that vision. Similarly, companies must think in detail about which positions are most critical for their value agenda and build a detailed view of the profile needed for each. They must then find the right talent based on that description.
- 2. Align your internal development journeys with business needs.** For every position, you need to understand the required skills, but just as importantly, how to systematically find and develop those skills. In football, club-owned academies scout players from an early age and develop them to fit the team's playing style, strategy and requirements. By the time Lionel Messi joined FC Barcelona's starting 11 in 2005, for example, he had been involved with the club since 2000—a relatively short time in professional football but long enough to understand the club vision and his role within it. Great corporations also have systematic, transparent and meritocratic talent development pipelines in order to develop future executive talent.
- 3. Identify gaps early or in advance.** Players retire and so do managers and executives. These retirements or departures are predictable—even if the specifics are unknown—and can be prepared for by developing a deep bench of available talent with the required skills. Football teams like Bayern Munich have been successful for years in part because they are rarely surprised by gaps in talent and have “the next man up” ready for a given position at all times. Corporations, too, need a strong succession plan to prepare the next generation of leaders and avoid being surprised by future talent gaps that may arise as role and skill needs evolve.
- 4. If gaps exist, reskill, upskill and search externally.** Free agency is a boon for professional football teams because sometimes the best talent must be bought and not developed. The same is true in the corporate world, and if the right candidate doesn't exist internally, recruiters should target talent from another team. When Liverpool realized it lacked an elite center back with superior aerial skills in its talent pipeline, club executives scouted Dutch defender Virgil van Dijk and ultimately poached him from fellow Premier League side, Southampton. He became a key pillar of the

team's success this year and was awarded "Premier League Player of the Season." In the business world, companies must also look externally if it becomes evident a key talent gap cannot be filled internally. If talent needs evolve, reskilling and upskilling must become targeted instruments for talent development at large scale.

I can't promise success in business will be nearly as exhilarating as winning championships in football. But to maintain a competitive advantage year after year, corporations must treat talent development in the same way football clubs treat player development. Both are critical to building a sustainable and winning organization, whether that's a Fortune 500 company or a 22-time Champions League victor.

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