Football Management as a Metaphor for Corporate Entrepreneurship?

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Abstract

The entrepreneur’s functioning within an organisational context has been the subject of some detailed academic attention since the 1980s. Although such research has value in furthering understandings, there are potential dangers of subscribing to a set of cohesive perspectives. Metaphors are increasingly being utilised because of their generative powers and abilities to stimulate new understandings. This paper utilises the English football manager\(^1\) as a metaphorical vehicle for exploring corporate entrepreneurship. The findings from this analysis offer potential insights into attitudes, aptitudes and roles so providing a catalyst for debate and the exchange of ideas.
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Introduction

This paper proposes the English football manager as a metaphorical vehicle for exploring corporate entrepreneurship. It examines aspects of the football manager’s functioning and raises issues that may have a bearing on the operation of the entrepreneurial individual within the organisational context. In so doing, this thinking aims to engage the reader’s imagination and potentially promote different sources of thought and ideas. The subject of football itself approached in this way may attract some to reconsider the issue of entrepreneurship in a fuller manner, so embracing varying organisational contexts beyond the small business sector. It is hoped that this paper will provide one framework for debate and reflection on the subject of corporate entrepreneurship, thereby enriching existing understandings.

The issues of management role, style and effectiveness within the organisation have long exercised academic thought and research. The emphasis upon the entrepreneurial individual within a similar framework has been a relatively recent subject focus traceable to thinkers such as Drucker (1985), and Pinchot (1985), who extolled the virtues of intrapreneurship. Kanter’s (1996) analysis of America’s corporations and Peters’ exhortations on managerial excellence (Peters, 1989; Peters & Austin, 1986) were heralded as major works. Stanworth’s (1987) position was that corporate entrepreneurship was commonplace and represented “an attempt by the individual to find expression in his/her job”. More recently, the contribution of corporate entrepreneurs was recognised as being integral to successful strategic management, particularly where unpredictable environments prevail and central direction is impossible or undesirable (Wesley Morse, 1986; Stompford, 1994; Harrison cf Johnson & Scholes, 1999).

The foregoing seems to elevate corporate entrepreneurship to a managerial approach that achieves a favourable combination of two extremes. On the one hand, there is the market and financial standing of the established organisation and on the other, the flexibility and responsiveness of the initial entrepreneurial venture. This intrapreneurship concept therefore suggests a potential relevance to all organisations from SMEs to multinational conglomerates. Viewed in this way, it can be interpreted as a vehicle for reinvigoration in otherwise inhibited established ventures enabling them to act more nimbly and thereby grasping, (to borrow from Jennings & Beaver, 1997), “enhanced performance and competitive advantage”.

Although works such as these further shared understandings, there are dangers of subscribing to a set of relatively cohesive perspectives. Acceptance of the corporate entrepreneur’s ability as an organisational change master (Kanter, 1990), for example, also suggests correctly or otherwise a capability to thrive on chaos (Peters, 1989). Similarly, connections between the distinct concepts of corporate entrepreneurship and the so-called learning organisation (Senge, 1992) came be involuntarily made. In these circumstances, questions can remain unanswered concerning the prospect of corporate entrepreneurship in less ‘enlightened’ organisations.

Without careful consideration, other potential difficulties may also be minimised. It is, for instance, comforting, but not necessarily correct, to believe that the ready, fire, aim culture described by Peters and Waterman (1982) automatically offers protection to those who may have tried but ‘failed’. Wickham (1998) once described the entrepreneur as challenging orthodoxies. Fundamental implications can arise in employing those with such a viewpoint; indeed Pinchot contended that they were “cynical about the system but optimistic about their ability to outwit it”. On reflection, entrepreneurship within an organisational context can only create conflict. Corporate attempts to manage continuity and stabilise are bye products of organisational growth. The entrepreneur’s
tendency to challenge the status quo under these circumstances creates disruption and disharmony. The notion of Schumpeter’s famous description of *creative destruction*, and self-expression are alien to the concept of conformity to a corporate ethos.

It is easier to minimise negative or discomforting implications such as these rather than acknowledge the difficulties they imply. An argument in brief emerges as follows. Corporate entrepreneuring can potentially raise awkward questions, which without care can be minimised or overlooked completely. One danger of such a gap in understanding is an absence of genuine insights into corporate entrepreneurs, including their values, motivations and aptitudes.

**Metaphors as a vehicle for understanding**

Metaphors are utilised by researchers because of their generative powers and ability to loosen thinking, leading to new sources of creativity and insights (Schon, 1979). Some who would associate themselves with postmodernism acknowledge their value, while thinkers such as Gareth Morgan (1997) have extended their use into areas of management and business. Within the specific context of small businesses and enterprise, Atkin and Perren (1998; 1999) previously highlighted the value of metaphors “to unfreeze management assumptions”, having concentrated on their role in management consultancy processes.

**Football: an appropriate metaphor?**

Football as a metaphor for any business-related area might initially appear a curious choice. It is after all a commonly held belief that the business acumen that brings the money to control a football club seems to desert entrepreneurs when they are in charge (Fletcher, 1999). It is the view of the author of this paper however that the nature of workplace interaction often reveals certain truths about football’s potential for deeper understandings. Football is already an unofficial reference point for some in comprehending organisational functioning. For instance, differences between the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ workplace language frequently emerge whereby officially it echoes conventional wisdom as espoused in texts that stress ‘strategy’, ‘corporate planning’ and hierarchies of command. The unofficial language conversely identifies ‘going over the top’, ‘moved goal posts’, ‘keeping your eyes on the ball’, ‘level playing fields’, ‘forcing draws’ and ‘team players’. Those causing self-damage in office politics score ‘own goals’ while trusty members of staff, like goalkeepers, are described as having ‘a safe pair of hands’.

English football, despite its huge popular appeal, is strangely ‘under researched’. Of late, a sea change is evident coinciding in greater social respectability, finance and media attention (Perry & Davies, 1997). This heightened interest in football has also begun to permeate the thinking of the country’s business schools. It is inevitable that this should be the case. Money in the game has attracted business, and business attracts management theorists. This paper proposes one aspect of the game, the football manager, as a suitable metaphorical vehicle.

**The football manager**

There surely can be no stranger grouping of managers than the ‘men’2 charged with responsibility for the playing fortunes of their clubs. Both the individuals themselves and the features of their jobs display many distinctive peculiarities. It is an obvious but often overlooked fact for instance that the profile of the football manager is unique in terms of gender and ethnic composition as well as sector influence and background. There have only ever been five black managers, despite the fact that up to one quarter of the country’s professional players are black. Likewise, managers are exclusively male. Few progress to the role through routes other than being a former professional (‘pro’) player. A lack of preparation is also a prominent feature of the job, and turnover levels are extremely high. Indeed, between one in two and one in three clubs can expect to start each new season with a different manager. Despite this, there seems an inexhaustible stream of candidates waiting to seize an opportunity to be a football manager. In short, football apparently constitutes a large industry where
the core product is managed in isolation of external influences, and these managers appear ill-prepared, insular in outlook and drawn from a narrow segment of society. It is something of a paradox therefore that certain managers receive generous testimony to their abilities from a variety of sometimes unexpected sources. Fagerfjall (1994), drawing direct parallels to the notion of assembly of the ideal work team as championed by management thinker Belbin (1993), extolled the football manager’s virtues. He contended that the skill in recognising and assembling a balanced team, inherent in football sides, is often lacking in service and industry team composition. The chair of Marks and Spencer regularly dines Manchester United’s manager Sir Alex Ferguson in order to share ‘truths’ about people management (Davies, 1996). Ferguson has also been singled out for praise because of his stress management skills (Cooper, 1997). Other managers are held to be experts in certain areas where textbook theory and formal management training flounder.

Undeniably, football managers make for an intriguing subject study focus. This said, it is acknowledged that the linkage between the football manager and the corporate entrepreneur is not a wholly cohesive translation: that is not the point of it. Alvesson (1993) suggested that the creation of a successful metaphor was dependent upon not too little or great a similarity to be present. The author believes that use of the football manager in this way has potential for further understanding of the corporate entrepreneur by challenging the reader’s thinking.

**Methodology**

A five-year study of the modern role of the English football manager using a grounded theory research methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was recently concluded. This involved the generation of data from many sources including managers past or present, former or current professional footballers, other club employees, directors, press and professional organisations. Data generated included 21 in-depth interviews lasting between 30 and 90 minutes each. Ultimately a mature understanding of the role was gained.

Since completion of this work, linkages between the football manager and the corporate entrepreneur have been progressed. There is therefore a new phase of analysis underway based upon the newly gained insights into the contemporary football manager’s functioning. This second stage parallels the thinking of Currie and Kerrin (1996) when using football itself as a metaphor for organisational change.

**Findings**

**The football manager: an overview of findings**

The football manager’s role differed greatly between clubs, with some managers having near autonomy over all aspects of the business while others appeared to be predominantly ‘big name’ figureheads to attract star footballers. The common factor, the *sine qua non* of management, was the right to pick the first team. None of the clubs analysed as part of the study corresponded to Senge’s (1992) definition of a learning organisation. Indeed many touchstones that are taken for granted in business either were suspended or wholly absent within the football organisation. Managers often established a role for themselves and defended it accordingly, using a number of mechanisms including bullying and physical violence. Targets were poorly defined and there were general expectations that were not clearly articulated.

The critical aspect of the football manager’s role was that of maintaining key stakeholder relationships and in so doing his effectiveness in winning and maintaining confidence. Sackings were treated almost as part of ‘paying one’s dues’ and the value of formal training was minimised by managers themselves. Yet for all the manager’s lack of real business preparation, there was an almost unnaturally high level of dedication, love for the job and emphasis on motivational techniques and one-to-one contact with subordinates. There was also evidence of huge on-the-job research,
sophisticated networking and intelligence gathering which afforded the football manager little time to develop relationships outside the game.

**Qualities**

The environment within which the modern football manager operates is one of great dynamism. The products of football’s sea change inevitably have an effect upon him. A new breed of directors, saturation media interest and large financial inflows, particularly for bigger clubs, form a revised landscape for his managerial operation. All this has resulted in complicating the role and increasing the potential tasks he undertakes and shares with others. Despite this football managers apparently turn teams of losers into winners, and individual underachievers into achievers. They exercise a range of behaviours in order to develop and maintain key relationships. They invest time exercising leadership in ‘one to one’ situations. They expose themselves to high level of accountability and are prepared to justify publicly the technical operational decisions they make. They exhibit a willingness to work under difficult circumstances and for long hours. They have such an affinity for a single industry that even sackings will not embitter them. They assemble balanced teams and like alchemists concoct a whole that constitutes more than its constituent parts. In some cases, they sanction and negotiate multi-million pound transactions. They deal weekly with a greater diversity of stakeholders than most other managers do in a working career. They act as pressure blotters protecting subordinates and superiors from criticism.

If we identify these qualities are desirable in areas other than football, where do we begin looking for these corporate champions? This is where literature on the entrepreneur is also of value. They too are widely acknowledged as being contagiously enthusiastic, working well in teams, enjoying risk, but being aggressively competitive and hating routine. Perhaps they also share other qualities evident in football managers?

**Local conditions**

Job descriptions for the manager, and clear accountabilities, such as devolved controllable budgets and straightforwardly articulated objectives, were rare. Further, the incidence of Board meetings as a reporting mechanism was variable. Rather, localised mostly ill-defined expectations and conditions at a particular club, coupled with the manager’s own personality, dictated the precise tasks he performed. Thus, it became impossible to identify what a ‘typical’ football manager’s job constituted. Conventional wisdom suggests that a ‘smaller’ club implies a wider range of duties for the manager. The findings clearly showed however that precise job roles were varied, open to interpretation and negotiations and significantly were not dependent upon club size.

Localised structures, which appeared to be constantly evolving, influenced relationships and relative power bases within them. If, for instance, a Director of Football assumed responsibility for contract negotiation with players, it became inevitable that manager/player relationships differed from situation where the manager performed such a function.

In summary, roles were contingent upon certain variables including the person himself and the local conditions he encountered: the culture of the organisation, its formalised structures, the local personalities and stakeholder groupings. Such factors were peculiar to an individual club at a point in time. These local conditions facilitate or constrain the football manager’s actions and combine to provide powerful dimensions to the exercise of the role at an individual level.

Returning to the issue of corporate entrepreneurs, do they similarly function within the uncertainties and local obstructions of organisational frameworks? Lloyd and Seaford (1987) appeared to emphasise these local conditions when they described the corporate entrepreneur as vulnerable to policy changes, strategic reorientation, and changes in key personnel. They could easily be analysing the football manager. Boardroom upheavals and changes in chairmanship frequently resulted in changes of manager. The establishment of positions such as Chief Executive or Director of Football
often represented severe restrictions on the manager’s scope of operation. Sometimes managers resign when faced with changes in, for example, transfer funding or perceived interference into his duties. The football manager however was given scope to formulate a role for himself and project an external image through the media. Such notions of self-expression are also central to the concept of entrepreneurship.

**Informal roles**

The performance by the football manager of a multitude of informal roles was apparent from the research. Past theorists have linked this functioning with that of a military officer, beneficial patriarch and witch-doctor (Dunphy, 1986; Gurney, 1997; Morris, 1981). All such roles were found to have some validity. In addition to these, the striving for influence over potentially powerful groupings, ‘off the record’ press briefings, and the short-term nature of the post also conjured new parallels. In short, football managers also often acted in ways more associated with a diplomat or politician.

Past academic football-related work has tended to focus upon spectators rather than managers. Marsh, Rosser and Harre made comparison between school life and the world of the terraces concluding “it is a world of compacts and bargains, of control of present and future by ritual, a world dominated by the absolute power of words ….” (1978, p.3). If this were true of the terraces of the late 1970s then it also has echoes twenty years later in the dressing rooms, manager’s offices and on training grounds. The ‘lads’ cluster according to their class, (established first team-ers, youngsters, senior pros., etc.). Ritual ridicule and social chitchat is allowed but controlled, and there is a high degree of camaraderie, generally within class. Coaches perform the role of prefect making sure that the banter and pranks do not get out of hand. The Head (or manager) may be absent for long periods in the study dealing with disciplinary matters, admissions, and expulsions or on the telephone to outside parties. Like the Head, the manager insists on differentiation through title (nor ‘sir’ in this case, but ‘gaffer’ or ‘boss’). Taboo areas and practices (or out of bounds areas and school rules) reinforce the social order. They include the dressing room (the preserve of the manager and his players only), and the team bus (directors sitting apart from the players). Whereas the school’s Head has traditionally relied on the sanctions of detentions and corporal punishment, the manager has an armoury that includes exclusion from the first team and financial penalties.

Football managers, chameleon-like, assume a diversity of informal identities in order to conduct their activities. Like corporate entrepreneurs, the political dimension to their operation is of great significance (Wickham, 1998). Their functioning, like that of the corporate entrepreneur, is a risky operation given the possibility of betrayal by colleagues particularly when ‘results’ are not going well. It is not surprising therefore that they should allow a multitude of images to blossom including the strong military leader, or unflappable head teacher, while operating subversively in political fashion.

**Shared beliefs**

An important feature of the study was that of shared beliefs. One aspect of this that affected the role was that of relative power bases and demarcation lines. One coach explained his understanding of his role relative to the manager in these terms: “tactics and team selection are the boss’s area”. Quite apart from an informal mutually respected delineation of responsibilities, the deference to status implied in the phrase ‘boss’ is noticeable.

Managers viewed as vital their relationship with players. Perversely these subordinates can and do receive superior remuneration packages to the manager, but this was of little consequence in the ‘power game’ that was enacted. Coaches kept managers informed of players’ feelings, and the position of ‘boss’ was maintained through the use of sanctions of various kinds including financial and emotional. Discipline can be draconian, and bullying was tolerated by the players themselves. Some excused this behaviour as being part of the need to get players ‘to die for you’. There was a general belief that too much leniency on the manager’s part may be detrimental to the boss/player...
relationship. The sparing of punishments in dealing with, for instance, ‘big time Charlies’ or wayward youngsters may lead to claims that a manager was ‘weak’ or ‘too nice’.

The achievement of formal coaching and management training qualifications was seen as a desirable but unnecessary job requirement. One Premiership manager commented:

> Some people are born to be managers, some aren’t. I don’t know yet if I’m born to be a manager…..it’s the same with a coach to a certain extent, you can get your badge, but that doesn’t make you a coach.

Although some valued the experience of coaching before managing, few felt a need for a more direct form of prior management training in the traditional sense. The unfavourable insider attitude to formal management training was at odds with the efforts of officialdom to strengthen formal preparation for management. Similarly, a vision of qualified managers within the marketplace having the effect of regularising employment appears unlikely, certainly in the near future.

There was a widely held view that the best bosses have a deep knowledge of, and suitable experience in, the British game. Until recently obstacles for ‘outsiders’ not conforming to these requirements appeared to exist, thus restricting foreigners and those who have never played the ‘pro’ game. It was explained that unless a manager was formerly a professional who has played at the ‘right level’, he was unlikely to succeed for a number of reasons. It was believed, for instance, that he would be incapable of empathising with players, or disadvantaged in gaining the level of industry knowledge needed (of teams, players, contacts) or unable to adjust to football’s culture. Increasingly these obstacles are being overcome, and a significant number of foreign coaches now hold managerial positions.

Clearly, aspects of a shared culture such as this may have implications beyond football to other sectors and industries. Perhaps corporate entrepreneurs also pride themselves on an industrial knowledge and display aggression in establishing the parameters and measures of their corporate functioning? Does the corporate entrepreneur belittle the value of professional managers? Football is not unique in that decisions made by all managers are subject to power, politics and influence of others which in turn impact on actions, behaviour, and decisions (Torrington, Weightman and Johns, 1994). Perhaps like corporate entrepreneurs football managers force their personalities on others and display ruthlessness in order to ‘get results’?

**Attitudes to employment**

Unlike other areas of commerce and industry, few football managers completed application forms or prepared written career resumes, preferring instead to network with others in the game. (One experienced ex-manager confided that he had never applied for a job in his life). In most industries, a sacking appearing on a curriculum vita would constitute career blight, but not so in football. This ‘hire and fire’ mentality seems to the outsider to be an omnipresent shadow over the manager’s functioning. No players or coaches interviewed however rejected management as an option on these grounds. Further, managers themselves saw dismissals as more an occupational nuisance and were generally undeterred by the experience. One even identified sacking in positive terms:

> Like a lot I swear blind the only way you learn about management is to get sacked. Until you get sacked you don’t really appreciate it properly.

The motivations for becoming a manager, given the insecurity of the position are of interest. Past explanations, involving a lack of experience outside the game and the need to make a living holds little credibility given the newfound wealth of most Premiership players. This aside, a love of the game and ego fulfilment appears to be obvious but incomplete explanations. In one interview a (financially secure) manager who had come out of retirement spoke of an exhilaration from winning, but commented that this lasted only an hour after the game, and the job was ‘shit basically’. Parallels
to drug dependency can easily be made. An addict is thought to minimise the dangers and side effects
of the habit in the pursuit of the ‘buzz’ that it offers.

The manager’s job was coveted with issues like stress, unsociable and demanding hours and job
insecurity all being minimised. Similarly, the financial attractions of the post were not prime
considerations. Pinchot (1985) once mused that the corporate entrepreneur must come to work willing
to be fired. The football manager by comparison comes to work expecting to be fired. Is the impetus
to exhibit entrepreneurialism within a corporate framework similarly driven by an entrepreneurial
buzz whereby commitments of time, lack of monetary reward and risk of dismissal are minimised?

Conclusions

To conclude it is necessary to summarise something of the topics raised. The author has articulated
how the contemporary football manager exercises his role within the organisation and sought to
provide a metaphor for entrepreneurialism within the corporate venture through the raising of
questions. The themes explored include the football manager’s qualities, how local conditions impact
on his formal role, the informal role he exercises, the commonly held beliefs and attitudes to
employment.

There is a growing shared recognition of the intrinsic relationship between economic success and
entrepreneurial activity. Organisationally, for longer established ventures of all sizes this implies an
inescapable challenge to foster processes and practices that encourage entrepreneurial behaviours
amongst their employees, or suffer the consequences. As such, organisations must be better informed
about the corporate entrepreneur. This paper provides a considered perspective of the football
manager whilst suggesting clear potential for wider understandings within differing organisational
contexts. The reader may concur that that the football manager is an appropriate metaphor for the
corporate entrepreneur-or not. Alternatively, the reader may conclude that the football manager is in
fact an entrepreneur in the broadest sense. The real significance of the issues raised by this paper is
that it can be used as a basis for validating existing theories or for stimulating further research. As
such, it is hoped that it will provide a catalyst for fresh thought and the exchange of ideas.

Notes

1. The research concerns the football manager’s operation at English and Welsh clubs within the so
called the ninety-two called 92 club ‘pyramid’ comprising the FA Premierhship (previously
Premier League) and Divisions 1, 2 and 3 of the Football League.
2. The use of the male pronoun is far from being a sexist oversight, more a reflection of the male
domination of this area.
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References


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