

Module 1. Mindsets and culture: the human foundation of digital transformation

Introduction: why mindsets and culture matter in digital transformation

Introduction

Digital transformation in sports organizations is no longer solely about implementing new technologies or adopting digital tools. Instead, it increasingly hinges on the underlying human foundation: mindsets, culture, and leadership. While investments in data platforms, fan apps, and automation tools are essential, these technical advances often fall short unless the people within the organization are both equipped and willing to adopt new ways of thinking and working.

In the sports industry, where tradition and legacy hold significant sway, change can be culturally challenging. Unlike tech-native companies that were “born-digital”, most sports clubs, leagues, and federations have evolved over decades (if not centuries) in environments that favored stability, control, and hierarchy. Shifting from these legacy cultures to dynamic, agile, and collaborative ones requires not only structural change but also deep cultural transformation.

This transition involves more than just awareness; it demands emotional buy-in, leadership alignment, and a shared belief that digital change is both necessary and possible. Digital culture, as such, refers to the shared values, behaviors, and mindsets foster digital innovation, support data-driven decision-making, and promote cross-functional collaboration. These values manifest in how people experiment, take risks, share knowledge, and adapt quickly to change, all of which are crucial in a competitive and rapidly evolving sports landscape.

Moreover, research confirms that organizations with strong digital cultures are more successful in transformation efforts. A study by McKinsey and Company (2020) emphasizes that cultural factors are among the top reasons digital transformations fail—not the technology itself. Similarly, Google’s *Project Aristotle* (2015) found that psychological safety, trust, and inclusive decision-making are the strongest predictors of high-performing teams. These insights underscore the importance of not just **what** an



organization does digitally, but **how** people think and behave while doing it.

Finally, the sports business context is particularly sensitive to the speed of change in fan expectations, media behaviors, and digital competition. The most digitally mature organizations know that investing in people and culture is just as critical as investing in tech or data. As Accenture (2021b) puts it, hyper-relevant customer experiences come from companies that are not only technologically capable but culturally agile.

The purpose of this reading is to explore how sports organizations can build a digital-ready culture—one that embraces learning, encourages experimentation, and promotes cross-silo collaboration. We will examine key mindset shifts, leadership roles, inclusion practices, and real-world case examples from both within and outside the sports world. This cultural lens will help bridge the gap between strategic digital vision and its successful execution.

The cultural core of digital transformation

Introduction

Digital culture refers to the values, beliefs, and behavioral norms that support an organization's ability to operate effectively in a digital-first world. It is not merely about using digital tools or launching digital campaigns—it is about how an organization **thinks, acts, and makes decisions** in a digital environment.

A strong digital culture emphasizes experimentation over perfection, transparency over control, and collaboration over siloed execution. It values data-informed decision-making, rapid learning, iterative delivery, and psychological safety to voice ideas or admit failure. In sports organizations, this means rethinking how departments interact, how leadership communicates vision, and how decisions are made rather than relying solely on legacy structures or past successes

Digital culture is one of the most critical enablers of transformation. In fact, companies that embed digital culture into their transformation efforts are up to five times more likely to achieve successful outcomes (McKinsey and Company, 2021).

Culture as a differentiator in the sports industry

Sports organizations face a dual reality: on one hand, they enjoy powerful emotional connections with fans; on the other, they must compete with highly agile, tech-native entertainment brands like Netflix or TikTok. Traditional strengths—such as history, loyalty, and physical presence—are not enough to keep pace with evolving fan expectations.

Here, culture becomes a competitive advantage. A club that promotes openness to



experimentation, collaborative project teams, and rapid feedback loops will be better positioned to test new digital fan services, launch campaigns, and adjust based on results. Conversely, an organization that clings to rigid hierarchies or risk-averse behaviors will struggle to match the speed of digital disruption.

As Salesforce (2023) argues, the most effective organizations invest not just in customer technology, but in aligning their internal culture around flexibility, agility, and data literacy.

From command-and-control to empower-and-enable

One of the biggest cultural shifts in digital transformation is the transition from command-and-control leadership to empower-and-enable leadership. In a digital-first organization, decision-making becomes more distributed. Leaders focus on enabling frontline teams with access to data, clear direction, and tools for collaboration. Teams are trusted to experiment and deliver iteratively.

This mindset shift is essential in sports, where legacy governance structures (boards, directors, traditional hierarchies) often slow down digital decision-making. Enabling mid-level managers and cross-functional teams to take ownership helps organizations respond more effectively to new technologies, partnership opportunities, and changes in fan behavior.

The **agile mindset**, as outlined in the original Agile Manifesto, embraces individuals and interactions over processes and tools, and adaptability over rigid planning (Beck et al., 2001). Organizations that internalize these values culturally—not just operationally—tend to deliver more effective, fan-centric innovation.

Cultural lag and the risk of misalignment

A key challenge in many digital transformations is cultural lag—where the mindset and behaviors of people do not evolve as fast as the technology or strategy. A sports club might launch a fan app or CRM system, but still operate with siloed departments, manual workflows, or turf wars between digital and commercial teams.

This misalignment can be costly. A KPMG (2022) report on digital maturity in sports emphasizes that high-performing clubs focus not only on technical development, but on embedding cultural change through leadership, training, and incentives.

A digitally mature culture promotes continuous learning, cross-team rituals like retrospectives or demos, and transparency through dashboards or shared metrics. These are not just agile “tools”—they are cultural habits that reinforce alignment and momentum.



Key mindset shifts for digital readiness

Introduction

Digital transformation in sports isn't just about technology or tools—it's about how people think and behave. For sports organizations to thrive in a fast-moving, data-rich environment, core mindset shifts are essential, as they provide the foundation for more agile, innovative, and fan-centric ways of working. This section outlines the four most critical mindset transitions sports leaders and teams must embrace to become truly digital-ready.

From stability to adaptability

Traditional sports organizations often thrive on stability—fixed season calendars, legacy sponsorship models, and predictable hierarchies. However, the digital landscape demands adaptability. In a world of rapid technological advancement, fan behavior can change overnight, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital engagement became indispensable.

A digitally ready organization must shift from long-term certainty to short-term responsiveness. This doesn't mean abandoning strategy—it means embracing agility in its execution. Teams must continuously test, learn, and adapt. Leaders must reward experimentation and tolerate failure as part of learning. McKinsey (2020) highlights that high-performing digital organizations develop **adaptive learning cultures** where teams iterate rapidly based on real-world feedback.

From hierarchy to empowerment

The legacy model of sports governance—with centralized decision-making and vertical communication—clashes with the demands of fast-moving digital teams. Empowerment means trusting frontline teams, data specialists, and product owners to make day-to-day decisions aligned with broader objectives.

Empowered teams work faster, stay closer to the customer, and build stronger ownership over outcomes. In agile organizations, decision rights are distributed: teams can launch experiments, refine offerings, and pivot without requiring endless approvals. According to *Project Aristotle*, psychological safety and shared ownership are critical drivers of team performance (Google, 2015).

From perfection to iteration

Digital-native companies—and increasingly, digitally mature sports entities—operate with the principle of **release early, improve often**. This contrasts with traditional



planning-heavy approaches, where a campaign or platform is perfected internally before being launched to fans. In digital transformation, iteration beats perfection. Whether it's launching a new fan app, experimenting with AI-generated content, or redesigning a ticketing funnel, small experiments that are rapidly improved tend to outperform big launches delayed by complexity or fear of failure.

Salesforce (2023) defines this as “agile confidence”—the ability to act without having all the answers upfront.

From control to trust

Leadership in digital-ready organizations must evolve from directive to enabling. Leaders set direction, define outcomes, and then **trust teams to deliver**. This requires a cultural and emotional shift—from measuring hours and outputs to measuring value and outcomes.

For sports organizations, this is particularly important when working with external partners or hybrid teams (e.g. agencies, data vendors, broadcasters). Instead of micromanaging, clubs should establish shared KPIs and rituals for collaboration, such as agile stand-ups, retrospectives, or joint sprint reviews. According to Atlassian (2023), high-performing agile teams are grounded in trust, clarity, and shared purpose.

Developing digital fluency across the organization

Introduction

While mindset is a crucial starting point for transformation, it must be accompanied by knowledge and capabilities. Digital fluency goes beyond technical skills—it refers to an organization-wide ability to understand, discuss, and make decisions about digital initiatives, even among non-technical staff. For sports organizations aiming to deliver seamless fan experiences and unlock value from data, building digital fluency at every level—from the ticket office to the C-suite—is critical.

What is digital fluency?

Digital fluency is not just about coding or analytics. It's the ability to participate meaningfully in digital conversations, whether that's co-creating a product roadmap, interpreting performance dashboards, or collaborating with external vendors on data infrastructure.

According to McKinsey (2021), digital fluency includes understanding the strategic role of



technologies (e.g., CRM, CDP, DAM), the customer impact of digital touchpoints, and the agile ways of working needed to iterate fast and deliver value.

This shared language reduces silos, accelerates execution, and builds a culture of curiosity and collaboration.

Digital literacy vs. digital fluency

It is important to distinguish between **digital literacy** and **digital fluency**:

- **Digital literacy** = basic comfort with digital tools (e.g., using apps, sending emails, operating dashboards).
- **Digital fluency** = ability to think critically and act strategically using digital tools and data.

A digitally literate marketing coordinator can follow instructions to set up a campaign; a digitally fluent coordinator can identify automation opportunities, interpret user behavior, and suggest platform improvements.

Harvard Business Review (2020) explains this evolution as a shift from using tools to using them well — and using them to drive strategic conversations.

Building digital fluency: tactics and structures

To embed digital fluency across sports organizations, especially those with traditional roots, intentional upskilling and cross-functional exposure are needed. Here are some proven tactics.

Digital onboarding programs for new hires, including an overview of the organization's tech stack and digital roadmap.

- **Lunch and learn sessions** where product teams or data specialists share recent developments or campaign results.
- **Cross-functional teams** that include representatives from marketing, data, operations, and customer service—to break silos and share insights.
- **Shadowing or secondments** to digital departments—letting commercial or operations staff spend time inside agile teams.
- **Executive training**—equipping top leadership with the



vocabulary and frameworks to champion digital investments.

Accenture (2021a) notes that digital fluency is a predictor of organizational adaptability, and high-performing organizations invest in continuous digital learning—not just one-off workshops.

Roles that anchor digital fluency

Digital fluency doesn't happen by chance. It needs **internal champions**.

- **Digital transformation leads** who own the roadmap and support change across teams.
- **Product owners** who align business goals with technical delivery.
- **Data translators** who help bridge the gap between technical analysts and business stakeholders.
- **Coaches or agile facilitators** who promote agile ways of working and foster learning rituals (e.g., retrospectives, demos, reviews).

These roles help distribute digital knowledge and normalize cross-functional collaboration

Culture of experimentation and psychological safety

Introduction

Digital transformation is not just a technological shift—it is, fundamentally, a cultural shift. One of the most critical cultural enablers of innovation and adaptability is fostering an organizational environment where experimentation is encouraged and failure is accepted as part of learning. This is especially important in sports organizations where a strong tradition of performance, control, and linear planning often dominates organizational behavior. Shifting toward a culture of experimentation—underpinned by psychological safety—is essential to unlock new thinking, drive digital innovation, and ensure long-term adaptability.

Why psychological safety matters

Psychological safety refers to the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. It means that team members feel comfortable expressing ideas, voicing concerns,



admitting mistakes, and challenging prevailing assumptions without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or punishment. This concept gained major attention after Google's multi-year research initiative, **Project Aristotle**, which concluded that psychological safety was the most important factor in determining team effectiveness—ahead of technical skills or individual intelligence (Google, 2015).

In a digital transformation context, psychological safety becomes foundational. Teams are often tasked with testing unfamiliar technologies, iterating new customer experiences, or working across organizational silos. Without safety, teams are more likely to play it safe, avoid taking initiative, and resist voicing issues early. With psychological safety, however, they become willing to test, learn, and evolve—fast.

Experimentation as a strategic imperative

In leading digital organizations, experimentation is not a one-off activity—it is embedded into daily workflows, project structures, and leadership expectations. Rather than demanding business cases for every decision, these organizations empower teams to run structured tests, gather feedback, and decide based on real-world data.

For example, Netflix has institutionalized a culture of experimentation by encouraging employees to test ideas that might contradict senior leadership's views. CEO Reed Hastings has famously emphasized that innovation requires the freedom to fail—and to learn from those failures without fear (Hastings and Meyer, 2020).

In the sports industry, this mindset can translate into rapid A/B testing of fan-facing services (e.g., app features, ticket pricing models), agile marketing experiments, or pilot initiatives with emerging technology. The emphasis is on **learning through action**, not waiting for certainty. Each experiment contributes insight, even if it does not produce the expected result.

Creating psychological safety: leadership and team practices

While the concept of psychological safety may sound intangible, it is built through specific actions—particularly from leaders and managers. Creating this environment involves the following.

- **Modeling vulnerability:** leaders who admit when they don't know something or openly reflect on failed initiatives set a tone that risk-taking is accepted and even expected.
- **Rewarding learning, not just outcomes:** teams should be acknowledged for running structured tests, even if the results are inconclusive or negative.



- **Establishing open feedback channels:** whether through retrospectives, daily stand-ups, or digital tools, teams require regular, low-risk opportunities to share perspectives and constructively challenge one another.
- **Avoiding blame:** when something fails, the focus should be on improving the process or assumptions—not on assigning personal fault.

McKinsey and Company (2020) highlights that organizations moving toward agile, cross-functional models often falter when leadership fails to support a safe learning environment. Without safety, the demands of speed and iteration create anxiety rather than innovation.

Sports organizations and the shift toward experimentation

For sports clubs and leagues accustomed to season-by-season planning cycles and tight public scrutiny, fostering experimentation may feel risky. However, digital transformation requires shifting from “perfect launch” thinking to iterative delivery.

Examples of experimentation in the sports context include the following.

- **Segmented fan testing:** trying new mobile app features or content formats with a small fan segment before broader rollout.
- **Data-driven marketing trials:** running pricing, personalization, or upsell campaigns on digital channels with variant testing.
- **Low-cost tech pilots:** deploying lightweight tools—like AI-powered fan chat or immersive matchday experiences—in one stadium or fan zone to gather feedback.

Experimentation does not mean acting without strategy. It means **planning to learn**, and treating each iteration as a step toward insight.

Institutionalizing the culture

The final step is making experimentation and psychological safety part of the organizational operating model. This may involve:

- Embedding test-and-learn KPIs into team evaluations.
- Allocating dedicated budgets for innovation sprints or pilot programs.



- Documenting lessons learned and sharing them across teams.
- Using agile frameworks—like scrum or design sprints—that naturally support iterative progress.

When experimentation becomes routine, and psychological safety becomes normalized, organizations are not just digitally capable—they are digitally resilient.

Leadership's role in driving cultural change

Introduction

In any digital transformation, leadership plays a defining role—not only in setting vision, but in shaping the values, behaviors, and norms that enable change to take root. While technical skills and strategic planning are important, it is leaders' everyday actions and attitudes that determine whether cultural transformation succeeds or stalls.

Digital transformation is not just a “tech initiative”; it is a people initiative with deep cultural implications. That is why leadership must evolve alongside technology—moving from command-and-control mindsets to trust-based, enabling approaches. In digitally mature sports organizations, leaders are not distant strategists; rather, they are cultural architects who actively foster learning, collaboration, and innovation across teams.

As McKinsey and Company (2020) puts it, organizations do not transform—people do. And it is leaders who make it possible by embodying and modeling the change.

This section explores how leadership influences digital culture, how mindsets at the top trickle down into everyday behaviors, and what practical steps sports leaders can take to guide cultural transformation with purpose.

Leading by example: behavior as the blueprint

In transformation efforts, people watch what leaders do—not just what they say. The idea that “culture is what leaders tolerate” is especially relevant in sports organizations, where hierarchies and role modeling are deeply embedded.

Leading by example means consistently demonstrating the values and behaviors that support a digital-ready culture. If a club wants to encourage experimentation, its senior executives must show openness to testing, learning, and even failing publicly. If it wants transparency, leaders must be willing to share progress, challenges, and results across departments, rather than confining such communication to boardrooms.

For example, when a sports organization implements agile rituals like retrospectives or sprint planning, the presence and participation of senior leaders can reinforce



psychological safety and signal that these practices are meaningful—not just procedural.

Cultural modeling includes admitting when you don't know something, recognizing teams for learning rather than just results, asking open-ended questions in meetings, and actively sharing fan feedback across silos. Leaders who consistently model curiosity, openness, and adaptability send a powerful message: this is how we behave here.

From vision to empowerment

Leadership in a digital transformation must go beyond setting goals—it must also empower others to act on them. In traditional sports hierarchies, decision-making often rests with a small group of executives or board members. In digital-first environments, this model creates bottlenecks and slows innovation.

Empowerment means distributing decision-making power to frontline teams, digital specialists, and product owners who are closer to the fans and better equipped to respond to fast-changing realities.

Empowered teams are trusted to test and iterate without waiting for top-down approval, supported by leadership with tools, data, and clear strategic goals, and held accountable for outcomes rather than micromanaged on inputs.

A digitally ready leader doesn't have to know all the answers—they create the environment where others can find them. This shift from directing to enabling is one of the most profound cultural changes required in transformation. As noted in Google's Project Oxygen, one of the key traits of effective leaders is empowering teams rather than making all the decisions themselves (Google, 2019).

Shaping the culture from the top and the edges

Cultural change must be both top-down and bottom-up. While leadership sets tone and strategic intent, true transformation spreads through behaviors at every level of the organization.

This dynamic can be especially important in sports organizations, where digital transformation may be met with skepticism from long-serving departments or legacy business units.

Top-down culture shaping includes publicly rewarding digital-first behavior, tying performance reviews to collaboration and learning, and hiring or promoting leaders who align with new values.

Bottom-up culture building includes recognizing "cultural champions" within teams, allowing teams to co-create new rituals and workflows, and establishing feedback loops



from employees to leadership.

In agile organizations, leaders often act more like coaches than commanders—asking questions, removing obstacles, and enabling growth rather than dictating solutions. This dual focus—guiding from the top while empowering the edges—is critical to cultural resilience and adaptability (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

Case example: Ajax Amsterdam and empowered innovation

Ajax Amsterdam offers a strong case of leadership fostering innovation and digital change by empowering internal experts. When the club sought to integrate performance analytics more deeply into its coaching processes, leadership chose not to centralize control in a single technical office. Instead, it empowered analysts, data engineers, and coaching staff to co-develop tools and workflows that supported on-field decision-making.

This collaborative model was supported by leadership through cross-functional working groups, open communication rituals, and visible alignment between executives, coaches, and technical teams. By trusting specialists to lead change within their domains—and backing them up with resources—Ajax created a culture where digital innovation was co-owned, not imposed.

Leadership behaviors that signal cultural commitment

To help reinforce the cultural transformation, leaders can adopt a consistent set of visible behaviors. The table below outlines key leadership actions and the cultural signals they send.

Table 1. Key leadership actions and their cultural signals

Behavior	Cultural signal
Admitting failure in public forums	Risk-taking and learning are safe
Asking for feedback from all levels	Everyone's voice matters
Sharing strategic context openly	Transparency and trust are valued
Participating in team retrospectives	Continuous improvement is part of the norm
Supporting cross-functional promotions	Collaboration is rewarded

Source: own elaboration.



These small but repeated actions build credibility and reinforce that cultural change is not a side project—it is how the organization operates.

Conclusion

In digital transformation, leadership is not just a role—it is a cultural signal. What leaders do, say, reward, and tolerate becomes the blueprint for how others behave. Sports organizations looking to shift toward more agile, collaborative, and fan-centric ways of working must start with leadership transformation.

By leading with transparency, enabling others to make decisions, and consistently modeling digital-first behaviors, sports leaders can become the catalysts for cultural change that lasts—beyond any one strategy or season.

Resistance to change in sports organizations

Introduction

One of the most persistent challenges in digital transformation is resistance to change. In the world of sports—where legacy, tradition, and emotion are core pillars—this resistance can be particularly strong. While technology may be readily available and digital strategies may be sound, transformation often falters because of internal cultural pushback, not external obstacles.

Resistance is rarely about incompetence or apathy. It often stems from deeper psychological, cultural, and identity-based factors—fear of the unknown, loss of control, or perceived threats to status or tradition. Understanding the roots of resistance, and addressing them with empathy and structure, is essential for any sports organization seeking to become more digitally mature (Kotter, 1996).

This section examines the cultural dynamics behind resistance, particularly in sports contexts, and offers concrete strategies to reduce friction and build alignment.

Cultural roots of resistance

Sports organizations are often built on legacy structures—long-standing leadership, departmental silos, and rituals that are deeply embedded in daily operations. These cultural elements can be a source of pride and identity, but they can also become barriers when change threatens the established order.

For example, traditional broadcast teams may feel threatened by the rise of digital content units. Ticketing departments may resist CRM system upgrades that automate processes they once controlled manually. Coaches or performance staff may distrust data analysts



if roles and decision-making boundaries are unclear.

This is not mere stubbornness; it represents an expression of cultural friction. People resist not just because they dislike the new, but because the new challenges their sense of place, relevance, or value (Lewin, 1951).

Kurt Lewin's foundational change model identifies this dynamic as a "refreezing" of old behaviors that have become normalized over time. Breaking this inertia requires both rational arguments (e.g., improved performance) and emotional connection (e.g., a shared sense of purpose) (Lewin, 1951).

Emotional and identity-based barriers

In many sports environments, professional identity is tied closely to tradition—how things have always been done. For example, marketing teams may see themselves as brand stewards, and not as data-driven content optimizers. Coaches may feel their authority is undermined by predictive analytics, even if the tools support their decisions.

These emotional and identity-based attachments to past roles or ways of working are often underestimated during transformation. Change is perceived as loss—of competence, autonomy, or prestige—rather than opportunity (Kotter, 1996).

According to John Kotter's (1996) research on organizational change, one of the most common transformation failures is under-communicating the vision by a factor of ten or more. Without a strong emotional and narrative foundation, change efforts get blocked by invisible cultural resistance.

Practical tactics for reducing resistance

1. Storytelling and narrative framing

Leaders can present change as a gradual evolution rather than a sudden disruption. By linking the digital vision to the organization's core values or to its mission toward fans, they foster stronger emotional alignment. In this sense, investing in digital initiatives should be seen as a way to enhance the fan experience rather than replace human connection (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

2. Involvement and co-creation

People are less likely to resist what they helped create. Involving staff in co-designing new systems, workflows, or service models increases ownership and reduces fear. Change should feel like a team project, not a top-down imposition (Lewin, 1951).

3. Internal champions



Identify and support “cultural carriers”—respected figures within departments who are open to change. Their endorsement can build trust faster than external consultants or executive mandates (Kotter, 1996).

4. Pilot programs and visible wins

Starting small and showcasing early wins helps build credibility. A/B testing, digital campaigns, or department-specific experiments demonstrate value without triggering full-scale resistance (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

5. Feedback loops and listening sessions

Create regular, open channels for staff to raise concerns or suggest adaptations. This reduces the “us-versus-them” dynamic and signals that transformation is an evolving process, not a rigid script (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

Case example: FC Barcelona’s digital transition

When FC Barcelona began overhauling its CRM and fan data systems, internal pushback surfaced from both marketing and ticketing departments. Employees who had spent years managing databases and communication channels manually felt excluded from the process and uncertain about their future roles.

The turning point came when leadership shifted strategy—moving from a system-centric rollout to a people-centric approach. They introduced cross-functional working groups, gave legacy staff direct input into vendor selection and system design, and paired training with visible career path discussions (FC Barcelona, 2022).

This approach reduced fear and boosted morale. Instead of resisting the platform, departments began to see it as a tool they shaped and owned. Adoption rose, and the project ultimately laid the foundation for new, fan-personalized experiences across digital channels (FC Barcelona, 2022).

Conclusion

Resistance is not the enemy of transformation—it is a signal. It reflects emotional realities, identity concerns, and gaps in communication. For sports organizations navigating digital change, understanding the deeper cultural context of resistance is essential.

By combining empathy with structure, storytelling with inclusion, and strategic clarity with emotional intelligence, resistance can be transformed into engagement. The goal is not to eliminate friction entirely, but to use it as a force for refinement, dialogue, and shared ownership of change.



Embedding and sustaining cultural change

Introduction

Creating a digital-ready culture is not simply about launching change initiatives—it's about making those changes stick. Many sports organizations begin digital transformation journeys with energy and clarity, but often struggle to sustain cultural momentum beyond the initial wave of projects and workshops. Cultural change is inherently slow-moving, non-linear, and highly susceptible to regression if not deliberately reinforced.

To embed culture change, sports leaders must move beyond symbolic actions and short-term campaigns. They must introduce new rituals, routines, symbols, and performance systems that reinforce the desired mindset over time. Embedding culture means making it part of how things are done—not just how things are talked about.

This section outlines the key ingredients for cultural sustainability, from onboarding and rituals to internal champions and performance alignment.

From momentary enthusiasm to enduring transformation

In the early stages of transformation, excitement is often high. Teams participate in workshops, executives announce strategic shifts, and new tools or ways of working are introduced. But without long-term reinforcement, people may revert to familiar patterns—especially under pressure, during seasonal workloads, or in leadership transitions (Kotter, 1996).

Sustaining culture requires more than communication—it requires consistency. New behaviors must be embedded into the everyday fabric of the organization. Just as high-performance athletes rely on daily habits, organizations must rely on daily cultural cues to shape mindsets and behaviors (Lewin, 1951).

Rituals, symbols and onboarding

Culture is transmitted through actions and artifacts. This includes recurring rituals (e.g., retrospectives, daily standups, learning demos), onboarding practices (e.g., digital culture orientation), and symbolic actions (e.g., leadership joining sprint reviews or highlighting team learnings).

These rituals help normalize new behaviors and establish shared expectations. They also send signals about what is valued—experimentation, collaboration, learning, or customer-centric thinking.



Examples of embedding tactics include the following.

- Onboarding sessions that introduce the digital strategy and key cultural principles.
- Weekly team meetings that begin with “What did we learn this week?”.
- Quarterly retrospectives that reflect on both delivery and cultural alignment.
- Office visuals (physical or digital) that reinforce agile values or fan-first thinking.

As Salesforce (2023) notes, organizations with consistent rituals and cultural artifacts are more likely to maintain momentum in times of uncertainty or change.

Cultural carriers and internal champions

One of the most effective ways to embed culture is through people—especially informal leaders or cultural carriers. These are individuals who model desired behaviors, support others through change, and act as translators between strategic vision and daily practice.

Cultural carriers don’t need formal authority. They might be a mid-level product owner who always invites cross-functional feedback, or a customer service team lead who reinforces fan empathy in every team huddle.

To sustain change, organizations must:

- identify cultural carriers across departments,
- give them visibility, support, and recognition,
- create forums for them to share success stories, tips, and tools,
- pair them with newer or more skeptical staff during onboarding or transitions.

In effect, cultural carriers become “local amplifiers” of the broader transformation, helping to scale new mindsets across silos and layers (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

Aligning culture with performance and KPIs

Culture becomes real when it affects how performance is defined, evaluated, and rewarded. If teams are told to “be agile”, but judged solely on output volume or rigid annual targets, the old culture remains dominant.



To embed cultural change, organizations should:

- tie cultural behaviors to evaluation criteria,
- use 360° feedback to assess collaboration, learning, and ownership,
- include agile KPIs like sprint velocity, team autonomy, and delivery-to-learning ratio,
- monitor employee engagement and cultural sentiment through pulse surveys.

Leaders should also review whether existing KPIs support or contradict the desired mindset. For example, if fan engagement is a strategic priority, teams should be measured not just on revenue, but on speed and quality of fan-feedback loops (KPMG, 2022).

Visual: culture embedding checklist

To support organizations in embedding change, the following checklist can be used internally. It reflects common high-impact embedding mechanisms.

Table 2. Cultural embedding checklist

Culture embedding practice	In place	Needs work
Digital culture included in onboarding	✓	
Weekly rituals reinforce learning	✓	
Cultural behaviors tied to KPIs		✓
Internal champions Identified	✓	
Stories of learning/failure		✓



shared regularly		
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Source: own elaboration.

This checklist can be adapted for workshops, team retrospectives, or leadership alignment sessions.

Conclusion

Sustaining cultural transformation requires far more than a one-time push. It involves embedding new ways of thinking and working into the operating system of the organization. Through rituals, people, and performance systems, digital culture becomes not just a project—but a lived reality.

For sports organizations, embedding culture means creating an environment where agility, learning, and collaboration thrive every day—not just during “transformation moments”. It’s what separates one-off change efforts from lasting competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Culture as the competitive edge in digital sport

Across every phase of digital transformation—from strategy to execution—one consistent truth emerges: **culture determines success**. While technology provides tools, and data unlocks insight, it is the people, their mindsets, and shared behaviors within an organization that ultimately shape outcomes. In the high-pressure, tradition-rich world of sports, this human factor becomes even more critical.

The most digitally advanced sports organizations are not simply those with the latest platforms or fan apps. They are the ones where **culture enables agility, people feel safe to learn, and leadership embodies transformation values**. Culture, in this sense, represents the invisible infrastructure—the system of energy, trust, and alignment that sustains innovation at scale.

Recap: cultural enablers and blockers

This reading has outlined the foundational role of mindsets and culture in sports transformation. We have explored:

- Why culture matters more than technology alone.
- The shift from fixed to growth mindsets.



- The role of leadership in modeling and enabling change.
- The impact of psychological safety on experimentation and innovation.
- How resistance is shaped by emotion, identity, and tradition.
- The need to embed transformation through rituals, onboarding, and KPIs.

At every step, the message is clear: culture is not merely an abstract concept; it is the solid foundation of sustainable change.

Culture is a design challenge

Winning digital teams don't leave culture to chance. They **design** it—intentionally and iteratively—just like any product or service. This includes defining the values that matter, modeling them visibly, reinforcing them through systems, and adjusting over time based on feedback.

For example, if collaboration is a cultural goal, it must show up in team structures, decision-making processes, and performance incentives. If customer-centricity is a value, then fan feedback loops, A/B testing, and user interviews must become routine—not optional.

As Accenture (2021a) puts it, high-performing digital organizations are those that treat culture as a core business asset—something that must evolve alongside strategy and structure.

Culture as competitive advantage

In a crowded sports market where digital fan expectations are rising and global competition is intensifying, culture becomes the differentiator. Technology can be copied. Culture cannot.

A club that consistently empowers its teams, learns from experiments, adapts to feedback, and aligns around fan value will outperform those that cling to silos, fear failure, or confuse hierarchy with leadership. Culture is what enables speed without chaos, innovation without burnout, and clarity without rigidity.

Organizations that invest in culture today are building the platform for all future success—digital or otherwise.

Final thoughts

Digital transformation is not a destination. It is a way of operating—dynamic, iterative, and human-centered. To thrive in this environment, sports organizations must treat



culture not as a side issue, but as a **strategic asset**.

Mindsets drive behavior. Behavior drives outcomes. Culture binds it all together.

In the end, winning the digital game isn't just about adopting technology. It's about **becoming the kind of organization where transformation is possible—and sustainable**.

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