

Module 4. Leading change: structures, talent models, and the role of leadership

Introduction: the leadership imperative in the digital era

Introduction

Digital transformation in sports is often framed in terms of technology—new platforms, fan experiences, data ecosystems, or AI-driven analytics. However, the true enabler of change is not the technology itself, but leadership. Without the right leadership mindset, structure, and talent model, even the most advanced digital strategies will struggle to take root.

This has become increasingly evident across global sports organizations. Where leadership embraces innovation, transformation accelerates. Where it clings to hierarchy or tradition, efforts stall. As McKinsey and Company (2021) emphasizes, leadership alignment and capability are consistently among the top predictors of successful digital change. The sports industry—long steeped in tradition and hierarchical command—now finds itself needing to reinvent what leadership looks like off the pitch.

Previous readings in this course have outlined the key human drivers of digital transformation: culture and mindset (reading 1), future-ready skills (reading 2), and team-based execution (reading 3). Yet none of these levers works without intentional leadership. Leaders are the activators—they shape culture, sponsor skill development, design the structures for cross-functional collaboration, and hold the vision that guides organizational transformation.

Leadership today is no longer defined solely by position. It is defined by behavior, influence, and adaptability. Especially in high-stakes environments like sports—where performance pressures, public visibility, and legacy structures are pronounced—leaders must balance clarity with flexibility, and vision with empathy. As Deloitte (2021) argues, modern leadership is increasingly about navigating complexity, not managing certainty.

This reading will explore what effective leadership looks like in a digitally transforming sports organization. It will examine how organizational structures, talent models, and leadership behaviors must evolve to meet the demands of a rapidly changing landscape.



It will also highlight how leadership is not confined to the C-suite, but distributed across teams, departments, and emerging roles throughout the organization.

Ultimately, leadership is not just a support function for transformation. It is the operating system. And for sports organizations to thrive in the digital era, they must rewire this system—not just upgrade it.

Leadership in context—transformation in sports organizations

Introduction

Leadership in sports has traditionally been built on stability, hierarchy, and command-based decision-making. Clubs, leagues, and governing bodies have long operated with deeply entrenched roles and chains of command—designed for operational efficiency, risk aversion, and reputational control. This made sense in an era when sports organizations were primarily event-based businesses with predictable, seasonal rhythms.

However, the shift to a digitally driven operating model has upended this foundation. Fan expectations are now shaped by 24/7 engagement, immersive digital content, real-time data, and personalized experiences. Revenue models are increasingly diversified—with streaming, sponsorship tech integrations, and digital merchandise creating new complexities. To respond, sports organizations must become more adaptive, cross-functional, and data-literate. This puts pressure on leadership to evolve not just what they do, but how they do it.

The transformation mandate

Digital transformation in sports is not about adopting technology for technology's sake. It's about responding to an environment where agility, innovation, and fan-centricity have become strategic imperatives. Leaders are now required to sponsor change across a range of domains: data and analytics, digital marketing, talent development, cybersecurity, and even AI adoption. And crucially, they must do so while managing traditional operations, team performance, and competitive pressures.

This dual transformation—managing today while building for tomorrow—is what makes leadership in sports so uniquely challenging. As McKinsey and Company (2020) highlights, transformation leaders in sports must be able to shift between roles: strategist, motivator, systems thinker, and cultural architect. Those who cling only to positional authority or historic playbooks quickly fall behind.



Emerging examples from the sports industry

In recent years, we've seen a growing number of sports organizations adapt their leadership models to meet this complexity. For example, **Juventus FC** launched a digital transformation office directly under its CEO, empowering cross-departmental teams to lead initiatives spanning CRM, content, and fan data strategy (Juventus FC, 2023). At **Formula E**, leadership embedded digital innovation KPIs directly into executive performance reviews, ensuring strategic alignment from the top down (Formula E, 2023).

Similarly, **LaLiga Tech** emerged as a dedicated innovation arm—with leadership from both the league and technology sectors—to develop digital capabilities for Spanish football clubs. This structural leadership shift enabled more experimentation and platform development than would have been possible through traditional league governance alone (LaLiga Tech, 2022).

These examples reflect a critical realization: transformation cannot be outsourced to “digital teams” alone. It must be owned and embodied by leadership at every level.

Leadership accountability in a transparent era

Finally, leadership visibility and accountability have fundamentally changed. In a digital-first world, employees, partners, and fans all have higher expectations for transparency, responsiveness, and purpose. Leaders must now be visible not only at board meetings but on social media, town halls, and digital platforms where culture and trust are built.

As Accenture (2021) notes, this has given rise to what they call the “visible leader”—someone who communicates openly, demonstrates vulnerability, and connects authentically across channels. In sports, where cultural alignment and public scrutiny are intense, this kind of leadership is no longer optional. It's foundational.

Structural readiness: designing for agility and speed

Introduction

In digital transformation, structure is strategy in motion. The design of an organization—the way teams are configured, authority is distributed, and workflows are managed—directly determines its ability to adapt, innovate, and execute at pace. For sports organizations seeking to modernize, structural readiness is no longer optional. It is the scaffolding that enables all other transformation levers, from culture to capability, to work effectively.



From bureaucracies to adaptive operating models

Historically, many sports organizations have mirrored traditional corporate hierarchies: command-and-control structures, rigid reporting lines, and centralized decision-making. This model, while stable, is poorly suited for the complexity and speed of today's digital environment. In contrast, adaptive operating models emphasize decentralization, flexibility, and speed. They are built around empowered teams, rapid learning loops, and transparent decision flows.

McKinsey and Company (2020) describes agile organizations as networks of teams operating in rapid learning and fast decision cycles supported by a strong shared purpose and people-centered culture. The goal is not chaos—but controlled autonomy within clear strategic boundaries.

Functional vs. team-based vs. networked structures

In the journey toward structural agility, sports organizations typically move through three models.

- **Functional structure:** traditional departments with vertical chains of command (e.g., marketing, analytics, ticketing).
- **Team-based structure:** cross-functional project teams operate within or across functions, often informally.
- **Networked structure:** teams are the primary unit of operation. Roles, skills, and projects flow across a connected organizational web.

Reading 3 explored how teams become the execution engine of transformation. This section zooms out: leadership must reconfigure the entire organizational structure to support this shift. Without a structural reset, even the most high-performing teams struggle to scale impact.

Empowerment through decentralization

Decentralized structures empower decision-making closer to where value is created. For example, fan engagement squads composed of data analysts, marketing strategists, and tech leads can launch and iterate campaigns without routing decisions up and down the hierarchy.

This is particularly vital in sports, where rapid response to fan behavior, content trends, or platform shifts is a competitive advantage. Juventus FC, for instance, adopted a



decentralized approach to content production, empowering local teams to tailor messaging to fans across regions while aligning with central brand strategy (Juventus FC, 2023).

Leadership in this context becomes about creating alignment, not controlling execution. Structures are designed to enable autonomy—with governance mechanisms that ensure accountability.

Org charts for transformation

A key artifact of structural readiness is the **modern org chart**. Rather than static boxes and titles, these charts reflect dynamic team configurations, talent pools, and inter-team relationships.

Manchester City's digital division, for example, adopted a flexible structure where specialists (e.g., designers, developers, analysts) belong to "chapters" but are embedded in agile squads focused on specific fan journeys (Manchester City, 2022). This hybrid model allows for both skill development and business ownership.

Sports organizations must visualize their future-state structure—who works on what, with whom, and how decisions are made—and map the transition from their current model.

Talent models for the digital age

Introduction

If structure determines how work flows, talent models determine who can perform the work and how quickly individuals adapt to changing needs. For sports organizations undergoing digital transformation, traditional approaches to talent are being outpaced by the demands of agility, innovation, and continuous evolution.

Rigid hierarchies, siloed expertise, and narrowly defined roles simply don't fit the dynamic environment of today's digital-first sports industry. A new kind of talent model is required—one that embraces adaptability, mobility, and lifelong learning.

From legacy to future-ready talent models

Legacy talent systems in many sports organizations are built on fixed hierarchies, long-term job roles, and slow-moving performance and promotion systems. These models reward stability and tenure but can inhibit experimentation, risk-taking, and skill evolution.

Future-ready models, by contrast, treat talent as fluid. Roles are dynamic. Individuals are



not hired just for what they've done, but for their capacity to grow, collaborate, and shape the future. This means:

- Moving from **fixed roles** to **project-based assignments**.
- Replacing static job descriptions with **capability maps**.
- Encouraging **cross-functional mobility** across departments.
- Developing **intrapreneurs**—employees who innovate from within.

In a high-speed digital context, learning becomes more valuable than knowing. The focus shifts from having experts to developing explorers.

Case: Arsenal FC – Future-focused talent and career paths

Arsenal FC has reimagined how it approaches career development in its business operations, particularly in digital, commercial, and marketing roles. Their “digital careers” program promotes skill growth through rotational roles, targeted upskilling, and project-based assignments across the club’s media, analytics, and fan engagement teams (Arsenal FC, 2022).

The result is a workforce that is both more adaptable and more engaged—able to shift focus quickly and bring new thinking to evolving challenges. This kind of model not only increases internal mobility, but also deepens talent retention and loyalty.

Case: Ajax – nurturing digital intrapreneurs

Ajax has taken a grassroots approach to talent innovation, encouraging employees across departments to lead internal innovation projects—even without formal innovation roles. Employees pitch ideas related to fan experience, digital platforms, or performance analytics, and cross-functional teams are assembled around the best concepts (Ajax, 2022).

This model of intrapreneurship allows the organization to benefit from untapped ideas while providing employees with leadership opportunities and new digital skill-building experiences. It’s a practical expression of the belief that leadership and innovation can come from anywhere in the organization.

The importance of internal talent marketplaces

More digitally mature sports organizations are beginning to experiment with **internal talent marketplaces**—digital platforms that match employees with short-term assignments or innovation projects based on their skills, interests, and growth goals.



This approach benefits both the organization and the individual:

- Employees stretch and grow beyond their current roles.
- Projects benefit from diverse perspectives and hidden skills.
- Leaders can mobilize talent quickly without hiring externally.

Deloitte (2021) notes that internal talent marketplaces are a key enabler of agility and transformation because they liberate capacity and empower the workforce to take charge of their development.

Moving from job architecture to capability architecture

Talent models in transformation-ready sports organizations must shift from managing people in boxes (job architecture) to managing people by potential and impact (capability architecture). This means:

- Defining what digital capabilities matter most (e.g., data fluency, experimentation, UX literacy).
- Mapping those capabilities across teams and individuals.
- Designing learning pathways to close capability gaps.

This approach allows HR and leadership to act strategically—investing in the right skills, for the right people, at the right time.

Leadership capabilities for digital transformation

Introduction

Digital transformation is not just a technological evolution—it is a human challenge. While new platforms, analytics, and digital products are essential, these tools only deliver impact when paired with the right leadership. For sports organizations aiming to modernize their business, engage fans through new channels, and future-proof their operations, leadership plays a catalytic role. It is leadership—not technology alone—that creates alignment, nurtures innovation, and drives culture change.

What distinguishes effective leadership in the digital era is a shift from control to enablement. Leaders are no longer expected to have all the answers; instead, they are expected to create the conditions where the answers can emerge. The task of leadership



becomes one of building trust, embracing uncertainty, and leading with purpose, not just performance metrics.

Redefining leadership in sports

Historically, leadership in sports organizations has drawn heavily from command-and-control paradigms. Club presidents, directors, and general managers often led with a combination of charisma, authority, and deep industry expertise. While these traits still matter, digital transformation has introduced new demands. Leaders now need to be comfortable navigating ambiguity, building multidisciplinary teams, and fostering experimentation across the organization.

As McKinsey and Company (2021) notes, digital leaders are those who create clarity where there is none, cultivate resilience, and drive continuous reinvention. These are leaders who focus on people, process, and platform—simultaneously. In the sports world, this means guiding both on-field and off-field innovation while inspiring teams through cultural shifts that are often unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

Traits that define digital-era leadership

The most successful transformational leaders display a combination of adaptability, empathy, and vision. Adaptability allows leaders to evolve their thinking in response to rapid changes in technology and market conditions. They learn continuously, ask questions more than they provide answers, and are comfortable letting go of past best practices.

Empathy is critical in environments of change. As teams navigate uncertainty—new tools, structures, workflows, or expectations—leaders must support the emotional and psychological transition, not just the operational one. This requires listening, vulnerability, and a willingness to share in the discomfort of transformation.

Vision remains essential, but it no longer means rigid planning. Instead, it means offering a compelling direction of travel—one that inspires alignment and creates space for agility.

Visionary leaders in sports understand the long-term digital aspirations of their organizations—whether it's global fan engagement, immersive experiences, or data-powered coaching—and translate that vision into short-term momentum through iterative steps.

Finally, resilience and humility tie it all together. Leaders must endure repeated cycles of change and adaptation while remaining grounded. Humble leaders don't fear saying "I don't know". They engage their teams in co-creating the path forward and build collective ownership of both strategy and execution.

Unlearning as a leadership practice

One of the hardest elements of leadership in the digital age is not what must be learned, but what must be unlearned. Many of the behaviors that previously signaled strong leadership—decisiveness without consultation, centralized control, emphasis on stability—can now be liabilities.

In digital contexts, perfectionism must give way to iteration. Top-down authority must make room for distributed decision-making. Leaders who were rewarded in the past for being the “smartest person in the room” now need to shift their focus to being the most **curious** person in the room. It’s a mindset shift from “knowing and directing” to “facilitating and learning.”

Sports leaders, especially those who have spent decades in traditional models, may find this shift difficult. But those who embrace it are already seeing results in terms of employee engagement, innovation velocity, and cross-functional performance.

Models for leading in complexity

Several leadership frameworks help codify what this new type of leadership looks like in practice. The **digital leadership index**, developed by McKinsey, offers a diagnostic tool to assess a leader’s ability to operate effectively in digital environments. It focuses on dimensions like digital acumen, customer-centric thinking, innovation leadership, and ecosystem engagement.

Adaptive leadership, pioneered at Harvard Kennedy School (n.d.), emphasizes the need for leaders to mobilize people in the face of complex, non-linear challenges. It recognizes that many digital transformation obstacles are not technical but adaptive—meaning they require changes in values, behaviors, and organizational identity.

Humble leadership, introduced by Edgar and Peter Schein (2018), underscores the importance of psychological safety, mutual respect, and co-creation in environments where innovation depends on open dialogue and team-based learning. This model is particularly relevant in sports environments where generational differences, digital literacy gaps, and performance pressure all converge.

Measuring leadership impact

As organizations evolve, so must the way they evaluate leadership. Traditional metrics—like revenue targets or cost savings—tell only part of the story. Progressive sports organizations are also measuring:

- **engagement and trust** levels across departments, often via pulse surveys,



- **team health and collaboration** through frameworks like Atlassian’s Team Health Monitor,
- **innovation throughput**—how many experiments are launched and iterated,
- **decision-making speed** across squads and cross-functional teams.

Ultimately, the most valuable leadership metric is the ability to unlock the potential of others. In digital transformation, this means empowering teams to act with clarity and confidence— even in the absence of certainty.

Change management in action

Introduction

Change is inevitable in digital transformation—but progress is not. For sports organizations navigating the transition toward more agile, tech-enabled ways of working, the role of change management becomes a vital leadership responsibility. It is not enough to implement new systems or restructure departments; transformation only sticks when people come along for the journey.

In the world of professional sports—where tradition, performance pressure, and emotional investment run high—leading people through change requires clarity, consistency, and empathy. From football clubs shifting toward data-driven recruitment, to leagues adopting centralized digital platforms, every change effort impacts the people behind the scenes: analysts, marketers, coaches, content creators, and business leaders alike.

The emotional side of change

One of the greatest leadership challenges in any transformation is addressing the human response to disruption. New structures and strategies often spark fear, confusion, and even resistance. People may worry about job security, skills irrelevance, or loss of influence. These reactions are natural—but without intentional leadership, they can slow or sabotage transformation efforts.

Effective change leaders understand this emotional dynamic. They create space for dialogue, not just dissemination. Instead of simply explaining what is changing, they engage teams in exploring *why* the change is happening and *how* it benefits them and the broader mission.

Trust as a change accelerator



Trust is a fundamental currency in change management. Teams that trust their leaders and the organization's intent are more likely to take risks, adopt new behaviors, and persist through uncertainty. Conversely, if trust is low, even the best-designed transformation strategies can fail.

In high-performing sports organizations, leaders build trust by being transparent about both the opportunities and trade-offs of change. They don't overpromise. They invite feedback, act on concerns, and demonstrate consistency between their words and actions.

Research from Deloitte (2021) suggests that organizations with high trust climates are 2.6 times more likely to see sustained change outcomes. Trust, it turns out, is not a "soft" leadership trait—it's a measurable business enabler.

Rituals and routines that enable change

Change doesn't happen in grand pronouncements. It happens in the daily rhythms of the organization. That's why many transformation-ready sports organizations adopt leadership rituals that reinforce clarity, communication, and connection.

Examples include the following.

- **Town halls:** open forums where executives share progress, spotlight success stories, and invite live questions.
- **Retrospectives:** borrowed from agile practice, these allow teams to reflect on what is working, what's not, and what to improve.
- **Listening tours:** executives and team leads meet with staff across levels to understand experiences and build empathy.
- **Change agents or champions:** peer advocates embedded in teams who help socialize new ways of working and gather feedback from the ground.

These rituals build momentum and normalize change as part of the organization's DNA—not an occasional disruption.

Case study: the NBA's internal transformation strategy

One notable example of change leadership in sports comes from the **National Basketball Association (NBA)**. Over the past several years, the NBA has invested heavily in internal digital transformation—restructuring operations, modernizing fan engagement, and



digitizing content workflows across franchises.

According to public interviews and case profiles, a core part of their approach was **cross-functional change leadership**. Senior leaders championed a new vision, but mid-level managers were empowered to shape how change was implemented locally. Change communications focused not just on outcomes, but on acknowledging the discomfort of transition. Teams received coaching and access to new learning tools to build confidence.

The result? A transformation that didn't rely solely on directives from the top—but on ownership at every level. By combining strategic clarity with human-centered leadership, the NBA built momentum across a sprawling and diverse set of internal stakeholders.

Building a culture of distributed leadership

Introduction

In the context of digital transformation, the traditional model of top-down leadership is becoming increasingly obsolete. Instead, the most forward-thinking sports organizations are shifting toward a **distributed leadership** model—where leadership is seen as a behavior, not just a job title. In this model, responsibility, initiative, and influence are shared across many levels of the organization, enabling faster decision-making, stronger ownership, and a culture of continuous improvement.

This approach is especially critical in digital environments where agility, responsiveness, and innovation must be embedded into the day-to-day workings of teams. In sports organizations—where competitive pressure is high and fan expectations evolve rapidly—distributed leadership ensures that authority and creativity are not bottlenecked at the top but are activated throughout the workforce.

Beyond the C-Suite: leadership across the organization

Historically, leadership in sports organizations has been associated with high-ranking executives or iconic managers. However, in a digital-ready model, leadership is exercised across every layer of the organization. A CRM analyst designing a fan retention strategy, a performance scientist piloting wearable tech, or a junior marketing manager launching a new social media campaign—all these individuals take on leadership roles in their domains when they initiate, influence, or drive progress.

Recognizing this type of leadership requires a shift in mindset: organizations must stop equating leadership with hierarchy and instead reward behaviors like initiative-taking, collaboration, creative problem-solving, and accountability. This cultural shift enables faster action, broader participation in transformation, and higher levels of employee engagement.



Empowering team leads, product owners and squad captains

One practical way organizations are embedding distributed leadership is through the creation of roles that hold leadership responsibilities without formal authority. These roles are critical in agile team environments and include positions such as team leads, product owners, chapter leads, and squad captains.

Team leads are responsible for coordination and cohesion within multidisciplinary squads. They ensure that members stay aligned to goals, remove blockers, and support team performance—not through command but through facilitation and guidance. Similarly, **product owners** play a pivotal role in digital teams by owning the backlog and prioritizing work based on user needs, organizational objectives, and business value. They serve as a bridge between the business and technical teams, making decisions that directly influence user experience and impact.

Chapter leads, on the other hand, provide mentorship and quality assurance across a functional area such as design, engineering, or analytics. While team members may be embedded in various squads, chapter leads help maintain discipline-specific standards and encourage knowledge sharing across teams. **Squad captains**, a term used in some clubs like Juventus and Ajax, support team health and rhythm, often organizing retrospectives or ensuring alignment with broader strategic goals.

These roles reflect a flatter, more dynamic model of leadership where people lead based on expertise, accountability, and context rather than hierarchy.

Developing leadership at every level

Creating a distributed leadership culture isn't just about redefining roles—it's about **investing in leadership development for everyone**, not just executives. Many sports organizations are now designing learning journeys that help individuals grow their leadership capabilities regardless of their job title or seniority.

Leadership development programs are increasingly inclusive, combining technical upskilling with behavioral coaching. Workshops on decision-making, communication, and team facilitation are offered to team leads and mid-level managers. Some organizations establish **peer learning communities**, where professionals in similar leadership roles (e.g., product owners or data team leads) can exchange experiences and co-develop best practices. Others set up **mentorship networks**, pairing emerging leaders with experienced ones to support growth and succession.

At the club level, there are examples of **internal leadership academies**, designed to cultivate in-house talent with the potential to lead cross-functional digital projects. These programs often involve real-world assignments, coaching from senior leaders, and



structured reflection sessions. This democratization of leadership development accelerates transformation by ensuring more people are equipped to drive change from wherever they sit in the organization.

Redefining the role of senior leadership

For distributed leadership to thrive, senior leaders must change how they see their role. Rather than issuing directives, they must act as **enablers of leadership in others**. This means setting clear intent, creating psychological safety, listening actively, and building systems that support experimentation and autonomy.

Micromanagement, gatekeeping, and siloed control are the enemies of distributed leadership. Instead, executives should model vulnerability, empower decision-making at lower levels, and reward initiative over compliance. Trust becomes the operating system, not control.

Leaders who create these conditions often unlock surprising capacity in their teams: faster problem-solving, more innovative ideas, and greater resilience in the face of disruption. Leadership, in this model, is a multiplier—when shared, it scales impact across the organization.

Visualizing leadership distribution: the leadership pyramid

Many organizations use **visual metaphors** to communicate this shift. One such model is the

leadership pyramid, which compares two models.

- In the traditional **top-down structure**, leadership flows from a narrow apex. Decision-making, information flow, and recognition are all concentrated at the top, limiting agility and creating bottlenecks.
- In the **distributed model**, leadership radiates outward from multiple nodes: product teams, chapters, cross-functional squads, and frontline units. These nodes are connected through shared purpose, data, and mutual trust, creating a resilient and adaptive organization.

This visual storytelling can be helpful during onboarding, leadership development, and transformation roadshows. It reinforces that leadership is not a ladder—but a network of influence and responsibility.

The role of HR and people strategy in leading



change

Introduction

Digital transformation is not just about adopting new technologies—it's about transforming how people work, learn, and lead. In this context, **human resources (HR)** is no longer a back-office function responsible only for hiring and compliance. In digitally maturing sports organizations, HR is evolving into a **strategic transformation partner**, shaping the culture, capabilities, and leadership pipeline required for sustained change.

To succeed in this new role, HR must align closely with the organization's digital agenda and become a catalyst for future-ready talent strategies, continuous learning, and culture-shaping initiatives. In many of the most forward-thinking clubs and leagues, the people and culture function now sits at the heart of transformation teams, guiding everything from organizational design to leadership development.

HR as a strategic transformation partner

In traditional sports organizations, HR departments have often focused on operational responsibilities: payroll, contract management, recruitment logistics, and policy enforcement. But as digital transformation accelerates, this transactional model is being replaced with a **strategic HR mindset**—one that contributes directly to the long-term competitiveness of the organization.

Strategic HR teams participate in shaping transformation roadmaps, aligning people initiatives with business objectives. They help define new team structures, redesign performance management systems, and partner with business leaders to ensure talent is deployed where it can create the greatest impact. This shift requires HR professionals to develop **business acumen**, understand agile working models, and become change agents themselves.

In sports, clubs like **Manchester City** and **Ajax Amsterdam** have integrated HR into digital development teams, allowing HR professionals to co-lead workforce planning, culture change programs, and internal mobility frameworks.

Capability mapping and future skill design

One of the core responsibilities of HR in leading change is **capability mapping**—the process of identifying current competencies across the organization and defining the new skills required for future performance. This is especially important as roles evolve quickly in the face of new technologies like AI, data science, and immersive fan engagement platforms.



Leading organizations are using **skills taxonomies**, career frameworks, and digital assessment tools to create visibility around internal capabilities. These insights allow HR teams to proactively reskill existing employees, close skills gaps, and build internal talent marketplaces.

For example, clubs like **FC Bayern Munich** have begun experimenting with **skill passports**— digital profiles that track employees' expertise, certifications, and project contributions.

These systems support smarter talent deployment, enhance career mobility, and create personalized learning journeys aligned with business goals.

Succession planning and leadership pipelines

Transformation-ready organizations don't just fill roles—they **build leadership pipelines**. This means investing in emerging leaders early, giving them cross-functional exposure, and designing learning programs that prepare them for digital-era challenges.

Modern HR practices involve **succession planning tools** that identify high-potential talent and map out critical roles within the organization. These tools enable proactive leadership development, reduce key-person risk, and support diversity goals by broadening the pool of future leaders.

At **Juventus FC**, for instance, leadership succession is not just a boardroom concern—it's baked into their digital strategy, with HR and business leaders jointly sponsoring leadership accelerators focused on innovation, resilience, and cross-functional collaboration.

Performance systems that reinforce new behaviors

Transformation often fails when old behaviors are rewarded. HR can help prevent this by redesigning **performance management systems** to align with new ways of working. This includes:

- Moving from annual appraisals to **continuous feedback**.
- Shifting from individual metrics to **team-based outcomes**.
- Embedding **values-based recognition** for behaviors like experimentation, collaboration, and learning.

Sports organizations like **Arsenal FC** have introduced **OKRs (objectives and key results)** across departments, ensuring that performance goals reflect the speed, focus, and agility required in digital environments. These practices create alignment while reinforcing a culture of shared accountability.



Learning platforms, coaching, and leadership academies

To build capabilities at scale, leading sports organizations are investing in **learning ecosystems** that combine digital platforms, curated learning paths, internal academies, and coaching.

For example:

- **Digital learning platforms** allow staff to access just-in-time content on tools, methods, and strategic themes.
- **Leadership academies** create tailored development for managers, team leads, and executives.
- **Peer coaching networks** build trust and transfer experiential knowledge across functions.

The NBA, for instance, has developed an internal **digital learning hub** focused on emerging technologies and data fluency. This platform is open to all staff, reinforcing a culture of lifelong learning and curiosity.

Leading by example: transformation leadership stories

Introduction

Behind every successful transformation in sports, there are individuals who lead not just through position, but through vision, behavior, and relentless commitment to progress. These **transformation leaders**—whether club executives, commissioners, or former athletes turned decision-makers—are the visible champions of change, shaping both strategy and culture through example.

This section highlights several high-impact leadership stories from across the global sports ecosystem. These are not abstract models—they are real people demonstrating what leadership looks like in the era of digital disruption.

Omar Berrada – Architecting Manchester City’s innovation engine

As the former Chief Football Operations Officer at **Manchester City**, Omar Berrada played a crucial role in modernizing the club’s business and football operations. He was instrumental in building **City Football Group’s global strategy**, scaling the club’s digital capabilities, and championing a data-first approach to player performance, fan engagement, and sponsorship analytics.



Berrada emphasized cross-functional collaboration and embedded digital fluency into the culture of the club's leadership team. Under his guidance, Manchester City developed a tech-savvy operating model that influenced other clubs worldwide—driven by shared KPIs, real-time analytics, and digitally augmented decision-making.

He also helped recruit multidisciplinary teams, blending data scientists, marketers, and digital product managers to transform both the sporting and commercial sides of the business. His leadership is a clear case of how **transformation depends on integration, not just innovation.**

Ebru Köksal – Redefining leadership in a traditionally male-dominated space

As a former general manager at **Galatasaray SK**, chair of **Women in Football**, and board member at FIFA's governance committees, **Ebru Köksal** is a leading voice for inclusive leadership and governance reform in sports.

Köksal's leadership journey is defined by bold cultural change. At Galatasaray, she oversaw digital restructuring of operations, professionalized talent management, and introduced data-led planning to a historically hierarchical organization. Her influence extended beyond club walls—helping reshape how football governance bodies view gender equity, transparency, and agility.

Her work highlights that **leading transformation often means challenging legacy mindsets.** Through her roles in education, mentorship, and global speaking engagements, Köksal continues to build pathways for the next generation of sports leaders—especially women navigating male-dominated structures.

Don Garber – Scaling MLS with strategic innovation

As commissioner of **Major League Soccer (MLS)** since 1999, **Don Garber** has led one of the most significant transformation stories in global sports. Under his leadership, the league expanded from 10 to 30 clubs and invested heavily in **digital innovation**, youth development, and strategic partnerships with tech platforms.

Garber has championed a **“league as a platform”** model, enabling clubs to adopt new fan engagement technologies, digital ticketing, and content personalization. His tenure includes the launch of **MLS NEXT**, a nationwide youth development system, and **MLS Digital Lab**, a hub for testing innovation in match data, streaming, and fan analytics.

Crucially, Garber has emphasized leadership decentralization—empowering clubs to lead transformation locally while aligning them through shared principles and league-wide infrastructure. His story illustrates how **system-level leadership can enable localized agility.**



Conclusion

Leadership as a system, not a role

Leadership in the digital age is not defined by titles or corner offices. It is defined by **behavior, adaptability, and the ability to activate change through others**. As we've explored throughout this reading, leading transformation in sports organizations requires a systemic approach—one where structures, people, and culture are aligned toward agility, innovation, and long-term impact.

We've seen how traditional models—hierarchies, static job descriptions, centralized control—are being replaced by dynamic systems of **empowered teams, fluid talent models, and distributed leadership**. The sports industry, while rooted in tradition, is learning to adapt at speed through strategic leadership that embraces risk, reinvention, and inclusion.

Crucially, digital transformation is not just a technology project—it's a leadership challenge. From designing agile-ready organizations to growing high-potential digital talent, from shifting leadership mindsets to embedding change rituals into everyday operations, **leaders set the tempo for transformation**.

Each of the previous readings in this course—culture, skills, teams—has pointed toward this moment: the recognition that leadership is the connective tissue holding everything together. Without empowered, future-ready leadership, even the best talent, the best tools, and the most ambitious strategies will fall short.

To close, the path forward for sports organizations is clear:

- **Design for adaptability, not control.**
- **Grow leaders at every level—not just the top.**
- **Build systems that align people, structure, and purpose.**

Digital transformation is not a destination—it's a way of operating. And leadership is not a role—it's the engine that makes the transformation real.

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