

Module 1. An Introduction to Fan Engagement Leadership

Unit 1.1

1.1.1 Fan engagement as a cultural phenomenon

In this new course we are going to look at several of the key elements involved in enacting a successful fan engagement strategy. As we study in other parts of the certificate, success—in terms of rising levels of emotional engagement and the benefits that bestows upon a club—is achieved through a combination of a clear, unambiguous strategy with a big business focus on engagement and creation and sustain of the right culture.

Culture is tied to engagement: that is known from all of the available research in other business sectors. Of the many models developed, since the emergence of customer engagement as a business philosophy, each one we have reviewed places leadership at its centre. To reflect this, the four pillars of engagement include people engagement, which focus on what the national association, league or club does to create the right culture.

In this course, it is argued that developing an appropriate approach to fan engagement leadership is vital, because, of the several factors that set the culture of the workplace and its areas of focus, the leadership team is perhaps the most important. So, we will define and explore the characteristics of fan engagement leadership in this module and also examine all the relevant factors associated with changing and/or maintaining a strong fan-focused culture.

What is culture? In many respects, culture is ‘the way we do things.’ In fact, in football, in a football club, it is probably best to express it that way. If you say to people ‘let’s change the culture’, then you make the assumption they know what a culture is.

There are many definitions of organisational culture, but they all have the same few elements in common. **An organisation’s culture sets the right way to behave within the organisation if the goals set are to be achieved.**



This culture consists of **shared beliefs and values established by leaders and then communicated and reinforced through various methods, ultimately shaping employee perceptions, behaviours and understanding**. It can be viewed in the way people interact, the little rituals they observe, the way they respond to change and the way they work with customers. It is the sum of everything that is done to depict the personality of an organisation.

A business with a customer-focused culture would prioritise the activities, processes and behaviours associated with retaining customers through outstanding service. They would prioritise listening; leaders would 'walk the talk' and spend time with customer-facing employees and customers themselves; people would be rewarded for providing great service; and, most importantly of all, the business's values would shine through in the experiences that customers enjoyed.

A business with a strong sales culture might reward staff for sales, focus training on sales techniques, talk about sales results and put it at the top of every meeting agenda. However, as history has told us on many occasions, the result is usually that sales are achieved regardless of their suitability to the customer, leading to huge distrust and then to a downturn when media commentators, negative publicity, intervention from regulators and 'word of mouth' combine.

Not having a discernible culture often means that messages are mixed, leaders do not practise what they preach, employees do not receive clear guidance and rely on adherence to 'rules' for decision-making, among other results.

So, this begs the following question: from what each of us knows about our favourite football club, is its culture fan-focused, focused on some other aspect, or is there no discernible culture at all?

As we examine in other parts of this certificate, football club culture often indirectly results from an aggression or determination associated with the achievement of sporting glory. The assertion required to win a tackle, to be first to the ball and to outlast our opponents often, in your professor's experience, frequently infects fan-facing areas of the club where this aggression manifests itself as poor service, with little or no focus on the fans' interests. Whether or not you agree with this opinion, one must surely agree that the absence of a clear culture in football –, ideally a fan-focused one– damages the sport and its potential to grow.

In researching the evolution of customer engagement –the origins of fan engagement– in the course *Why Fan Engagement? Definition, Principles & Rationale*, we discussed the importance of culture in the context of providing great customer service. Research has,



for many years, shown the clear correlation between motivated, informed and valued employees and more consistent and better quality customer experiences. We know great customer service leads to improved revenues through retention and positive 'word of mouth' advocacy, so we must start at the beginning and create the culture to foster this.

Back in 2005, your professor wrote *Inconvenience Stores*: the world's first customer service travelogue. Its aim was to record one family's year, month by month, as they went about their lives and interacted with the various business and service providers they elided upon. The contention behind writing the book was that it should be possible to get a glimpse of the prevailing organisational culture by interacting with its employees. It should be possible to see and connect good employee attitudes and behaviours with their employers' culture.

Although the year in question did contain many more poor-quality customer experiences than positive ones, it highlighted several moments when it was clear that the prevailing organisational culture was customer-focused.

Here's one small example from the book:

On a trip to the US a couple of years ago I happened to drop into Borders in Chicago. Having made my purchases and arrived at the cash desk I was warmly greeted. When my answer betrayed my status as a tourist, the youngster in front of me asked what I was doing in town. 'I'm making a presentation on customer service at a conference,' I told him. 'So, I guess you could say you're a sort of customer service teacher?' he offered. 'I suppose you could.'

'Well,' he continued, his face opening up into a beaming smile, 'it is teachers' week here in Borders, so we can give you a 30% discount off all your purchases today. (Bradley, 2005, p. 35)

What explains this memorable moment of outstanding customer service? Is this just one 'rogue' happy employee performing a cameo that you would not get from any of the others? Is this just 'American' service (this is, after all, a country where the benefits of good service were first understood and acted upon)?

Or is this an example of what happens when a company's culture is focused on ensuring the best possible outcomes from customers?

On the other hand, we have those moments that really frustrate customers, such as the following two examples from *Inconvenience Stores*:



Someone I recently met mentioned their Borough Council, who had clamped her car one morning because it was double-parked. This, in spite of her appealing (and not hearing back from the council) the original fine as all of the parking places had been taken by construction workers and residents had nowhere to park.

Oh yes, she'd been asked to pay by 9.00am on the morning the clamp was placed on the vehicle. She only saw the clamp as she left the house with her kids for the school journey.

One London Borough continues to fine a resident for crossing a bus lane. Fair enough, until you realise that she has a bus lane between her drive and the main road. Each time she leaves the house, the camera whirrs into action, the ticket bounces on the doormat, she appeals and the labyrinthine process of trying to get blood out of a stone commences. (Bradley, 2005)

First of all, both of these 'service providers' are not the type of businesses you associate with customer service. They are public sector providers. The customer does not have a choice as regards who their local civic authority is –or does he/she? After all, there are municipal elections.

So, how do you explain them both? Is this simply a case of isolated examples (an exception in a business where everything is usually tuned in to the customer's needs) or is this a symptom of a culture that is more about generating income through fines than it is about meeting and respecting the needs of residents?

Culture is absolutely vital in business. The right culture can unleash the passion, imagination and flexibility of employees in ways that secure custom for years to come whereas the wrong culture can hamstring progress everywhere. Finally, changing from the wrong culture –the absence of culture– to the right one is not easy either, as we will discover further in this section of the course.

Exercise:

Consider your most recent day-to-day transactions and interactions with service providers, be they in the private, public/government or voluntary sectors.

Describe the most memorable one (good or bad). What insights does this experience give you into the culture of the service provider involved?



1.1.2 The challenge of enacting culture change

Changing an organisation's culture is difficult, beset with challenges and full of pitfalls, to the extent that few organisations achieve it well. Many, seeing the obstacles, chose to fix issues with 'sticking plaster', that is, with temporary solutions.

So, what can we learn about the challenge of culture change that is applicable to the challenge of embedding fan engagement into the culture of our clubs, leagues and national associations?

One way of looking at culture is to see it as someone's intrinsic personality and characteristics. Just as we are defined by the things we do, the things we believe in and the way we react to certain situations, so do businesses behave.

Speaking to Business and Leadership Guru David Jackson, back when he and your professor were both lead assessors for the Unisys/Management Today Service Excellence Awards (a corporate service excellence development and recognition programme run from the 90s to the 00s). David used an analogy to describe why culture change is so different:

He explained just how difficult it is to change someone's intrinsic personality. The things that define one's personality are not dynamic: they are deeply wired into each and every one of us. In fact, David argued, if you look at the reasons for personality change, you get an insight into how difficult it is for **groups** of personalities (that is, organisations) (Jackson, 1998).

The reasons include bereavement or separation, religious conversion, hypnotherapy or drug therapy, or serious illnesses. We do not easily alter our core personal characteristics.

There are also more mundane reasons why organisational culture is difficult to change. As an American organisational expert confirms, the expected time frame for culture change –estimated as two to three years– is seen as 'unpalatable' (Fajak, 2018):

A company's business model might have changed twice in that time, you might have a new executive team, possibly a new CEO. The time it takes to change culture I believe is one of the deterrents to people engaging in change. (Fajak, 2018, para. 2)

There are many other factors, too. Consider the organisation during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic who is forced to make significant redundancies. Many people have been in the



difficult position of either losing their job or having to break the news to colleagues, who have become close friends, that they no longer have a role in the organisation.

When, as it is the case now, these numbers are in their hundreds or thousands, then the combination of experience and skill of those people is lost. Any prevailing positive culture is likely to be damaged as a result.

So, let's re-examine this question in the context of football. Given the precarious model of many football leagues, where owners invest to cover losses until rescued either by the sale of assets such as star players, success on the pitch, further investment or the sale of the club, there is little by way of a solid foundation to establish a culture in the first place.

We know that promotion can bring in the extra resources to aid culture change and fan engagement programmes, but we also know the opposite is true, as well.

It is often those who are most closely associated with delivering culture-related support who are the first to go when a club is in trouble (how many clubs outside of the elite/top tier of a national league system have a Human Resources officer?). When clubs are in trouble, it is often those with a great deal of operational experience who are the first to lose their positions.

There is another factor, too. Those who work in football organizations, based on your professor's experience, tends to employ people already experienced in football (and often without experience in any other industry, where organisational change is seen as a big part of the day-to-day). This can narrow the perspective of leaders with the impact that they are less equipped to address culture change.

Psychologically, many clubs outside the elite live a 'hand-to-mouth' existence, which means that everything is geared to be prepared for the next game. While it is true that many clubs see the value of developing their people, this is rarely one of the main business priorities.

There has also got to be a strong motivation for football to change culture. For example, if it can be seen to bring great measurable benefits, then it is likely to be embraced. However, as we have studied in this course, we often have owners who want to know the return on investment of fan engagement, without being prepared to invest in the tools to allow that (such as surveying fans, engaging in dialogue or co-creation with them). Perhaps the advancement of fan engagement leadership will chip away at some of these outdated attitudes.



Just like business, football is not going to embrace and achieve culture change easily. It needs a very clear and compelling case to embark upon a journey riddled with obstacles, but when it gets this right, the benefits, in terms of fan acquisition, fan retention, community advocacy and transformed external perceptions, will pay back the initial investment many times over.

So, if we are going to address the challenge of embedding a fan engagement culture into football, we need to be clear about the barriers. To conclude this theme, let's review them with change management expert Torben Rick:

- The culture of an organisation is practically its DNA. Culture determines how everything else in the organisation unfolds. As Peter Drucker said: 'Culture eats Strategy for breakfast'
- The organisation and its culture are reciprocal and interdependent: the organisation, its design and strategies influence its overall culture and vice versa
- An organisation's culture reflects its deepest values and beliefs. Trying to change it can call into question everything the organisation holds dear, often without that conscious intention
- The culture of an organisation is embedded in the entire organisational system. Each little change effects every layer of that system
- Organisational culture evolves over time. An organisation's identity is based on its culture, which is deeply linked to its history and development. (Rick, 2015, para. 3)

As Torben Rick himself concludes, changing culture is very much like changing the course of a large ship with the engines pushing the vessel against the tides (Rick, 2015).

Exercise:

You are an organisational change consultant hired by a medium-sized club to help them develop a fan engagement culture. What questions would you ask to establish where the club is now and who would you speak to?

1.1.3 Culture challenges in a global game

As we have emphasised throughout this certificate, football is a microcosm of society, and global football is a microcosm of global society.



While it offers youngsters across the world the prospect of earning a living playing the beautiful game, many thousands more will not make it. It has the potential to bring great joy in the moments of glory and the moving stories of social responsibility but is also guilty of exploitation, including failing to safeguard young players and also exploiting young players from less developed parts of the world.

At the highest levels of the game, there have been high profile stories of corruption, and at regional levels, gambling syndicates have been working to influence results through exerting influence over players and engaging in financial inducement. The importance, therefore, of football establishing a culture of safety and integrity in relation to the development of young talent is clear.

The Afghanistan FA's president recently received a life ban from the game for his part in the sexual abuse of women players while in the UK, the trial of former football coach Barry Bennell continues. Bennell is a serial abuser of young footballers who caused the loss of many lives and many survivors' battling mental health problems and stigmatisation.

One of the brave young players to call out the injustices in Afghanistan was Khalida Popal, the player-turned team director. A German online newspaper reported on her experience:

Popal, who fled Afghanistan in 2016 and sought asylum in Denmark, said she first became aware of the abuse at a training camp in Jordan in February 2018, but has since learned that the abuse dates back as far as 2014. "My national team players were sexually abused," she reiterated.

"Some of them were raped by the president of the football association. They were sexually abused and mentally and physically harassed by some of the coaches."

She told DW that Afghanistan remains a "male-dominated country" in which women have to overcome significant social and familial barriers in order to play football, and in which a stigma is attached to topics such as sexual abuse.

"When [players] are harassed or sexually abused, they cannot go back to their families and society and complain," she said. "Because they'll say: we told you that football is not for women." (Khalida Popal concerned about FIFA's decision on sexual abuse in the national team, 2019, para. 7-9)

Khalida Popal's courage in calling out these crimes has seen her become a voice for survivors of abuse in football (through her Girl Power organisation), and she now

continues to apply her experience at Danish club FC Nordsjælland, where she has been a full-time commercial coordinator since 2018.

Coincidentally, FC Nordsjælland are also helping to change football by being the main football partner in the Right to Dream group. This group aims to identify talented children and provide them with a transformational education foundation.

It does this through football, education and character development with the result that young people receive the opportunity to follow world-class professional pathways.

The group enables 'young people to change their reality, become impactful leaders and give back to their communities. We then use their remarkable stories of human potential to inspire a global community'.

FC Nordsjælland, owned by the Right to Dream founder, Tom Vernon, share the values of Right to Dream and apply them to the context of football. The aim was to build a team made up entirely of academy players, showing the football world that there is a new successful and sustainable player development model.

Videos highlighting particular young players' stories can be seen at <https://www.righttodream.com/fc-nordsjaelland>

Sky Sports News website reported on the FCN story in May 2020, explaining how the Right to Dream Academy was originally created at a disused football stadium in eastern Ghana. Vernon, now chairman of FCN, believed that the combination of sport and education could lift children out of poverty and help them create better opportunities for themselves (Phillips, 2020). The report continues as follows:

"At first it was just money from my coaching salary and a few people helping out, but over 20 years we've managed to build Right to Dream into the most respected academy in Ghana," says Vernon, who now has a purpose-built facility housing 90 boys and girls on a residential basis.

It has been an incredible success story. Seven of the players who came through the system have been capped by Ghana.

"We have over 50 graduates who are professional footballers playing around the world, over 70 kids at universities in America, and it is the only girls' academy on the African continent. It is something that a lot of academies in Africa are looking to replicate." (Phillips, 2020, para. 3-5)

The results have certainly been very impressive.



FC Nordsjaelland has the youngest team across all of Europe's top divisions, with an average age of 22 years and six months¹. Sixty per cent of the first team squad is made up of graduates from both the Ghana and Denmark academies.

This is not just a showcase for positive thinking, but a club with a clear objective of winning.

"We have made the Europa League qualifiers in the four years we have been here, and we are looking to build on that. The way we have developed players at Right to Dream we think is a globally relevant model. In many ways we think the European academy system has lost its moral compass, the way kids are picked very young and kicked out after a couple of years. Are we really investing in their education? (Phillips, 2020, para. 9.)

This is the key point: for many years, people have questioned the morality of taking young kids from Africa, developing them and then, if they do not make it, effectively leaving them to fend for themselves. Vernon's belief is that they should be offered an education so that, if they do not graduate on the football front, they graduate on the professional education front.

Football may face many challenges, and we have examined only two of them here, but these examples show how individuals, clubs and federations are working, not only to address these issues in football, but to help fight these issues in society too.

Safeguarding and exploitation will always be opportunities for those who hold power over others. Because the development of football requires coaches, children, agents and clubs, there are many risks. There will still inevitably be incidents of these crimes going on around the world, but the courage of Khalida Popal and the vision of Tom Vernon are showing the football industry that it is possible to protect children, safeguard their futures and support them on their paths.

Exercise:

In this theme we have looked at safeguarding and exploitation, but, of course, there are many other global issues which football, though implicated, is working hard to overcome. What are the key issues in your country and how is football helping to address or overcome them?

¹In 3F Superliga games



1.1.4 Defining fan engagement leadership

Leaders are critical in the process of creating and sustaining a culture of fan engagement, and their impact on the behaviours and focus of the people working for them can never be overestimated.

So, in this theme (and in some of those that follow in this module) we look at this role in detail: just how leaders can effect change, make it part of ‘the way we do things here’ and use their position to prepare clubs for the challenges of the changing football world that we have studied via several different business and academic papers.

We know that fan engagement suffers because of its lack of clear definition. We continue to offer a generic one here –everything done to understand, respect and grow the fan’s emotional investment in the club–, as this allows leaders to adapt it according to their particular challenges.

We have also looked at the four pillars (identity and meaning, dialogue and consultation, execution and experience, and people/culture) and at a good working knowledge of these; how they support growth and how they are translated in operational activities will also help the leader to establish him or herself.

Anecdotally, what your professor sees is that fan engagement leadership, however, is still largely notable by its absence. Without leadership, of course, nothing happens. What leaders espouse will influence the focus of those around them. What leaders measure (we know) gets done, and what leaders reward is replicated. Yet, in football, fan engagement still fails to have the focus it needs to be effective and to be part of the culture.

This needs fixing. So, while we have shared a blog that covers many of the key elements² in other parts of this certificate, in this theme we will look at some activities and practices associated with creating a culture of customer engagement in customer-facing businesses, and we will show how these can be adapted for leaders in football.

Businesses in sectors other than sport which develop a competitive advantage (and are most likely be able to ride out difficult economic periods) do so largely as a result of 4 key strategic dimensions:

Leadership & values: having strong principles that are apparent in the decisions they make, the priorities they give their employees, and the experiences enjoyed by customers.

² See <https://fanexperienceco.com/2020/07/fan-engagement-leadership/>



Understanding customers: prioritising feedback and dialogue to the extent that they understand what matters most to different customer groups and are able to pinpoint what elements of the experience/product/service drive advocacy and repurchase intention with each group.

Customer experience: using innovation and feedback to ensure that every touch point delivers hassle-free, added value to customers and ensuring that service recovery (complaints and problems-solving) drives continuous improvement.

Employee engagement: creating a working environment where people are encouraged, motivated, supported and recognised.

You can see the four pillars reflected in these widely-accepted leadership and cultural dimensions above. But what does it look like on the ground—in the day-to-day—and how does a leader in the club go about creating the conditions for a sustained focus on the fans and other stakeholders?

First of all, it does not happen by training alone. Just as in other businesses, this has to be backed up with an environment in which the new skills can thrive. So, let's look at five key areas of activity and consider how they might be applied in practice.

1. We have a clear view of our identity/brand/DNA based on intensive research and stakeholder input

As we have discussed in many parts of this certificate, identity and values are critical in the pursuit of fan engagement. If there are no clear values or sense of identity, then the leader's role is to address that, by working with all stakeholders. On the other hand, if there are clear values or sense of identity, they need to be adhered to, used as a filter for key decision-making and also referred to when describing business goals and challenges.

If all they do is appear on a poster on a wall or get quoted when a new commercial partner comes on board, then they are pointless: show me what they mean and how I can bring them to life in my job.

At times of crisis, the power of values can be clearly shown. If they are overlooked or ignored, then what is the point of having them? This is why they have to be clear, meaningful and easily translatable into actions. Try to oversee a process that produces meaningful values if they are not already in place. Consider the Bury AFC process given as an example elsewhere in the certificate and make sure people can see just how they influence activities, behaviours and decision-making.

2. Our values are widely understood and practised

In the context of fan engagement leadership, the role of the leader is to ensure that everyone working for the club –full time, part time or match day only– understands and buys in to them. Again, in our example from Leeds Rhinos in this certificate, we show how you can do that. If people cannot see how your values translate into behaviours and attitudes, then we have failed.

Coaching and development of people is important. Leaders should ask them for examples of where they have used the club's values to influence idea production, to help improve interactions with fans or to improve the fan experience.

So, if you are going to create imagery and assets to make sure everyone is aware of your values, go one step further and, in every piece of communication or on every poster, show just exactly what the value could mean.

3. Our leadership and management behaviours and processes bring our values to life and produce a customer-led culture

In effect, this is about 'leading by example'. Throughout this certificate, we have shared examples of particular leaders who 'role model' ways of bringing values to life: the CEO who greets fans on a match day (regardless of how well or badly the team is playing), the CEO who watches the game with fans and moves from tribune to tribune to get different perspectives and the CEO who takes phone calls on season ticket renewal day to see how things are to help anticipate issues and to motivate colleagues –these are all great practices.

We know anecdotally that in NBA the commissioner ensures that every club CEO takes at least one match day when they 'walk in the shoes of the fan'. They have to buy a ticket like any other fan, travel to the game and enjoy it and, then, importantly, write a presentation and share it with other club CEOs to see what has been learned.

This, of course, has many benefits in helping the CEO to understand the opportunities within the fan experience and to eavesdrop what fans are saying, but in doing so the leader gains vital profile as someone whose advice can be trusted because they have gone and actually done it.

4. Our leaders actively champion fans and ensure that the 'voice of the customer' is heard at every level of the organisation



One of the main reasons for the lack of a focus on fans and their needs is because little or no time is spent on it; it fails to occupy a place on meeting agenda, and, as a result, people at the club assign less importance to it. The fan engagement leadership approach demands that leaders articulate business priorities in the context of fans: how it affects fans, how it reflects their priorities and how it will make their experiences different. Whether addressing groups of people individually or in groups, in person or via video conferencing, the leader seeks to remind people who we are serving.

One of the ways in which leaders express the importance of fans is how interventions like surveys are communicated. Perhaps the CEO announces it in the company of supporter representatives; perhaps they have helped to create the survey, by sharing current issues; and perhaps he or she then has a Q&A with fans in the place of simply communicating the results.

5. We invest in developing leadership across the organisation, with strong evidence of succession planning, based around established club values

A leader conscious of the value of creating a culture of fan engagement would ensure that recruitment is based on the attitude and values of the applicant –especially, to ensure that they reflect what the club stands for. This can easily be prepared for by creating a list of questions setting out situations and possible responses.

The impact of **not** recruiting people who have values fit with the club is that, at any given moment, they may react to a situation by falling back on a belief system that is at odds with what the club stands for and, in most cases, which will damage levels of engagement.

When it comes to succession planning, while clubs will need to appoint from outside to maintain perspective, it is important to make sure that internal promotion is also based on the values fit of the individual.

Exercise:

You have been appointed to the role of CEO at a club in a small industrial town where the club's heritage is in the steel trade and where 'hard work' is a natural value (albeit not strongly used by the club). Name 3 actions or behaviours that you would introduce to anchor the club more strongly around its values.



Unit 1.2

1.2.1 Key leadership competencies

Competencies are the qualities, skills and abilities that someone possesses. They may be intrinsic or learned, but they are an important way of assessing someone's appropriateness for a role in an organisation. The recruiting team will have a set of competencies associated with the role and will be looking for evidence of these in the recruitment process.

So, this theme will look at the key leadership competencies associated with the creation of a customer-focused or fan-focused culture or working environment.

Let's review the five key areas of activity from the previous theme and consider the generic competencies that a leader will need.

First of all: let's remind ourselves of those five areas of activity/focus:

1. We have a clear view of our identity/brand/DNA based on intensive research and stakeholder input.
2. Our values are widely understood and practised.
3. Our leadership and management behaviours and processes bring our values to life and produce a customer-led culture.
4. Our leaders actively champion fans and ensure that the 'voice of the customer' is heard at every level of the organisation.
5. We invest in developing leadership across the organisation, with strong evidence of succession planning, based around established club values.

Let's consider the key competencies that good fan engagement leaders would possess, considering the deeply emotional nature of fandom and the need to understand factors such as social identity (Riggio, 2014).

1. Social intelligence

This relates to the ability to thrive in different social situations and is, by definition, improved by spending time with different stakeholders, including fans.

2. Interpersonal skills



These are often related to as 'soft skills' and are vital in establishing positive working relationships across the team. Being able to sit in with the Ticketing team is one thing, but being able to make connections with every member of the team so that they are more open to discussing their experiences and putting forward their ideas without fear is something different.

3. Emotional intelligence

This is now considered one of the most important leadership competencies and it relates to being able to communicate at an emotional level.

In order to develop this competency, leaders are encouraged to practice "reading" others' non-verbal cues. They become more skilled at regulating and controlling their emotions and emotional moments/outbursts. They are good at appropriately expressing emotions, which, in football, is essential. They become able to engage and appreciate the emotional aspect of the game but can still rationalise this.

4. Analytical skills

Data is playing an ever-increasing role in helping organisations to understand their customer bases and to make accurate decisions. Therefore, given the emphasis on the need to understand fans' motivations, behaviours, need and motivations, the successful fan engagement leader will need to possess strong analytical skills.

5. Courage

This is crucial because making fan engagement flourish only happens when it is allied to clear, articulated values. It is in times of crisis that values matter most. If they are cast aside at this point in favour of expediency, then no one will take the values seriously again. Therefore, having the courage to stand up for something, do the right thing or act according to the club's expressed beliefs and principles will help the good fan engagement leader to be effective.

6. Conflict management

Conflict happens in any role, but in an emotionally charged sport like football it is an inevitable factor and something that will occur regularly. Two key sub-competencies are a) collaboration: you help two opposed parties achieve a 'win-win' solution, b) or compromise and agreement: both parties accept that they need to concede on some points of their argument.



7. Decision-making

A good fan engagement leader understands when to make a decision, when to consult subordinates or peers and to bring them into the process, and, of course, when it is time to step back and let others decide. This is something that leaders develop over time, but it is essential in creating a culture where everyone feels they have a voice.

8. Political skills

Football can be an extremely political industry. Riggio (2014) explains that 'people will try to bend rules, gain allies, push their personal agenda, etc., in order to try to get ahead. An effective leader is a good political player, who knows how the game is played but can also manage political behaviour so that it does not lead to group or organisational dysfunction' (para. 16).

9. Influence skills

A leader with good social skills and the ability to 'listen' to the organisation and to understand the formal and informal processes behind changes in behaviour will develop the ability, over time, to use this in pursuit of giving fan engagement the profile it requires.

10. Expertise and competence

Naturally, a good grounding in all of the aspects of fan engagement will be an important factor in the success of a leader. There are several sources of good material on the subject, many of which we cover or refer to in these studies. It is important to consider two perspectives: (1) that of the academic or scholar, where there is rigour in the theory or argument, and (2) that of the practitioner, where you are able to contextualise the theory and see how it works in practice.

Exercise:

Review the above competencies. Which are your strongest sets? Which do you think you need to work on? When you think about your experiences with your own favourite club, which of these competencies are evident in the senior people you are aware of?

1.2.2 Fan engagement leadership in national associations

The national association (or football association) is the governing body of the game in each country in which it is played.



They are usually responsible for growing participation in the game, organising and administering competitions and leagues (although some professional and/or elite leagues in the world are separately run, including the English Premier League and the English Football League), and sanctioning the game (issuing fines, etc.). They also train, license and support coaches, referees and others volunteering or working in the game.

It is important to be clear about the different roles and responsibilities of the different organisations involved in football at a national level, as without this clarity fans do not know where to direct their queries or, in some cases, criticism.

For example, in England, referees are appointed by the FA, but when one is deemed to have performed poorly, fans sometimes direct their ire at the League instead. And when, as is the case of England, you have separate and independent professional leagues covering the top tier (Premier League) and tiers three, four and five (EFL), this can lead to even more confusion.

But let's focus on how engagement strategies can help national associations to deliver on one of the most common objectives they have: growing attendances in the non-league and grassroots games they often serve.

It is important to distinguish between marketing and engagement here. As Megan Rapinoe, the now well-known US star player recently said (and which we have referenced elsewhere in this certificate): 'If the only thing that's said about us is how inspiring we are to little girls, then our marketing plan is a complete and utter failure. Make me want to go to the game!' (Bradley, 2020, para. 14)

Megan was articulating the concern that branding and marketing alone may transform perceptions of the women's game and its players, it serves less purpose in actually increasing ticket buying followers of the game.

So, how do we do that? The English FA, in its 2016-2020 strategy, specifically set out the objective: 'A doubling of the player base and fan following of female football' (The FA Strategic Plan 2016-2020, 2016, para. 6)

The FA runs a women's pyramid with, currently, the FAWSL as the elite division, with one league feeding that (the FA Women's Championship) and then a regional pyramid feeding that league. Clubs apply for and are granted a licence to participate in the top two divisions with the top tier –the FAWSL– being professional since 2018 and the FAWC becoming part-time (Garry, 2018).



There has been, of course, a lot of innovative marketing, branding and communication in the mix in meeting this challenge of doubling attendance, but there are two elements which we are going to study here: the Sister Club programme and the Fan Experience Assessment and Feedback Programme. The former was designed to attract more of the target group (young girls who play and who are interested in football) while the latter ensured that those attending had such a great experience that they wanted to come back.

Naturally, with the emergence of Chelsea, Arsenal and Manchester City as the strongest teams, there may be an imbalance on the pitch in the years to come, but with a strong fan acquisition programme in place (including the Sister Club) and an effective retention programme (including the Fan Experience programme) the Women's game in England has created a basis for growth.

The Sister Club was the brainchild of the then Women's Football Marketing Manager Sissel Gynnild Hartley. The idea is that each FA WSL club offers a unique benefits package to local girls' grassroots clubs, which includes player appearances, visits to open training sessions, free merchandise, flag bearing, player escort opportunities and an exclusive Sister Club logo –an asset for the individual clubs to use.

This 'contract' ensured that, rather than simply engaging with the grassroots clubs and imploring young girls to attend, or rather than incentivising attendance, the girls were given something of real value. This would, over time, help the grassroots clubs develop the skills among their young players while increasing interest in the game and benefitting the local FAWSL or FAWC club with increased attendance.

This has been in place since 2016 and continues to evolve, with a recent update reporting that, since the programme was established in 2016, over 100 grassroots clubs have become affiliated, which has contributed to over 5,000 fans attending games.

So, what do the youngsters get out of the game? Well, the flag bearing and player escort opportunities continue to ensure that 'magic moments' are present in the mix, while the Fan Experience Assessment programme provided feedback to clubs in the top two tiers of English Women's football to ensure the 'new fan' experience was of a quality that would drive retention.

The assessment, undertaken by an experienced assessor and working to a template developed over the seasons since the League was founded in 2011, covers the following aspects of the 'new fan' match day experience:

- Information
- Ticketing



- Arrival
- Quality of welcome
- Facilities, including toilets
- In-stadia comfort & view
- Merchandise
- Social & refreshments
- Match day programme/magazine
- Pre-match entertainment
- Half time entertainment
- Post-match entertainment
- Post-match experience
- Follow-up
- Social media
- Volunteer contribution/engagement

Each club in the top two tiers receives a report in which the assessor relates his or her experience at each of the above 'touch points', offering a rating, any relevant improvement recommendations and best practices.

The data is summarised and sent to the FA so that they can track club performance, observe trends and intervene with support.

These are two ways in which national associations can apply engagement strategies to growing women's football, in both participation and attendance.

Exercise:

Is there a women's league in your country? How does the National Association support increased attendance at games? If you were called upon to make recommendations to support the growth in attendance, what would the top three be?

1.2.3 Fan engagement leadership in leagues

While clubs may not have the resources to emulate businesses in other sectors and provide a complete supporting infrastructure for customer engagement, the leagues that support them should be able to do more.

While there is still little evidence of leagues adopting roles such as fan experience or fan engagement director, they are finding ways to help their clubs to profit from new approaches to fans.



As we have studied in other parts of this certificate, there are several examples of how leagues are creating programmes to help the clubs engage specific fan groups. In Denmark, the 3F Superliga has an annual fans survey that provides feedback on a national, league and club-by-club basis.

It includes insights on how the fans of each club perceive their identity right through providing information on how fans perceive match day experiences and wider relationships within clubs. Importantly, it also highlights what fans regard as most important, since this will help the clubs to avoid investing in areas that are of least or less value to fans.

The EFL provides support to clubs in many different ways, and we have already picked out and studied the Family Excellence scheme, which commenced in 2007/08 and provides feedback, recommendations, recognition, best practice support and an annual face-to-face forum to share experiences and hear from the leading practitioners.

But for this particular theme, we are going to pick out a non-elite league and one whose clubs have far fewer resources when compared to those in the league system above them.

The National League runs the 5th and 6th tiers in England. The National League³ is a league consisting of three divisions: the National League, the National League North and the National League South.

Most National League clubs are fully professional while most National League North and National League South clubs are semi-professional. Some professional clubs were previously in the EFL, as opposed to clubs that have always been outside of the top four tiers in England.

The National League is the lowest of the five nationwide football divisions in England, below the Premier League and the three divisions of the EFL, and is the top tier of what is called 'the National League System'.

Naturally, the League has limited resources so has to target them carefully to ensure clubs get the best support where and when it is needed.

In 2011, in partnership with the FA, it conducted a project aimed at getting a 'baseline' understanding of the strengths and opportunities relating to the first-time fan experience.

³ Official website: <https://www.thenationalleague.org.uk/>



This data –and the related insights– has informed its fan engagement interventions since. Each intervention has to acknowledge that two thirds of its clubs are semi-professional, so they often rely on a mix of part-time and volunteer administrators.

Although the research in 2011 highlighted many ways to improve the fan experience, its main output was a positive one. It highlighted the great potential of the League to attract more fans through several key advantages it has over Premier League and EFL clubs. Among these, were the following:

- Friendly and relaxed
- Space for kids to run around
- Freshly made food
- Good social facilities
- Closer to the action
- Accessible players
- Community feel

The National League has since made several interventions aimed at helping the clubs to not only improve their focus on these areas and the service they provide but also to help create a culture of engagement.

In 2018/19 the focus was on recognition. Each month, the League sought nominations from all of its 68 member clubs for a volunteer who made a significant contribution to the club. This could be in the quality of the fan experience or in other areas important to the club's success.

The project was sponsored by the League's own commercial partner, Vanarama. The divisional winners received an award, and they were also recognised in a regular feature in the League's TV coverage. This helped to lift the club's focus on volunteers which, in turn, motivated them to provide better and better experiences for fans, upon whom all of the clubs rely, since the vast majority of ticket revenue for the League's member clubs comes from this source.

So, how to build upon this in 2019/20?

Having worked with the League since 2011, the Fan Experience Company continues to amass a large cache of best practices, available to its partner clubs, leagues and associations via the different developing projects each is involved in.

The League wanted to find an easy and high-profile way to convey these best practices to clubs, in a season where face-to-face events were ruled out by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Meanwhile, the Fan Experience Company was considering better ways to share the learning that it had accumulated in a way that met the particular needs of the particular partners. Thus, the Best XI was born.

Created by Fan Experience Company associate Darren Young, it worked as follows:

1. The idea of the pre-match team sheet influenced the design of an online/physical League-branded document with the Best XI practices taking the place of the players' names.
2. The document displayed all of the key touch points in place of the players' names and the featured specific club's best practices with an accompanying photo.
3. The Best XI document was distributed, with those clubs featured being recognised for their achievements.

Figure 1: Image from Best XI document

The image is a screenshot of a 'Best XI' document for Harrogate Town. It features a dark orange background with a white 'BEST XI' logo in the top left corner. A 'TRAVEL' jersey icon with a train is positioned at the top center. Below it, a yellow and black jersey with the number '4' is shown. The Harrogate Town AFC logo is in the bottom left. The 'vanarama NATIONAL LEAGUE' logo is in the top right. The main content area contains the following text:

CLUB: HARROGATE TOWN

DIVISION: vanarama NATIONAL LEAGUE

EXAMPLE: "BUS PARTNERSHIP"

In a world with ever increasing parking restrictions and charges, travel to and from games is an increasingly important factor for fans. If the club has adequate car parking available at the stadium, that makes a difference but what if they don't? Or if public transport links are a better option?

Harrogate Town have created a partnership with local transport company, The Harrogate Bus Company / Transdev, where any supporter wearing the team colours can take advantage of discounted travel to the game - the bus drops fans off right outside their CNG Stadium every 30 minutes - with the Match Day Bus Ticket. This gives people an affordable and viable alternative to the car, helping the environment and easing congestion in the local area.

But the added beauty of this simple but fantastic idea? It means more people wear their club's distinctive yellow and black colours, spreading their identity and altering other people in the town to the fact there is a match taking place and maybe getting some of them to come along too in future.

At the bottom left, there is a 'BACK TO TEAMSHEET' button with a left arrow icon. At the bottom right, there is the 'BT SPORT' logo.

Source: Fan Experience Company official website. (n. d.). [Best XI (2019/20) document] Retrieved September 2020. Screenshot by author.

Exercise:

In your country a top tier of women's football has just been re-launched. All clubs are volunteer-run and have few resources. You are the person working for the league responsible for ensuring the clubs recognise the importance of attracting and retaining new fans. Suggest one way in which you could help them to do that.

1.2.4 Fan engagement leadership in clubs

In this theme we look at fan engagement leadership in clubs, review what it looks like now and consider how it may need to evolve in the context of current challenges, including COVID-19.

As we have explored in this module, one of the key objectives of the fan engagement leader is to foster a supportive culture so that engagement of customers is both a business and a cultural priority, and the organisation is designed around the needs of its customers.

So, how do businesses do this through its leadership and what can clubs learn from this?

In larger businesses, there are often people whose key responsibility is to lead engagement. The role of the customer experience vice-president, director or manager is common nowadays. A Recruitment company outlines the following:

Director of customer experience is a leadership role, required to supervise and oversee the strategy, planning and execution of the organization's overall customer experience goals.

This recently emerged 21st century role is critical to the success of an organization's customer-centric vision and meeting business goals through delivering great customer experience. (Khandelwal, 2020, para. 1-2)

In larger clubs and in the most progressive leagues (MLS included), there will also be fan engagement directors or fan engagement managers; on the other hand, in smaller clubs, especially outside of the elite, it may not be possible to have someone with those specific responsibilities. Instead, these responsibilities may be shared across the organisation.

What is the risk of taking this approach? Clearly, that it is seen as less important than the objectives of the specific roles to which people have been appointed. You may have someone running ticketing and operations, someone else running marketing and communications, and then someone managing commercial and finance.



Just how do you ensure that each of them is devoting time to the less immediate (i.e. research, dialogue, experience improvement, etc.) rather than the more obvious day-to-day requirements of dealing with fan queries and planning for the next game?

The chief executive could clearly be the one creating a spirit of fan engagement, but, as we have seen, this is not just strategic and cultural, it is also tactical. Who is ensuring every ticket purchasing fan receives an email asking for feedback after every game? Who is the one contacting fans to ask about their reasons for non-renewal?

While the CEO may lead and inspire the club's efforts to transform experiences and perceptions, who is actually managing the operation elements? The team may create the action plan, but who undertakes the action?

We have studied the supporter liaison officer (SLO) role in European football and the importance of this person in terms of relationships between fans and clubs. However, this is rarely a full-time appointment in clubs (especially, outside of the elite).

It is often a part-time role, sometimes, a volunteer and usually not someone with the authority or resources to enact fan engagement strategies. Where it is a full-time role and where the person is connected throughout the eco-system of the club, to other clubs and to the governing body, much can be achieved. Jonathan Waite, Tottenham Hotspur SLO was announced as the supporter liaison officer of the year, at the FSA Awards in January 2017.

Commenting on the award, Thomas Guthrie from the Premier League said the following:

Jonathan is a great example of how the SLO role can be embedded into a big club structure and become a valuable influence and an agent for positive change.

He is at the forefront of researching what other clubs and organisations are doing, both at home and abroad, and is always looking for ways to build best practice and fan feedback into Spurs future plans.

His knowledge and interpretation of the football landscape is very impressive, and he has developed good relationships with key fan groups. In particular, his work during the Club's stadium ongoing redevelopment plans has been highly impressive. (Tottenham's Jonathan Waite named SLO of the Year in England, 2017, para. 7)

Jonathan himself shared some of the elements of his approach at Spurs:

It has been very pleasing to see the growth of more and more supporter focused thinking across the league and the SLO role has undoubtedly had an influence in that.

We've been able to recruit a team of Fan Liaison Officers to work around the stadium and we now take our own liaison staff to all our away matches, including those in Europe. This really helps in understanding and ironing out any issues. (Tottenham's Jonathan Waite, 2017, para. 4)

Jonathan is a fantastic example of someone who, through exuding engagement and warmth in the way he conducts his job, has been a significant factor in establishing the culture of fan engagement that can be seen in the design of the new stadium. Jonathan left us in 2018 and the football world still mourns him.

Without the clear evident focus on fan engagement that infectious, engaging and experienced people like Jonathan can bring, key people in the club (key fan-facing people, for example) will not see it as a key business priority.

We know that this will lead to, at best, inconsistent delivery which, in time, will impact measurably on levels of advocacy and emotional loyalty.

So, how do clubs address this?

Working closely with a Supporter representation group, such as the Red and White Army at Sunderland, studied elsewhere in this certificate, can help to facilitate change, to focus on what limited resources there may be in the right direction, to get feedback and maintain dialogue. But without a clear consistent focus inside the club, it will always be difficult to get everyone onside.

While elite clubs continue to mirror the development of customer engagement leadership in other businesses –albeit with many clubs still not practising the use of an individual role–, the challenge for clubs outside the elite remains clear: how do we create the culture and manage the operational aspects of a fan-engagement-focused club?

The role of the ultimate leader –the CEO– is key, but he or she must ensure that fan engagement is an absolute key priority, that the decisions made must reflect values, that opportunities to co-create with fans must not be missed and that engagement must be at the head of all business agendas. Naturally, with the pressures that football management at non-elite levels brings, this is a difficult balance to achieve, but we believe this

certificate sets out much of what is needed, and we believe the students learning this will be armed with the knowledge to change things in the future.

Exercise:

Write a short job specification for a new fan engagement director role at a mid-sized club. Use the references provided in this theme as a guide and identify five key areas of competency and areas of activity where the new appointee will lead.



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