

Module 2. A Model for Engagement

Unit 2.1

2.1.1 Understanding your association/league/club culture

In this unit we are going to look at the tools at your disposal as a leader to create a culture and strategy for fan engagement.

It is true that theory alone never changed anything, but as research continues to show the strong link between customer-focused organisational design and customer satisfaction, retention and growth (Bedarkar, Pandita, Agarwal & Saini, 2016), it is important that in an association/federation, league or club setting, the leader aims to maximise these links in the way the organisation is designed and directed.

We have studied organisational culture throughout this certificate and shown how it is as important as strategy –or, indeed, more important than strategy– when it comes to solidifying an approach which rests as much on psychological motivation as it does on work processes.

In this unit, we will look at some of key dimensions of organisation culture and at the way they can be observed in football settings.

First, let's remind ourselves of what we mean by 'organisational culture'. In one of the many sources of information on the subject, it is described thus: 'Organisational culture is quite complex. Every company has its own unique personality, just like people do. The unique personality of an organisation is referred to as its culture.' (Organizational Culture: Definition, Characteristics, Roles, Types, n. d.)

This is key to understanding organisational culture, because it is an invisible but powerful force that drives or influences the way people in the organisation behave.

There is a wide acceptance in related research that when we refer to organisational culture, we are also thinking about the shared values or belief systems that everyone working for the organisation shares.



As we have studied, sometimes this perfectly complements and creates the conditions for the organisation's main objectives. However, sometimes (and, from our experience) it can also be something which *works against* achievement of key aims. Therefore, the fan engagement leader needs to understand the characteristics of organisational culture so that he or she can make interventions to achieve the adjustments of focus needed to point everyone in the right direction!

Culture in an organisation can be seen in the different ways it behaves, from the ways it conducts its business, treats its employees, customers and the wider community to the way in which freedom is allowed in decision-making, developing new ideas, and personal expression.

You can also observe organisational culture in how power and information flow through the leadership team and the supporting hierarchy and also how committed and focused employees are on achieving broad collective aims.

We know that culture is the result of processes, technologies, learning, and significant events (with COVID-19 being a good example of something that can change or alter an organisation's culture). It is the sum of the values, traditions, rituals and meanings that make a company unique.

There are several clear characteristics of organisational culture and, while not everyone agrees on how many there are nor how each should be described, the following table does reflect your professor's understanding and experience of organisational culture¹.

¹ Mark Bradley was, from 2000-2005, a lead assessor for the Unisys/Management Today Service Excellence awards in which organisations were recognised for 'designing themselves' to engage customers.



Table 1: Characteristics of organisational culture

| Characteristic | Description |
|-----------------|--|
| Risk | What is the organisation's attitude to innovation? Does it have a reputation for being an 'early adopter', for example, or does it usually wait for others to act before committing? |
| Precision | To what extent is the culture defined by 'attention to detail'. Is the focus of the leaders on getting things right, whether this be in following internal rule and regulations or adhering the standards related to the 'customer'? |
| Achievement | An organisation where sales bonuses are paid for higher achievement may lead to employees cutting corners or bending rules to make that extra dollar, but equally, in the context of football, a high achieving club on the pitch may well apply similar standards internally too. |
| People/Fairness | To what extent does the organisation prioritise the employees' welfare and dignity? Organisations with a strong people culture are characterised by an interest in what employees think and a focus on getting them fully involved in the service improvement process. |
| Collaboration | Some organisations prize the individual, but others focus on teamwork. While each may help to achieve the organisation's objectives, the latter is characterised by positive relationships between employees and their leaders. |
| Competitive | Football is naturally defined by its competitive nature and, as we have shown elsewhere in these studies, this can sometimes translate from aggression on the pitch to a similar brusque attitude to fans off it. In organisations outside football, this characteristic is often manifested by the way the organisation prioritises beating the competition over everything else. |
| Rules | In sectors such as pension management, it is important for organisations to develop cultures that are rule-based, stable and, to a wide extent, predictable. However, in areas such as marketing and design, having such intrinsic behaviours and priorities could well lead the organisation to fall behind others with a more open attitude to risk. |



When we look at typical football structures across the world, we could generalise and say that the majority of associations –responsible for rule adherence and governance– might tend to follow the characteristic ‘rules’–preferring that to instability. You might expect leagues, whose objectives include helping clubs, to prosper, to be slightly more risk-oriented and experimental at times.

Clubs are usually focused on winning, as we have studied, and this brings the danger of bringing in an aggressive, competitive culture, which can be counter-productive when trying to build engagement with fans.

Having this basis of understanding will help the student or practitioner to better progress engagement.

Exercise:

If you work in the football industry, please consider the above organisational culture characteristics and describe those (as many as you wish) that you can see in your own association, federation, league or club.

If you are a student of the football industry, take your favourite club and consider your most recent experiences and interactions with it. What do they tell you about the prevailing culture? Which characteristics can you see?

2.1.2 Re-purposing your club: from winning to engaging

Throughout these studies, we have focused on the importance of the concepts of trust and emotional loyalty: factors which means that fans will develop stronger relationships with a club, not just based on its performances on the field of play, but more visibly, through deeper connections, including shared values and beliefs.

Having the right organisational culture in the federation, association, league or club will help to foment fan engagement, but that is an outcome for most, rather than a starting point.

If we are going to change a culture from one of competition to one of engagement, we first need to acknowledge the challenges that this represents, especially in the world of football.



Leadership is fundamental. As the common proverb ‘the fish rots from the head down’ indicates, it is an accepted fact that failure in an organisation usually begins with the leaders and their choices. Such is the case with an organisational culture. Some leaders in football are able to foster a spirit of fan engagement through the way they behave: their actions, their words and the way they share their time.

Paul Barber is the chief executive and deputy chairman of English Premier League club Brighton & Hove Albion. His club has a reputation among its fans for a level of engagement and understanding that, anecdotally, is not often seen in football. Early in the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, he (and other club colleagues, including employees and the club chairman) started to make a series of telephone calls to the club’s more elderly fans –those most at risk during the pandemic.

As the local newspaper reports, this has not only benefited the fans, but inspired those making the calls:

The club’s chief executive and deputy chairman is one of more than 70 staff members, including owner Tony Bloom and head coach Graham Potter, who have been phoning fans aged over-70 to check on their wellbeing and to make sure they have food and medical supplies.

He said: “Twenty-odd years ago the community saved this football club, so it was really important in this unprecedented period that we found a way to keep in touch.

“Yesterday I called five people, the chairman has called a few today. I know that Graham is doing some and Bruno is doing some, Andrew Crofts, Bobby Zamora and players from the women’s squad. The first two people I phoned were in their garden, but they were really appreciative of the call. We had a good chat, a few laughs and joked about what they’d been up to. We checked and made sure they had the food they needed and any pharmacy requirements they needed.

“It’s a small thing we can do but I think it’s the right thing to do and it’s been great. It’s been uplifting for me personally, funnily enough, also the others who’ve been in the calls. It gives you a little sense you’re contributing to something.” (Talbot, 2020, para. 1-4)

In any organisation where the leader consistently places him or herself alongside colleagues, removing hierarchy in favour of shared objectives, he or she is effectively role modelling how the club should behave towards its community. Key in Paul Barber’s words is the reference to the community that ‘saved the club’, since only a few years ago



the club was in danger of extinction, and, without the work of its supporters, it might not have survived to take its place among the elite of English football.

It is no surprise that the club has also been featured in other parts of this certificate (for example, with its initiative to record the miles travelled by each fan, each season –home and away– to then be able to let each fan know , at renewal time, just how ‘loyal’ they have been). This is a wonderful way of using engagement tactics at a time when it might easily translate into direct fan retention.

Paul Barber is not alone. Football enjoys many leaders whose behaviours set the tone for their organisations. Each is acutely conscious of the need to be consistent in their words, actions and behaviours, since any perceived contradiction or mixed message may lead the people working at the club to have an unclear focus.

Darren Bernstein, a director at newly-formed AFC Bury is also acutely aware of the need of the club, a need created as a response to the expulsion of Bury FC from the EFL League One (third tier of English professional football). It's itself a result of the actions of a questionable owner.

Darren also believes that it is not only how leaders in football behave when times are good, but also –and, in fact, more importantly– how they behave in a crisis that matters. This is one of the reasons why one of the first acts of the ‘phoenix’ club was to create a set of values based on those of Bury FC but reset to link them more clearly to the beliefs and activities the new club would espouse and live by.

Values are therefore fundamental in any attempt to change or adapt an organisation’s culture. In football, as a consequence of this, the best starting point would be the values and/or the identity of the club.

The prompt for a change of culture could come from several different sources. Fans (and the wider supporter community) may have become disenchanted and disconnected with the club –and this may have come as a result of the actions of the ownership and/or the team’s performance. There may be (less reported, to be clear) concerns among other senior employees, including players, as their voice is also important.

The culture change may be prompted by a change in government, government policy or geo-political factors, which are increasingly becoming intertwined with football, especially at elite levels. There may even be a recognition among the leadership team that the culture of the club needs addressing.



So, in order to move the club from a focus solely on winning to a dual focus on sporting glory and community engagement, there needs to be platform where values, identity and a clear vision for what that looks like are in place.

St Louis-based Shep Hyken² is an expert in customer experience. In a recent article (Hyken, 2020), he sets out a path to steering a culture, over time, to one of customer focus and engagement. To achieve this in any business context, he offers several clear milestones. Here there are, together with comments from your professor on their application in football settings:

Start with The Right People.

First, the leadership team must create the culture. Then, you must hire people with not only the skills to do the job, but also the right mindset to fit in with your customer service culture. (Hyken, 2020, para. 7)

How many football organisations recruit to a template which contains the requirement for a values-fit?

Make Sure Everyone Understands the Basics.

Before you can empower people to do the right thing, they must have a base of knowledge to work from. Therefore, everyone must go through basic customer service training, so they understand your vision for delivering good service [to customers]. (para. 8)

Football clubs are increasingly seeing the value in customer service training, after recognising the fact that fans do expect this. But ensuring this is designed in the context of the club's identity, values and vision is critical. Is that the case in all football settings?

Give Them the Freedom To Do The Right Thing.

Once your employees are trained in your special brand of customer service and know the guidelines in which they operate, empower them to make their own decisions. Let them know they don't have to "ask the manager" for approval every time they make a customer-focused decision. (Hyken, 2020, para. 9)

²@hyken on Twitter



As we have studied, some football settings reflect strong risk-based belief systems (e.g., governance) while others are more innovative; so, easing into this approach may or may not have its challenges.

Reinforce and Realign.

Take advantage of customer service triumphs and missteps as opportunities to give feedback to individual employees and use success stories as examples to teach others. (para. 10)

It is demonstrably true that we learn from our mistakes. However, in most football settings, it is unclear whether there is a process to make sure this happens. How many times do teams in various football settings review fan feedback and use that as an input to improving processes, services and experiences?

Define Your Customer Service Vision.

Create a customer service vision statement, or mantra, in simple terms. It should be short and to the point, something that everyone can remember and understand, and it should inspire your employees to deliver great customer service. (para. 13)

So, every club needs to find a way to distil its identity, values, vision and beliefs into a memorable statement that guides all activities and interactions. This is exactly what Darren Bernstein is doing at Bury AFC: ensuring that the values are not archaic heritage concepts, but a living and breathing guide to how the club should operate in the modern context.

Let the Vision Guide Your Hiring Decisions.

Of course, you want to hire someone with the technical knowledge and skills to perform the job, but it's also essential to consider a candidate's personality and attitude and how they fit in with your customer service vision and customer-focused culture. (Hyken, 2020, para. 14)

Again, the focus on recruitment in an area as specific as football understandably homes in on experience and relevant skills. Unless we widen this to incorporate values-fit, we will find it difficult to create a culture of fan engagement.

Train Everyone.



Start training from day one, focusing on the soft skills, your customer service expectations and your core values. And, the training has to apply to everyone, including leadership. Otherwise, employees will come away with the impression that customer service isn't as important as you say it is. (para. 15)

This is one of many areas in which football has a distance to travel. Where training or employee development relates to fans and engagement, it must be more than a one-off. It must at least have review sessions built in to monitor progress and hear from co-workers, but it should be something regular, so that more and more people see engagement as 'part of the way we do things'.

Model the Behaviour.

Everyone, but leaders in particular, should serve as role models for others to emulate. Treat employees with the same respect and dignity as you would the customer –maybe even more so. (para. 16)

This is perfectly illustrated by the CEO who greets fans as they arrive, the CEO who calls elderly fans during the COVID-19 pandemic or the CEO who takes the opportunity to attend a game as a fan would.

Empower Employees to Deliver Good Service.

Once employees are trained in your customer service vision, don't encumber them with rules that get in the way. Give them the power to do what it takes to meet and exceed your service standards. Trust them to do the right thing. (para. 17)

The best way to do this in football is to identify circumstances where co-workers may feel compromised because what the fan wants is contradicted by the process. The key to this is to act freely where you know the outcome will benefit the fan and the club. Where acting may create a bigger risk, then the leader should still be there to be consulted.

Provide Continual Feedback.

Recognise others when they do well. Letting people know when they are doing a good job may be the motivation they need to continue or, even better, take it to the



next level. Also, if someone is not acting in sync with the customer service standards, consider it a teaching opportunity and use it to help the employee grow to be more successful in the future. (Hyken, 2020, para. 18)

In football, with clubs often having limited resources, it is easy to fall into the habit of not doing this, of not spending time with colleagues observing interactions and feeding back. Observation, feedback and coaching are key fan engagement leadership practices.

Celebrate Success.

Employees love to be appreciated and rewarded, so don't forget to celebrate a job well done. That doesn't have to mean a party every week. It may be recognition at a weekly meeting or a mention in the company newsletter. Or, maybe it is something big, like an annual awards dinner. (para. 19)

In football, leagues like the EFL in England or the Superliga in Denmark understand the value of taking the time to celebrate achievement and reviewing learning on a seasonal basis.

Culture change is one of the most difficult –if not *the* most difficult– part of organisational design. Few organisations –especially the larger ones– can truly claim to have a culture that is not imperfect or without its weak spots. However, by understanding the steps involved in adapting or changing a culture to one of engagement, the student or practitioner can save many hours of frustration and inertia.

Exercise:

Consider the challenge of a new CEO appointed to a club in the 4th tier of football in your country. It has no history of achievement, has not been higher than the 3rd tier and only has six full time employees. The owner recognises that it risks becoming detached from the rest of the community in the town 'unless it modernises and embraces new technology and a new focus on engagement'.

With the owner's support, set out 3 steps you would take to begin the process of developing a culture of fan engagement.

2.1.3 Undertaking a Cultural Survey



One of the best ways to start a culture change journey is to collect as much data as possible on the current culture so that it can be better understood and so that any issues or barriers can be addressed and overcome.

In football, with its many different and diverse settings, with its different (and often conflicting and competitive) objectives, it is difficult to know where to start when addressing opportunities to move to a more fan-focused culture.

We can learn a lot from the ways in which sectors outside of football –but focused on customers– use surveys to collect data from co-workers so that they can begin to build a picture of what the current culture looks like. Having this detail means that they can start to address any evidence of non-alignment with the desired culture in ways that will be welcomed by staff.

There are many ways in which a survey can be undertaken, but let's look at the idea of an internal questionnaire which will help leadership teams to understand what their culture looks like and how it could potentially be.

In this example, taken from the website *World of Work Project*, we first see the value of doing this:

1. it gives people the language to speak effectively about culture;
2. it captures a summary of the current working culture in the team; and
3. it documents what the team would like their culture to be like. (A Simple Organisational Culture Assessment Questionnaire, 2019, para. 2)

The article continues:

There are no right or wrong answers in most culture assessments, just different ways to do things. While culture assessments are very useful, they only explore a current state and a desired future state, not the steps needed to move between the two. (A Simple Organisational Culture Assessment Questionnaire, 2019, para. 3)

The audience for the survey could be limited to the leadership team (especially if the scope of the survey focuses on leadership behaviours and on the way they are perceived), but it could (and in your professor's view, should) embrace all views within the club, league or association team.

So, with these benefits and caveats in mind, what does the survey look like?



Overleaf, you can see an example of a cultural assessment questionnaire, based on the key cultural characteristics identified by the World of Work Project, but we could equally use the characteristics shown earlier in this unit.

Either way, the idea is to present the extremes of each characteristic, i.e., from team to individual focus and from competitive to collaboration focus.

The respondents then express their view by giving a rating, showing where they think their present culture 'is'. The results allow the leadership team an insight into the 'present' culture and inform the process of moving it towards the one it needs to achieve its vision.



Figure 1: Cultural assessment questionnaire

| CULTURE ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description A | Rating | | | | | | Description B |
| Individual Individual Performance is encouraged and rewarded | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Team Team work is encouraged and rewarded |
| Centralized Close monitoring and control by leadership, most decisions are made centrally | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Decentralised Looser monitoring and control by leadership, most decisions are made by teams |
| Rules Driven People's behaviours are guided mostly by rules laid down in policies, procedures and manuals | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Objectives-Driven People's behaviours are guided mostly by targets and objectives |
| People There is a strong emphasis on employees and concern for their well-being | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Task There is a strong focus on completing work and hitting targets |
| Service There is a strong emphasis on customer service and building long term customer relationships | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Product There is a strong emphasis on designing and manufacturing high quality products |
| Tradition Employees are encouraged to use tried and tested approaches and avoid mistakes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Change Employees are encouraged to try new ideas and take risks to improve the business |
| Consensus Decisions Decisions are made through consensus and require the prior agreement of a wide group of people | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Small-group decisions Decisions are taken by individuals or a small group, and then communicated to a wider audience |
| Results focus Minimal time is spend on forward planning - the focus is on swift action | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Forward Thinking Significant time is spent planning and thinking things through before acting |
| Team Communication Communication from management is clear, transparent and frequent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Need to know Communication from management is infrequent and on a "need to know" basis |
| Competition Teams, departments etc compete internally to provide the best service or value for money | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Cooperation Team, departments etc coordinate and cooperate well to provide the best service or value for money |
| Attention to detail Primary focus on getting the details right - the aim is 100% accuracy | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Pragmatism People apply the 80/20 rule, they are more concerned with getting the "general direction" right than the details |

Source: World of Work Project. (2019) [Cultural assessment questionnaire]. Retrieved September 2020 from <https://worldofwork.io/2019/07/organizational-culture-assessment-questionnaire>. Screenshot by author.



In these studies, we have looked at different aspects of culture: from leadership competences to cultural characteristics. Each of the different football settings would approach this differently. For example, an association or federation with 100+ employees working together across one or two sites might benefit from the approach above whereas a club may decide to focus on just a few key elements –perhaps linked to its values and vision– so as to facilitate the process of finding a clear way forward.

As has been stated several times in this certificate, areas such as Marketing and Communications, Stadium Operations and Ticketing are all established areas with clear professional guidelines and supported by many decades of research and good practices.

Culture and Fan Engagement are less well established in football. There is less to lean on, less academic research and little professional development by comparison. This certificate is an introduction, too, and does not claim to be an advanced course on fan engagement; so, the key message is to take the principles behind each of these models and find a way for them to work in the football setting relevant to each of us.

Exercise:

Culture, by its nature, is not easy to change. Many different models have been offered, and there is much research into organisational design in other business sectors. So, what do you believe are the biggest obstacles to applying these approaches at club level in your country?

What do you think is the best way to advance the idea of creating a fan-focused culture in the different football settings in your country?

2.1.4 Developing agility and the ability to adapt to change

In course Delivering Fan Engagement we have explored the concept of change and how, when compared with other industries, football feels it more acutely.

In the vast majority of professional football leagues, relegation is a reality. For elite clubs, unless there is a major breach of the rules or some other unexpected event, it is less of an issue, but then COVID-19 came along and suddenly everyone in football is facing existential questions like the following:

- Can we remain viable as a club? Will we become extinct?
- Can we play our games this season?
- How do we play our players and employees?



- How do we decide who should be declared champions? Is 'points per game' the best way of determining how a season should be decided?
- How much support can we obtain from the Government?

COVID-19 may have put the emphasis on our ability to deal with a crisis, but we know that change is a high-profile element of the game. It is in the nature of football. One day we are up, and the next...

But when clubs understand the nature of change and can do everything possible to prepare themselves for it, their response to it becomes more considered and more effective. They are better able to adapt to it, to innovate and to be ahead of the curve. As football evolves in the future, so shall these clubs be in a position to strengthen their reach.

There are plenty of examples of businesses which have evolved over time and are now in the ascendancy while there are also many cases of those that did not. Apple's success with the iPhone presided over the failure of Blackberry and Nokia whereas Samsung met the challenge and have continued to rival Apple in recent years.

Nokia themselves were always regarded as an exemplar of how to deal with change. Over the more than 150 years of its history, the Finnish company has moved from wood pulping to cable manufacturing and then from mobile phones to electronic communication infrastructures, according to the evolution of consumer needs over this time.

Football is also full of stories of clubs who may still be football clubs, but whose journeys have been remarkable. There are clubs like FC Magdeburg, who were the only East German club to have won a major European title (the European Cup Winners Cup in 1974), but who then fell on hard times post-German reunification and only returned to professional football in 2015. There are also clubs like AFC Wimbledon, who were formed after the controversial move of Wimbledon FC from its spiritual home in southwest London to Milton Keynes, more than 100 kilometres away, and who have risen through many tiers of non-league football to the third tier of the professional game in England in just over a decade.

The nature of football means that attendances are likely to rise when a team plays consistently good football over any given period of time, but it is also true that continued poor performance will have the opposite effect. A big win may lead to more fans coming to the next game while a big loss may knock a significant percentage of the following match's attendance figures.



Advances in technology, such as data analytical tools, new social media platforms, such as TikTok, and virtual/augmented reality also present challenges, and while there is little risk involved in elite clubs embracing them, the costs and implications of getting it wrong can have more negative implications for non-elite and smaller clubs.

So, while fan engagement can help to strengthen relationships with fans over the medium and long term, we still have to deal with the inevitable change that football endures on a day-to-day basis. We, therefore, need to see change –and our ability to deal with it– as part of our overall fan engagement strategy.

If we look to how other businesses deal with change, there are several key elements that, if applied to football, would help those employed in the game to manage it better.

In other businesses, change is about responding to micro- and macro-environmental changes, whether political, economic or social in nature. Football has an additional dimension, being as it is about achievement of victories, trophies, championships, and etcetera. Pursuing sporting glory clearly has its downside, and, whether that is ‘relegation and promotion’, a risk to losing a franchise, or simply losing attendances due to poor on-field displays, the need to be agile to the wider environment is vital.

Having an awareness, therefore, of the actions taken by leading business organisations to create intrinsic agility will be of benefit to our sport, and here are several ways in which the game could defend itself better from the challenges presented by change.

Encourage and accept constructive criticism

In successful customer-focused businesses, the edge they enjoy often comes from insights provided by customer-facing employees, so creating a culture in which people are not afraid to point out inconsistencies, broken processes or to make improvement suggestions.

Football clubs are often top-down organisations where leaders make the decisions and employees enact them. This often creates an environment where people do not proactively offer criticism, implied or otherwise. So, the club, league or association that accepts criticism is more likely to be ready to anticipate and manage change than one where people feel less able to have an opinion.



Help people to deal with change

How often do people talk about change in a football club? Relegation is a permanent risk for most clubs, but how often are its implications discussed (other than when clubs are in its midst)? How often do non-elite clubs consider the opportunities that new technologies offer and discuss this in the open with all of the club's employees?

This would represent a substantial move towards emulating the activities of the world's most customer-focused businesses. It would also contribute to creating a positive fan-focused working environment –addressing any sense of 'top down'– and showing employees that their views count.

Capture and share knowledge and expertise

There are several ways in which clubs, leagues and associations could obtain and then share useful information. Leagues and associations will often offer an update service to their clubs, by way of newsletter, face-to-face briefing or workshop. But what could be done in the clubs themselves?

Two important ways are shadowing: one consists of individuals from one part of the club getting to spend time with others, learning about their roles and objectives and about the way they do the job, and the other consists of the idea of, every now and again, one team within the club gathering everyone together and giving a briefing on what they do, what their current priorities are and asking for any questions.

Again, these simple activities –capable of being scaled up or down according to the size of the club– can help to move the culture towards one of fan focus.

The ultimate impact of these simple interventions will be to help people respond to change more confidently and to see it as an opportunity for the club, rather than a threat. It is crucial that the fan engagement leader articulates change as inevitable and seeks to create the capability to accept it and to see it as an advantage rather than a risk.

Inevitably, there are some changes that people in the club may not be able to influence (such as relegation or periods of poor on-pitch performance), but having an understanding that although change is inevitable, it also offers an opportunity will be an important part of the fan engagement leader's role.



Exercise:

Consider the fortunes of a club experiencing relegation. An analysis of social media comments about the club and its players shows a profoundly negative vibe.

In a situation like this, how should the leader act with regard to employees and volunteers of the club? How can he or she help them through difficult periods like this? Let us assume that no one is going to lose their job when considering this question.



Unit 2.2

2.2.1 Identity and values

We all field eleven players each week, try to win and to achieve sporting glory for our community of supporters, but we know that this alone cannot be guaranteed. In fact, for the vast majority of non-elite clubs, it is possible that it may never happen.

A club's identity and values are fundamental in driving fan engagement, and, in this theme, we will explore in some detail how to create them and why they are such an important part of a fan engagement strategy.

In other parts of this certificate, we have focused on the psychology of the football fan. We explore concepts such as social identity as concepts capable of explaining the deep emotional connections people feel to their favourite teams. We have also explored the importance of cultural capital and even discovered that levels of emotional connection are often most powerfully felt when the team has had a big loss, when it has lost an important game on penalties or when it has been relegated.

We have also studied the concept, introduced by Daniel Lambert of Bohemian FC in Dublin, of the high quality fan.

So, all of these elements underline the often irrational but always present deep emotional and psychological ties between a fan and his or her club.

By focusing on the club's intrinsic identity, what it stands for, what its origins are, what it believes in and what the community would lose if it were not there, we can find a way of lifting our engagement with fans above what merely happens on the field and working at a much more meaningful and emotional level.

This is why so many progressive football clubs publish and promote their values. FC Barcelona's are respect, effort, ambition, teamwork and humility³, and, unlike many clubs, they describe them in detail so that their community (mainly their *socis*⁴, but also all of the other stakeholders) clearly understand that the club is much more than a football team. *Más que un club*.

Let's explore one of these values: humility. The club itself describes it thus:

³ See <https://www.fcbarcelona.com/en/club/identity>

⁴ The club's members. FC Barcelona is a member-owned club



Often when athletes, and people in general, achieve the goals they have set themselves, they start feeling superior in physical, moral, economic and other terms, and this leads them to forget certain values that have in all probability helped them to achieved those very goals: effort, perseverance, self-control, etc.

We are all aware of how FC Barcelona has dealt with its victories of recent years, and how it has always shown humility (and also such values as effort, rigour, responsibility and others) to win respect in its field, and among its opponents, and generally everyone. Humility probably consists of knowing how to be clear about one's values, and to maintain them and defend them even in situations where you are clearly superior and more successful. (Values, 2020, para. 5)

Given the recent history of FC Barcelona and its many achievements, humility could be considered one of its most important values. A team that wins and then belittles the opposition through wild celebration or disrespectful acts or social media posts may raise some smiles among its own fan base but will find itself disrespected by the wider football community –and that is important.

Let's take one particular stakeholder: the media. The adventures of FC Barcelona are captured, followed, discussed and, most of all, speculated about, by two daily sports newspapers: *El Mundo Deportivo*⁵ and *Sport*⁶.

Each has a strong physical presence in every newsstand, regardless of whether you are in *El Passeig de Gràcia* in downtown Barcelona or in a provincial town like Vic, and each has a huge online following too. For an Englishman working in Girona in the 1980s, I was taken by the almost-obsessive attitude to news about the club.

Although other sports are covered, like basketball, ice hockey, handball and others, the vast majority of focus is on FC Barcelona (with some on RCD Espanyol, too, the other major team in the city).

Practising humility, in all of the ways the club interacts with its stakeholders, ensures that they continue to respect the club. It means that the club makes its people available and accessible; it means that the club's players do not use their fame to detach themselves and that, most importantly of all, the members see that humility transmitted in all of the club's communications and interactions with them.

⁵ Official website: <https://www.mundodeportivo.com/>

⁶ Official website: <https://www.sport.es/es/>



When we consider the concept of social identity (formulated by Tajfel and included in several of the reference tables throughout these studies), meaningful values, such as humility, can help to strengthen group affiliations: someone is a fan of FC Barcelona because they see their own values reflected back at them.

The personality of a club is a tangible asset. Just like each of us is defined by our own personalities, so is a club. Articulating this clearly can help clubs to take a big step towards building better relationships with their fans.

This is why the development of values cannot be underestimated or be a question of 'going through the motions'.

Let's consider the scenario where you are working at a non-elite club with around 15-20 employees. The CEO has asked you to address the lack of values in the club and to propose a way of creating them.

Here are the steps that you should take.

You need to start with a **vision** and **mission statement**. What is the club continuously aiming at that will inspire everyone connected to it? Consider employees and fans, but also reflect on how the vision needs to reach out and connect with other stakeholders: your immediate community and others such as the media, commercial partners, community groups and municipal and educational establishments.

The vision should be focused on the future. How is the club going to change/improve things for everyone in its community? How will it make a difference? How will the club give back to society (social commitment)? These are all questions that should be considered when formulating a vision. Creating a mission statement to convey this in more detail is also recommended.

Let's look at an example from English Premier League club Everton. Their charity, Everton in the Community, has a clear purpose, vision and mission, re-printed here:

Our Vision

'To be the most effective charity, both nationally and internationally, that uses sport as a tool to identify and support vulnerable people and help to change lives for the better.'



Our Mission

Everton in the Community works in partnership with many individuals and organisations on a local, national and international level. Through the use of a comprehensive variety of sporting and social opportunities, Everton in the Community states that:

'Through the positive promotion of sport, physical activity and the brand of Everton Football Club, we are committed to providing high quality, accessible participant and development opportunities that positively change lives and bring enjoyment to our communities.' (Purpose, Vision and Mission, n. d., para. 3-5)

Having clarified our intentions as a club, we can then create the values to support them: to keep us on track, to help with decision-making and to define us in a crisis.

Values must be meaningful, rather than simply generic or abstract phrases or words that do not clearly evoke the spirit and intention of the club. The danger of values that are too generic is that fail to convey the personality of the club they purport to represent. So, when creating values, consider using verbs or phrases, as they will make it easier for you to make the club's vision and mission much clearer.

Another way to help articulate values is to consider how they are meant to affect the organisation in detail. Australian employee engagement consultancy WorkLogic sets out just how values should impact on an organisation:

- Guide staff behaviour as well as strategic and operational decisions.
- Provide a solid foundation for your employee policies and “fill the gaps” where policies are silent.
- Over time, improve the organisation's ethical character as expressed in its operations and culture.
- Demonstrate integrity and accountability to external stakeholders.
- Set the organisation apart from its competitors.
- Reduce risk of inappropriate behaviour.
- Strengthen the employment value proposition.

(Organisational Values guide everything you do at work, 2020)

Consider how a football club's values could bring about such an impact. They could help employees to diffuse difficult situations without having to seek assistance from a more senior colleague. They could help the club to identify future employees who share the same values set. They could help to transform external perceptions of the game by having

strong ethical values and/or they could ensure that, when interacting with fans, representatives of the club 'live the values'.

Club identity, values and all of the related concepts are so important in bringing to life the personality of a club that everything that makes it special and different is clear and in the open. It helps to strengthen fan engagement because it goes to the heart of the psychological importance of fandom and gives existing and potential fans something much more than just the football to connect them.

Exercise:

How visible are club values in your country of study? How many clubs publicly promote their values? Provide an example of a club with clear values and show how they communicate them.

2.2.2 Fan consultation and dialogue (including working with independent fan groups)

A fan engagement strategy must encompass how the club will ensure that its communication and consultation processes are designed to reflect the fan's importance as a stakeholder and key partner and to allow dialogue to flourish.

In several different parts of this certificate, we have shown the principles behind dialogue and consultation, given examples of how it is addressed in different clubs and also shown how it can be done in clubs of different sizes.

In this theme, we are going to explore one further example of positive and pro-active communications: how a league can ensure that dialogue is prioritised in its member clubs.

In the late 90s, as a result of the then UK Government's Task Force, the Premier League and the (then) Football League (now EFL) committed to introduce the concept of the customer charter to all clubs.

The charter aims to set out exactly what the fan should expect from the club, not just in terms of communications, but in every aspect of the fan/club relationship. It initially aimed to address the perceptions that football had often failed to take into account the needs of supporters, but as it has developed in the two decades since, it has become a useful point of reference for supporters.



Arguably, the term 'customer' is not as powerful as 'supporter' or 'stakeholder', but the charter itself can be a very good way to underline a club's commitment to its fans and wider community and a useful contact and information point for fans.

If we look at Arsenal FC's Customer Charter⁷, one is immediately struck by its extensive content. It contains the following areas:

- Accessibility (for disabled fans, etc.)
- Away Support (for visiting supporters)
- Loyalty & Membership information
- Consultation and Information
- The Club's Foundation and Community Activity
- Good Causes Policy
- Merchandise
- The Stadium
- Catering
- Staff Conduct
- Data Protection
- Customer Service
- Club Ban Appeals Process (The Club Charter, 2017)

Let's explore the Consultation & Information element of the club's customer charter in more detail.

Consultation & Information

4.1 Arsenal Supporters' Club

Contact details for our worldwide family of officially recognised Arsenal Supporters' Clubs can be found on Arsenal.com by using the following link - <https://www.arsenal.com/supportersclubs/>.

The guidelines for establishing and operating Supporters' Clubs can be obtained either by telephoning the Supporters' Clubs Hotline on 00 44 (0) 20 7704 4949 or emailing the Supporters' Liaison Officer Mark Brindle - mbrindle@arsenal.co.uk

⁷ <https://www.arsenal.com/the-club/corporate-info/the-club-charter>



4.2 The Club has hosted regular 'Fans' Forums' since season 2001/2002. Approximately 18 supporters attend three or four forums per season and represent different supporter groups by discussing various issues concerning Arsenal with senior members of staff and Club Management.

4.3 In addition, the Club consults supporters on an occasional basis through liaison groups, the Premier League annual Fans' Survey and Supporter Panels. The Club also occasionally uses Arsenal.com, the matchday programme and email surveys to consult on various issues.

4.4 The Club publicises its position on major policy issues in the Club matchday programme and on Arsenal.com.

4.5 The Club has in place, and continues to develop, ways of consulting sponsors, Islington Borough Council and other interested parties.

4.6 The Club gives the earliest possible notice of any changes to its ticketing policy and the reasons for such changes.

4.7 The Club utilises Arsenal.com, social media and the subsequent home matchday programme, to notify supporters of any fixture changes as soon as they are confirmed.

An email service is also available for local residents, whereby news of any planned fixture / event that might impact on the local community is emailed as soon as details are confirmed. To subscribe, please send a blank email to localresidents@arsenal.co.uk. (The Club Charter, 2017, para. 31-39)

Having such a detailed set of 'promises' provides a clear foundation for positive communication. It also pro-actively addresses areas that fans may need to know about and ensures that the right queries are addressed to the right part of the club.

Therefore, if you are creating a fan engagement strategy for a club, league or association, having such a charter, alongside your vision, mission and values, can make it clear that you value fans, that you have the processes in place to conduct open dialogue with them and that, to save fans' time, you have made the resolution of particular queries much easier.

It is, of course, important to review this information, to make sure that it is current and correct, and it is also very important to make sure that everyone representing the club is aware of it, as it is a reliable source of accurate and helpful information for fans.

Exercise:

If you were going to introduce a charter (or series of promises) to fans at a League level (i.e., one which would appear on the League's own official website), what would you include? Please give appropriate section titles and briefly bullet point what each one would include.

In doing this, please consider the relationship between a league and its fans and the differences between that relationship and the fan/club one.

2.2.3 Service/Experience improvement

If you do an Internet search on improving the fan experience, you will find a lot of references to the 'modern stadium' and 'digital technology'. Quite rightly, clubs should be looking to maximise these opportunities, but, if we are going to embark on a programme of improving the fan experience, then we must start with the fans (and others who we serve on a match day).

In this theme, we will look at fan experience surveys: why they are important and what you should consider when designing them.

We are going to examine the stadium experience. For the majority of clubs, this is critical, since ticketing revenue is their biggest single form of income. However, these days fans can consume their football in any number of ways –from the comfort of their home with better camera angles, virtual and augmented reality, via many different platforms, at any time that is convenient, in the comfort of their own living room.

So, ensuring the fans want to come to the stadium is becoming more and more challenging. Add in the fact that even our traditional match-attending fans may have lost the habit during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and one begins to recognise just how vital this is.

First, we need to focus on three key questions:

1. What do our existing fans expect from their stadium/match day experience?
2. What are their current levels of satisfaction with the current match day experience?
3. How would they like their experience to be improved?



The survey must, therefore, obtain importance ratings for the different elements of the fan experience. As an example, in a recent series of surveys undertaken in the USA and covering all of the major sports there, the following emerged as the most important factors for fans (The Stadium Experience, 2018):

- They expect the stadium to be safe, comfortable, and clean.
- They want the view from their seats to match their expectations.
- They desire a high-quality game.
- They expect an exciting atmosphere within the stadium. (para. 17)

All match-attending fans experience common elements. We have referred to these throughout this certificate as 'touch points', and the survey needs to be designed to reflect the fan journey. For example, you could ask about the following:

- Finding information
- Ticket booking
- Season ticket renewal
- The club app
- Travel (including parking and public transport)
- Stadium vicinity (including arrival and welcome)
- Fan zone (and any other external activities or entertainment)
- Stadium access (including automated or manual turnstiles)
- Retail and merchandise
- Stadium concourse
- Stadium facilities (including washrooms, signage)
- Stewards and stadium representatives (including responsiveness and personal interaction)
- Social and refreshments (including bars and kiosks)
- Pre-match, half time and post-match entertainment (including stadium announcer)
- Stadium comfort and view
- Stadium atmosphere
- Ease of movement and exit
- Leaving the stadium (exiting car park and access to public transport)

This is not an exhaustive list, but one typical of most clubs: elite and non-elite.

Care must be taken not to make the survey too long, as research shows that respondents can be demotivated by long surveys; so, this should be factored into survey design and

also, perhaps, the overall frequency of surveying. Maybe, the club surveys different parts of the match day experience at different times.

Survey response levels can also be influenced by the time of the season. For example, pre-season is a good time to do an annual survey, as the fans will be in a positive frame of mind. Conducting a survey mid-season is more likely to see response numbers impacted by the team's performance and other factors.

Some clubs have considered incentivising respondents, perhaps by offering a small gift or a discount code to be used in the official club store. There has been anecdotal evidence in the past that this may lead some respondents to be more positive in completing the survey, but from our own experience, it makes very little difference.

We may send the same survey to all fans, and this can be a good way of identifying key priorities, or we could segment our survey and send relevant surveys to groups such as season ticket cardholders, members, users of the Family Stand and disabled fans, etcetera.

The surveys can be deployed in many different ways now, but you must ensure the survey is not too long to make it even less convenient if the respondent is using a smartphone to complete it. Not everyone will be sitting at a laptop or desk top computer, and we must factor this in.

Do not forget that we are doing this to increase fan engagement. We are trying to understand what matters to fans, how they feel about the experience they currently have and what would make it better. So, we must allow fans to give ratings for these different elements and then separate out their overall levels of engagement with the club.

As we have explored in other parts of this certificate, having a measure of fan engagement is important, as not only does it help us to know how well we are doing but it also gives us a tool to lift the profile of the fan within the club, league or national association. Quite clearly, the fact that we are seeking feedback, analysing it and sharing it means that improvement is always in mind.

In considering which overall measure you wish to use, we would reiterate two points: if we are considering existing fans, it may be better to avoid asking how strongly they would recommend us; on the other hand, if we are focused on fans/customers/stakeholders who are less emotionally connected (e.g. new fans, users of hospitality or hirers of our conference facilities), then asking the recommendation question can be quite valuable.



You may also simply wish to ask them to declare a level of satisfaction with the overall stadium experience.

Regardless of which approach you use, always recognise that by analysing the results you will be able to see which part(s) of the experience matter the most to each of the different fan groups.

Co-creation is important, too. Is it possible to consult fan's groups –your main supporter group representatives– in creating the survey. Taking this 'external' perspective helps you to avoid forgetting to include an element of the experience that is important to them. For example, you may think the price of a beer is important to fans, but for them factors such as 'speed of service' may be more important.

Finally, if you do not have the resource or opportunity to conduct a larger survey, it is still valuable to be more direct: to ask fans to 'score' the experience, to say why they have given that score and to consider how they would like to see the experience improved.

Exercise:

You are creating a survey about the social (bar) and refreshments experience at your club. You are able to include 5 questions about this on your annual survey. Based on what you have seen above and in other parts of the certificate, what would you ask?

2.2.4 Employees and the working environment

In this theme, we use a blog from 2016 to explore the importance of making everyone who works for the club feel valued, because, as we know, the more engaged and valued an employee or volunteer is, the more committed they are to the 'customer'.

Football, as we have stated several times, is characterised as 'keeping fans at an arm's length'. However, it is now recognised that, in order to survive and prosper in the future, it needs to build strategies that do not rely just on the achievement of sporting glory to attract and retain fans, but also on the development of a strong emotional connection with them and the bringing to life of this in their experiences.

To give a different perspective on this, we have re-printed a blog written by your professor in 2016 for *FC Business Magazine*. To summarise, we believe that football is also guilty of failing to value and support its own 'family' of employees and volunteers sufficiently well. We compare football with how it is done in a very progressive organisation.



Please read the following text and answer the questions at the end:

'Zappos, the US online shoe seller offers every new recruit \$2,000 dollars to quit after one month in his or her new job.

To quote a piece written on businessweek.com: *Apparently, when Zappos hires new employees, it puts them through an intensive four-week training program, immersing them in the company's culture, strategy, and processes. Then, about one week in, Zappos makes what it calls "The Offer," telling newbies, "If you quit today, we will pay you for the amount of time you have worked, plus a \$2,000 bonus." A BusinessWeek reporter interviewed Hsieh recently. He says only 2% to 3% of people take the offer. The other 97% say no deal—they choose the job over the instant cash.*

Why do they do this? Surely there'll soon be a queue of people wanting to go through the 4-week course, just to get the money. Hell no, as my American chums might say.

Zappos wants to be the best (and it's clear from what we read that they already offer astounding levels of customer service) but they know that it's the culture they create inside the organisation that maintains and grows this phenomenon.

The most immediate sign of a customer-focused culture is a workforce who feel appreciated, valued and supported (and, as a consequence, who look forward to coming to work) so the company not only treats their employees fantastically well but has also inserted this imaginative extra little filter to protect this culture.

It works from both perspectives too. If you join up and the initial course puts your intrinsic values at odds with the company's, then you've an easy exit point. Or maybe you just don't see yourself retailing shoes online. To paraphrase the article from Business Week, if you want to amaze your customers, start by amazing your employees, develop that passion, togetherness and ownership of the customer at the very first moment of joining the organisation, and it's clear that a hugely more impressive level of service will follow.

When I was a judge for the Unisys / Management Today Service Excellence Awards (back in the day) I recall finding out about Rackspace's approach to new recruits too. Given that the new recruit has a far better perspective on his or her new surroundings than a 'lifer', the company exploited this valuable resource positively.



The CEO would take each new recruit to lunch on their first day, explain the value of their perspective (and the danger of them simply becoming part of the culture around them) and then ask them to complete a 'little black book' with anything they observed as good, bad or interesting in their first few days.

A fortnight later, they would enjoy lunch together again and review the new recruit's notes. As a consequence of this tiny little practice, Rackspace soon discovered that many of its most successful improvement ideas would come from people who hadn't been on the premises for more than a fortnight.

From a financial standpoint, these ideas make increasing sense the more you think about them. Most CEOs agree turnover costs tens of thousands of dollars in recruitment, training, and lost productivity. So identifying the pieces that don't fit the jigsaw early (at a cost of just one-week's salary and \$2,000) or using the fresh perspective of the new starter to expose the cultural barriers that are holding us back, could just be the best deal a company can make.

As part of our work in football, we have collected detailed match day assessments from real supporters over a period of 12 years now and the topic of engaged employees, match day assistants and volunteers is never far from my mind, especially given the fact that the experiences that *really* endure – the magic moments that compel people to come back – are often directly the result of a warm and / or imaginative cameo from someone working at the club.

"I say 'often' and it is true that the volume of positive personal interventions is increasing, but it's still against a backdrop of an industry that sometimes seems to regard employees as an inexhaustible, unthinking yet perpetually responsive resource whose commitment can always be guaranteed by being reminded that 'you are so lucky to work in football.'

In my experience, many employees at football clubs see themselves if not physically dispensable, then at least psychologically so. I spoke to a friend the other day who, while working for a club a few years back as a press and media officer, was expected to be in at 9 am every day, even though he may have just got back from Carlisle at 3am the previous night (as well as working most of the weekend). This was justified on the basis of 'treating everyone the same'.



We have seen some positive changes in recent years, but I'm concerned there are still few clubs who see the connection between a great working environment, happy employees and excellent supporter relationships.

I was privileged to spend time a couple of years ago with Pete Winemiller, someone who has been recognised for his work in improving fan experiences and making fan engagement flourish, over at Oklahoma Thunder in the NBA" (Mark Bradley's experience).

His concept of 'guest relations' (that expression already tells you something about the care with which supporters are treated) has characteristics you would not be surprised to find: good communication skills, good listening skills, responsiveness, technical knowledge and an ability to connect with people, but the greater intent is to create an engaging working environment where full time and casual employees know that the one and only aim is to make fans happy.

Here in the UK that is the missing link. The two stewards chatting to each other and ignoring you as you stand by wondering where the family stand is, the gum-chewing automaton at the turnstile whose gaze rarely leaves their phone and the ticket assistant who cannot wait to get you off the phone are all simply a by-product of an industry that has not figured out that if it wants to love its supporters as much as they love football, it needs to start by loving its employees first. (Bradley, 2016)

Exercise:

Imagine you are the CEO of a small provincial team in the 3rd tier of your professional league. What ideas could you take from the above blog and adapt to help to create an engaged and valued team of employees at your club?

Consider the match day team in particular (i.e., stewards, security teams and those in refreshments, retail and other areas of the stadium). What could you do to show how much the club values their work?



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