Module 4. Embedding Fan Engagement

Unit 4.1

4.1.1 Feedback and improvement

In this module we are going to look at how you might enhance a fan engagement strategy by taking the key elements we study throughout the certificate and showing how they might fit into a plan, capable of being scalable to meet the demands of any football setting.

There are several principles we have now learned from the customer engagement industry, which we know, if applied consistently, would help to transform levels of engagement in the football industry.

These include, for example, the need to lift the profile of engagement and introduce and sustain practices, activities, systems and processes that create and sustain trust and emotional loyalty among our supporter communities. The more our teams get used to these new areas of focus, the more likely they are to become part of our culture –to become part of 'the way we do things'.

They also include moving from instinct to proven process, for example, recognising that the outputs of any system are only as good as the inputs. We can see this in areas such as feedback and improvement.

- Is it a case of running a fan survey every season?
- Is it a case of simply reacting to the loudest voice in the fan base?
- Is it simply a case of having an improvement meeting now and again?

Obviously, our approach needs to be more nuanced that this, so let's explore what could be in a fan engagement strategy for a club in relation to using feedback from fans to improve experiences.

In order to do this, we are going to take several generic principles and understand how they can be applied in a football setting.

It is important to consider the bigger picture and distil it down to several key principles. That way you can easily adapt to whatever setting you are working in or are hoping to work in.

As Customer Experience expert Amy Brustia says:

> Whilst Customer Experience does include customer service it also encompasses the whole end-to-end experience of a customer's journey, including all the **people** they interact with, all the back- end **processes** they go through and all the **technology** that enables successful delivery of the service.
>
> Improving Customer Experience doesn't have to be complex, what is really needed is to go back to basics.
>
> It is simply putting the customer first and then setting up and aligning your organisation to fit around them so that the whole of the customers' experience is consistent, connected, memorable and hassle-free. (Brustia, 2017, para. 2-4)

Let's explore these principles.

Talk to fans

One of the cultural characteristics we have studied in this course is that of internal focus. Businesses whose people exclude the customer perspective, either formally (surveys, focus groups, etc.) or informally (simply talking to people) are likely to make decisions that do not fully meet the needs of customers.

So, in football, regardless of setting, it is important to keep that fan perspective channel open. In the past, football was guilty of thinking it knows what fans want without ever involving them in the co-creation process.

Embed the intelligence

Cascading the information produced by your fan feedback processes throughout the organisation needs to be done in a simple, memorable format that is relatable to each member of staff and their specific job role so that they can align their daily decisions and actions with the strategic direction of the company.

All too often staff are handed details of values, a vision or a mission with no understanding of how this relates to them or the role they play in achieving this. In creating a fan engagement strategy, regardless of the size or resources of the football setting, there

must be a process or activity in place to ensure everyone understands what has been learned and what is changing as a result.

Work together

Simply put, people working together will achieve more. It is far easier to solve issues, drive change and improve communication when everyone (including different teams within a football organisation) works together.

This way of working also ensures shared ownership of the fan experience instead of individual interaction channels. For example, the insights gathered by a ticketing team may only fully be maximised when placed in the context of insights gained by the marketing team.

Empower your people

It implies being at the forefront of interactions with fans, your employees are your most important asset. Equipping them with all the training, experience, information and inspiration they need to fulfil their role is crucial, as is training them on fan engagement to help them understand what the overall fan experience is and the part they play in building a fan-driven organisation.

Let them actively own issues and give them the power to solve problems without always having to get authorisation from managers.

By involving staff and asking their opinions, they are more likely to accept the changes that come. Many employees have years of experience and, as a result of that, several great ideas and insights relating to the fan experience. Make sure you create an outlet for this.

Cut through the bureaucracy

Question why you are doing something if it does not involve improving things for your fans (and it is not a regulatory requirement in your country). Stop doing it.

Very often, if you ask someone why they are doing something, you will normally get the response, 'it is always been done like this' or 'we were just told to do this'. This just reinforces the fact that if people do not understand why they are doing something, they will never be able to spot issues, improve things or work autonomously when needed.

Pause and reflect

It is very rare, in any workplace, to have the time to stand back and pause and to take the time to reflect on how well things are going. Regular fan journey mapping sessions can provide an insightful context that helps you not to forget the fan perspective and to create opportunities to improve it.

We will end this theme by introducing a particular football setting, a national association in a large country, one whose national team often qualifies for major tournaments, and asking you to consider how to apply the above insights.

Exercise:

A national association is responsible for organising international fixtures and managing the national team supporter membership schemes. Due to their size, they may have an Insights Team who can review transaction and behaviour trends while also applying algorithms to social media and learning about the key themes there.

They may also be able to deploy surveys, conduct focus groups (centrally or regionally) and provide considerable analytical skills to allow the association's leadership team to clearly understand where the issues are and how they could be addressed.

However, there is evidence that (1) not everyone in the organisation is aware of the major improvements made in fan experience and in understanding what fans think, and (2) fan experience improvement decisions appear to be taken on a departmental basis, rather than holistically across the organisation.

What improvements would you make to help ensure that the focus on fan experience and fan engagement lifts across the association and that the fan experience improvement process is optimised?

4.1.2 KPIs

In this introduction to fan engagement certificate, we have often reviewed the impact of established approaches in other businesses outside football and applied them to challenges in a football setting.

The focus on the customer in other businesses is probably at least one or two decades ahead of where it is in the football industry. So, using this as a learning source is valuable, albeit once we acknowledge some of the key differences between business and football.

The key challenge for football is to lift the profile and importance of fan engagement as a key area of business focus, so that in the place of *ad-hoc* activities, everyone clearly sees

the fan as a priority. One of the areas in which businesses outside of football achieve their focus on customers is measurement and, in particular, key performance indicators (KPIs).

Many of you will have already experienced KPIs in your existing workplace, and most of you will be aware of their existence. Few of us may have considered their particular relevance in football and the way they can be used to contribute to the creation of a fan-focused culture and attendance growth strategy, for example.

What is a KPI? What is its purpose?

Let's see how the business support organisation Klipfolio sees this and let's then begin to understand how we build a KPI capable of driving the focus on fans in any football setting.

First of all, we should define what a KPI is:

> A Key Performance Indicator is a measurable value that demonstrates how effectively a company is achieving key business objectives. Organisations use KPIs at multiple levels to evaluate their success at reaching targets. High-level KPIs may focus on the overall performance of the business, while low-level KPIs may focus on processes in departments such as sales, marketing, HR, support and others. (What is a KPI? Measure your performance against key business objectives, 2020, para. 1)

So, it follows that in any football setting, there could be one or more fan engagement KPIs, but, in individual teams serving the fan, there may be different ones. If we are going to consider this in football, we might have the KPI of How Personally Valued as an overall measure for fans, but in a particular team, such as the Ticketing one, there may be measures designed to improve the quality of call handling or online purchase.

To ensure our KPIs are effective, we must follow a well-established business maxim and create SMART key performance indicators. Does this mean intelligence or quick thinking KPIs? Effectively it does. SMART is an acronym for the following:

- Is your objective **Specific**?
- Can you **Measure** progress towards that goal?
- Is the goal realistically **Attainable**?
- How **Relevant** is the goal to your organization?
- What is the **Time frame** for achieving this goal?

Many of you will have used such an approach in your workplace and/or studies, but it remains one of the most popular tools, simply because it works.

If you address each of the questions above, you can highlight gaps in the current KPI, ensure different teams within the club, league or association contribute and, overall, make your KPI more effective.

So, let's consider a KPI for first time fans. We want to ensure that every fan attending his or her first game gets an experience that compels them to return, regardless of how well the team did. We have decided to use the Net Promoter 'likely to recommend' question, not just because it has been proven to link directly to customer retention, but because it is an easy one to communicate across the organisation. The better we do, the more likely they are to recommend us. The better we do, the more likely they are to come back.

Can we measure progress towards that goal? To do this we would need to have access to data, which in turn can be turned into information that allows us to answer that question. We can do this through ensuring that every person attending his or her first game receives a short- emailed question afterwards. In this survey they would be asked to give their response to the recommendation question, along with, perhaps, an explanation behind their score and an opportunity to request or suggest an improvement.

We might also track the subsequent purchase record of each new fan and (this is highly recommended) choose to call a small number of them just to hear them describe their experiences.

Is the goal attainable? Well, of course this depends on the extent to which the KPI is meant to represent the vision, a key milestone or something tied to incentives and rewards. For something quite holistic like this KPI, it may be something whose frequency, especially for first time fans, is significant every time we pause, summarise and drill down into the data.

For some clubs, you might just focus on existing fans (resource issues, for example); for other clubs, you might do this just once a year, review the results, adjust and continue; but for some clubs, this KPI may drive the agenda of post-match debrief meetings or perhaps a monthly or quarterly review meeting.

In reality, it may take several seasons to truly understand the extent to which the KPI does drive re-attendance.

Many organisations who use Net Promoter, for example, do set themselves stretching targets, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, as long as it is driving the right behaviours and does not lead the team members or managers 'cutting corners' or falsifying data to make sure they are on track.

Relevance might be a harder argument, especially in a club or other football setting where fan engagement has not been strategically or culturally part of the organisation. 'Maybe it just comes down to building a winning team' says the CEO. He or she is probably right. If you can do this and, most importantly, sustain it over a generation, then you are likely to be doing OK. But who, in football –and especially outside the elite– is in a position to predict the future?

So, the relevance question may be answered by the owner or leadership team by saying that the fan engagement KPI is in place to help us refocus and reset around the needs of our supporters. They may say that it is initially intended as a form of research, but, if it leads to the right behaviours, it may start to lead to incentives, for example.

In considering the time frame for KPIs, the broader holistic ones may require quarterly, half season or annual reviews, while other, more team-performance-related may even be reviewed daily. How many season tickets were we aiming to renew yesterday? How many did we manage? Can our data give us insights into why we achieved what we did? Can we infer any possible improvement actions to respond to this?

There is also another way you could look at KPIs by thinking differently and, instead of having a numerical target, choosing to have a more abstract one; such is the case, for example, of a letter received from a fan or other stakeholder praising for the club for making him or her proud. Perhaps this could be framed and placed on the wall in the club's reception. KPIs do not need to be simply numeric, but they do need to be stretching, and they do need to contribute to changing the way people behave.

Ultimately, the role of the KPI is to be the element of performance measurement in any business improvement strategy, but in the most customer-focused organisations, it keeps the focus in place, too. For an industry with a record of keeping fans at a distance, the right KPI could make an impact not only on strategic attendance growth, for example, but also on the establishment of a new fan-focused culture at the organisation.

Exercise:

You are meeting with the head of security before the start of a new season to get her input on some of the challenges that lie ahead. She believes that levels of pro-active engagement and good service from stewards would improve if the team leaders were working towards a specific SMART KPI.

What would you propose? Support your idea with comments.

4.1.3 Continuous improvement tools

It follows that if we are to emulate the most successful customer focused businesses in the football industry, we should do much more than just look at the bigger picture: we should also explore the detail.

Every organisation serving customers takes the conversion of data into intelligence seriously, because they want to improve their customers' experiences and, as a result, their sales and retention levels.

In football, we want to know if we are serving our community well. One of the ways we do that is talking to them and using their feedback to improve their experiences. However, sometimes it is hard to know how to approach this. Having a strong suite of continuous improvement tools at your disposal will make this process a lot easier.

Many's the time a group of people at work will have a loose brainstorm to try to improve a situation, but that has its limitations. A brainstorm, by definition, allows anything in. You then hone down to the nub of the opportunity later. But its main objective is to make sure people are not constrained by experience or subject matter. We will explore using a brainstorm in the context of football later in this unit.

Having a good knowledge of key continuous improvement tools can make the whole process of turning fan feedback into action much more effective and impactful. However, football is just not used to these approaches, and, if we acknowledge that fan engagement is still in its infancy in the game, then we must also acknowledge that these tools are not likely to be used extensively either.

Let's examine two continuous improvement tools that are widely used in business and which can have a very positive effect in a football organisation wishing to strengthen levels of fan engagement.

PDCA

The PCDA (Plan - Do - Check - Act) cycle is another excellent continuous improvement technique. It is a way of identifying and testing initial hypotheses.

The four steps of the PDCA cycle are the following:

- **Plan:** identify an opportunity and plan for change.
- **Do:** implement the change on a small scale.

- **Check:** use data to analyse the results of the change and determine whether it made a difference.
- **Act:** if the change was successful, implement it on a wider scale and continuously assess your results. If the change did not work, begin the cycle again.

One of the contexts in which this might work is in improving the refreshments service within the stadium on a match day. Fan feedback suggests that service is slow, and fans cannot get back in their seats for the start of the second half. The club calls a meeting with its catering partner, who is aware of the improvement opportunity, and they set about addressing it.

PDCA allows them to undertake a small-scale service improvement, review it, improve it and then roll it out, having understood all of the likely issues involved in its implementation. In practice, this might have involved introducing the service improvement in one particular area of the concourse: one that could be sterile for the duration of the project (i.e., only accessible by people sitting in a particular part of the stadium) and easily monitored.

PDCA is a cycle, so it is expected to continue. At the end of the season, the catering partner and club leadership review the data again and, following the cycle, do another small-scale improvement, and then roll it out again.

In the context of the club asking for feedback post-game via email, they will have data to inform this improvement cycle. Others who do not or others who do not ask for feedback from fans will find continuous improvement tools less helpful.

The other tool we will explore in this theme is the 5 Whys.

According to a report published in PlanView official website, 'the 5 Whys is a thinking tool for identifying the root causes of problems' (Continuous Improvement Tools and Techniques, n. d., para. 16).

Using the 5 Whys, teams practicing continuous improvement are able to:

- move past blame
- think beyond the specific context of a problem
- identify a proper, sustainable solution to resolve the issue

> The 5 Whys method is very simple in practice: Start with a problem statement and then ask 'why' until the root cause is revealed, and the answers become absurd. (Continuous Improvement Tools and Techniques, n. d., para. 17-18)

So, let's apply this to a football league. They have an Insights Team who regularly access feedback and other data showing how fans feel about the competition, including referees and their performance, fixture scheduling and communications.

At the start of the season, one of the senior analysts thought it would be a good idea to contribute a regular blog to the League's website so that fans could gain an appreciation of how they work and feel more positively towards the League.

However, only one blog ever appeared and, later in the season, a couple of fans on social media gained traction when they suggested this was an example of the League not really being interested in fans.

Holding a 5 Whys conversation at the League, with all of the relevant people present might go something like this:

> *Problem:* We promised a regular blog but only produced one.
>
> *Why?* Because the senior analyst was too busy to do more.
>
> *Why?* Because we do not have anyone owning that process, so it seems like it is everyone's responsibility and no one's responsibility at the same time.
>
> *Why?* Because we never decided on a clear process to support this idea.
>
> *Why?* Because... we're all too busy?

The last response here is a little unreasonable or absurd, of course. The root cause seems to have been revealed after the third 'why'. The team never actually created any support around the process. They simply thanked the analyst for the idea and, basically, left him to it. Because of this, the blog never received the priority that it should have and, when it was part of the plan to engage fans, it ended up antagonising them.

This process means that instead of focusing on blame or mistakes, the team can quickly identify the root cause, address it and move on. In this particular context, it might be a good idea to go public, accept that they did not deliver, share the improvement decision with fans and thank them for bringing it to the League's attention.

This theme has just touched the tip of the iceberg, of course, as there are many more continuous improvement tools, including one entire continuous improvement belief system (Kaizen, which we study in another part of this certificate). However, it does show how issues and feedback continuously drive improvements in other businesses, and football must embrace this.

Exercise:

*Take one of the above continuous improvement tools and apply it to a football club, league or association issue/opportunity of your choice. How might the **5 Whys** conversation proceed and what might the root cause of the problem be?*

4.1.4 Innovation and creativity tools

As well as finding value in the continuous improvement tools that other businesses use to improve customer experiences and to drive loyalty, retention and advocacy, there are tools to get us 'thinking outside of the box'.

One of the biggest barriers to innovation in any organisation is the tendency for people to narrow their thinking and base it on their own experience or that of the place where they are working. In fact, the businesses that are best at innovation often have the best cultures, because, as well as those charged with innovation, they also benefit from the ideas other employees want to share too.

On the other hand, when people are asked to come up with new innovative ideas in business, they often all rush to do a brainstorm, without properly understanding how to get the best out of it.

So, in this theme, we will describe and discuss two common innovation and creativity tools with a view to showing how they might flourish in a football environment and be used to innovate in fan engagement.

In an article of *Psychology Today* the problem with brainstorming is summarised:

> Brainstorming is one of the most overused words in business today, maybe even most overused in all organisations. Any time people are trying to come up with ideas, they call it brainstorming. And as a result, the techniques, rules, and

> methods of brainstorming are twisted and abused to where everyone seems to hate brainstorming and no one seems to be doing it right. (Burkus, 2018, para. 1)

Contrary to what most people think, someone did actually invent brainstorming. So, did they have the idea of an uncontrolled chaotic session of shouting, cancelling the most outlandish ideas and trying to get a very specific outcome?

Of course not. Alex Osborn set out an idea to help people working in groups to generate the maximum number of ideas possible (Osborn, 1979).

There are four basic rules in brainstorming:

1. Go for quantity over quality, because we know the best way to get good ideas is to just start with lots of ideas.
2. Withhold criticism, also expressed as "no idea is a bad idea."
3. Encourage wild ideas; just freewheel and go crazy (exactly the point of rule 2)
4. Combine and improve upon ideas. (Burkus, 2018, para. 4)

Where most sessions fall down is in censoring what people are saying and what is key is the need to combine and improve upon ideas.

So, in the context of football, we might be addressing the question 'how do we improve the refreshments experience in our stadium?'

Let's imagine someone says, 'Let's expand our services and sell more', and someone interrupts and says, 'Ah, but we do not have the space for that': keep the idea anyway. Take more ideas and you might end up with a series of regular 'pop up' stores, with different ones appearing at different games, offering street food where previously there was a very narrow and underwhelming choice.

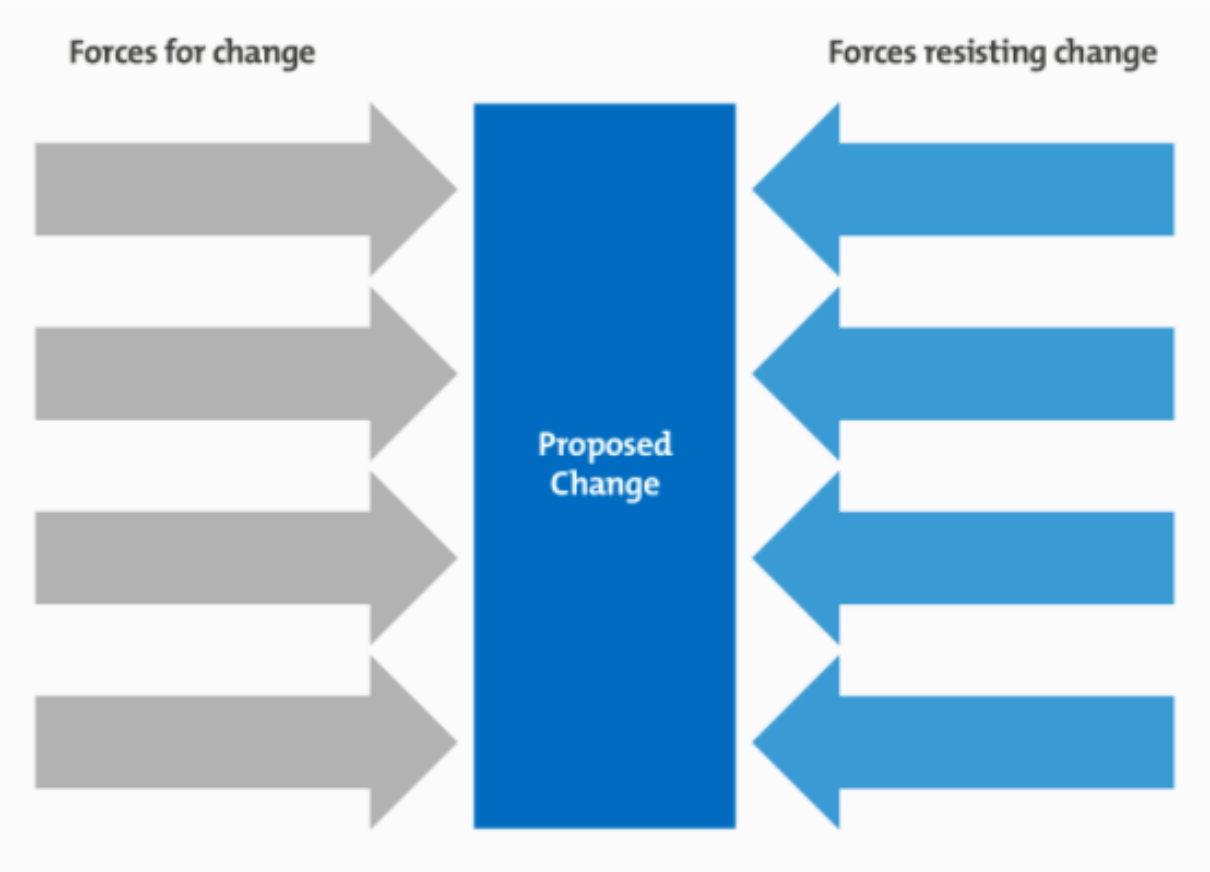
Another creativity tool is Forcefield Analysis. In the emotional context of sports, decision-making can be difficult. Even when doing so in the context of the football club's values, finding our way to the right decision may be difficult. Forcefield Analysis sets out to make this easier by taking a structured approach to the process of decision-making.

How does it work?

It was created by a social psychologist in the 1940s, but it is now used in businesses everywhere. The idea is that circumstances in the business are maintained by an equilibrium between forces that drive change and others that resist change. As it is explained in Mindtools website: 'For change to happen, the driving forces must be

strengthened, or the resisting forces weakened' (Force Field Analysis: Analysing the Pressures for and Against Change, 2020, para. 1)

Figure 1: Force Field Analysis



Source: Mindtools official website. (2020) [Force Field Analysis] Retrieved October 2020 from https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_06.htm. Screenshot by author.

There are only steps. First, define your plan or idea and write it in the central box. Then identify the forces for change. In a football club setting such as an association, there will be internal and external forces for change, including, for example, the needs of local grassroots, football clubs and the motivations of stakeholders such as Government, among other forces.

Embracing a culture of fan engagement, by definition, means that different football organisations will not only have the intention of doing better for fans, but the expectation that things will change. A fan engagement leader with an improvement and innovation toolkit at hand will be able to effect these changes.

Exercise:

Undertake research and identify one more innovation or improvement tool that you could use to improve levels of fan engagement in any football setting.

Give an example of a specific problem or opportunity that this tool could help you to overcome or achieve.

Unit 4.2

4.2.1 Recognition programmes

Let's remind ourselves of the four pillars of fan engagement. These are the four dimensions football organisations need to include in any strategy aimed at lifting levels of trust and emotional loyalty.

They are based on a thorough analysis of similar models outside of the football industry and then adapted to meet the unique demands of the 'beautiful game'. They are important, because they address both the strategic and the cultural elements of developing a customer-focused business.

They are also designed to be scalable according to the type of football setting and all of the other contextual factors that define our different clubs, leagues and associations.

The four pillars are the following:

1. Identity and meaning
2. Dialogue and consultation
3. Execution and experience
4. Culture and people

The 4th dimension is culture and people. This area is vital. Regardless of the football setting, the need to create a fan-focused culture is absolutely vital. As we study in different parts of this certificate, strategy is useless without a supportive culture, and, unless you have a clear culture whose values, behaviours and activities align with that of the fan, it will not be possible to see a sustainable difference in advocacy and retention.

It is therefore important to consider the factors involved in ensuring the team, however large or small, is consistently encouraged to put the fan first.

When we study this fourth dimension, we recognise that there are several key activities that define an organisation with a positive working culture and environment. They include the following:

- Our people are recruited on the basis of attitude and club identity/DNA fit.
- Our people have the right skills and knowledge to exceed fan expectations.

- We give people the freedom and authority to exceed fan and customer expectations.
- We monitor people engagement, act on the findings and create a fan-focused culture.
- Our people work better because they feel good about themselves.
- We recognise, reward and champion those people who epitomise our brand and create and deliver value for fans and customers.

The latter relates to the way we recognise our people. So, what do we mean by this? It may seem an obvious answer, but there are reasons why we need to be clear about this, since in the experience of many of the people we have spoken to in my 20 years in the sport, there is a sense that if you work in football, then 'you are lucky'. Of course, you are, because it is the greatest sport on the planet!

Nevertheless, this should not be the employers' only form of recognition. The co-worker working in the Media Team could easily be expected to arrive early, stay to report on an evening away game, interview the manager post-match and not get home until the early hours.

Thankfully, that is rare now, but there was a time when those individuals were not given the option of coming in late or any other flexible working option to recognise the long hours they work, and that tended to characterise (in England, at least) the lack of true recognition football industry employees received.

The irony, of course, is that football exists to achieve recognition through the award of trophies and medals. Its whole philosophy is based on winning and then giving a reward. In different parts of this certificate, we review how this obsession with the pursuit of sporting glory can influence customer service levels in other parts of the football organisation, with that intrinsic aggression translating into poor and/or inconsistent levels of service.

So, recognition and reward are key parts of any fan engagement strategy. What would they look like in any given setting?

First of all, we have to balance achievement of outcomes with adherence to the process. If we say to our team that the person achieving the most 'sales' gets the main prize, then it is possible (as we have seen in the financial services industry, where new regulation continuously appears to ensure customers are not mis-sold) that individuals may 'cut corners' or 'bend the rules' to achieve sales and end up selling the customer a product that is not right for them.

But we are football. So, we still want to recognise achievement! If we win, we need a trophy!

The key is to also recognise adherence to the process in both measurable and *ad-hoc* ways: in other words, to reward people who live the club's values, whose behaviours demonstrate that they have bought in and whose actions are seen to contribute to lifting levels of engagement.

Let's look at the principles of recognition and the way they are applied in a different industry: the education sector. Michigan University has published a very clear set of recognition guiding principles to ensure success through consistent adherence to a set of important factors.
Here is a list of such principles:

1. Link recognition to the organization's mission, vision, and values. Recognition decisions must support defined guiding principles of recognition and business objectives
2. Provide equity in the distribution of recognition. All staff members should be given an equal opportunity to be recognized for the results of their work
3. Give recognition for specific achievements
4. Encourage managers and supervisors to use recognition to encourage positive actions or acknowledge results. Actions that produce positive and measurable outcomes should be rewarded. All supervisors and managers are responsible for ensuring that recognition is specifically linked to positive actions and contributions.
5. Involve co-workers, customers, and partners in recognition efforts. They often have an awareness of the contribution that an employee makes
6. Give recognition in a timely manner. Recognition given promptly is most effective
7. Emphasise team recognition that encourages teamwork and fosters the cooperation needed to address the overall strategic business goals and mission of the University
8. When practical, emphasise non-monetary recognition. Use of innovative non-monetary recognition can create a positive work environment
9. Get input from employees regarding the type of recognition they receive. In appropriate circumstances, employees should be given the opportunity to provide input about the type of recognition they would like to receive
10. Publicise recognition activities including local level efforts

11. Provide flexibility for recognition decisions at the University of Michigan. Staff will be encouraged to delegate responsibility for recognition decisions to the lowest level practicable and eliminate unnecessary layered review processes
12. Incorporate funding for recognition into department budget planning
13. Employee recognition must be given attention in the budgeting process
14. Provide uniform training for managers and employees in effective use of recognition. A discussion of the recognition process should be included in all management training programs, and recognition guidelines should be included in the orientation package for all new employees. (The Guiding Principles of Recognition, n. d.)

What the University of Michigan has, in effect, done is to create an employee recognition plan/strategy. Key to success will be the fact that they have created a budget for recognition. That means that if a team has come through difficult people, well, the leader can take them out for dinner to thank them without having to have any awkward conversations with the Finance Team!

Some football clubs have linked the team's victories to internal recognition, as well, and this is a great idea. The downside, of course, is that if the team has a very poor season, it is probably unfair to withdraw from recognising people who are not able to influence that.

Recognition programmes are also extremely powerful when they are driven by customer feedback. How many clubs have schemes whereby fans get to choose their favourite match day employee for recognition? How many have a staff member featured in the match day magazine, programme or club website every month, and how many then hold a post-season vote where fans can decide which one is 'employee of the season'? Perhaps a club commercial partner can create some magic for him or her and their family!

The absence of structured and substantial recognition programmes is a symptom of an industry still coming to terms with the paradigm shift upon it. Any fan engagement leader who is serious about producing a change in focus in his or her club must ensure that employee recognition is a key part of that plan.

Exercise:

Having read this theme, how would you set about 'recognising' individuals in a ticketing team, where 90% of their work is 'responsive' (i.e., dealing with purchase requests and information queries from fans/customers)?

Set out how you would do this in no more than 4 bullet points.

4.2.2 Benchmarking

Benchmarking is not a term everyone is familiar with, even outside football. Therefore, this theme will give a description of what we mean by the term and show how it can be used at a club level to support the aim of creating a fan engagement culture.

First off: let's define it in general terms. **Benchmarking** is a process of measuring the performance of a company's products, services, or processes against those of another business considered to be the best in the industry, also known as 'best in class'.

The point of **benchmarking** is to identify internal opportunities for improvement, and this can not only relate to the processes, products and systems that may be present inside a top performing organisation, but also in the 'way they do things'. Yes, the idea of cultural benchmarking is gaining credence, since businesses everywhere recognise the power of creating a focused culture.

Clearly, because of the unique links between a customer-focused company's values and the way its people behave, it is not something that can be imitated. Every company will have its own 'present' culture and an idea of where it wants to go; so, while you cannot do this by saying 'let's be Disney now!', you can look at the way Disney brings its culture alive in customer settings and adapt those ideas to your own.

In football there are 'best in class' clubs emerging in the different fields of operation characteristic of the different settings in our industry. For example, if we want to make sure our social media is a pro-active part of our social contribution strategy, then AS Roma's beautiful idea of accompanying every new signing announcement together with a photo and details of a missing child is something that we could adapt[1]. Is there a campaign or activity the club is already aligned with local that could benefit from such coverage?

As the concept of 'best practice' begins to gain ground in football, especially in relation to concepts such as 'fan experience' and 'fan engagement', it is noticeable that the clubs who do it better usually have a very distinct culture of their own.

Lewes FC may be known for their unremitting focus on equality[2], but that also implies an interest in treating everyone well, as well as equally. So, you would not be surprised to

[1] AS Roma's twitter account: https://twitter.com/ASRomaEN/status/1313836271295438850
[2] For more information, read the article "Equality FC - a level playing field for women" on https://www.lewesfc.com/article/equality-fc-a-level-playing-field-for-women

find some of the best food available anywhere in football[3], never mind at the 7th tier of the game where the clubs play.

So, how can football embrace benchmarking in ways that make it possible for every club, league and association to benefit?

There are a number of football forums and conferences now, with the emphasis on hearing about 'best practice' from practitioners and the people they work with. The Fan Experience Company[4] and the Stadium Business Company[5] first established a Fan Experience Forum in 2012 (hosted by the city of Turin in Italy), and now you can hear about 'best practice' in football at conferences like Soccerex[6] both in person and, post-pandemic, online.

These events often seem like they are designed and populated by elite clubs, associations and leagues, as well as global service providers. However, there are also organisations like the Future of Football Business[7], who cater for clubs outside of those regularly qualifying for the UEFA Champions League, for example.

There are magazines too, such as the UK's dedicated football business magazine *FC Business*[8], where your professor writes a monthly column on fan experience and fan engagement and where 'best practice' features appear regularly.

Organisations like Supporters Direct Europe[9] are the 'go-to' organisation for best practice in areas like SLOs (supporter liaison officers) while experts like Kevin Rye[10] provide advice and best practice examples to clubs wishing to improve consultation, dialogue and governance too.

Increasingly, federations like UEFA are organising more and more events to share best practice in every area of their operation while their GROW programme[11] helps developing countries to increase participation and attendance. Many national associations are now seeing the real benefits, particularly in terms of their motivational power, of identifying and sharing best practices.

---

[3] For more information, read the article "Lewes FC reopens the Rook Inn" on https://lovelewes.com/2020/lewes-fc-reopens-the-rook-inn/
[4] The Fan Experience Company official website: www.fanexperienceco.com
[5] Stadium Business Company official website: https://www.xperiology.com/
[6] Soccerex official website: https://www.soccerex.com/
[7] Future of Football Business official website: https://futureoffootballbusiness.com/
[8] *FC Business* official website: www.fcbusiness.com
[9] Supporters Direct Europe official website: www.sdeurope.com
[10] www.faninsights.co.uk
[11] For more information, read the article "UEFA Grow committed to growing European football" on https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/football-development/grow/

Many leagues also do the same. Every April, the EFL (English Football League) –the 2nd, 3rd and 4th tier of English football) hosts a club event to review the results of its Family and Away Fan Excellence programmes. At these events, attended by representatives of every one of the 72 clubs, attendees can see who is leading in different areas of fan experience, by touch point and by division.

The Family Excellence reports that each receipt after their assessments also contain benchmarking. They provide details of the individual club's performance across each match day fan experience touch point and then show how they rank against others in their league and then over the entire 72 club membership. What this means, in simple terms, is that a club languishing near the bottom of the 4th tier might actually find itself at the top of the league for 'friendliness'.

When that is the case, the best clubs 'on the pitch' are keen to learn what it is they do and how they sustain it.

Figure 2: EFL Family Excellence 'end of season' report

Source: EFL official website. (2019) [Family Excellence 'end of season' report]. October 2020. Screenshot by author.

In the image above (a genuine extract from the Family Excellence 'end of season' report received by a club in the second tier), you can see how they performed overall (across all 72 clubs) and then within their own tier. Having this information is very motivating to clubs and contributes to creating a culture of achievement and improvement across the League.

Finally, there is the most informal level of benchmarking to consider: that of simply attending a game at a 'best practice' club (perhaps in a sport similar to, but outside of, football). The fan engagement leader is also looking to expand horizons, to see how different businesses address common 'touch points' and see what can be 'pinched' and adapted for use within his or her own club.

With most clubs semi-professional and non-league clubs fearing the long term impact of COVID-19 in 2020, some were finding it their most successful season ever, in terms of commercial revenue generated. How could that be achieved?

Football Marketing and Media consultant Charlotte Richardson is an associate at 7th tier club Margate FC. In an email interview in October 2020, she told me the following:

> At Margate we've been back to a relative normal for a few months now. One of the major positives to come out of the darkness has been the launch of our YouTube Channel. Fan engagement with a real digital focus: we've enjoyed over 30,000 views by offering the live stream for free and the stats have helped us attract more (commercial) sponsors than in the past four seasons I've been involved. So, perversely, it is been our best commercial season and it is Covid season. Reward for the club being on the button and putting fans first, I feel. (Richardson, 2020)

Benchmarking is another of those areas beginning to get a foothold in the football industry, and it is hoped that my emphasis on providing as many specific case studies as possible in this study material will make this Barça Innovation Hub Fan Engagement Certificate another essential reference point for the future football leader.

Exercise:

What is the best way of accessing 'best practice' in football in your country? Please list the various opportunities. Is there a gap? How would you address it?

4.2.3 Internal assessments (mystery shopping)

In this theme, we will describe mystery shopping and consider its potential for use within a football setting. Mystery shopping is a process that has accompanied the rise of the customer in business operations globally, because it is a way of seeing the experience through the eyes of the customer.

This external perspective can therefore be a useful way of assessing levels of service so that improvements can be made, and, as we have explored in this unit, co-workers can be recognised for their contribution.

Clearly, as football moves into an era of engagement, having this tool will be important, but first of all, let's define the process so that we fully understand it, its potential and how it could be applied in the football setting.

In simple terms, mystery shopping is a process where an assessor posing as a customer transacts with an organisation and then provides feedback on the quality of the transaction. It is common in retail, hospitality and leisure services, but can also be applied online and also in a B2B setting (where the assessor poses as a representative of one business transacting with another). The aim is to check to see if pre-agreed standards and/or levels of service are being applied.

The benefits are clear: if undertaken properly, the process can identify flaws in the process and help organisations to make improvements, but, of course, mystery shopping also has its disadvantages. So, before embarking on this approach in football, let's understand them.

First of all, most mystery shopping programmes are continuous, large scale in numbers and regularly reported. This means that large retail businesses, for example, can pick up trends from the 'bigger picture' emerging, rather than from an individual assessment. So, if you are using mystery shopping as a tool to understand current levels of customer service or product quality, you need to make sure the data you produce is of a sufficient sample size to render the output significant.

Another caveat is to remember that mystery shopping is primarily designed to ensure that existing standards are being met and product quality is delivered. That is fine, as long as that is why you have implemented such an approach. However, this does not tell you if your existing standards or quality standards are actually right for the customer, and this is a mistake many organisations make.

There clearly needs to have been some input by the customer into what these standards should be. So, always bear in mind that this should come before you embark on a programme to assess the quality of their delivery.

But it is also valid to use mystery shopping to try to uncover themes that may help you to better understand customer experiences so that any improvement interventions are actually going to be meaningful.

Imagine, for example, a retail department store, like Sears in the USA, John Lewis in the UK or El Corte Inglés in Spain. Imagine you have launched an in-store credit card with your financial services partner and, to do this, you have placed promotional assets around the tills. If you are going to assess your employees on the quality of their contribution to the experience (which is likely to be one of the biggest factors in achieving the highest score) and perhaps recognise them for this, then make sure that the assessor focuses on these items.

> Anecdotally, I know of a UK department store where the member of staff could not have done more for the Mystery Shopper, but the credit card promotional stand was placed at the wrong angle. The resulting score was 3/5, leading to an extremely upset co-worker and the impression that the organisation sees advertisements as more impactful than the contribution of their people. Mystery Shopping may end up undermining customer-facing staff and de-motivating them, when in reality it aims to help them by finding gaps in the service design.
>
> Mystery Shopping, when done by an external assessor (who are often from professional mystery shopping agencies), will offer several statements describing the desired levels of service. Depending on the experience or experiences the assessor has, a score will be given for each element of the transaction.
>
> There are usually several other assessments in any given measurement period before a score is sent to the branch, outlet or store. According to the score achieved, the manager will either congratulate (and possibly reward or recognise) the team for their work or find ways to address any issues.
>
> This again brings into play a key point: take a team approach. If, let us say, the shopper visits the store 6 times in any given period and, in 4 of the occasions, sees the same member of staff. Ordinarily, the staff members are not named or described, unless something really bad or exceptionally good happens, so what do you do as a leader when you have the results? Because Mystery Shopping is meant to be an anonymous process, it is important not to pick out individual members of staff. In the event of a great result, it is important to thank the team

and, by contrast, if there are improvement opportunities, it is important to address them together with the entire team.

To be fair, most customer-facing staff do not like or trust mystery shopping as the feel that it is too small a sample; fails to acknowledge contextual factors; often focuses on the wrong thing (see the credit card promo board example above) and / or is used to pick out and criticise individual members of staff.

Also, other than providing more detail on what happened (to justify a score, for example) the shopper is rarely asked to provide comprehensive detail on how the service could be improved; how it made them feel or, indeed, whether they themselves would feel confident in recommending the provider. (Mark Bradley's experience)

So, what are the opportunities in football for taking such an approach?

For a club new to the fan engagement journey, it is an excellent way to see what it is like to be a fan, to understand the entirety of the experience and to begin the process of improvement. However, what is the most important here is that this new perspective can become a catalyst for change within the club, as we shall see in the next theme.

So, for example, at every point where the club interacts with fans, there is an opportunity to introduce an element of mystery shopping. If you are running a large ticketing team, with most transactions taking place online and only specific queries and exceptional circumstance calls undertaken by phone, you would think about covering both the online transaction and the physical transaction in your mystery shopping scheme.

You would do that for either of two reasons: either to measure performance against an already-agreed set of customer experience standards or to understand just what happens in a typical customer interaction so that you can add that to other data and begin the process of improving it.

Remember also that many mystery shoppers are agents. They are paid for each assessment they make. As things stand in 2020, when this study material is being compiled, they are most likely to be experienced in retail, hospitality or leisure assessments, rather than in football. So, how do you account for the emotional aspect of the relationship between the football fan and his or her club or national team? We will address this in the next theme.

Overall, mystery shopping can contribute to helping you understand how well services or products are being delivered and also to see whether pre-planned levels of customer experience are being achieved. It can also help you to pick up on themes that will support your wider improvement ambitions. Nonetheless, it does have its limitations, and, because it might undermine other positive work you are doing (if not designed well), one should carefully consider its use and be absolutely clear about its objectives.

Exercise:

At your club, the majority of season ticket renewals are carried out online, with a minority face-to-face in the ticket office and around 20% over the phone. Naturally, there are also queries which are dealt with online and over the phone.

The club wishes to introduce a mystery shopping process but does not yet know exactly what standards are to be aimed for or delivered. So, how would you design a mystery shopper programme to help the club pick up on the themes that the ultimate assessor-driven programme will focus upon?

4.2.4 External professional assessments

Taking the principles of mystery shopping and applying them to the challenges associated with the pursuit of fan engagement, you have two different approaches.

You can use the process to gain insights into the fan experience (broadly qualitative in nature –descriptive and appropriate for things not easily measured, such as the qualities of human interaction–) to then use it as inputs to the wider development of fan engagement in the club. You can also use it as a quantitative intervention (things that can be measured and counted and therefore able to show statistical significance, such as the frequency with which a co-worker offers a specific service in the circumstances where it would be appropriate or beneficial to the customer) by measuring a process sufficient times to see if fan experience standards are being adhered to.

Your professor began his career in fan engagement as a direct result of his adaptation of its principles to support a League's wish to not only improve the family experience across a league of three divisions but also to create a catalyst for clubs to think differently about the needs of different existing and potential fan groups.

Having said that, as the process evolved to meet the changing needs of the target group (families) and wider macro-social changes (digital technology, such as smartphones and the rise of social media as a communications tool), it could also be regarded as a

quantitative intervention. This is because, while each club receives two comprehensive assessment visits (usually containing more than 30 A4 pages of detail encompassing every 'touch point' experienced by the assessor) something definitively qualitative in nature–, the programme has now run for 14 seasons, therefore providing 28 individual reports to each of the 72 clubs over that time and, at the level of the League, providing over 2,000 individual detailed reports over that time.

This process has evolved to provide a qualitative approach at the local club level, but a more quantitative approach when the League rolls up all the data. This latter fact allows the League not only to identify where there are 'gaps' in the fan experience for families and what needs to be done to address them but also to focus on 'the bigger picture' and to use the data to foment a readiness for change and a determination to improve within clubs (and, therefore, attract more families)

So, how has this approach evolved over the seasons? What results has it achieved, and what can other associations and leagues learn from this case study?

The programme officially began (in terms of providing a direct service to clubs) in the 2007/2008, but a year later some important qualitative research was undertaken.

Your professor and his young family (partner and children, 10 and 7) attended 30 matches over the previous season (from late September to mid-April).

Five clubs were chosen randomly to represent each division, and each club was visited twice: once by the family attending the game as supporters of the home team and once by the family attending as supporters of the visiting team.

The idea was not to see how well the clubs were doing, but rather to discover *what* they were doing. How did each member of the family experience the experiences offered by each club? What were their expectations and how did the experience affect them? Which touch points were most important to a new family attending their first match and which were less so? To what extent could individual club match day employees either set the tone or influence the overall perceptions of the family? Finally, were there examples of good practices that could be shared with other clubs?

> Crucially, the EFL decided to share the results of this pilot in person, not only inviting your professor along, but extending an invitation to the rest of the family too. Having listened to the context and the opportunity and then reviewed the data produced by the family (in the form of written reports, comments from each member of the family on each experience and then affixing scores), the rest of the

> family was invited in to answer questions, share more opinions and details about their experience.
>
> Of course, I was already a published Customer Experience writer so the concepts at the heart of this programme were, in my mind, well established. There were no existing Family Engagement standards, so this programme was an attempt to uncover the themes that might well inform such a list. But, more importantly, it felt like letting clubs hear what it is really like for new families was the most important thing to do.
>
> There were club representatives present that day that I am still in touch with now. Some recognised the cultural barriers that had prevented clubs from taking the fan perspective and shared those difficulties and that led the League to reflect and offer the idea to clubs of a structured season long programme where every club (not just 15 of them) would receive data from a real family visitor (1) at the start of the season and then again (2) later on to see what progress had been made. (Mark Bradley's experience).

In the first couple of seasons of the scheme, authentic families were recruited (all from your professor's network, most of whom were already customer experience professionals and also keen on football). What became important was to find people who could be objective and who could also deal with some of the challenges a first trip to the football might bring. So, for example, we made sure that, in every family group, there was at least one person who had previous experience attending a game, while we ensured that others in the group compiled the report. This meant that every family knew how to ensure they experienced every touch point and did not, for example, miss out on a trip to the club shop because the kids wanted to go inside.

In the first couple of the years, feedback was also provided on the experience of families coming to games as supporters of the visiting team, but it was felt (and the clubs were the major voice in determining the course of action) that we should focus on the new family 'home supporter' experience.

Over the course of the first 10 seasons of the scheme, several minor changes were made. A smaller, more experienced team of assessors was created, once we had a clear picture of what the experience *should be*. Many of those assessors still support the programme many years later and are often amazed at the changes clubs have made.

The EFL is keen to ensure that clubs get the best out of the scheme; so, they review it regularly, take formal and informal feedback from clubs and allow them to steer the

direction of the programme (it is in itself a great example of taking a customer-led approach, as the clubs are the League's customers too).

As the vision of what a family attending their first game became clearer, the assessment documentation evolved to reflect that, taking into account the increasing expectations as, during the course of the 14 years of the programme, social media has established itself, smartphones are now the main way of purchasing items and that the idea of carrying cash is starting to become less common.

In addition to this, recognition and benchmarking have also become bigger elements of the scheme, to reflect the need to base decision-making on factual evidence and to make it easy for clubs to know where the best practice is so they can go and attend another club as a fan and see what they are doing.

Perhaps the best way to show the value of the scheme is not just to focus on the estimated 6 million more children attending matches after its first ten seasons but on what it teaches us about enacting change in football settings

Your professor has met a CEO of a cricket team recently. He had recently joined the club after working in football for more than two decades. His view was that the biggest problem with change is that businesses enact a change and then expect things to have changed significantly in just a few months. 'It should be at least a 5-year programme' he opined. 'Because until it becomes the 'way we do things', it won't lead to any real change.'

The EFL Family Excellence programme is now into its 15th season[12] and, in spite of the challenges presented by the pandemic in 2020, continues to be well supported by the clubs, with record levels achieving the expected status.

The clubs who embraced it in the early years, like Cardiff City, Huddersfield Town, Middlesbrough, Doncaster Rovers, Norwich City and Queens Park Rangers, have become centres of best practice themselves; and even those where resistance was observed back in the first few seasons of the scheme now recognise its validity, to the extent that it has now been recognised as a 'best practice' scheme in the wider sports industry[13].

The principles of the scheme are now to be seen in schemes across Europe, in women's football and men's football at all levels of the game. We are still learning, though and, while this offers Leagues and National Associations a useful path to creating change and

[12] For more information, read "EFL Clubs highlight importance of family" on https://www.efl.com/news/2020/september/efl-clubs-highlight-importance-of-family/
[13] For more information, read "EFL Family Excellence scheme earns recognition at Sports Business Awards" on https://www.efl.com/news/2018/june/efl-family-excellence-scheme-earns-recognition-at-sports-business-awards/

improvement in its present form, it will be interesting to see how the concept of 'external professional Fan Experience assessments' evolves in the future.

Exercise:

You are the CEO of a League with two divisions of 12 clubs each. 40% of the clubs are located within 15 kilometres of the country's capital, where your office is based.

Anecdotally, you know that the experience of disabled fans is poor or at least inconsistent. You currently have no real data on the situation, but the board of the League insists that the situation be improved, not just because they wish to make the league more diverse, equal and accessible, but because they also want to ensure that new Government regulations about disabled access are adhered to and that the League is not sanctioned or admonished for poor performance.

These regulations will come into place immediately, but organisations will have 3 years to demonstrate adherence. How could a mystery shopping programme be part of the solution? Describe how you would use such an approach to support an improvement in disabled fans' experiences.

References

Brustia, A. (2017, 20 December). Seven Principles to Improve your Customer Experience Multifarious Consultancy. https://experience.multifarious.co/7-key-principles-to-improve-your-customer-experience/

Burkus, D. (2018). How to Brainstorm Properly. *Psychology Today.* https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/creative-leadership/201811/how-brainstorm-properly

Continuous Improvement Tools and Techniques. (n. d.). *Planview*. https://www.planview.com/resources/articles/continuous-improvement-tools-techniques/

Force Field Analysis: Analysing the Pressures for and Against Change. (2020). *Mindtools*. https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_06.htm

Osborn, A. (1979). *Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures of Creative Problem-Solvi*ng. Charles Scribner's Sons

Richardson, C. (2020, October). Unpublished interview conducted by Mark Bradley [Phone interview].

The Guiding Principles of Recognition. (n. d.). [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://hr.umich.edu/sites/default/files/guiding-principles-of-recognition.pdf

What is a KPI? Measure your performance against key business objectives. (2020). *Klipfolio.* https://www.klipfolio.com/resources/articles/what-is-a-key-performance-indicator#KPIeffective