

Module 4. People & Culture

Unit 4.1

4.1.1 Why does culture trump strategy when it comes to engagement? ('Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast.')

As has been stated on many occasions in these studies, Fan Engagement is about understanding, protecting and growing the fan's emotional investment, commitment and/or bond.

We have also set out the benefits of this approach: from tangible factors such as the attraction and retention of more fans and related transactions that directly influence revenue generation streams for the club to the more intangible ones including positive 'word of mouth'; a more forgiving and understanding approach to the club's performance and a likelihood to become more involved in club initiatives, including volunteering, for example.

We have shown how key strategic dimensions can be central too. Protecting the club's natural intrinsic values and using them to guide decision-making can ensure that the club's individual personalities and characteristics shine, so that people choose to follow or remain based not just on a winning team, but on the fact that they felt part of something different, bigger or special.

Another important factor is executing the fan experience well, to ensure that fans of different types and with different needs, find the match day easy to enjoy, full of social opportunities, entertainment and activities and with 'magic moments'. The challenges that lie ahead in the post-Covid 'new normal' will require a fundamental shift of attitude, because even the most loyal fans may be tempted to stream games or watch them on TV, because of health or economic concerns. Delivering an engaging fan experience can help clubs survive and thrive, while collecting feedback and using it in a Kaizen-style approach of continuous improvement which will also make sure that the 'fan' is at the heart of the improvements you make too.

We have also shown the power of structured dialogue and consultation and argued that, whether or not fans of your club prefer outright fan ownership; part-ownership or socio-ownership (where the club is owned by individuals, but the structures and processes are in place to guide decision-making and adherence to values) the voice of the fan is vital in ensuring the club is aware of issues and can address them to the fan base's satisfaction.

This module looks at the fourth of these dimensions: people engagement and culture. It will explain these terms and show how clubs of different sizes can create an internal environment where Fan Engagement can flourish, while explaining the difficulties clubs will have in establishing it where a supportive culture is absent.

We will consider clubs of different sizes and, for example, show how being a small club with a small FT team may, in fact, give you an advantage in cultural terms.

First of all, we need to define culture in the context of businesses, customers and fans.

In pure organisational terms, culture is the unique social and psychological environment created in an organisation by the values, behaviours, activities and rituals that characterise it. The idea of company culture has been around for nearly 70 years now (Jaques, 1951). By describing, analysing and observing the development of company behaviours, Dr Jaques was able to identify the factors which made up an effective organisational culture.

These were refined by Jaques (1998) and Flamholts (2001) and what was remarkable over the intervening five decades was that the core components had altered very little. In fact, there has been general agreement on what makes up a positive organisational culture for a long period of time now.

Most models of organisational culture include:

- The positive treatment and understanding of customers
- The positive treatment and understanding of people (employees)
- Performance standards, targets and accountability throughout
- Innovation and change
- The emphasis on service delivery
- Leadership styles that are supportive

Most recently, the following explanation was given of organisational culture:

An organisational culture is based on shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, and written and unwritten rules that have been developed over time and are considered valid and are viewed as the shared norms and values of individuals and groups within an organisation. (The Business Dictionary, 2018)

Organisational strategy has also been consciously pursued by companies over the decades, where objectives are set and the resources, plans, systems and processes to

support them are described, along with milestones in place to monitor and measure performance, but it is inarguable that the 'human factor' –the organisational culture– has emerged as the ultimate indicator of success.

The business and management guru Peter Drucker is associated with the phrase 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'¹ as this phrase conveys the principle that, regardless of how good your strategy is, unless there is a positive working environment –sometimes called 'the way we do things'– performance is likely to be constrained.

In the context of business, if the employees are not excited and motivated by the company's 'vision' then that lack of passion is likely to be visible in the way they execute it, i.e. the way they serve the customers.

The Internal Service Profit Chain theory illustrated just how important culture and people engagement was in the overall pursuit of positive business outcomes, because it showed how employee satisfaction was linked to customer satisfaction and, thus, profitability (Heskett et al, 1994).

In fact, the better your working environment and organisational culture is, the higher the levels of employee satisfaction you will have. Their 'buy in' to the vision and culture means that the service is executed without constraints, leading to more engaged customers who, in turn, buy more. On the other hand, companies who do not prioritise customer service and support it with a strong positive culture, will lose money. A UK consumer report titled 'Stupid Company' (n.d.) highlighted the millions of pounds being lost as a result of customers taking their business elsewhere.

As customers, we are at the 'sharp end' of this formula, as we can infer the characteristics and strength of an organisation's culture by the quality of service we receive.

I wrote what is believed to be the world's first customer service travelogue and, over the period of the preceding twelve months when I recorded my family's actual service experiences, it was very easy to judge the strength of a company's culture by the quality of the customer experience it provided. (Bradley, 2005)

Another undeniable fact about culture in organisations is that culture happens regardless of whether or not the management team have planned it that way. Compare the business where employees meet and talk with each other about the opportunities they have seen in customer interactions with the one where employees restrict their views to conversations in the washrooms or canteen. Which organisation adapts more quickly to customer needs?

¹ There is no agreed origin for this quote



Contrast the business where the CEO often spends time with customer-facing employees, even including serving them him or herself to demonstrate solidarity; to check service conditions and to hear directly from them with the CEO who never leaves the office and who only spends time with his or her peers.

When Mark Bradley was working as a lead assessor for the Unisys / Management Today Service Excellence Awards in the late 1990s, it was considered 'best practice' for a leader to balance his or her time between his or her own peers, executives in different organisations (inside and outside of their business sector), and his or her employees and customers.

At the time, one of the businesses recognised for its service excellence and excellent organisational culture was Rackspace², an IT hosting company, based in London.

An analysis of this company's approach to creating and sustaining a positive, customer-driven culture highlighted a remarkable level of innovation and underlined the abovementioned theories about organisational culture and the impact of motivated and engagement employees on the customer experience.

Here are some of the things the company did in the early 2000s:

- Collected feedback continuously and analysed it in an integrated fashion through regular 'open book' and 'cut the crap' meetings (characterised by honesty and prioritization).
- Hand in Black Books –for new starters to write their own perceptions of the organisation in. This means that they benefited from not having 'gone native' and had the possibility to come up with truly objective comments, fed directly back to the MD in a lunch, that is held on the employee's first day and then several weeks later, when they've had time to fill their little notebook
- Conduct 'A Day in the Life' programme to help multi-skill employees, where individuals shadow others in order to get a 360° view of the business.
- Have peer reviews designed by the employees themselves.
- Create an employee-designed work wear, which builds the team and the sense of pride and belonging.
- Dress Up Fridays – which is a nice switch on the maudlin conservatism of the 'dress down' day.
- Give a presentation skills training.
- Share life lessons dedicated to supporting people outside of work.
- Create quarterly customer forums to identify what could be done better.

² Official website: www.rackspace.com



- Hang posters listing the strengths of each person and also ten things 'you don't know about me' to build the team and to build personalities.
- Have a 100-day time bank for people to work for good causes.
- Impart a continuous leadership programme with ten employees who are given the opportunity to embark on a management development course.
- Make multiple benchmarking visits to other organisations undertaken by employees who must provide evidence so that the outputs can be converted into learning and put into practice.
- Have a no voice mail rule: everyone works in the same building so if you want to speak to someone, you walk over to them and do exactly that.
- Create an initial customer insight survey completed after new customer's first 30 days (so new customer's first impressions are captured and acted upon).

It will not come as a surprise for you to learn that the levels of motivation and engagement at this business were extremely high.

The opportunities for football are clear. By creating a positive fan-focused culture in the club, based around its identity and culture, it should be possible to lift and sustain levels of Fan Engagement.

Exercise

Reflect on some of your most recent transactions as a customer 'outside of football' and describe (1) a physical and (2) an online transaction you made.

What could you determine about the culture of each of these businesses/organisations? Which had the strongest customer culture? Why do you say that?

4.1.2 Making Fan Engagement 'the way we do things'

In this theme, we will consider the importance of creating a culture of Fan Engagement in football and, specifically clubs, leagues and National Associations.

As we have seen from its impact on business and also from the opportunities we have identified in this certificate, having a culture of Fan Engagement may bring many benefits, from increased retention of ticket-purchasing fans and more forgiving and engaged followers to a rapid transformation in external perceptions: a barrier to so much progress in world football.

However, getting from where we are now to where we want to be is not as easy as simply deciding to do so. Culture change is a complex and difficult area, because we are talking

about human psychology and behaviours rather than business processes and systems. If a computer programme is not providing the right results, we can address the problem by re-coding it. Still, human behaviour, especially at work, is something much more difficult to change.

There are many reasons as to why the attempts at culture change may fail and they are mostly to do with the 'people' factor. They include the often short tenure of National Association, League and Club leaders. Many do enjoy consistent leadership over the years, but if the football industry reflects the rest of the business world in leadership tenure, then you can expect the senior team to move on every six years (Lyons, 2017).

There are other factors too. It takes time to change the way people behave. It does not happen overnight. Football is an industry with a reputation of wanting to change things quickly. Team Managers and Coaches are often removed after a run of defeats, before their ideas have time to embed themselves. So, if a club is embarking on a culture change programme and there are no quick results, it is possible that it will be shelved.

Culture change must be modelled by the senior team. The phrase 'walk the talk' encourages leaders not just to talk about good practice, but to model it themselves. When a club owner talks about treating fans well, but criticises staff in front of their co-workers, there is no positive outcome. They say one thing but do another.

As TV shows like *The Office* show, the area of organisational culture is littered with catch phrases and words, often characterised by the contrast between their usage and lack of evidence (with the attendant opportunities for humour). As a colleague once said, nothing pinned to a wall ever lives for long. If you only encourage the right culture through posters and big words (and not actions) then nothing is going to change.

Fear of change is also going to be a barrier to culture change. In actual fact, we are always told that change is a part of life, but the psychological response to change at work is often to deny it –to fear it. Why is this the case? Why would something capable of bringing positive change be rejected by co-workers?

David Rock, author of the *Handbook of Neuroleadership*, explains that uncertainty registers as an error, gap, or tension in the brain: something that must be corrected before one can feel comfortable again. Not knowing what will happen next can be profoundly debilitating because it can overload cognitive resources, which can diminish memory, undermine performance, and disengage people from the present. Maslanka (2017)

In fact, it is believed that only one in three culture change efforts succeed (Dewar & Keller, 2009), so it is unsurprising that many leaders simply enact change by telling people what to do, rather than considering the benefits of supporting culture change positively: by role-modelling the right behaviours; presenting the benefits (for customers, fans and employees); acknowledging that people will need support to get through it and supporting them by granting them training and coaching.

In a small club, this is probably easier to achieve, as the leader and the team will be working together and seeing each other many times every day. The staff will infer from the leader's behaviours what matters and, over time, they will adapt to that. In the case of a larger club, league or national association, this process is more difficult because of the layers of organisational hierarchy; the infrequency with which co-workers may interact with leaders and the potential for the business to be spread across different geographical locations.

So, what are the key factors a leader in a club, league or national association needs to focus on if a positive culture is to be created and maintained and fears of change addressed positively?

Our experience confirms that, unless fan engagement is a core business activity, supported by an appropriate 'customer-driven' culture, there is little chance of success in terms of fan engagement or increased numbers. Therefore, 'leadership' is vital.

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

Succession planning is important, even in a very small club. It is essential that the process is not only based around experience and aptitude, but that it is also based on the values of the club and the culture it espouses.

Fear of change is natural, but there are ways in which a forward-looking leader in football can help to address this, an industry that, in many league systems, operates promotion and relegation: big-style change!

Pursuing sporting glory clearly has its downsides and, whether that is 'relegation and promotion', the need to be agile in the wider environment is vital, in order to avoid the risk of losing a franchise or simply of losing attendances due to poor on-field displays.

What most sports businesses do is simply 'react' as they are unaware of the things leading business organisations do to create intrinsic agility. So, it is recommended that leaders in football foster embrace the change by engaging in the following activities:

- Constructive criticism becomes part of 'the way we do things'. This is a big one in football as, according to your professor's experience, leaders in football generally do not create an environment where criticism is accepted. In fact, there was an example in one European League last season, a club owner instructed the fans of the club to vote a particular way in a national election. Another insisted that the staff cleaned his car. Such approaches are unlikely to foster a spirit of engagement, let alone one of challenge.
- Leaders provide support to employees to be able to deal with change. This might be as simple as holding discussions about the challenges the club is dealing with and inviting comments and questions.
- Leaders capture and share knowledge and expertise, so that employees are up to date with the changing 'sporting' or 'market' environment.

In all likelihood, the most positive activity will be to talk about employees' concerns and worries, so regular one on one coaching and personal development sessions will contribute to creating the right culture.

4.1.3 The role of NA/Club employees in delivering fan engagement

We have explored the concepts of culture and change and how clubs might incorporate some of the good practices and knowledge from other business sectors. We are now going to consider the role of club co-workers and volunteers in delivering fan engagement.

In an interview with Kenneth Cortsen, the Danish sports finance expert (Cortsen, 2020), we can point out one particular excellent choice of words that is so relevant to this section of the certificate. We were talking about the value of Fan Engagement and Kenneth observed that, if you were welcoming friends to your home, you would do everything you could to make sure that they felt welcomed and that they had the best possible experience. To put it simply, you would give them your best.

It's true, isn't it? You'd clean the house. You'd put out some fresh flowers. You'd make sure that you offer them the best food and drinks and the best dinner that you know how to prepare.

You wouldn't leave the house unclean; offer your guests processed food; refuse to talk to your guests, unless they had done something you didn't like ... the analogy is clear. If football professes to value its fans as much as it does ('football without fans is nothing') then why do we treat them so poorly?

Fans often tell us that they find it so strange that their love for the club should be met so often with so much indifference (and occasional hostility) from the people that they encounter from the club and that they meet on a match day.

While not all clubs treat their fans this way, it is inarguable that the stereotypical treatment of fans is not positive and, while we have examined the origins of this, there is no longer any excuse not to engage properly, as the benefits of doing so are proven to be positive – and shown to be so throughout these courses.

As we have shown, positive behaviours from co-workers and fan facing staff create fans whose emotional investment in the club is strengthened.

The first question to ask is: are clubs (and football authorities) all sufficiently self-aware? Do they understand the perceptions of the people they serve? Is research undertaken to identify the issues influencing fan attitudes?

In our work, the importance of match day staff and the way they interact with fans always emerges as an important factor. This is especially important in the retention of new fans, as the levels of engagement of match day staff will form a key part of their first impressions.

In the EFL Supporters Survey (2019), when asked to rate the importance of different aspects of the match day experience, the attitude of club staff and stewards came in fourth position, only beaten by atmosphere, safety and stadium facilities (comfort, view, toilets, etc.). So, when considering a Fan Engagement strategy, the role of match day employees and volunteers is vitally important.

So, how exactly can they enhance a match day experience?

Engaged match day employees and volunteers can make a huge difference to the experience of a match day fan, with opportunities right across the match day 'touch points'. While most purchases of tickets are done online (except at non-league and local community club level), fans will often have a specific query. The person they reach at the club and the experience they receive will often seal their first perceptions.

When we undertake an assessment of the 'first time fan' experience, we always ask our visitors to call the club with a specific query. Just like the tweet we send, this is a great opportunity for the club to respond positively. The difference provided by an engaged team member can be significant. A fan may call to ask about purchasing tickets for a family group. While you hope to get the basic information, the employee who picks up on this and makes specific recommendations based on that family's specific needs, will make a very positive first impression.

They may suggest tickets in the Family Stand. They may ask if the purchaser would like some extra match day information to be emailed. They may introduce their 'first time fan certificate' (as a few clubs have introduced) and suggest that any kids attending their first game sign up for it. They may say 'I hope you enjoy the game. I'm sure you will, so perhaps you'd consider membership afterwards. I'll email you my contact details in case I can fix that for you.'

This is one of the areas that national associations and clubs must carefully consider especially when they have contracted out their ticket sales function to a third-party supplier. In our experience, these parties often do not have the local knowledge that new fans (and others with important needs) desire. It may suit the costs of the partnership to keep calls to a minimum, but if opportunities are missed to provide additional information, then this can damage levels of engagement.

A club that runs its ticketing function itself will always be able to provide the extra information that fans need, whether related to the match day experience itself or other factors, including recommending local eateries, hotels or visitor attractions.

Parking attendees find themselves in another key position. An engaged one who smiles and welcomes the fan to the game while issuing the permit or who makes an attempt to connect with the passengers, will always contribute to making it a more memorable match day experience. Once, an away fan arrived at a game at Birmingham City in his car. The parking attendants noticed that he had a puncture in one of the tyres, so they offered to put on the spare tyre while he and his friends were at the match.

If there is one role with which football's traditional 'arm's length' treatment of fans is associated, it is that of the steward. We know that the prime function of a steward is safety, but that does not mean that he or she cannot help in the engagement efforts with fans. They may have to practice security checks. For example, there may be local intelligence from security forces suggesting that fans may attempt to bring pyrotechnical devices into the stadium, so searches must take place. Given that these devices can be small enough to be hidden in someone's pocket or wallet, the search process may be invasive.

If the steward explains what needs to be done and why, in a positive, engaging language, then inviting a fan to let the steward inspect his or her pockets and wallet could be done in a way that doesn't antagonise the fan and also maintains a positive environment.

When the steward 'lunges in', demanding to see the away fan's wallet without a word of explanation, the fan is entitled to add that club to his or her personal 'blacklist'. The risk is that he or she shares this experience with other travelling away supporters. If each one is spending €40-50 at the club, an increase in negative word of mouth could be costly.

Of course, it is acknowledged that supporter behaviour can be a widespread problem in many parts of the world, but when stewards are there to protect other fans, it is possible to undertake positive searches.

Demeanour and presentation are important. When we undertake an assessment, we provide our experienced visitors with a scale of personal engagement so that, when observing interactions between club representatives and fans, their demeanour can be measured.

What we are looking for is positive body language and eye contact, smiles and pro-action. Rather than waiting to be asked a question, they are out front making conversation. Rather than leaning against a wall listening to the music on their phones, they are approaching groups to wish them a good game and suggest appropriate activities. 'Do you know there's a kids' room in the South Stand? There's loads for kids to do there! Do you know how to get there?'

For retail and refreshments staff, speed of service is what is required most, until something goes wrong. In this context, resourceful, pro-active staff will shine. If a product isn't available, the server knows where it can be purchased. If something goes wrong, they fan gets something for free. If a family needs help carrying food back to their seats, a server calls over a steward who is only too pleased to help.

One of the ways in which these challenges can be addressed is with the use of 'here to help' teams. These are often students, volunteers or specially recruited co-workers whose aim is to create a welcoming and enjoyable environment for fans. They may have lanyards with additional detail for the more complicated query, but they are recruited to smile and be friendly. Over the years, we have visited many clubs in the UK and Europe where we have witnessed the engagement power of this approach.

At fourth tier English club Exeter City³, for example, they employ a team of fans: volunteers with many years' experience in supporting the club. This proud team is distributed around

³ www.exetercityfc.co.uk

the stadium and their job is to interact with fans; welcome them; answer any questions and make sure that their visit to St James Park is a memorable experience.

Figure 1: Team of fans interacting with other fans



English club Exeter City official website, posters category (n.d.) Retrieved from www.extercityfc.co.uk. Screenshot by author.

For new fans and those with families, in particular, their impact can be transformational. It also follows that club representatives inside the stadium (such as stewards placed inside or at the front of stands or tribunes) have the opportunity to make a connection, albeit from a distance.

“I have yet to see a group of stewards perform YMCA like the team cleaning the diamond at the Yankees Stadium in the Bronx, New York, but I have seen stewards react entertainingly to fans identifying their lookalikes or similarly adding to a positive atmosphere” (Mark Bradley experience).

For people who have listened to negative external perceptions of football, having this experience can overturn the way they perceive the club or national association.

UEFA's Supporter Liaison Officer Programme (UEFA, 2017) is another way in which club representatives can transform the match day experience through the power of their presence. As we have shown in other units in this certificate, we now have SLOs providing advice to visiting fans, looking after younger fans, being a permanent presence at games and always offering advice to fans. While liaising between fans, clubs and security forces may have been the motivation for the programme's creation, their impact on levels of fan engagement is clear.

Club employees and volunteers can therefore have a powerful, even transformational effect on the experiences of fans, both at club and national association level, helping to create the conditions for stronger levels of engagement: retention and growth.

Exercise

Undertake an assessment of the club representatives you encounter at the next football match that you attend.

- In general, at which 'touch points' did you encounter the highest levels of personal engagement?
- What best practices did you see?
- How could this club improve its levels of match day personal engagement?

4.1.4 Creating an employee engagement plan

Creating an employee engagement plan is vital in modern business in order to meet the needs of two key stakeholders: (1) the customer and (2) the employee, since as well as ensuring that the wider vision is executed by customer-facing teams, businesses want to ensure that their best-performing employees wish to stay and, like a high performing football player, not sign for another team!

We see this as one of the key 'gaps' in global fan engagement and where football lags behind progressive growing businesses in other sectors. To put it simply, people work better when they feel good about themselves and the cultural legacy of the way football has operated in the past works against this.

When you consider the approaches that are required to value employees and to create the conditions for them to thrive, to execute the club or national association vision and to deliver high levels of Fan Engagement, several key areas of focus emerge. These tend to be reflected in the engagement plans of successful customer-facing organisations outside of football too.

In our experience, what follows are the prime activities to include in your football club or national association employee engagement plan.

First, ensure that people are recruited on the basis of their attitude and their fit with the club's vision, values and DNA. One of the best examples of this can be seen in Zappos, a US shoe retailer.

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.com⁴:

⁴ No longer accessible / no reference available

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", by telling newbies, "if you quit today, we will pay you for the amount of time you have worked, plus a \$ 2000 bonus." A Business Week reporter interviewed Hsieh recently. He says only 2% to 3% of the people take the offer. The other 97% say no deal—they choose the job over the instant cash. (Business Week, 2009)

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. 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.

For the next element you need to ensure that you build on this fit/attitude with the right skills and knowledge to exceed fan expectations. Many clubs now invest in Fan Experience training for employees and we will focus on the particular competences in the next theme.

Recognition and reward are important. By this, we do not just mean salary or pay. Employees need to be motivated and one of the best ways of doing this is to ensure that the club or national association recognises, rewards and champions those people who epitomise the club or national association identity or values and who create and deliver value for fans (and other stakeholders).

Another area where we have seen rapid development in recent years is the move to delegate freedom, decision making and authority to customer-facing employees. This is one of the ways in which the UK steak restaurant Hawksmoor has built its brand. Not only does it serve the best steak in Britain, but it also gives its team members the freedom to solve issues themselves, in the moment, for their guests (Mark Bradley experience).

Fans don't want to have to wait for someone to 'speak to my manager'. They want instant resolution. The club who can deliver this has a clear advantage when it comes to creating strong levels of Fan Engagement.

Just as we do with fans, it is important to monitor the levels of engagement of our employees, volunteers and contracted staff too. For, if they have issues or problems, these will negatively infect end-customer experiences. In fact, it could be said that responsive fan-facing teams fulfil the socio-ownership ideal: where fans 'emotionally' own the club but are reassured that the club has the processes and systems in place and also displays the behaviours required to achieve this.

Finally, those clubs who understand that people work better when they feel good about themselves, put into place the levers and actions to achieve this. You've just experienced a very busy period where staff had to work extra hours for free to deal with ticket sales for a major cup game. So, you do something in the moment to show the team you value them. This might involve taking them out for a pizza or surprising them with a shopping voucher, so their living costs are cut.

Consider the following abridged blog (Young, 2020) and the way it describes the challenges of building the right culture at a football club or national association and it becomes clear that having a strong employee engagement plan will go a long way supporting this.

Before the lockdown curtailed all travel plans curtailed, I was at a meeting in Switzerland ... on the subject of the football fan experience and we tackled ways to improve the match day at stadiums and thus, encourage more fans to attend games in countries all over Europe.

The ideas were plentiful, and very workable, but my primary concern –so much that I mentioned it twice– was culture. Not a lack of it; every association, league and club has one, but that this culture needed to be *right* one or otherwise, the rest of the potential improvements were not worth implementing. I said this mainly to mitigate against pointless efforts and wasted time. Yes, the landscape has changed a lot in the ensuing six weeks (with the Covid19 pandemic), but one day football will return again and this will become an important debate once more; arguably with more relevance than ever.

Culture, for me and to try to simplify it, can be described as the 'way things are done around here.' It's not a trained attitude or behaviour but rather a learned one. In other words, if you began working at a small business, large corporation or even a football club, you'd pick up on these 'ways' naturally and in spite of what people might say.

In a job I started in 2002, I was asked to spend half a day with the Head of Sales and half a day with the Head of Manufacturing as a form of induction. 'You'll like it here' they both said, 'it's the least political company I've ever known.' They must not have known many, as the company was one of the most 'political companies imaginable and the culture was one of backstabbing, untruths and double standards, even if the company slogan pointed towards one big happy family.

In that kind of culture, it's hard to do anything constructive, everything feels like trying to push water uphill. Note, I don't say the *wrong* culture –after all, who am I or anyone else to define *wrong*– but a culture that is not conducive to change or

one not ready or able to listen to or look at other approaches. A culture might be perfectly acceptable in the eye of the beholder, and that's fine, but it's also not an organisation or body that is worth trying to work with on new ventures and different strategies. As hard as it is, in my line of work, to walk away from someone needing help, there is sometimes a moment when it's prudent to diplomatically agree to 'come back when the conditions are different.'

Does this matter in football? Well, as with any organisation, a culture that they don't recognise or understand can be very dangerous. Worse still, if they think an entirely different one exists then this also leads to problems.

That's the thing about culture, it's almost invisible to the naked eye; often only seen explicitly in the way an organisation acts in extreme situations. When AS Roma players deferred their wages for four months, or helped in campaigns to find missing children, they do so as part of something bigger, maybe sub-consciously. It is not a directive from above, telling them what to do, but more a case of them doing what they want to do. Because it inherently feels right. It's the way they do things.

There are always outliers who are counter to the culture. That is why, even in the very worst of organisations, there will be great people doing what they do in spite of the culture. But they tend to stand out for their differences, and most are brought into line quickly if at all possible. *'That's not the way we do things here.'*

Strangely, fans (own and rivals) pick up on a club's culture very quickly, sometimes in one visit and before a ball is kicked. It's incredible how fans can work out what a club 'stands for' even if the club and its hierarchy doesn't know itself.

The significance of this is also much deeper than the club (or any organisation for that matter) knows. If I arrive at a football stadium, and the first person I see that represents the club (usually a car park attendant or a steward outside the stadium) is miserable, rude, disengaged or indifferent towards fans there is a very good chance that it's not just the individual who is these things, but the club too, or large parts of it.

That sets the tone and forms impressions. It may be enough to put me off them instantly, or to form lasting opinions that are hard to change. It will shape my relationship with them in the way I engage and communicate, how I refer to them when talking to others. And lots more besides.

Usually, culture is driven from the very top. The owners, leaders and other influencers will often display very similar traits (sometimes overtly, often not). I

once consulted at a company where the boss walked in, chose the route that took him past the least number of people, never said a word to anyone and then, once in their glass walled office in the far corner, said to me 'right, how can we get these people [pointing outside] to be more friendly to each other and work together as a team?'

The power of unspoken gestures is startling. This empowers and permits such attitudes and behaviours everywhere, in all staff at all levels. To see for yourself, once the lockdown is lifted, listen to how many staff at one famous UK sports retailer openly discuss customers and them potentially *stealing* stuff. And while culture can be changed, the bad news is that the change is usually driven from the top too. So those in positions of power have to *want* it to change. And it takes time to change – you can't just introduce a new one when you choose to.

A culture is, therefore, another potential hidden killer or at least a relationship-spoiler. Organisations can be unaware they are damaging (or destroying) their reputation and relationships right up until the point that it's too late. What they do when they don't say a word can speak volumes about them.

Culture takes so long to change because it relies on so many smaller things changing first. Anyone who defines a solution to a problem as *culture change* is really saying that it's organisational change on a much larger scale; culture is just the intangible part at the end that will automatically change if the rest does. It's not an overnight process. There's no magic button. If a football club wants a better culture now, they need to start at least twelve months ago.

This is where football comes back into it. As the world's largest participation and spectator sport, it will have a role in the rebuilding of people's lives. Clubs aren't just a football team; they are often representative of the heartbeat of a local community. The owners and leaders have great power and great responsibility.

If they get this right, it doesn't necessarily follow that their actions will be a 100% guaranteed guide to the culture at the club moving forward, but it's a good barometer. (Young, 2020)

Exercise

Having read the above theme, we would like you to address the challenge of creating a culture in a large club, where a new ownership team has just arrived.

You're going to brief the new owner on the club's history, identity and core values. Suggest three things that the new ownership team could do to get employees of the club to improve the way they relate to fans.

Unit 4.2

4.2.1 Key competences for match day colleagues

This section continues to explore employee engagement: a strategic dimension which, alongside identity and purpose, fan experience, dialogue and consultation, combines to create a foundation for building Fan Engagement in your club or national association.

As we have studied in previous themes, the customer experience (fan experience) is a critical point in the club/fan relationship, where the fans can infer aspects of the club's culture from the quality of the interaction. Get an indifferent stare from more than one steward and you know that engagement isn't part of the culture of this club. Find that when you call the national association to enquire about tickets, you get one-word answers and no interest in you as a fan or in developing the relationship.

We know that this lack of focus on employee engagement has its origins in the historical tendency of football to keep fans 'at arm's length' and, while we acknowledge that this is changing and clubs and national associations are becoming more aware of the need to develop good relationships with fans, it is evident that football has much more to do to make this intent part of the way it does things.

If you review the approaches to branding, marketing and fan engagement from new or expansion sports, you can see how much focus there is on delivering an engaging experience. The USA is a good place to start and, to give you an example of the higher standards of engagement practised there, we would like to introduce to you Pete Winemiller. Pete sadly passed away from lymphoma a few years ago, but the reaction to his death showed just how much his work at NBA team Oklahoma Thunder was recognised and appreciated by fans.

As we have argued, there are lots of reasons why match day employees and volunteers do not approach the levels of engagement and customer service you will see in other sports and leisure businesses. They include the difficulty of dealing with large numbers of people in a short period of time, being a contract worker and, therefore, having little connection with the host club or simply not being trained, motivated or encouraged to make a difference. Again, all of this has its origins in the complacency we often see in the football's attitude to change. Why make the effort when people are only here to see the team win?

People are often also expected to work very long hours, turnover can be high and those who arguably matter most to Fan Engagement (game day casual staff) are often not supported in any great depth. The work undertaken by Pete Winemiller at Oklahoma

Thunder is therefore one of the best examples we can find of a comprehensive match day staff engagement programme (Carlson, 2017).

Pete was the Senior Vice President of Guest Relations at Oklahoma Thunder. His philosophy, quoted by many of the eulogies posted after his death, was 'business goes where it's invited and stays where it's appreciated'.

He was obsessive about levels of customer service and team engagement, even including the number of guest relations on the disposable coffee cups of a game day so that fans and employees could feedback on the experience. Pete embedded these behaviours into the team with a simply mnemonic: CLICK.

Each letter spells out how to connect with fans.

- **C**ommunicate courteously.
- **L**isten to learn, not to respond.
- **I**nitiate immediately.
- **C**reate connections.
- **K**now your stuff.

I met Pete in Manchester in 2011 and it was clear that he was well appraised of the research into service excellence and the idea of placing employee engagement at the start of the success story. He knew that, in order to grow a business through customer engagement, you must start with your own people.

As the Internal Service Profit Chain confirms, for each point increase in employee engagement, there is a direct correlation to improved experiences, improved customer engagement and increased retention, advocacy and growth.

Pete's CLICK mnemonic describes the key competences that match day team members must display and these, it would be advised, are appropriate for any team at any football club (Mark Bradley's experience)

In our 15 years of undertaking fan experience assessments for both games, men and women, at every level, we almost always find one person at every club who espouses Pete's beliefs. They often do this alone, self-motivated, without the support and often even the awareness of the club where they are working.

Why? Because they love the club or the job and what it means to them. These are important competences too, because they can help to create the conditions for 'going the extra mile'; delivering 'magic moments' or otherwise making someone's day.

When Leeds Rhinos⁵, a famous Rugby League club from the north of England, opened two new stands in their famous Headingley Stadium in 2019, one of their first actions was to plan for and deliver a sequence of meetings with mixed groups of match day (and other) employees. People from right across the club sat together; exchanged their experiences and worked on creating a level of service that would be right for the fans.

What Sian Jones, Head of Customer Experience at Leeds Rhinos, wanted to do was to create the motivation, the tools and skills to deliver a level of service to fans that would recognise the thing that made the club different: its fans' outstanding loyalty to the club even in times of very poor on-pitch performance. (Jones, 2020)

So, while both Sian Jones and Pete Winemiller's approaches were characterised by a focus on the quality of the interaction with fans, other characteristics and competences were recognized, such as the idea that the club or national association employees need to support growing levels of Fan Engagement.

What you are looking for is someone who is going to act as an 'ambassador' for the club, not just someone delivering against a set of expectations. The clubs who lead on Fan Engagement are looking for people whose intrinsic motivation is to honour the club in every way. So, for most clubs and national associations, it is recommended that they look to recruit people who are fans of the club first.

As part of our work in football, we have collected detailed match day assessments from real supporters over a period of 15 years now and the topic of engaged employees, match day assistants and volunteers is never far from our minds, 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.

If we can address this inconsistency and move from 'cameos' to a consistently delivered level of service, characterised by people who truly understand what it is to be a fan, then levels of Fan Engagement at all clubs, regardless of their level of performance on the pitch, size or resources, will rise exponentially.

But to do that, we have to lift the profile of the match day volunteer or team member. Being conscious of the key competences for the role will be a good start.

⁵ www.therhinos.co.uk

Exercise

You are interviewing someone for the role of supervisor of your match day safety team and you want to ensure that the team delivers high levels of personal engagement at every game.

Consider this and previous themes and make a list of 5 questions you will ask to determine if this is the right person for the role.

4.2.2 Optimising colleague engagement: training, support and recognition

For this theme, where we explore how different sporting organisations create high levels of engagement in their match day teams, we are going to eavesdrop on a workshop. Rather than setting out the different approaches, we are going to be present at a workshop and then ask you, the student, to constructively criticise the approach taken by this particular club.

The workshop you're attending has been several weeks in preparation. The objective is to ensure that, for this new season, fans get the best possible experience so that, even when the club is going through difficult times (which it has recently), people look forward to attending games because the experience is so good.

We consider that in this club we do some good things. At every game our CEO stands near the main group of turnstiles, welcomes people and talks to them as they come in. Now and again, he's had a bit of abuse, especially when a big signing didn't turn out to be very good and has now left the club (and created a financial loss), but on the whole, fans seem to appreciate that she is there and is always happy to talk to them.

The club usually has attendances of around 15-20,000 and plays at the top tier. It's based in a large city where there is one rival team and several other large spectator sports.

The workshop itself wasn't a natural choice, because the senior team had examined lots of other methods of delivery, but they felt that getting people together was the best way to convey messages. The fact that there were more than 200 people involved (stewards, refreshments servers, retail employees, programme sellers, hospitality, kitchen and conference co-workers and the ticketing team) meant that the events needed to reflect the needs of people working during the week and those only working at weekends.

The senior team agreed the objectives: to hold interactive events where the employees themselves would discuss the context (with some external input) and then, in mixed

groups to allow everyone to know each other and to give people an appreciation of other people's challenges and roles, they would work through a series of questions to identify:

1. How important it is to 'go the extra mile' for fans and other match day visitors.
2. How to create special match day memories.
3. What gets in the way/makes it difficult to do this.
4. What the club can do to help to make it easier.
5. How the club could give the team the confidence to immediately act in the best interests of the fans.

To achieve this, three sessions were arranged: two in the evenings and one on a Saturday morning, shortly before the start of the new season. Each session would last no more than 90 minutes; food and drinks would be provided and those attending would receive a little 'thank you gift' for their efforts.

At each session there were 10 tables spread across one of the bigger hospitality areas. Around each table sat a mix of colleagues from different parts of the club. One of those present was elected spokesperson, while another would be the note taker.

To keep the participant conscious of the club and its identity, each table was given the name of a famous past or present player from the team. Most importantly, people were invited to come along 20 minutes before the actual session started so that they could socialise with the people facilitating the event greeting everyone personally as they arrived; registering their attendances and then moving from table to table to ensure everyone was comfortable.

Each session began with an introduction from the club's Head of Customer Experience. She is the one responsible for all fan-facing parts of the match day business: refreshments, retail and ticketing and, of course, was well known to everyone present. She was joined by an external facilitator –an expert in Fan Engagement, who was there to provide a different perspective; to talk about the principles of engagement and to share best practices from other clubs. Moreover, this external facilitator was there to provide a different perspective.

Following the short introduction, a quiz was held. The aim of the quiz was to ensure everyone knew about the history, identity and achievements of the club. To make it as enjoyable and participative as possible, it was run as a series of multiple choice questions, covering topics such as when the club was founded, who scored the most goals, who was the youngest player to appear for the first team and who was the captain of the women's team, etc.

The quiz also asked questions about the club's match day operations, including the cost of the new season's replica shirt; the name of the official website and the range of match day catering available. The aim of this quiz was to relax everyone, to create some laughter and competition and to set the scene for the workshop.

The next to appear was the CEO, who talked about the club's proud identity and how important it is to match performance on the pitch with a great experience off it. She pointed out of the window and across the car park to the club's Memorial Garden, the final resting place for many fans and a place where people would gather to remember their loved ones and their shared passion for the club.

The workshop continued by asking everyone to consider what we meant by a great customer experience and, it was generally agreed that this was about going 'beyond what is expected'. That, it was agreed, was something worth aiming for, but how would we do something different, something that would really stand out to the fans? To do this, the group needed to explore what made the club different and what made the fans different.

Having let the participants discuss this, the session was opened up to hear their observations. Many of the responses were things that defined other clubs, but when someone mentioned the fact that this club's fans had a reputation for being the most loyal in the league, people saw something that other clubs could not lay claim to.

'We need to do something special for our fans, because they deserve it more than any other group of fans' was one of the comments noted. So how do we do this?

The facilitator introduced the different match day touch points, including conferencing and banqueting and hospitality services and a discussion was held about the opportunities to 'go the extra mile' in the different roles in the club. Each table was then given time to identify the things they could do differently – things they could do that would really stand out – with the note taker writing down the ideas and, after a further ten minutes, each table's spokesperson would share the group's ideas.

At this point, the facilitator thanked everyone for their ideas and, one would imagine that might be the point to say something motivating and hope that people would go away, feel inspired and start to do things differently. This, of course, ignores the reality of trying to enact a culture change. Some jobs have little or no fan contact. What should the chef do? How does someone working in the back office do?

So, at this point, a further discussion was held with the questions 'what gets in the way?' and 'what will stop you from making the changes?' This was a critical juncture in the workshop as it allowed time for people to be honest. The fact that they were in mixed groups allowed them to talk more freely about their challenges and, while some issues

like the lack of support from a supervisor were to emerge later, many barriers were named and collected, including the lack of confidence, the lack of training, the lack of knowledge and, more than anything else, the feeling that you needed to have the permission of someone senior to 'go the extra mile for a fan'.

The facilitator asked the people on the workshop to describe the moments when they really enjoyed their jobs. What do you set out to do? What makes you feel good when you're working? What makes you feel bad? He asked people on the workshop to tell stories about how they've really made someone's day great or how they've created a magic moment. And then there were the barriers and the obstacles. What gets in the way of doing a good job? It could be that they are under time pressure. It could be that they're dealing with hundreds and thousands of fans in a short period of time. So, it's not possible to be 100% fantastic with everybody. There are real practical challenges here.

At this point, both the CEO and the Commercial Director gave their clear commitment to the idea of experimenting to make the fan experience better. 'The best way to learn is to make mistakes' one of them said. In the feedback received afterwards, it was clear that this was a turning point. Naturally, many would need further convincing by seeing a mistake made and forgiven by the senior team, but it helped spur on debate on each table and, before too long, each group had a list of at least 3 things they could do to make a difference (very few were to do with process) and more were to do with levels of personal interaction.

One idea was to re-write signs to convey the personality of the club and this was quickly enacted with an example that can be seen here below.

Figure 2: Signs created to convey the personality of the club



Source: Crohn's and Colitis UK (n. d.) Retrieved August 2020 from <https://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/news/your-views-on-not-every-disability-is-> Screenshot by author.

This then led to table discussions about the help the teams would need to overcome the barriers they themselves had identified and, after a few more minutes' conversation, some clear requirements emerged, including:

- The need for match day employees and volunteers to be able to see what fans are saying about the match day experience and to access other sources of feedback.
- Formal opportunities to share and discuss ideas and best practices (i.e. inside the workplace and not in their own time).
- Finding ways to recognise and celebrate achievement to keep up motivation levels and make sure there is a forum for sharing wider progress.

There were also more specific requests for things like information lanyards for new and less experienced members of the team and more focus on Fan Engagement in the pre-match briefing and post-match review.

In exploring the sort of recognition the employees would like to see, there was interest in it being both co-worker and fan-led in nature. That meant that they wanted to create opportunities for their work colleagues and fans to recognise the contribution of key match day staff.

One idea that emerged was that fans would be asked to nominate a match day colleague for recognition every month and that news, when communicated, would also allow the club to update fans on other fan experience-related topics.

They also felt it was important for individual teams to choose monthly 'heroes' too, always with a focus on recognising behaviours that led to highly engaged supporters.

After the meeting, the senior team met to discuss how best to embed these behaviours and how to support the move to a much more fan-driven culture. One of the immediate ideas emerging from the workshop was to set up a cross-functional team with input from every area and that would have the responsibility of taking forward ideas; discussing and refining them with the leadership team and monitoring their implementation.

This is a genuine example of how one club addressed the need to lift the focus on Fan Engagement through training, support and recognition.

Exercise

This particular approach was found to be appropriate for a club with 200+ full time, part time and contract employees and, when followed up with a detailed fan experience assessment some weeks later, it was clear that there were signs of improvement.

Your task is to consider how a much smaller club could do this. Let's say you are the CEO of a women's team who has just been promoted to the top tier of your country's league. There are only 3 full time staff at the club (outside of the coaching team) and you rely on volunteers for every other match day role.

Make recommendations for how you would address the training, support and recognition of your match day team.

4.2.3 Learning from other sports: How new and expansion sports pursue engagement

One way of looking at the lack of evidence of strategic fan engagement in football is to ask the question: would there be more evidence if football was a new sport, trying to attract audiences for the first time? The answer is 'yes', especially as the new and expansion sports competing for our leisure spend and support are heavily focusing on providing much more than a game, match or event.

What all of these new and expansion sports are doing is simply applying proven approaches from the business world that we have studied in this course. They know that simply providing a sports event will only likely attract people who love that sport, so when it's a new sport, for example, there are unlikely to be enough attendees to make it sustainable.

So, they concentrate on delivering a great, engaging experience, in order to ensure that the new fan gets much more for his or her money and starts to feel more of an emotional bond with the sport.

So, in this theme, we'll look at some of the advancing methods of engagement in new and expansion sports; show how they are being adapted in football and look at both the physical and digital experience too.

One example of an expansion sport growing audiences through a great fan experience is the NFL with the games it plays in the UK. For over a decade now, there have been a series of games initially played at Wembley, but also at Twickenham (the home of English rugby) and also the new Tottenham Hotspur stadium.

One of the innovations the NFLUK team implemented over several series of games was the Recognition Team. This was a highly skilled, motivated and experienced team whose role was to recognise great engagement from game day employees. Of course, the NFL experience transcends the game itself and includes the traditional tailgate party, fan zones and lots of opportunities to socialise and to enjoy oneself. The contribution of match stay employees is, therefore, critical to success.

So, to help the NFL staff on a match day be motivated to do their best, the Recognition Team role-models the right behaviours (interacting positively and pro-actively with fans) and, when they find a game day employee doing the same, they recognise them and gives them a gift. These could range from special limited-edition items to magical memories in the form of a special commemorative football. These little gestures create a culture where people give more of themselves; remain motivated for longer and are less likely to miss an opportunity to make someone's day.

Figure 3: Motivated staff



Source: NFL (n. d.) Retrieved August 2020 from <https://www.nflgamepass.com/> Screenshot by author.

One of the impacts of expansion sports like the NFL and, more recently, MLB, the US Baseball league, is that it offers a fan experience unlike anything you're likely to encounter in any traditional British (or European) spectator sport. Its focus is on much more than the game. It aims to create an experience that you don't want to miss and that, over time, will start to lift the expectations of what sports fans on this side of the Atlantic Ocean want from their match day experience.

Another sport which has grown phenomenally in recent years is Darts. Yes, darts. Something which, in the UK, has been a pub game. Two players throw darts at a board and try to outscore each other. They were never athletes in the true physical sense of the word and by the 1990s the sport was becoming obsolete, almost an anachronism, with few people playing in pubs, which themselves had evolved with the boom of the 80s and 90s to embrace dining.

Darts has transformed itself, largely due to the efforts of an entrepreneur named Barry Hearn. I assessed the 'first time fan' experience at the 2017 William Hill Darts World Championship at the Alexandra Palace in London for Sport Business magazine and what I found was just how perceptions of a sport can be transformed by addressing the fan experience rather than the sport itself (Bradley, 2017)

Darts is the case study *par excellence* for any sport that needs to refresh its format and improve its fortunes. The sport has magically transformed itself from lampoon and parody into a highly prized visual spectacular, with interest in the game growing all over the world. For most minor sports, just generating any level of public interest would be good, but what darts has achieved from such a pejorative starting point is singularly impressive.

The past? Jocky Wilson's infamous five-pints-a-night 'warm-up' routine; the UK television show *Bull's Eye*, which ran for 15 series and included the self-deprecating catchphrase: 'look at what you could have won'; and the legendary *Not the Nine O'clock News* sketch where, instead of throwing darts, the participants took increasingly strong drinks.

Now there is wall-to-wall coverage from UK pay-television broadcaster Sky, £1.65m (€1.9m/\$2m) in prize money –including £350,000 to the winner– and a packed arena every single night. Tickets went on sale in July for this Christmas event, or 'Darts-mas' as it is now known, and a week ahead of the competition only restricted-view tickets remained.

I thought about what mattered to me as a fan attending a sports event for the first time. I wondered if the organisers would make it easy for this 'newbie' to get the best possible experience. I wondered if the event would make me feel genuinely

valued and engaged and I wondered if the PDC had found ways to deliver an experience that is truly unique.

Before the event I did need to combine visits to the PDC, See Tickets and Ally Pally's websites to get all of the info a first-timer needs, such as details regarding ticket purchases, getting there and the schedule for the evening. However, while the provision of a 'New to Darts-mas?' tab on their websites would have been helpful, it wasn't a massive chore to find the information. Social media was on point throughout too, as I discovered when I joined 182,000 other users in following the @OfficialPDC Twitter account. There was also an official PDC app, which offered some fun darts games.

The first real darts were due to be thrown at 7pm but the Fans' Village opened much earlier, so it was here that I presented myself at 5.30pm, accompanied by (people dressed as) several large lobsters, a troop of Tellytubbies and some Donald Trumps. The fancy dress competition is a big part of the event's USP.

As a first-time attendee, I had little or no expectations of how the evening would turn out, but the early signs were good. There were some decent eateries available (pizza, burgers, German sausages, etc.) and activities too, one of which, presented by tournament sponsor William Hill, offered the chance to win a t-shirt by throwing more than 101 with three darts. The queues of people waiting to have a go were a testament to the success of this particular piece of activation.

While the eateries were diverse, the range of drinkeries was narrower since just about everybody I met was drinking beer. As I watched people pass by carrying their large plastic jugs of ale like steadicams, I smiled at the organisers' understanding of their customer base. They clearly appreciate that, at this time of year, there's a market for groups of revellers who want to have a great time, make some noise and have a few drinks.

This was also clear upon entering the venue since the first thing that greeted me was the opportunity to buy drink tokens. But that was another tick in the box marked 'ease', since one thing I've learned from fellow sports fans is that the quality of beer is secondary to the speed at which it can be obtained.

I spoke to several fans within half an hour of arriving, as I was keen to know more about their motivations for being there. This turned out to be a wise move, since later conversations proved less coherent by the pint (Mark Bradley's experience).

"Why not?" replied three German lads in matching Technicolor suits and Santa Hat freebies. "It's fantastic. We love it." While we chatted, an event security representative



approached the group and politely asked for a translation of the message they'd written in their native language on the back of their sponsor-provided '180!' card. It's a family show after all, evidenced by the presence of a family enclosure in the arena.

A group of older guys took their seats. Their first love was football and, specifically, Premier League football club Chelsea, but they were delighted to be here. "We missed out last year," they told me. "We'd seen it on TV and it looked brilliant. We couldn't believe the tickets sold out so quickly, so we got in early this time."

A light show illuminated the full range of seating options: there were long Oktoberfest-style drinking tables, a hospitality area with pre-ordered drinks waiting; plus, a family area or tiered seats at the back.

The ominous thudding rhythm of Radiohead's *Burn the Witch* accompanied a dizzying countdown on the big screen and we were into the action. Each player walked down a specially designed 'catwalk' to their own individual and far cheerier signature tune, accepted the crowd's acclaim and then took to the stage alongside four cheerleaders.

And the sport itself does take centre stage. Two giant screens, at either side of the dartboard, put the players' skills under the microscope, while the announcer drew the roars of the crowd with this old game's familiar catchphrases, "one hundred and eighty!", "double top!" and "Kevin, you require...".

Within moments the entire floor was loudly singing 'stand up, if you love the darts!' while Sky's cameras picked out the crustaceans, Tellytubbies and Donald Trumps in the crowd and a huge cheer accompanied the first 180, as its author Kevin Painter, followed by Jamie Lewis, Gary Anderson and Michael Smith all progressed to the second round.

In such a party atmosphere, the darts could have felt like an afterthought, but the presentation of the action itself draws you in. It is a sports tournament, but it's also one massive Christmas party and it's felt 'darts-massy' all the way back down the hill and into a mild December London night.

Many sports see 'fan engagement' to be purely about providing entertaining sporting 'content' and fail to appreciate the growth potential offered by its strategic dimension, understanding and responding to the deeper motivations and needs of the audience. But this experience proved to me that darts has a very clear idea about what moves its audience.

"The reason I love the darts so much," one of the revellers told me later in the evening, "is that they don't take it too seriously." But if there's one thing I've learned at this spectacular event, it is that they very clearly do.

Darts, as we have said, is a long-established sport that has been spectacularly rehabilitated, but Formula E⁶ is a completely new one and my experience of attending the ePrix in London the same year showed how, when it comes to new sports, rules and conventions are there to be broken.

Formula E is an example of a new sport rising in the digital age. It not only uses electricity to charge the cars and provides a great live experience, but it is a sport where the fan can participate, not just through gaming, but also by becoming directly involved in the races.

As the online site GPfans.com explains, Formula E's FanBoost is a very good example of a new sport 'disrupting' the industry (Scott, 2019).

The article goes on to explain:

Sports fans around the world are renowned for doing whatever they can to help their favourite team. They buy jerseys, take part in pre-event rituals, some even wear the same pair of lucky pants if they think it'll help their team win. Most of these things, of course, do nothing.

Fanboost, however, offers fans who want to help their team to win a chance to make it so, allowing them to vote for their favourite drivers and give them an actual edge in the race. The drivers still need to use their skills to know when to use the boost, and to overtake or defend, but it's a slight edge that can make all the difference.

Formula 1, on the other hand, encourages you to vote with your wallet. You want to help your team? Buy something –buy from their sponsors, buy from their fan shop, buy from them at a race. Just buy something.

Fanboost gives drivers roughly a 20% power increase for a few seconds of the race and, while exact budgets are closely guarded secrets, you'd have to buy a lot of hats and t-shirts to give a Formula 1 team a similar power surge.

Fanboost isn't the only way drivers can make up time though; Attack Mode, the new addition for the 2019 season, is a Mario Kart-type "power-up" that gives drivers another temporary speed boost and is activated by running off the racing line at a set location. (Scott, 2019)

⁶ www.fiaformulae.com

Digital technology is giving the fan the opportunity to become more involved in the action, something which you cannot do in football and this, among a new intense focus on the fan experience is driving expansion sports, new sports forward and giving old sports a second chance at grabbing the attention of fans.

Football may not be able to let fans control the players like it was FIFA2020, but it can learn from the above examples. Fans expect an experience, not just a sport and they expect digital innovation to let them get closer to the action. These are the factors guiding the way football is getting closer to its fans. These are the measures by which football's ability to engage future audiences will be judged.

4.2.4 Measuring colleague engagement

Those students who believed Fan Engagement was simply relationship marketing for football; improving the match day experience or digital entertainment for fans will, by now, know that it is a fundamentally unique concept which sits above all of these elements. It recognises the emotional dimensions of being a football supporter and understands that you need supportive leaders, a business-wide strategy and the right culture to optimise its impact.

Sequentially, this is the last theme your professor has written on a learning journey that has traced the evolution of customer service to relationship marketing and the triumph of experience over product. In each area of this course, we have observed the same obstacles preventing football from fully embracing Fan Engagement as a robust and proven approach to growing clubs and transforming external perceptions.

There has been the age-old tendency—a subconscious impetus—to ignore or be indifferent to fans; to believe that they only have one expectation (to win) and that this means they will accept the worst levels of personal treatment and experience in order for the club to pursue that.

We have seen the reluctance of ownership to investigate, protect and support intrinsic club identities and values with the impact that the club becomes a corporate entity rather than a football club with all of its local connotations and meanings.

We have also seen the emergence of good Fan Engagement practices, as the many positive examples throughout this certificate have shown, but we have also met leaders who, on the one hand, want to see the return on investment without actually investing or committing to the things businesses outside of football do to maximise engagement.

We must also recognise that it is difficult to embed something into a sport that experiences change –often significantly so– on a season-by-season basis. A difficult season may lead to relegation and then to a downward spiral, shown perfectly by Netflix's two-season 'Sunderland Til' I Die' series. At some point, even where Fan Engagement is practised well, the club still has to win or at least play attractive football to keep people emotionally onside.

Fan Engagement isn't an alternative to winning, it's simply a more effective strategy than 'hoping' to win.

The lack of consistent application of Fan Engagement is, in our experience, the result of the wrong culture. Football has a recognisable culture but, in many –maybe the majority of countries where it is played– it's the wrong one. That is why this particular module is so important. Football needs to understand the importance of consistently valuing people: not just its fans and community, but an equally important group of stakeholders too: club employees and volunteers.

Just like we need to measure feedback from fans to understand what matters to them, what they think and how well we're doing, the importance of doing this with your people is equally important.

By making 'listening to employees' a key element of your Fan Engagement strategy, you are better able to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the culture of your national association or club. In fact, a Fan Engagement strategy developed without the input of employees is likely to fail because it doesn't recognise the existing elements that either motivate or demotivate fans. In my experience, both in football and as a Service Excellence consultant, assessor and writer, no organisation effectively improved its culture without employee input.

In fact, as leadership expert Henry Stewart argues, most organisations would enjoy higher levels of employee engagement if they removed managers altogether or let employees choose the person they enjoy working with the most. Henry takes up the story:

Let me paint a common scenario. One of your people comes to you and says "I love my job. I love the people I work with. I'm even happy with what I'm being paid. But... I can't stand my manager.

What generally happens next? Sooner or later, the person leaves. We know that people join companies and, all too often, leave managers.

There is a solution to this. At my company, ... We simply ask, "Who would you like instead?" Yes, this is our simple concept: Let people choose their managers.

According to one survey, 48% of the working population would take a pay cut to be able to change their managers. That's how bad things are.

Each member of staff gets to choose their manager, the person who provides support and challenge, who meets them regularly and coaches them to set their own ambitious targets. A separate person, with no line management connection, may be responsible for the strategy of the department.

If this sounds odd, think of projects. In many organisations, people work for weeks or months on a project. And their project manager is often not their line manager. But it works. (Stewart, 2017)

Henry Stewart's approach is another contemporary example of how businesses are adapting to the age of the consumer and they're doing this by focusing on their employees first. To paraphrase the Internal Service Profit chain, the more engaged your employees, the happier your customers, regardless of whether you are in a B2C (business-to-consumer) or B2B (business-to-business) sector (which has obvious benefits for the way your club or national association engages with commercial, community or civic partnerships).

So, for clubs wishing to maximise Fan Engagement, employees and volunteers must count. First, they should be listened to (see case study below for an example). We must treat them like customers: how do they rate their experience as employees? Why do they say this? What changes would motivate them and make the jobs easier and/or more rewarding?

You can already see that the club that believes 'you are lucky to work in football so just get on with it' is creating problems in the future, including increased turnover, reducing levels of commitment and, as we have shown, poor levels of engagement with fans.

In addressing employee engagement, businesses have found some common ideas that help to create more positive working environments characterised by employees who enjoy coming to work; devote time to thinking of ways to improve the customer experience and who do not fear constructively criticising any element of the company's operations or working methods.

As we saw with the Rackspace example earlier in this module, some of these methods can be innovative and surprising, but by doing simple things like 'shadowing', where people partner with other workers to learn about what they do and having leaders spend time with customer-facing teams, learning about real day-to-day challenges, the culture can be changed for the better.

Here is a list of other activities that will help to strengthen club culture and make Fan Engagement a key business priority:

- The CEO spends half a day each month working in the ticket office; taking calls and talking to co-workers. How do they feel about their roles? What could be improved? Are there queries from fans that we are not set up to address well? Does our ticketing partner support us well?
- The CEO spends the pre-match period at one match a month with stewards and fans, outside of the stadium, talking about their experiences and learning to role model positive behaviours.
- A fan-facing employee attends the senior management team meeting every month, just to hear the discussions and offer their own personal insights.
- Sending pairs of employees to other clubs or other sports events to record the experience; compare with our own club and make recommendations to improve.
- Having a co-worker improvement group who meets regularly to review fan data and make recommendations for improvement.

When Southampton FC⁷ set about creating their 5-year business strategy a few years ago, they engaged a Human Relations consultancy⁸ to ensure that this was guided by the people who work at the club. The work they did together led to Southampton FC being elected 'Employee Engagement Company of the Year' in 2017 (People Insights, 2017) – a competition open to businesses in all sectors!

Having created a 5-year plan and a set of values to guide them, the club recognised that this alone would not change the pre-existing culture. In order to do that, they needed to measure how well the values were being adopted, what impact they were having and to understand what else they should do to reinforce this. To achieve this, 2 of the 5 KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) they chose related to their employees:

1. Maintain employee engagement over 90%.
2. Achieve the Platinum award with the Investors in People⁹ accreditation.

The continual collection of feedback from the club's employees ensured that the desired culture had the best possible chance of establishing itself.

This was done by focusing on several key areas.

⁷ www.southamptonfc.com

⁸ www.peopleinsight.co.uk

⁹ www.investorsinpeople.com: a UK accreditation given to organisations who recognise that people / employees are company's most valuable commodity.

Firstly, the club would continue to measure levels of employee engagement and analyse the feedback carefully to ensure any obstacles were isolated and addressed.

The club would also evaluate how well the values were being adopted and embedded into the business. This was supported by steps taken to check how well employees understood the strategic plan and vision.

We know that, in football, people often work long hours. This is the nature of the industry, of course, and no one entering it would expect a 9-5 job. But that means that the danger of people –good, hardworking people– burning themselves out is a genuine risk. Southampton ensured that ‘work life balance’ was a priority and regularly assessed this by monitoring employee feedback and performance.

Southampton has emerged, in recent seasons, as an innovative, creative club (with several widely acknowledged ‘shirt launches’ exemplifying the positive culture at the club). For them, the investment in employee engagement will insulate them against most of the obstacles faced by clubs. It will ensure that, in every area of their operation, they adhere to the values that make the club so loved by the followers of ‘The Saints’.

This is exactly how employees and volunteers can contribute to creating and delivering Fan Engagement strategies. The concepts and approaches are capable of being called up or down depending on the size of the club. In short, it’s about valuing people. Without that, there can be no expectation that Fan Engagement will survive.

So, with a strong sense of identity articulated as a set of practical, actionable values; supported by a well-executed fan experience where ‘magic moments’ abound for all of the different fan groups; where supporter dialogue and consultation ensures that leaders ‘steward’ the club with their interests at heart and where employees and volunteers are valued, you create the conditions for Fan Engagement.

Exercise

The CEO of a National Association requests that you create an employee satisfaction survey in levels and in various departments.

Based on the information provided (and your own research), create a short survey for this purpose. In order to ensure that people complete the survey, you have been asked to keep it to fewer than 10 questions. What questions would you therefore ask?

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