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# What companies can learn from football

Football lives by its rules. They are perfectly suited to the game and ensure exciting matches. If the rules are ignored, the game is dead.

But what's that got to do with the world in which businesses have to exist? Probably more than you would think. Companies also need rules which everyone has to respect. Only then does interaction work properly. Only then can the outcome be success.

But watch out: football is so successful because it has fewer rules than other types of ball game. Companies need to bear this in mind too. If there are too many rules and regulations, staff motivation wanes, until they leave, taking success with them.

## Game and suspense: football and company organization

Why does a football team have 11 players – and not 9 or 15? Why is a goal 2.44 meters high and 7.32 meters wide? Why was the new return pass rule introduced? And why are players no longer allowed to use their hands as they were in early forms of the game? Why bother with rules at all?

The rules of the game are there to regulate it – no more and no less. In other words, it's the rules which make the game possible. Restraints on freedom are a condition of the game; without them, it would not take place. And the game ceases to exist when the rules no longer apply.

Rules do not fall from heaven. They are the result of trial and error. But what is the basis of this trial process? The answer to this question is one of the most fundamental truths which football has to offer. In the words of the legendary German trainer Sepp Herberger: "People go to the stadium because they don't know how the match will end."

Perhaps their team will win, but it may be a washout, a crushing defeat. Nobody would come if it was possible to prevent these eventualities.

So it's suspense which makes football attractive. Interest is maintained as long as the outcome remains undecided for as long as possible; not if one of the teams is way ahead and is leading 5:0 after just 20 minutes. Studies indicate that the largest numbers of spectators come when the probability of victory for the home team is around 60 percent. If it is higher, people will stay at home. Fans want to tremble and quake for their team.

### **Rules create suspense**

Suspense is the regulative principle of the game of football. Rules are there to create this sense of suspense. They are neither good nor bad – they only have to delay the result for long enough: premature certainty hails the end of the game. If we zoom in and take a closer look, we find that attack and defense must be balanced, their likelihood of success must be approximately even.



# Football tips for business practice

We could, for example, ask: "Why is the goal not twice as wide or only half as wide?" Well, if the goal was bigger, then a lot of goals would be scored; one single goal would not be so important and therefore not so exciting. If it was smaller, then only a very few goals would result; a single goal would be almost impossible to catch up. Both would make the game boring.

The same thing applies to the penalty kick: why does it have to be from exactly 11 meters and not from 12, for example? Because we know that, with the given goal size, between 70 and 80 percent of all penalty kicks will be converted. But certainly not 100 percent! So the suspense is sustained, and the more unpredictable the game, the greater the motivation of all involved.

## **And the lessons for the business world?**

Today's football rules have developed over more than 100 years and are brilliantly suited to the game. That's why nothing is as exciting as football. With the exception of business. We are, of course, aware that we are "only" selling furniture or credit or knowledge, but it is still exciting, and we still find it attractive. This is simply because it is also a game. And that's why suspense is also a regulative principle in business. Within companies, there are also different roles and tasks which have to be respected, if there is to be successful interplay: head office and subsidiary, sales and production, costing and marketing.

The interests of these subsystems have to be balanced out, just like a football trainer has to find the right balance between attack and defense. One particular rule may seem sensible and necessary from the point of view of head office, but not from that of the subsidiary which has to submit to it. One groans at the

guidelines imposed by the other, and vice versa. But here again, rules are not good or bad, although they may appear to be so from the point of view of an individual. Their sense is primary: they equalize different interests, balance different values, limit power, in short, they are designed to ensure that the corporate game can continue, and the suspense must be maintained to do so.

## **Rules must do justice to all parts of the enterprise**

If they are to work, rules must do justice to all parts of the enterprise. However, if they escalate in a particular direction, e.g. if production becomes too predominant, sales will become despondent, with employees proclaiming that it's just "no fun" any longer. But sales also have to take the needs of production and controlling into consideration.

If management goes over the top with regulations and strikes every problem dead with a guideline, enterprise becomes a battle against inner resistance. If you want really good employees to stay, it's essential to realize that one of the reasons why football is so popular is that it has far fewer rules than rugby, cricket, baseball, basketball, handball, or volleyball. What is attractive about football is the unregulated aspect, the freedom, its entrepreneurial element, if you like.

## **Excessive controls kill motivation**

The central question for a company is therefore: what can management do to maintain suspense and simultaneously eliminate too many imponderables? What can it do to ensure that people enjoy coming to work in the mornings, while keeping the company under control and predictable. It's difficult for companies to maintain high levels of motivation among employees when there is a proliferation of controlling bodies, everything has to be calculated, markets planned, net sales predicted, and nothing is left to chance. Employees who see themselves as a cog in a smooth-running process, or just go through the

## Trust promotes mutual motivation

motions, are no longer putting their hearts into their work. The more predictable the work process becomes, the more boring it is – a complete killer of motivation.

It is not possible to maximize both risk and security at any one time (or that's what supervisory boards think). A price has to be paid in terms of one or the other. So it's necessary to find a balance here as well; decisions about this have to be taken on an ongoing basis. One thing is clear: if you err too far on the side of security, suspense dies and with it, motivation. If you err too far on the side of risk, the company will not be fit for the capital market, and runs the risk of premature cancellation of the match (unless it has a tactical state guarantee, as recent examples show).

### **Managers need to learn to trust**

For managers, this means not seeing themselves as apostles of security and not regulating everything down to the last detail. The keyword is trust. Trust that people assume responsibility when they are challenged. Trust that most employees will rectify anything that cannot be controlled centrally. Trust that people will find sensible local solutions and will act in the best interests of the company.

The final of the 1930 World Championship is a wonderful example of a pragmatic solution. Both the Argentine and the Uruguay teams demanded that the match should be played with their own ball – in those days, balls were still that different. The referee made the judgment of Solomon that the first half should be played with the Argentinean team's ball and the second half with the Uruguayan team's ball.



Contents of this brochure are based on the book "Gut aufgestellt – Fussballstrategien für Manager" from Reinhard K. Sprenger.

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