

Leaders v Leadership – which should we fête?

Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan, so the proverb goes. Yet how often do we fête individual leaders for success in 21st century UK? And when we consider lasting success, to what extent should we be looking not at the leader, but at his/her leadership?

The media often ascribes success to the man or woman at the top. The leader. The cult of personality is endemic.

Indeed, the management merry-go-round continues both in business and in sport. The chief executive of WPP, Martin Sorrell, recently left the company after three hugely successful decades. The world's biggest advertising company now faces profound questions about its future direction, with no obvious succession to fill his sudden departure.

In football, Arsenal will soon find themselves with a new man at the helm for the first time in twenty-two years. Arsene Wenger transformed not just Arsenal, but English football as well. And with a reputation for being an incredibly 'hands-on' leader, it will be a huge challenge for his replacement to maintain the club's consistency.

By comparison, do you know the name of the UK CEO of Aldi? Or of the man who transformed British cycling? The answers are below if you don't.

Aldi's success (and that of its competitor Lidl) has been to transform the UK supermarket business over the last 10 years. The traditional big players, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Asda, have all lost ground substantially to the new entrants' disruptive market models. Opening in UK 1990, Aldi now has over 750 stores and a market share of 7%.

British cycling has been the fastest growing sport for several years. Since the early 2000s, it has moved from being an also ran to a dominant force in world track cycling.

Staying out of the spotlight is not a necessary condition for lasting success, albeit the absence of a leader's personal ego arguably can avoid unnecessary distraction. What other characteristics are common to lasting success? What other light can sport bring to business thinking?

Let's take an outlier from the world of football, Leicester City becoming Champions of the Premier League in 2016. That success is said to of come from two main factors – a strong team ethic and letting the players play what's in front of them. This was a star team (certainly not a group of marquee players initially) collectively delivering much more than looked possible on paper. Unusually, they were encouraged to play the game as they saw it unfold, not to apply a formulaic approach pre-determined by the man shouting on the touchline.

Rugby Union has long been an exemplar. Being captain of the school or college rugby team has traditionally been a lead indicator of leadership potential, given the nature of the game. Pulling together many specialist roles into a coherent whole and delivering collective success has proved a strong metaphor.

These examples illustrate leadership creating lasting results:

- Exeter Chiefs won the English Premiership title in 2017, having only been promoted to that league 7 years earlier. Their story is similar to Leicester City's – bringing together a group of mere mortals and crafting them into an outstanding team capable of making decisions on the pitch
- Wasps (formerly London Wasps) were a club with a deep history of success, but came close to

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going bust in 2014. Their new owner then moved their base from West London to Coventry, tapping into a rich seam of latent rugby interest locally. Crowds are up significantly, and the team's performance has been much improved and the club is back competing with the best in Europe.

- Saracens (for so long a nomadic team without a home of their own) in 2016 achieved that rarest of birds, winning both the European Cup and English Premiership titles in one season. They are only the third club to do this “double”, and were the first for 12 years, and followed this with a second successive European title in 2017.

Pundits not only talked about the magnitude of Saracens' success, but also predicted they would be the dominant force of domestic and European rugby for several years. Why? Because of the way they built the foundations for success. They have all the hallmarks of long lasting strength in depth. While it has not been that simple – it rarely is – the foundations remain strong and the team continues to perform well.

Those hallmarks provide an insightful checklist for any business trying to replicate lasting success:

1. Articulate a clear vision for the business, invest time to gain buy-in from all staff, and stick to that vision relentlessly
2. Set our clear Values to underpin the delivery of that vision, and adopt a zero-tolerance policy to deviations from them
3. Invest time in building a close-knit team with the ethic that team success overrides everything, and encourage people to be the best they can be individually, in that order
4. Liberate your people from the shackles of micro management, encourage them to play what's in front of them
5. Grow your own talent, supplementing them occasionally with experienced heads to grow their experience fast
6. Be patient, it takes time to build a collaborative culture based on trust.

In business and in sport, recent examples suggest that building a close-knit team is the most critical item on the check list, with everyone knowing their part in delivering success. Creating a star team (rather than a group of stars) maximises performance with the whole being much greater than the sum of the parts.

Becoming best in class in any sphere of business is a terrific achievement. But sustaining that performance is much harder to achieve. As we consider what “success” to celebrate, how should we value the latter, compared to the first?

Answers: Matthew Barnes was Aldi UK CEO 2009-18. Sir Dave Brailsford was British Cycling's performance director 2003-14.

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