

# World Cup Special: How to build a winning team



By Rick James and Rod MacLeod (Updated June 2014)

**Who is your Rooney? Who is your Neymar? Who is your Messi?  
Who scores your goals? Who controls the game?  
How do you manage them and bring out their best?**

Over the years we have found questions like these to be really useful in helping NGO leaders (with an interest in the beautiful game) to manage their NGO more effectively. Getting an NGO manager to think of themselves as Jose Mourinho, Arsene Wenger or Pep Guardiola can help people frame their management in a different and possibly more productive way. In this World Cup year let's use this football analogy and see what we can learn about NGO management from football. This Praxis Note highlights our starting eleven tips:

1. Focus on the field
2. Manage your players
3. Recruit a balanced playing squad
4. Concentrate on training
5. Bring out the best in your players
6. Get them to play together as a team
7. Set a style of play
8. Work out flexible tactics and formation
9. Rigorously review performance
10. Keep the score
11. Earn respect, instill pride and create meaning

### **Tell us what you think!**

Do you agree with our starting eleven? What tips would you have in your starting eleven instead? Or perhaps you use a different analogy which is more appropriate for your work? Email your thoughts to [praxisprogramme@intrac.org](mailto:praxisprogramme@intrac.org) and we'll try to use the best of them in a follow-up Praxis Note later in the year.



### **Focus on the field**

In football it is obvious that what really matters is what happens in the field, not in the office. NGO managers should also remember that the match takes place on the pitch. Sometimes too much attention is given to the bureaucratic demands of the NGO. Managers are overwhelmed with seemingly important meetings. Yet what really matters is what happens out there. We must shift the focus of our attention to the field - to the actual interactions with communities, with partners, with clients. This is where development occurs. The people who make a difference are the fieldworkers, the ones who have direct contact with partners and clients. These should be the focus of attention in an NGO. Everyone else is backroom staff. The organisation should be structured to support this critical interface with the world.



### **Manage your players, do not play yourself**

A football manager's role is to get the best out of the players, not try and play themselves. There are very few examples of successful player-managers. We would think it ridiculous if Brendan Rodgers kept running on to the pitch and taking the ball from his own players to do it for them. No, the manager has to let the players play. Managers are not meant to be great players. In fact the best managers tend to have been average, rather than world class players. Management is a very different skill to playing. It requires skill and insight which may need specific training. It is for good reason that all managers in the English Premiership are now required to have a Coaching Certificate. Do NGO managers behave as if they should be playing? Do they have the experience and training to manage well?



### **Recruit a balanced playing squad**

In football it helps to have a squad which blends experience and youth. When looking to recruit players, football teams do not advertise and interview – they scout for the best players elsewhere. They persuade them to leave their current job and join them. Or many have youth academies to develop young players into possible professionals. They often give youngsters experience gradually on the pitch as substitutes before putting them in the starting line up. At first glance this obviously contrasts with NGOs. Equal opportunities recruitment policies mean that we do not scout for proven talent in the same way (and possibly pay the price as a result). But the way some of the richer clubs are able to sign the best players from smaller teams does resonate with the way that international NGOs unashamedly recruit the best staff from local NGOs (but without paying any transfer fee!).



### **Concentrate on training**

In football players probably spend more than 90% of their time training and preparing for a game. Coaches constantly work with players on individual skills, team moves, strategies and fitness. How will we defend against set pieces? How will we attack on the break? Football managers spend hours investing in instilling ethics of discipline and hard work. But how much time do we as NGO

managers spend each week working with our staff on their skills, fitness and team tactics in particular projects?



### **Bring out the best in your players**

Who is it that really makes a difference in the field? Who is your Suarez? Your Rooney? Your Sturridge? Who scores the goals your organisation hopes to achieve? Who catalyses change in beneficiaries / partners / clients? Do you have a play-maker in your NGO? Who is your holding midfielder?

Who is your centre of defence? Who do people listen to and follow – your captain? Football managers are constantly trying to bring out the best in their players. Good managers give them freedom to play to their strengths. They encourage them to try things and not fear failure. They know their players' best positions. Playing people out of position can lead to confusion and undermine confidence, resulting in poor individual and even team performance.

All members of a team are different. People management is a key skill. What does this individual respond well to? Encouragement? Criticism? Pressure? Being left alone? How do you manage big egos? People management in football does not take place in the office. It is on the training ground, the dressing room, on the pitch – before, during and after the match. Being a good manager means being present and available to the players. How would it be if Arsene Wenger sat in his office all day at a computer screen or was continually in meetings? As NGO managers, do we give the same personal attention to our players? Do we regularly watch them and interact with them?



### **Get them playing together as a team**

A key to great football management is to get players to play together as a team. It would obviously be silly, however skilled they were, if one player just kept the ball to himself and refused to pass to his teammates. The challenge of football is to work together as a cohesive back four, to get players to link

well with each other, to play in triangles and diamonds up the pitch, to support each other on overlaps. Players need to work hard for each other, making dummy runs and covering back. When Real Madrid was full of 'Galáctico' stars it tended to underachieve. Egypt has arguably been successful in the Africa Cup of Nations because of their ability to play well together against teams with more individual star players. Some teams may have star players too strong for the manager. What might this say to us in NGOs?

Obviously not all players are the same. Some are left footed, others right, some strikers, some defenders. Some play more spectacular roles, making the headlines by scoring goals. But equally important may be the unsung holding midfielder, who keeps everything ticking over by relentlessly tackling and setting things in motion with quick, short passes. Good football teams have a mixture of players, as do good NGO teams. In NGOs you need different skills for different roles, some people will be shapers, others completer finishers<sup>1</sup>. Good NGO managers look for diversity, not clones. In the English Premiership, as in many international NGOs, a key challenge is to work with different cultures – to meld them together into a unified team.



### **Set the style of play**

Each manager has a favoured approach to football, an overall style of play. Arsene Wenger for example wants to play beautiful football, with quick

<sup>1</sup> See Belbin's theory on team roles: [www.belbin.com/rte.asp?id=8](http://www.belbin.com/rte.asp?id=8)

movement up the field. Others want to squeeze and control the midfield. Others are happy with the long-ball game, scoring on the break. It is the manager's role to instil the vision and train the team in the way they should play. This is something the team comes to understand, gets accustomed to and enables players to be more interchangeable. In your NGO, is your preferred management style more about solving problems or building on what is working well (appreciative inquiry)? Do you set clear measureable tasks or leave more room for creativity? What style of play do you want your NGO to follow? What culture do you instil in the NGO?



### **Work out flexible tactics and formation**

A good manager also knows each match is different. They analyse the context thoroughly, sizing up the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition. They also think about the specific situation. Playing home or away, playing in heat or at altitude, playing on a hard pitch or thick mud all affect the match tactics and formation. Your NGO might have an overall vision and ethos, which you stay true to, but it should be applied differently in different contexts. Some matches are more important than others. Some are 'must win', for others a draw is fine; and still others you can probably afford to lose. For each game it is up to the manager to pick the best combination of players that they think will play to these tactics. We need to remember in NGO management that not every piece of work has the same strategic importance.

Good managers have a flexible game plan. If the game plan is not working, a good manager will have 'Plan b'. They will change the tactics and the players midway through the game. What they do may be more important than what they say. How does the manager respond to a crisis of conceding a goal or even two? Is it just anger or blame, or do they do something practical about it? What happens in your NGO?



### **Rigorously review performance**

In football there is rigorous and regular performance assessment. They believe completely in action learning. Reviews are conducted after every match. Football teams invest considerable time and technology in thoroughly reviewing what happened after the event. Videos are analysed in depth. Statistics are collated on metres run, passes completed, tackles made... How much do we as NGO managers regularly review performance? Do we make time to watch our players in action? Do we even sit down with our staff after field trips to really find out how it went and how they performed?



### **Keep the score**

At least in football it is clear what the score is and what constitutes a goal. But in any game (or part of the season), managers may have a number of objectives. It may be about soaking up and surviving the pressure in the first half. It may be about testing out the opposition goalkeeper with shots on target. Managers will assess the team performance against a number of criteria. What would this look like in an NGO? What are the goals? What are the tactics for the next project period? A good manager then takes decisions based on performance. There may be man-of-the-match awards to give out. Or player of the month. Alternatively poor performance means difficult decisions are made. If a footballer is not playing well, they are likely to get dropped from the team. But if an NGO fieldworker is not playing well, what happens? Do we even have any idea how well they are playing?

In NGOs the overall score may be less obvious. Impact is what we are ultimately after, but this is difficult to measure in the short term. So we revert to proxy measures, like income. A

successful NGO is one whose income is growing. But from football we know how ridiculous this is. While income is not wholly unrelated to performance, some of the most successful clubs in the world make financial losses. And financial resources do not always guarantee success on the field. Good NGO managers need to be able keep the score in better ways than merely measuring income. They need to define and measure what real achievement and good performance look like as what constitutes conceding a goal or losing the game.



### **Earn respect, instil pride and create meaning**

Good football managers all generate respect, if not even awe, from their players. They get on well, but managers are not 'one of the lads'. They can be hard and harsh when necessary. Alex Ferguson played to his 'hairdryer' image of giving hot blasts to his players, but only in rare and exceptional circumstances. Most professionals agree that being screamed at does little good. Much more frequently good managers build up players' confidence. They show they have pride and faith in them. As Jose Mourinho says: 'A good manager must make all his men feel big, not small'. This is superbly illustrated by Pep Guardiola before the 2009 Champions League final who said to his players: 'Gentlemen, if you lose today you will continue to be the best in the world – but if you win today you will be eternal'. Barcelona went on to win. Great managers are able to get their players to feel as if they are playing for the manager. They do not want to let them down. They know that if they do, they may pay the price in the short term. But they also know that if the team continues to underperform, the manager will eventually be sacked.

Good football managers use image and charisma to create meaning. Jose Mourinho came to Chelsea with a proven ability to win big trophies with lesser clubs. He brought and further crafted an image of being a winner (the self-styled 'Special One'). This charisma and self-belief rubbed off on his players who proceeded to win the Premiership for the next two seasons. Mourinho motivates his players by manipulating meaning, creating the image of 'it is us against the world'. What might this mean for NGO managers? Are we able to get our NGO staff playing for us as managers? How do we use our image to the greatest effect? How do we instil self-belief in our teams? How do we create meaning?

## **The final whistle**

What other things does this football analogy teach you about management? How would Ancelotti, Hodgson or Klopp approach your job?

Obviously all analogies break down at some point. They can be pushed too far. After all football, unlike relief and development, is not a matter of life and death (whatever Bill Shankly might think). Resources are obviously different. But it is valuable to learn about NGO management from different disciplines. Playing with different analogies can help us think outside the box. This can unlock seemingly stuck situations. It obviously does not only have to be about football. The same analogy would work for any team sport like cricket, basketball, rugby or netball. But it certainly does not have to be just sport. Create an analogy from something you are passionate about or even just interested in. There are many good management analogies from jazz groups or orchestras or even dancing the Argentine tango. (see [www.cdra.org.za/nuggets/Jazzing%20up%20conversation%20by%20Desiree%20Paulse%20-%20September%202004%20Nugget.htm](http://www.cdra.org.za/nuggets/Jazzing%20up%20conversation%20by%20Desiree%20Paulse%20-%20September%202004%20Nugget.htm)<sup>2</sup>). Wherever two or more people are gathered together for a common purpose, management and leadership take place. These non-work experiences can be a rich source of profound learning, if we let our minds wander outside the box.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.cdra.org.za/nuggets/Jazzing%20up%20conversation%20by%20Desiree%20Paulse%20-%20September%202004%20Nugget.htm](http://www.cdra.org.za/nuggets/Jazzing%20up%20conversation%20by%20Desiree%20Paulse%20-%20September%202004%20Nugget.htm)



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