

## EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP: THE FERGUSON WAY

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### **Abstract**

*Today's globalized business world is characterized by hypercompetition and incessant changes. On the one hand, hypercompetition imposes business organizations worldwide to provide high quality and innovative products and/or services. On the other hand, numerous and often unexpected changes require strong leadership. Thus, there is a significant effect of organization resources, such as leadership, on gaining sustained competitive advantage in any domain of activity, either business or football). The aims of the paper are to define the concept of leadership, present the features of effective leadership and briefly analyse the successful way Sir Alex Ferguson managed one of the famous football clubs in the world, Manchester United. In this respect, the author employed a qualitative research method. The results of this study show that the concept of leadership has many facets and is rather difficult to be defined. Also, it emphasizes the features of effective leadership and exemplifies them in the case of Sir Alex Ferguson, one of the most successful football managers all over the world.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, effective leadership, Sir Alex Ferguson, football, Manchester United*

**Classification JEL:** *M10, Z20*

### **1. Introduction and context of the study**

Today's globalized business world is characterized by hypercompetition and incessant changes (Toma, 2005; Toma and Marinescu, 2015). On the one hand, hypercompetition imposes business organizations worldwide to provide high quality and innovative products and/or services (Lindskov, 2022). On the other hand, numerous and often unexpected changes impose strong leadership (Toma et al, 2020a). Thus, there is a significant effect of organization resources, such as capabilities and leadership, on gaining sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991) in any domain of activity (e.g., business, football).

Since its emergence, football (soccer) has expanded all over the world and became a way of life for many people (Orejan, 2011). However, Europe is still clearly dominating the global football landscape. Countries like the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain have a long tradition in this sport. The key governing bodies in the football world are the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Houben, 2023).

Its worldwide high popularity led to a significant increase of demand for various football-related products and services. Since the beginnings of the 1990s, football's commercialism has significantly changed the game (Carter, 2006). The global football market size attained USD 3.3 billion (bn) in 2023 (Zion Market Research, 2024). The revenues in the global soccer market reached USD 46.22 bn in 2022, USD 53.84 bn in 2023, and are projected to attain USD 56.67 bn in 2024 (Statista, 2024).

The increasing competitive environment of the global football market is characterized by a plethora of features such as dynamism, well-known football brands, highly attractive competitions, huge stadiums, famous players, football managers and coaches, and iconic clubs. In such a fastest-growing market (SkyQuest, 2024), achieving enduring performances requires effective leadership.

The aims of the paper are to define the concept of leadership, present the features of effective leadership and briefly analyse the successful way Sir Alex Ferguson managed one of the famous football clubs in the world, Manchester United. In this respect, the author used a qualitative research method. The structure of this paper is as follows: chapter 2 displays the literature review. The methodology is illustrated in chapter 3. Chapter 4 shows the results and discussion. The conclusions are presented at the end of the paper.

## 2. Literature review

During its existence, the term of leadership has gained the attention of numerous specialists from various domains (e.g., business, psychology, sociology, communication) and become a fascinating subject in the literature (Toma et al, 2016a; Grădinaru et al, 2020). Despite the lack of an agreed-upon definition, leadership is considered as:

- “the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement” (Stogdill, 1950, p. 4).
- „an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members” (Bass, 1990, p. 19-20).
- “a social process involving influence and persuasion” (Sadler, 2003, p. 15).
- “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2004, p. 3).
- “a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal” (Kruse, 2013, p. 1).
- “the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals” (Silva, 2016, p. 3).
- “a set of mindsets and behaviors that aligns people in a collective direction, enables them to work together and accomplish shared goals, and helps them adjust to changing environments” (McKinsey, 2024, p. 1).
- “a focus on collective processes of people working together toward common goals or collective leadership development efforts” (Dugan, 2024, p. 17).
- “the capacity of a company’s management to set and achieve challenging goals, take fast and decisive action when needed, outperform the competition, and inspire others to perform at the highest level they can” (Twin, 2024, p. 1).

The above-mentioned definitions reveal several features of the concept of leadership. First, there are multiple approaches on this subject that lead to the following various meanings of it: process, interaction, behaviors, influence etc. (Toma et al, 2020b). Second, leadership emerges in a group of people. Third, it involves the attainment of common goals. Fourth, leadership implies the existence of a leader and of him/her followers. Effective leadership (Fiedler, 1981; Gardner, 1990; Nanus, 1992; March and Weill, 2005; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Vecchio, 2007; Burns, 2012; Ulrich and Smallwood, 2012; Vilkinas et al, 2020) is based on a plethora of characteristics, both values and principles, as follows:

- self-esteem;
- trustworthiness;
- professionalism;
- commitment;
- integrity;
- morality;
- shared organizational culture;
- coaching and mentoring;
- establishing direction;

- envisioning goals;
- achieving aims;
- improving organization capabilities etc.

Therefore, effective leadership is a sine-qua-non condition in attaining high performance by any organization in today’s ever changing environment (Toma, 2013; Toma and Marinescu, 2013; Toma et al, 2016b). It should be connected with different elements such as organizational strategies (Toma and Grădinaru, 2016; Toma et al, 2016c; Toma, 2023), business models (Toma and Tohănean, 2018; Toma and Tohănean, 2019), marketing mix (Grădinaru and Toma, 2017; Catană and Toma, 2021a; Catană and Toma, 2021b) and branding (Toma and Catană, 2021), entrepreneurial acumen (Catană et al, 2020; Zainea et al, 2020; Toma et al, 2021), innovation (Tohănean and Toma, 2018) and creativity (Toma et al, 2013), social responsibility (Toma, 2006; Marinescu et al, 2010; Imbrișcă and Toma, 2020) and corporate citizenship (Toma, 2008a; Toma et al, 2011), and various methods such as Balanced Scorecard (Toma et al, 2010), Six Sigma (Toma, 2008b), organizational learning (Toma, 2012) and training programs (Marinescu and Toma, 2013).

The rapid worldwide spread of football, its increasing importance in everyday life of human beings and the generation of mass entertainment spectacles are only few features which contribute to its massive popularity. Since its emergence, it has become a “new social social phenomenon that transformed the leisure lives of millions of men and women” and “had the same cultural and economic impact on society regardless of the shape of the ball or the number of players in a team” (Collins, 2019, p. 2). This is why organizing and managing a football club represents a key element in ensuring its survival and development. Managing people whether in business or in football constitutes a complex and difficult endeavor. In this respect, the football manager encompasses elements from both management and leadership (Crust and Lawrence, 2006).

### 3. Methodology

To accomplish the goals of this study, the author used a scientific methodology based on a qualitative research method. After identifying the sources of information through desk research, he obtained and classified the significant data, mainly from articles and books. Then, he performed the literature review and synthesized the information. Finally, the author elaborated the paper.

### 4. Results and discussion

This chapter of the study displays the results of the paper together with their analysis. In the beginning, the author illustrates some milestones from the life of Sir Alexander Chapman “Alex” Ferguson. After that, he briefly analyses his effective leadership at Manchester United.

Considered as the most successful manager in the football history of United Kingdom (Premier League, 2024), Sir Alex Ferguson won 13 Premier League titles, five Football Association Cup and two Champions League titles with Manchester United in the period 1986-2013 (Britannica, 2024a). Born 31.12.1941 in Glasgow, he was the first son of Elizabeth and Alexander Beaten Ferguson. His father worked hard in the shipbuilding industry and his mother paid attention to every detail in running the family. Ferguson remembered those rather difficult years: “We mabee didnae have a TV. We didnae have a car. We didnae a telephone. But I thought I had everything I needed, because I had friends and family. And I had football.” (Lyons, 2021, p. 11)

Alex and his younger brother, Martin, attended Bromloan Primary School and Govan High School. They both were among the best football players in their schools. The youngster Ferguson “had a way with words, and could instantly gather a crowd by reeling off anecdotes” (Lyons, 2021, p. 14). He started his football career with Harmony Row Boys Club and Drumchapel Amateurs but also took a job as a toolmaker when he turned sixteen years old. Ferguson got involved with the Workers Union and requested better health and safety conditions within the workplace.

Being very determined, Ferguson played later for bigger football clubs such as Queen’s Park, St Johnstone, Dumferline Athletic, and Rangers. He decided to finish his playing career when he was 33 years old.

Ferguson still holds the record for “the most top flight Manager of the Year awards- eight- since its inauguration in 1966“ (Mitten, 2008, p. 11). He entered the football industry in his 33, at a young age, when he became manager at East Stirlingshire Football Club, a Scottish second-division club located in Falkirk. After leading St Mirren for four years and winning the Scottish championship, Ferguson moved to Aberdeen which he managed for almost nine years. Under his remarkable command, Aberdeen won three Scottish Premier Division, four Scottish Cup and a European Cup Winners’ Cup.

In November 1986, Ferguson was appointed football manager at Manchester United, nicknamed “the Red Devils” for its red football shirt and white short. Initially, the football club emerged under the name of Newton Heath L&YR FC in 1878. 15 years later, the club entered the Football League. During its long existence, the United team has had numerous famous players such as Billy Meredith, Charlie Roberts, George Best, Bobby Charlton, Joe Spence, Paul McGrath, Mark Hughes, Bryan Robson, Eric Cantona, Gary Neville, Peter Schmeichel, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Wayne Rooney, David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Roy Keane, and Cristiano Ronaldo.

After World War II, Sir Matthew Busby managed United for more than 25 years. A former British football player with Manchester City and Liverpool, Busby “successfully introduced a style of attacking play that depended on a highly mobile centre forward” (Britannica, 2024b). Under his wise leadership, United won five championships, and the first European Champions Clubs’ Cup in 1968.

In this line, the leadership of Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United made “constantly raised the percentages of his players’ and staffs’ performances” (Lyons, 2021, p. 175) by pulling all of them in the same direction (Blackhurst, 2024). His long reign at Old Trafford led to impressive achievements for the British football club (Crick, 2002). This is why he was highly respected for “his strong leadership and the achievements brought about under his management” (Denton, 2013, p. 3). Thus, his leadership style became a good example for business leaders all over the world.

It is said that “British football culture has generated authoritarian tendencies. As most managers were former players, they have been immersed in these habits, and as players themselves do seem to respect ‘experience’, they are passed on from one generation to the next” (Carter, 2006, p. 7). It is also true for Sir Alex Ferguson. In essence, the Ferguson Way in effective leadership can be characterized through several features as follows:

- dominance,
- professionalism,
- hard work,
- vision,
- discipline,
- commitment,
- working in team and cooperation,
- goals-oriented,
- self-confidence,
- ambition,
- motivation,
- responsibility,
- focus on people,
- high energy,
- passion,
- stress tolerance,

- hungry for success,
- charisma,
- inspiration,
- intellectual stimulation,
- resilience,
- loyalty etc.

Taking into account these considerations, football provides numerous examples of effective and thriving leadership. Sir Alex Ferguson, the long serving manager of United, was a believer in leading par exemple.

## 5. Conclusions

As old as human civilization, leadership has constituted since its appearance one of the most important topic in the world, irrespective of the domain of activity or size of the organization. Leadership is not only a science and an art but primarily a practice. This is why effective leadership constitutes a fundamental factor in obtaining performance both in business and football.

The paper shows that the concept of leadership has many facets and is rather difficult to be defined. Also, it emphasizes the features of effective leadership and exemplifies them in the case of Sir Alex Ferguson, one of the most successful football managers all over the world.

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