TEAM MANAGEMENT

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"Living is learning to play. Win or lose, but always living and learning to play."

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Since the more extensive broadcast of the Olympic Games in the 1960s, sports have been gaining increasing importance in society. It is undoubtedly one of the sectors of human development - coupled perhaps with entertainment technology - with the greatest importance in the social configuration of present times. It is certainly the sector that most influences society today, if we take into account the fashion patterns it imposes, and the styles of life that it organises, especially concerning the use of free time, sports education and the interest in the concretised events.

It is perhaps for this reason that sports are being less and less managed by sports leaders, who engaged in the process driven by the passion it entailed, and it is also for the same reason that the figure of an increasingly economic-oriented sports manager emerges all the more often in sports today.

What we realise today about this activity that is organised around the planet is that it is the final product of a process that began long ago, a process in search of new ideas, new sensations, new practices, new social dynamics and consequently, new human development projects.

Today, sports are not what they were in the past; and they certainly will not be tomorrow what they are today. So it is as important to understand its origins, as it is to understand the trends and its implications in the development of people’s lives.
Understanding the processes that determine the change is currently the most important way of understanding what is happening in sports. It is important to know what is in a state of constant evolution and its causes and consequences. Sports management is only possible through understanding what is changing. Managing a club or a sports school is different than managing a hospital or a public company. Understanding the context, the environment, as well as meeting the specific technology that characterises it, is decisive.

We are born, we grow, we develop, we enter into decline and eventually die. This applies to people, ideas, organizations and even civilizations. In this perspective, the secret of eternal life is beginning to change before this life collapses. Finding the right moment to do so, however, is the most difficult operation. Usually this is only achieved by few, those who see first further than the others. The problem is that in most cases, people often do not even want to see. They cling to the past as a lifeline and are not even interested in the needs of the new times. We cannot let our past, even if it is relevant, create barriers for a promising future.

Let’s take a closer look at the issues of change. Change should start when one comes to the realisation that the capabilities of a given system or organization will collapse in the more or less near future. This change must be prepared before the system’s capabilities are exhausted; while there is still the capacity to start a new cycle. The problem is that the change has to begin - and this seems contradictory - while all information from the system indicates that all is going well. This is precisely when there is still vital energy for change. We have to anticipate this move and demonstrate the ability to see beyond and to risk change.

Change disturbs sleeping consciences from years of routine. It is necessary to stir ideas, exchange opinions, exchange views, so that one can consider a change. And change is to read, analyse, think, discuss, understand. Understand that, nowadays, fierce competition, the quality of a product, an organization or a project is not everything. The value or price, neither. Even tradition or background are not valued. Today everyone wants to be constantly surprised and handled with care. Relationships are valued, ethical and emotional attitudes are ahead.

Anyone who thinks he knows everything about his profession is losing the "game" without realising it. A well-trained professional conveys more confidence and greater capabilities. The victory of a professional begins in his preparation, but the preparation never ends.

In my opinion, the team that has the best players only wins if:

- It is well-trained;
- Its players are well-integrated and motivated;
- There is consistency in the targets.

All this is only possible if it is based on a good relationship and communication: the key factors of successful projects today. In this sense, we saw the proliferation of theories about human motivation as a way of trying to understand what motivates people after all. I believe that one thing is consensual: Man is a multi-dimensional being; only when he satisfies his need to express himself on all levels (operational, social and political) can he feel truly motivated. And what is motivation? Definitions vary over time and, even today, there are profound differences. However, common sense dictates that it is a force, almost mythical, which pushes
a human being to act in order to achieve a given objective. In my opinion, motivation is a process and, as such, it relies on a logic of continuity by focusing on detailed issues of day to day, and again, especially those that relate to the very human relationship: closeness, complicity and solidarity, by way of example.

The appreciation of interpersonal relationships will then be the point of honour for a team. But it requires a coach with high capacity of perception. He has to know and feel when his group is working well, when it is bad, when it is committed, when it is sad, when it doesn’t produce what is expected. And then, the coach starts looking for motivational strategies to solve those problems. However, there are no effective motivational techniques if there isn’t a rigorous and clearly defined process of communication. This process of communication implies a variety of properly used leadership styles, praise and censure used with discretion and the existence of a very determining “how to listen”.

The Master of all masters of management, Peter Drucker, was the first to define the art of effective management. His pioneering influence on the ideas of current management is unsurpassed. Born November 19th 1909, in Vienna, Austria (deceased November 11th 2005, in Claremont, California, USA,) Peter Drucker was a philosopher and economist and is considered the father of modern management, the most renowned thinker on the phenomenon of the effects of globalization on the economy in general and in organizations, in particular - implying the modern administration as the science that deals with people in organizations, as he, himself, has stated – an argument to be taken into account in the management of sports team, as well.

According to Drucker, the foundation of all management is based on five main functions:

- Setting objectives;
- Organising your work group;
- Motivating and communicating;
- Continuously evaluating the result;
- Developing and training people;

For each of the five functions, the relationship between the concept of effectiveness (doing the right thing) and the concept of efficiency (doing that thing well) defines success. Because not doing the right things well or doing well the wrong things is equally ineffective.

Given these five functions and relating them to the management of a sports team, we should always bear in mind that the setting of objectives involves a continuous process of research and decision-making. It is of vital importance that a coach’s personal goal coincides with the goal of the group. Once the objectives are established, one must provide the necessary human resources to achieve them and make sure that they are effectively distributed. In a well-organised group nobody does anything superfluous.

I have once read that a high director of the car manufacturer, Ford, said that if you don’t spend four hours analysing the best location for a worker, you will spend 400 hours eliminating the errors arising there from. One should never forget that motivating and communicating is a
two-way relationship. And it is not an isolated or periodical task. We should keep multiple channels fully open and available. Today, the cyberspace has come to facilitate this relationship. Therefore, the ongoing education of a trainer in the area of new technologies becomes crucial. But in order to establish good communication, there needs to be feedback.

Evaluating sports is, and will always be, a polemic situation. For those who have a more economic view on the matter, things appear to be more unambiguous: More investment = better results. For educators, the relationship is not so direct.

The subject matter is to know where we stand. And for that, it becomes crucial to take into account the following factors: Market, competition, capital, quality, innovation, productivity, satisfaction, and moral of the entire workgroup.

When it comes to developing and training people, is it the coach depending on the work of the athletes, or the athletes depending on a coach's job? In fact, everyone has what might be called “family responsibility”. All depend on each other, so the development of people will have to start with each person, with each individual in the working group.

Returning to the example of the experience of Peter Drucker, he advised that - on the field of coaching - we should all prepare an action planned in six steps:

- Identify the strengths.
- Enhance the strengths.
- Increase our personal information.
- Eliminate bad habits.
- Practice good manners.
- Avoid weak areas.

He recommended greater concentration on the strong points and the least possible effort in the improvement of areas of little importance.

All human activities are moved and controlled by some sort of logic, a logic that acts more or less hidden, more or less sensible. Anyone who wants to succeed in a human activity should identify and understand the logic at its roots, reinterpret it and adapt it to new realities and challenges.

Identifying and understanding the logic behind a particular human activity, which we would like to assess is the basic necessity. We all have in mind examples of people, who want to manage an organization without ever having come to understand the basic functioning of the industry or system where it is inserted. In most cases, they are people of good will who believe that life is a roller coaster where everything goes up and down, full of events that can be both positive and negative, depending on the ultimate chance or providence.

If we want a winning team, however, we have to work steadily, we must generate sufficient revenue, i.e. we have to work on certainty and not merely on proposals. And this is only
possible through hard work, clear criteria, common sense and the understanding that nothing depends on chance alone.

Once having analysed and understood the project, the next step is to pay attention to our main competitors. Who was or is the current leader? Who is the best and who is the worst? And we need to learn from both. It is important to seek the reasons and causes for both positions.

There is a tendency to believe that leaders are born and not made. Based on this approach, the ability to lead groups of people would be innate and not acquired. It is not quite so. The leader must also make efforts, study and work hard on a daily basis. The error is usually the confusion between leadership and charisma and the often-repeated reference to the excellences of charismatic leaders. But if they don’t decide to develop their skills, they will become ephemeral leaders. After all, the key point of leadership and charisma lies in the legitimacy of the one who bears or takes advantage of this factor, and such legitimacy is granted in a transitory way. To keep your vanity, you must renew it every day with the achievement of positive results for the group, the kind of results which cannot be obtained without work.

In the same sense that the best thing that might happen to an artist is that inspiration finds him in full work, the most appropriate for a leader is that charisma finds him working.

Alex Ferguson, Manchester United coach of many years, once said: "When critics of our game are parading their theories about the attributes that make some teams better than others, it always amuses me their eagerness to focus almost exclusively on techniques and tactics comparisons. We often see them discussing football in abstract terms, forgetting that in reality it is played by flesh and blood creatures with feelings. Tactics is important, but this is not what wins games. Games are won by people."

Therefore, it is important to motivate people. If we can get people to do willingly and well those things that have to be done, we will succeed.

The life of a coach is clear-cut: If he wins, he’s the best. If he loses, he’s out. Plain and simple....

I would like to finish this work with a dialogue drawn from the story of Alice in Wonderland, between the main character, Alice, and the Cat. It takes place at the point when Alice arrives to an intersection and finds herself completely lost:

Alice: Which way should we take?

Cat: Where do you want to go?

Alice: I do not know.

Cat: Well, in that case, any way is right for you.

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