

PERSPECTIVE

The Pitch for a New Leadership Metaphor

Winsor Jenkins, VP-Human Resources, Northwest Pipe Company, Vancouver, Washington

We have all used metaphors to help explain things, including understanding the nature of change. For many of today's leaders, this includes the use of the sports metaphor. Football, for example, has been frequently used in sports metaphors to explain how business works, what leadership looks like, and how employees are expected to perform. Football as a sport—and the metaphor as a business application—have been a big part of American culture, which has recognized and rewarded individuals for their specific jobs.

Individual and team responsibilities learned on a playing field are key in today's business world.

As we move forward in the 21st century, however, the present nature of business is “being transformed from a structure built out of jobs to a field of work needing to be done,” writes William Bridges, a leading author on managing life's transitions, in his book, *Job Shift* (Addison Wesley Publishing, 1994). Because of this shift, “our organizational world is no long a pattern of jobs,” reports Bridges, and “football is too position-driven a game and inadequate as a metaphor.”

So what is a more appropriate metaphor for describing what business and leadership look like under a global context? I submit soccer as a far more fitting alternative.

Until the 1980's, soccer's development and growth in America had been a struggle since its introduction in the nineteenth century. Why? I would suggest that it was because people (in the mainstream) did not accept the values associated with the collective experience! Soccer's struggle ran smack into the American image of the rugged individual—a classic conflict between team or collective values and individual values.

Teams

In their best-selling book, *The Wisdom of Teams* (Harvard Business School Press, 1992), Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith talk about the conflict between team-based values and individual values when they write,

At their core, most people have values that favor individual responsibility and performance over any form of groups, whether it be a team or otherwise. Our parents, teachers, ministers, and other elders emphasize individual responsibility as paramount from our earliest days onward. We grow up under a regimen that measures (academic grades), rewards (allowances), and punishes (trips to the principal's office) individual—not collective—performance.

However, soccer provides American industry with a working metaphor for reconciling these conflicting values. Historically, the conflict has always been an either/or argument, with the values presented as opposites on a continuum. The reconciliation that soccer offers is not a question of dealing with the values in an either/or application, but understanding that both individual values and collective values are needed in order to compete, with real teams, in the global business environment of the future. Whether on the soccer field or business field, the focus needs to be on the results produced when all positions interact!

“As (real) teams become more important, modifying the strong natural emphasis on individual accountability will, of course, be necessary.”

---Katzenbach & Douglas

Soccer represents the world’s most popular game. Its popularity in America continues to grow at the recreation, high school, college and professional levels. The fact that soccer crosses a number of personal boundaries including age, ethnic background and gender, is adding to its growth and popularity. For example, soccer is a very attractive sport for females to play. In addition to providing physical conditioning, soccer provides a better understanding of the interdependent nature of the team experience, along with associated character and leadership skills such as self-sacrifice and cooperation, which are needed to be successful in the global business world. This is a world in which the “work of the manager or leader is as a servant, a counselor, and a confidant,” writes Richard Farson in his book, *Management of the Absurd* (Simon & Schuster, 1996). This all relates directly and vitally to the continued growth of women entering the business world and rising in management ranks. Additionally, diversity brings strength to soccer teams and reinforces the universal partnership the world has for the game. It is typical to find teams, including coaches, at the professional and international levels made up of many different ethnic groups. As American industry continues on the global path, diversity will be a necessary prerequisite in order to successfully compete and partner with others around the world.

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Soccer is not position-driven. Often described as the thinking person’s sport, the team’s work consists of advancing the ball to score goals and defending its own goal to keep the opponent from scoring. Eleven team players are called upon to play for two 45-minute periods as they move up and down the field. The goalkeeper is the only player on the team who may be described as partially position-driven; however, he or she does have the ability and flexibility to move out of that position to assist other team members. Each player on the team represents an interdependent part of the team. Multiple skills are extremely important in providing each player with the ability to control the ball in the air and on the ground, to change roles, and to play both offense and defense as the flow of the game dictates. The soccer player’s ability to do many things is a form of multi-tasking, and its application is tied to both individual players and the

team, which is expected to manage its entire work effort. In effect, the soccer team is a self-directed unit charged with performing the work needing to be done.

All of the characteristics described above are representative of a real team and its present and future application in the global business world. The distinction made in *The Wisdom of Teams* between “real” teams and groups that management often calls teams is an important one: “In any situation requiring the real-time combination of multiple skills, experiences, and judgments, a (real) team inevitably gets better results than a collection of individuals operating within confined job roles and responsibilities.”

American industry in today’s highly competitive global business world, where technology is empowering organizations to be more responsive to markets (speed) and empowering employees on the front line (and in the field) to make decisions, to take risks, to manage change, and to deal directly with the customer, has become more and more like the game of soccer.

Soccer is played on a larger field or *pitch* than most other sports, including football, and it requires all players to understand the bigger picture: team strategy and game-plan, goals, opponent’s strengths and weaknesses, and the like – all so important to the team’s success. Understanding the bigger picture empowers all players on the field to make decisions, take risks, and manage and anticipate change, as the flow of the game dictates. As a self-directed team operating on a real-time, continuous schedule, individual players and the team must be able to respond to changing conditions on their own! Except for serious injury on the field, there are no opportunities to stop the clock to plan a strategy, to give players a rest, or to slow down the opposition’s momentum.

Leadership

In soccer what is the primary leadership style for a coach? Delegating on the sideline and leaving the execution of the game to the team and its players! This means that the delegating coach “empowers the team to act independently (from the leader),” with the coach providing the “appropriate resources to get the job done,” according to Ken Blanchard, an expert in the field of leadership development and author of numerous books including *The One Minute Manager*, *Gung Ho!* and *Raving Fans*.

Leadership has vital significance to future global business applications. In the past, with American industry “at the center of the world’s economy during the industrial age, the emphasis was on self-sufficiency in every sort of enterprise - education, business, or government,” reports Warren Bennis in *On Becoming a Leader* (Perseus Books, 1994). Business and government at that time called for a command and control or highly directive style, with one-way, top-down communication. It was a management style appropriate to the mass production world of work calling for job specialization, and it helped America survive a depression and win two major wars by teaching people discipline, courage, dominance, and self-preservation. However, as John Scully, Chairman and CEO of Apple Computer at that time, pointed out in his discussion

with Bennis, organizations need to change and so does leadership style. Scully stated, “The new model is global in scale, an interdependent network. . . so the new leader faces new tests, such as how does he lead people who don’t report to him-people in other companies, in Japan or Europe, even competitors? How do you lead in this idea-intensive, interdependent-network environment? It requires a wholly different set of skills, based on ideas, people skills, and values.”

The soccer coach provides the best model of what leadership looks like in the context of a team application in the global business world. He or she is one who has the fundamental belief in people (teams) to accept responsibility for getting the work done, along with the ability (skills) to be totally responsive to the team by demonstrating the flexibility to change leadership styles in order to meet the team’s changing needs. To paraphrase Ken Blanchard, the most effective coach or leader is one who can provide for the team what it cannot provide for itself.

In sum, the soccer metaphor represents a natural way for American industry to understand global leadership and business requirements as it links up with global partners. The metaphor will help leaders, teams and individual employees better understand how to address change as they search for meaning and success in their organizations and careers.