

Finding space: 10 Top Tips for aspiring football leaders

Football is an industry that is never going to run short of job applicants or aspiring talents, both on and off the pitch.

The emotions that people in football experience make their jobs unlike any other in the world. And the business side of the game, more than ever before, is replete with opportunities for the best and brightest. At the same time, the plateauing of TV revenues and the rise of artificial intelligence, fluctuating supporter bases and changing generational preferences, all mean that disruption is coming, albeit possibly more slowly than in other industries.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that the conversations we are having across Europe show that there is demand for increasingly sophisticated executives. It is quite clear that the future leaders in football will need a lot more than just a love of the game.

Several factors keep coming back on the table... a knowledge of and affinity with football absolutely, but also experience in other industries such as ticketing, hospitality and events; first-hand experience of disruption, and an ability to see the bigger picture whilst still maintaining a hands-on, operational focus; and an ability to resist the super-fan urge to cross the line and go into the dressing room.

But that's not all.



The best football leaders must operate effectively across multiple domains. The next match and operational risks will always be a priority, but executives must be able to look beyond the next three points and master the club's longer-term objectives and strategic risks. And all of this happens under a media spotlight more common in FTSE100 companies than other traditional small and medium sized businesses. Leaders must be able to stay calm and plot a steady course in a fast-changing environment where short news cycles frequently lead to a host of negative emotions and bad behaviours.

So that's what a good football leader looks like — how can ambitious executives become one? What actions should they prioritise as they map out their careers? Here's Ten Top Tips from some of the most insightful senior football leaders across Europe...

1. Combine strategic nous with immediate operational knowledge.

Football leaders need to know what's happening in their club today, as well as set the right strategic direction.

“The most important trait is that people see the big picture, and that they see it straight away and can connect the dots. Most people fail to see the broader story. They must understand that there are politics, and that you must read between the lines. That is how successful people function.”

ILJA KAENZIG
CEO, VFL BOCHUM

2. Focus on technology enabled opportunities.

Digital and data represent huge opportunities for revenue growth and improved performance — on and off the pitch.

“In the past, we issued tenders and worked with media companies but were unable to create our own data-driven ecosystem. Now we are now in another world of streaming, direct connections and data-driven systems, and this means we have more control over our revenues.”

AXEL HELLMANN
CEO, EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

3. Tailor your approach to the local context.

While every club has a different context and complexities, leaders always must appreciate the needs of the local area, such as relationships with local politicians, especially in countries such as France or Italy.

“Understand the landscape of the club you are working at. Working at Inter, Lazio, or Palermo is very different. Do you need to have an approach that is more caring, democratic or autocratic? You can’t just apply the same playbook in different clubs — your approach must be context specific.”

GIOVANNI GARDINI
DIRECTOR GENERAL, PALERMO

4. Don’t be a super-fan.

As the CEO, you can (and should) enjoy football but you must be able to see the bigger picture and keep your eye on the long-term project.

“The biggest challenge is when an executive who works for a club becomes overly interested in the football itself. When they get too involved, then that can be problematic. It’s my belief that it’s very hard for executives to manage the revenue, the supporters, local politicians, the owner, and everything on the sporting side.”

LAURENT PRUD’HOMME
DIRECTOR GENERAL, OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS

5. Always be learning.

Career management and talent development on the business side of a club are rarely priorities and this means the onus is on individuals to prioritise their own development.

“Never stop wanting to learn. If you stop being curious, then you will reach a glass ceiling. At that point, your days become numbered. This is a mindset that is essential for innovating and reinventing yourself.”

BAPTISTE CRONIER-TEYCHENE
FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL, STADE
LAVALLOIS

6. Be a good communicator.

Any football club has internal and external stakeholders of varying ability levels. Leaders must be able to interact, manage and inspire all of them.

“Football clubs need leaders who can unite people. A football club CEO must be able to lead people and be someone who can talk to everyone. A leader is someone who can join the dots and get everyone aligned. The people in the club must want to follow the CEO.”

XAVIER COURT
BOARD MEMBER, SAINT ETIENNE

7. Hone your commercial skills.

No leader will flourish without an understanding of changing market dynamics and the financial implications of them.

“Even if the topic of branding is relatively straightforward, football leaders always need strong commercial skills. For example, they need to understand digital technologies, but they really need to know how to commercialise them. These two points are inextricably linked.”

MARK BULLINGHAM
CEO, ENGLISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

8. Use your sweet spot as an entry point into football.

Understand what interests you most and use that as your way in before branching out into other parts of the club or industry.

“An aspiring executive should find the parts of the industry that interest them. In my case, I can talk and sell, but I am not a marketeer. So, find the discipline that interests them the most and work on understanding how the industry operates. Trying to change the industry to meet your skill set won’t work — you’ll never beat the game.”

SHAUN HARVEY
DIRECTOR, WREXHAM

9. Brace for pace.

CEOs must be able to juggle myriad priorities 24/7 and at a pace that is unforgiving and unrelenting.

“A key challenge is the speed of change that CEOs must deal with. There are so many non-football things to be aware of, such as social media, workplace culture, DEI, and sustainability. All of this is not a bad thing, but it is relentless.”

NOEL MOONEY
CEO, WELSH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

10. Build relationships with leaders.

Spend as much time as possible with the senior people in your organisation and be curious about how they operate.

“When it comes to developing leadership, I like to see how other leaders interact with other stakeholders — sponsors, investors, politicians, and so on. This helps you avoid making mistakes down the line. As a journalist, I always wanted to learn about how the editor worked, how they dressed, how they walked the floors and why they did certain things. That appetite for learning should never leave you, if you want to keep moving forward.”

CHARLIE METHVEN
CO-OWNER, CHARLTON ATHLETIC





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Authors

Aidan O'Brien (Paris)

