

## Scouting football's future CEOs

Five qualities of tomorrow's top leaders

Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi are individuals who are likely to be recognised wherever they go. Yet their dazzling feats on the football pitch are, at least in part, reliant on having a talented and effective CEO managing their club's short-, medium-, and long-term activities.

Those CEOs have their hands full. Defining a strategy, mobilising a diverse team of people (including several top-level athletes) to deliver it, whilst achieving and maintaining financial sustainability, only starts to hint at the broad range of topics that CEOs of football clubs must address.

But what made CEOs successful in the past is changing. Previously, sporting success led to business success. No longer. In the face of a digital technology and data revolution, evolving ownership structures,

and changing consumer demands, clubs must now achieve greater business success to be able to compete more effectively in the sporting arena.

These changes have important implications for the CEOs of football clubs. What skills and capabilities do they need to succeed in this new world? What support and investment do they need to be effective leaders?

We sat down with a group of football club CEOs from across Europe's top leagues to consider these challenges. We identified five key traits and experiences that they think are needed for their future success, as well as identifying several key questions for club owners.



## Five qualities of a future football CEO

### 1. Maintains objectivity while defining and delivering a long-term vision

CEOs must be able to look at football in an objective, non-emotional way. They must then be able to define a vision for a football club and mobilise a diverse team of individuals to deliver it. However, this is not straightforward.

Short-term emotions are always present in football clubs, and they are often linked to the previous weekend's result. Those short-term emotions are not always in sync with a club's longer-term, often multi-year development goals such as talent development and the building of fit for purpose facilities.

*People want someone to blame straight away; society is more immediate and more aggressive. Supporters now instantly judge transfer activity despite it only being something you can really evaluate two years after a player arrives."*

KLAUS FILBRY  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, WERDER BREMEN

*A club is a business that must be run with a horizon longer than 12 months. A longer-term north star is essential for a club's success. There are always storms at a football club and it is key to have a roadmap to guide what you are doing. A club's strategic plan is its compass."*

FABRICE BOCQUET  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, OGC NICE

### Questions for the owner:

- » Does your CEO and leadership team have a strategic vision that looks beyond the end of the current season?
- » How does the board support its CEO? Does the board bring independent views and facilitate robust discussions?
- » Is the combined team able to align around a shared point of view after debate?
- » Are you happy with the balance that the CEO and the board strike between short- and longer- term priorities?

## 2. Understands that technology is more important than television

Broadcasting revenues have long been and continue to be the main source of income for clubs today. However, CEOs now need to realise that it is data and digital technologies that will allow them to diversify their club's income streams. This isn't about the CEOs possessing specific technology skills themselves, but rather them employing people who understand the commercial implications and opportunities of these new advances.

*We now combine experience and data when making decisions. For example, when it comes to season ticket prices, we consider both what our fans feel about our ticket prices and willingness to pay data to find the right answer. RB remains an emotional brand offering experience — it can't be just about the data — we mix data and emotions to make the best decisions.”*

JOHANN PLENGE  
DIRECTOR GENERAL AND CHIEF BUSINESS OFFICER, RB LEIPZIG

*By having the CEO of the port of Antwerp on the board, we were able to learn about how they were using drone technology to manage security 24/7 in the port and how this might be applicable in a football stadium.”*

DIRK VAN OEKELEN  
FORMER CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ROYAL ANTWERP

### Questions for the owner:

- » Does the CEO have a sufficient understanding of the commercial implications of data and new technologies?
- » Is the CEO sufficiently credible to be able to attract the right technical talents that clubs need?
- » Is the club a technology leader, a fast follower, or a laggard when it comes to the deployment of new technologies?

### 3. Builds relationships inside and outside of the club

CEOs need to drive results while also collaborating with and influencing many stakeholders, including local politicians. For football clubs, it is local, not national, politics, which really matters. There needs to be constant and constructive collaboration with the elected officials on which the club depends.

At the same time, CEOs need to mobilise employees and other multiple stakeholders behind their vision for the organisation. This is particularly challenging due to extensive media coverage, which invariably means that every employee has multiple people around them with a different view on the club. And a typical club also employs a diverse range of different profiles which means that CEOs must demonstrate chameleon-like skills to deliver the same message in many ways and formats.

*An ability to navigate the local context is crucial because you need to understand the environment that you're in. A football club is a major part of any town on many levels — social, political, economic. Very often in France, the key people in a city are the mayor and the CEO of the football club.”*

OLIVIER CLOAREC  
EXECUTIVE CHAIR AND MANAGING DIRECTOR, STADE RENNAIS

*CEOs must surround themselves with people who will challenge them and have different backgrounds and expertise because performance in football is fragile, and things can go awry quickly if you are not vigilant.”*

FABRICE BOCQUET  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, OGC NICE

#### Questions for the owner:

- » Who are the key internal and external stakeholders with the greatest impact on the club?
- » Is the CEO able to get their viewpoints into boardroom debates?
- » Is the CEO able to collaborate effectively and get a diverse group of people to agree on shared solutions?

## 4. Leverages skills and experience from outside professional football

The CEOs we spoke with had a variety of previous professional experiences. Some came from a football coaching background whereas others had worked their way up from a club's ticket office. Several former chief financial officers had also risen to the top job, and a few had had general management experience in other sports, or in different industries such as hospitality or strategy consulting.

Aspiring CEOs should also be able to question and develop themselves on a consistent basis, with the topics of technology and data being seen as particularly important but once at the top, there are few other options within the sport. The professional game does a poor job of offering clear career paths to individuals, and several CEOs encouraged ambitious executives to take their time before moving into football and to develop as many strings to their bow as possible before making the transition.

*The road to senior management in a football club is long and it takes a lot of time, dedication, and effort. To be successful, proactivity, empathy and knowing how to manage people are key."*

GIOVANNI CARNEVALI  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SASSUOLO

*I trace my success back to beginning as a goalkeeper coach, then a fitness coach, then a sporting director. You should experience many different aspects of the club before becoming the CEO. Personal and professional development is key, and you must experience many different situations and scenarios."*

DAMIEN COMOLLI  
PRESIDENT, TOULOUSE

### Questions for the owner:

- » Has the CEO had a sufficiently broad range of experience both inside and outside of professional football?
- » Is the CEO open minded and do they have a learning mindset?



## 5. Understands the value and importance of diversity

DEI is on the rise in football, even if only slowly. Football clubs will however continue to have heterogeneous workforces that will only become more diverse. A CEO's ability to lead a group of very different people will be a key determinant of a club's future success. But there is much more still to do.

Although almost all clubs are taking the first steps to try and achieve greater diversity, very few have managed to progress to the stage where there is a widespread appreciation of the business benefits of DEI for the club.

*I firmly believe that diverse teams with different points of view create better solutions for the challenges they are facing. Unfortunately, we rarely find female candidates or candidates from other ethnicities. German football remains dominated by older white men."*

MICHAEL MEESKE  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, VfL WOLFSBURG

*I have made a conscious effort to try and maximize diversity. But if you want to attract diverse talent, then you must create a culture where people are convinced that they can be useful. At Toulouse, we have a culture of the best idea wins — someone's background is irrelevant. We have created an environment where people feel safe saying what they think; this is how I believe you attract more diverse talent."*

DAMIEN COMOLLI  
PRESIDENT, TOULOUSE

### Questions for the owner:

- » What DEI initiatives is your CEO driving?
- » Is the club sufficiently transparent about its diversity commitments? Should it be doing more?
- » If your CEO doing enough to ensure the women and minorities at your club are being given opportunities to develop their skill base and are they being promoted fast enough?

## Meet football's future CEOs

Who runs a football club matters. The game's ability to break down barriers, cross borders and dominate sporting discourse the world over is unrivalled. It's only right that owners should seek out the best and brightest talent.

Changing societal attitudes and rapid changes in new technologies mean that football club CEOs need a new playbook. These new rules of the road reflect the fact that it is business success that drives sporting success, not the other way around. The clubs that have leaders who can ensure that their clubs adjust to this new reality will be the real winners over the longer term.





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