

Management Secrets from the World's Best Soccer Coach - Ferguson's Formula

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In this intriguing *Harvard Business Review* article, HBS professor Anita Elberse reports on her examination of the leadership principles of Sir Alex Ferguson, the highly successful coach of the Manchester United (U.K.) soccer team for 26 seasons. How many of these apply to K-12 school leadership?

- *Start with the foundation.* Ferguson defied the conventional wisdom (“You can’t win anything with kids”) and the obsession with winning the next game and focused on building the club for the long haul. He did this by recruiting promising young players who might eventually make the first team (David Beckham and Ryan Giggs were among the youngsters he brought in). “With this approach,” he says, “the players all grow up together, producing a bond that, in turn, creates a spirit... I always take great pride in seeing younger players develop. The job of the manager, like that of a teacher, is to inspire people to be better. Give them better technical skills, make them winners, make them better people, and they can go anywhere in life... You could say it was brave, but fortune favors the brave.”
- *Dare to rebuild your team.* Even when Manchester United was dominant, Ferguson looked to the future. “Although I was always trying to disprove it, I believe that the cycle of a successful team lasts maybe four years, and then some change is needed,” he says. “So I tried to visualize the team three or four years ahead and make decisions accordingly.”
- *Set high standards – and hold everyone to them.* Ferguson, driven by his own mediocre record as a player, arrived at work at 7:00 a.m. and pushed all his players to give one hundred percent and demand the same from their teammates. Practice sessions were carefully scripted and honed to perfection, and even his superstars spent extra hours practicing. “If you give in once,” he said to players, “you’ll give in twice.”
- *Never, ever cede control.* “[I]f any players want to take me on, to challenge my authority and control, I deal with them,” says Ferguson. “Your personality has to be bigger than theirs. That is vital... You can complicate your life in many ways by asking, ‘Oh, I wonder if the players like me?’ If I did my job well, the players would respect me, and that’s all you need.” He made a point of dealing immediately with insubordination, negative talk, or public griping by fining or trading the miscreants before things got out of hand.
- *Match the message to the moment.* “Few people get better with criticism,” says Ferguson. “Most respond to encouragement instead. So I tried to give encouragement when I could... As the same time, in the dressing room, you need to point out mistakes when players don’t meet expectations. That is when reprimands are important. I would do it right after the game.” Ferguson appealed to players’ blue-collar backgrounds, emphasizing the work ethic, trust in each other, not letting their mates down. When he had to tell a star player he wouldn’t be starting in a particular game, Ferguson would do it in private and always preface the bad news by saying, “Look, I might be making a mistake here, but I think this is the best team for today.”
- *Prepare to win.* Manchester United had the best record for winning when they were tied or behind at half time. That was because Ferguson drilled players in specific tactics to use when they needed a goal with 10, five, or three minutes remaining.
- *Rely on the power of observation.* Reluctantly at first, Ferguson delegated training sessions to assistant coaches and took on the role of observer. “As a coach on the field, you don’t

see everything,” he said. “Once I stepped out of the bubble, I became more aware of a range of details, and my performance level jumped... The ability to see things is key – or, more specifically, the ability to see things you don’t expect to see... Seeing a change in a player’s habits or a sudden dip in his enthusiasm allowed me to go further with him: Is it family problems? Is he struggling financially? Is he tired? What kind of mood is he in? Sometimes I could even tell that a player was injured when he thought he was fine.”

- *Never stop adapting.* “I believe that you control change by accepting it,” says Ferguson. Professional soccer went through major shifts during his 26 years at Manchester United, and he rolled with them – a youth league, a state-of-the art medical facility in the clubhouse, sports scientists to support the coaches, Vitamin D booths in the locker room to compensate for the lack of sunlight in Manchester, yoga sessions, GPS sensors on players during practice sessions.

“Ferguson’s Formula” by Anita Elberse with Sir Alex Ferguson in *Harvard Business Review*, October 2013 (Vol. 91, #10, p. 116-125), no e-link available