

World Cup Year – Strategy Principles from Football to Business

Now that we are entering World Cup year 2002, it is appropriate to look to the “footballing elite” to understand how the business community can learn from the “wisdom” which abounds in world football circles. Many inspirational words will be spoken as countries prepare to engage in the battle for supremacy in Japan and South Korea. Business leaders should pay careful attention to the marvellous wealth of insightful quotes available from the world of football – they can, inadvertently, guide strategic thinking in the uncertain and potentially turbulent year ahead!

This is a light-hearted look at a number of critical areas which business leaders, managers and executives need to address in the year ahead. There are 12 strategy principles, which companies should deploy to achieve success in 2002.

1. The Mark Viduka Principle of Strategic vision

“I would not be bothered if we lost every game as long as we won the league”

This may account for why Australia lost out to Uruguay in the qualification play-offs!

Roughly translated to industry this principle is all about seeing the bigger picture. Keep your focus on delivering a bigger picture and don't get drawn into unnecessary battles, which are unimportant in terms of winning the league!

2. The Ronnie Whelan Principle of Complementarity

“He's put on weight and I've lost it, and vice versa”

Clearly the point Ronnie is articulating for business is to eliminate overlaps to achieve cost efficiencies but remember that the gaps are the real cause for concern in strategic terms. As in football it's all about complementary skill sets and balance in the team.

3. The Johnny Giles Viewpoint Principle

“I'd rather play in front of a full house than an empty crowd”

As we listen to Giles, Dunphy et al. in the summer, business leaders and managers should remember the importance of developing viewpoints to create strategic options. Do you want a “full house” or “an empty crowd”? Make your assumptions for the year ahead, call the market and then manage your options. As Gary Liniker once said after a mediocre performance *“There's no in between – you're either good or bad. – We were in between”!*

4. The Thierry Henry and Ronaldo Fundamental Principle (otherwise known as the principle of the bleedin' obvious)

“Sometimes in football you have to score goals” - Thierry Henry

“We lost because we didn't win” – Ronaldo

As we all learned in 2001 in the post dot.com era, the fundamentals of business still apply. Clearly the message from Henry and Ronaldo is focus your time and resources on profitability, costs, revenues and cash – don't lose sight of the obvious!

5. The Ian Wright Principle of Compassion

“Without being too harsh on David Beckham, he cost us the match”

Ian's cleverly coded message is that in tougher and less certain times more important than ever to enhance employee, supplier and customer loyalty. Work hard to deepen the relationships you've got rather than assuming a mere confrontational approach – we're all in this together - as Ian would say!

6. The Stuart Pearce Planning Horizon Principle

“I can see the carrot at the end of the tunnel”

In changing times be practical and focus on real milestones or carrots that you can see. Use shorter planning horizons but don't be short sighted. Remember to see the carrot and the end of the tunnel. One is of little use without the other, and vice-versa as a famous footballer once said!

7. The New York Cosmos Positioning Principle

A New York Cosmos executive in the early '70's on Franz Beckenbauer's positioning -
"Tell the Kraut to get his ass up front. We don't pay a million for a guy to hang around in defence!"

While these well-meaning comments were uttered in a moment of frustration this executive articulated the importance of strategic positioning in two sentences where many books have failed. He forces us to look at the macro picture and look at the wider implications of our actions. We will not maximise shareholder value unless we crack the positioning principle in our markets, resources and industry.

8. The Lee Hendrie Intuition Principle

"I took a whack on the left ankle, but something told me it was my right"

Lee Hendrie clearly understands the value of intuition. His critical ability to make judgements is a lesson for all executives who procrastinate and agonise over decisions. Managers, leaders and executives are paid to make decisions. Like Mr. Hendrie trust your intuition!

9. The David Becham Principle of Flexibility

Interviewer: *"Would it be fair to describe you as a volatile player?"*

David Becham: *"Well, I can play in the centre, on the right and occasionally on the left side"*

With Mr. Becham's understanding of the Flexibility principle he cunningly bent his response around the interviewers confrontational question into the top corner (or was it into the roof of the stands?). The point David is making and demonstrating is the importance in developing flexibility and adaptability. In a changing environment "not one but two footed players" and teams are essential, particularly when "trying to walk before you run" as we say in business!

10. The John Lambie Principle of Innovation

John Lambie, Partick Thistle manager, when told a concussed striker did not know who he was - *"That's great, tell him he's Pele and get him back on"*. This is a class act when it comes to innovation. Few have had the foresight of John Lambie. England has, for example, tried to convince themselves in every tournament that the year is 1966 - concussion was clearly missing (or maybe not!). For business, innovation is what sets entrepreneurs and great companies apart. A bout concussion all round in 2002 is probably required!

11. The Ron Atkinson Competitive Advantage Principle

"He dribbles a lot and the opposition don't like it - you can see it all over their faces" - Big Ron at his spontaneous best!

Creating and sustaining competitive advantage is what it is all about. As big Ron says the key is in figuring out what the opposition or competitors don't like and what the supporters or customers really do like. In a flash of genius Ron has encapsulated the essence of Strategy in a manner not previously witnessed by the academic and business world.

12. The (Doctor) George Best Principle of Priorities

The final strategy principle for 2002 is brought to us ironically by the greatest footballer never to play in the World Cup Finals. With the convergence of political and economic changes, technological advancements and, a general sense of uncertainty for the year ahead the George Best principle of being clear on your priorities is the critical success factor for 2002. As George said, reflecting on how he lost his fortune,

"I spent a lot of my money on booze, birds and fast cars. The rest I just squandered!"