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What can be learnt from the Icelandic national team's managers, in project management and in shaping group dynamics?

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Abstract

Football is one of the most popular sports in the world. The football environment is demanding and challenging. In the last years there are more financial resources involved and social demand is increasing. Football is about creating the correct winning environment, overcoming significant challenges and handling expectations and pressure. At first sight, this environment seems very similar to the project management environment, but is it really? What can be learnt from the Icelandic national football team's managers in project management and in shaping group dynamics? The IPMA eye of competence is used as a framework for this thesis with a focus on leadership, strategy, team building and how to lead successful teams. The thesis is built up in two ways: qualitative study and quantitative study. In the qualitative study, two in depth interviews were conducted with the Icelandic national team's managers. The conclusion is that the main building blocks of the team are a structured working environment, values that support the organizational structure, appropriate combination of task- and social leadership style and team cohesion. In the quantitative study, a questionnaire was sent out to the Icelandic national team members. The conclusion is that the key success factors from the training processes are a structured working environment, discipline, mutual trust, mutual respect and repetition. It is our conclusion that the football environment provides a good testing ground for project management, but since fewer variables affect the outcome in football it can be difficult to apply it directly to business.

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1. Introduction

Project management is a young discipline, evolving and expanding at an increasing pace. That is why it is important for project managers to gather information from different perspectives and to apply the lessons in their personal development as project managers. The football environment is very complicated but also very structured and rule based. The financial aspect is getting more important and it has billions of television audiences all over the world (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004). The Icelandic national football team has been climbing up FIFA's World Ranking List ever since 2011 when Lars Lagerbäck and Heimir Hallgrímsson started leading the team. By the end of 2014 the national team rose from 104th place to 33rd place (Men's ranking, 2015). In this thesis it was decided to find out if there was a winning formula that leads to the Icelandic national football team's success. The research question is: What can be learnt from the Icelandic national football team's managers in project management and in shaping group dynamics?

The IPMA Eye of Competence, technical and behavioural competence is used as framework for this paper (IPMA, 2006). The main focus is on project management success, interested parties, leadership and team behaviour. The story of the Icelandic national football team's success concerns many stakeholders and surrounding environment: the team members, managers, supporters, media and the community. In laying the cornerstone for shaping a successful team, one must carefully review the leadership method and the team's behaviour. How do these two factors align with each other? What are the qualities that the manager and his team should have? How is a successful team shaped?

2. Literature review

The project managers' environment is all about planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling resources and procedures to achieve specific goals. The factors that project managers need to have in mind when planning a project are scope, time, budget and quality. In the project management environment, the project and its scenarios differ between projects- almost no task is the same. Various articles have been written about project management success and failure. There are some that stress the importance of time, cost and quality and there are additional articles that claim that measuring other factors such as the human factor are also important (Cooke-Davies, 2002; Kendra and Taplin, 2004). In this thesis ten success factors identified by Pinto and Slevin (1987) will be used to evaluate the success factors of the national team managers. The first factor they identified was the project mission or the importance of having clearly defined goals and benefits from the beginning. It is important not only by the team to understand what the goals and benefits are; it is also important for the whole organization. The second factor is top management support. The support of the senior management is important for the project manager as they are responsible for the allocation of the resources (financial, manpower and time). Project management confidence increases in accordance with management support. The third factor is the project schedule and planning. The importance of having a detailed plan of the stages of implementation is vital for success. In the plan, the milestones, resources and equipment are described. The fourth factor is client consultation. Client consultation is important in the successful project implementation since the client will be the end user. Once the project manager is aware of who will use the result he will be more likely to fulfil the client's expectations. The fifth success factor is personnel issues like recruitment, selection and training and the nature of the personnel involved with regard to skills needed for the project. Goals, personalities, skills and knowledge have to be considered. This is important as the personnel contribute to the empowerment of the organization. The sixth factor claims that the personnel are able to perform the technical tasks and have adequate technology to perform tasks associated with the project. The seventh factor is the client acceptance that must be taken into account. The eighth factor is monitoring and feedback. The key personnel receive information on how the project is going in comparison with the initial plan. This gives the project manager opportunity to anticipate and take corrective measures if the project is going off track. The ninth success factor is communication. The environment must support good communication channels for the organization and clients to exchange information. The tenth factor is trouble-shooting as the project manager has to be able to anticipate problems if they arise.

An organizational strategy shows where to focus in the future, explaining how to manage the company's resources for better performance. There are a few important dimensions to look into when creating a strategy: the existence, the content, the process and context. The existence dimension is especially important for sports clubs and similar organizations. The existence of the company is very important in strategizing as it provides the legal frame

and agreements, building blocks for creating the organization. The environment is constantly changing and the organization has to follow by updating the plan and guidelines. The client's and interested parties are important as they are affecting the organization with their demands (Steinthorsson, 2003).

It is important to have the stakeholders as allies when running successful projects. Media is a very important stakeholder in football as it provides information to the spectators, in both images and words. The media affects both publicity for the event and the team members psychologically. It is the link between the player and the observer. The larger the event, the more revenue the media can gain by selling more expensive advertisements as sponsors will get more exposure. The participants and spectators are also important as it looks better to have a large audience in the sports hall. As technology increases, images are more easily distributed online all around the world. It is therefore important to include the media as it also builds trust between the public and the team (Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris and McDonnell, 2012).

In the football environment the football manager defines the strategy, goals and the vision of the team. The football manager has the power to choose the team members for the game. Team selection is based on the players' skill and the tactics. In football, key performance indicators are well-defined. The football team receives points for their performance in the game. The same applies for each individual player, who is judged by his performance. Based on this information, it is very easy for football teams to access their status and improve if things are not working according to plan. Fields and opponents change, but the basic line-up of the team does not, regardless of how carefully the football environment is reviewed (Carson, 2013). Burnes and O'Donnell (2011) and Carson (2013) mention the importance of the leader, creating and preparing the right environment for success in football. The importance of creating and building trust enables the manager to change behaviour.

Let's look further into leadership styles since it is important to review when evaluating team success. A task focused leadership can be categorized after three behaviour patterns: transactional, initiating structure and boundary spanning (Hirst, Pirola-Merlo, & Richver, 2004). The transactional behaviour can be praise, a reward or a punishment based on role expectation (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas, & Halpin, 2006). Initiating a structure consists of two dimensions: directive leadership and autocratic leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003). The national team is led with autocratic leadership; decisions are made without consulting the team members (Schriesheim, House, & Kerr, 1976). By initiating structure, the leadership is primarily oriented toward task accomplishment. Team members have a clear sense of direction and purpose, and that can give a positive outcome with regard to team effectiveness and productivity. Boundary spanning involves collaborating with others outside the team, spanning the environment and negotiating resources for the team (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas, & Halpin, 2006).

A person focused leadership can be categorized by four behaviour patterns: transformational, consideration, empowerment and motivational (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas, & Halpin, 2006). Transformational leadership is when leaders can change vision driven people and context (Bass, 1985). This kind of leadership proactively seizes opportunities and solves organizational problems (Tichy & Ulrich, 1984). Transformational leadership makes the follower move from self-interest through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration and intellectual stimulation or individualized consideration (Bass, 1999). Consideration is a behaviour pattern where a leader can maintain close social relationships and group cohesion. This is done with open communication, mutual respect and trust, and emphasis on satisfying team members' needs (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas, & Halpin, 2006). Empowerment is when the leader can develop the team members' self-management and self-leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Motivational behaviour is used to promote team members' continued effort, especially in times of difficulty. Motivation is generated when needs and values are met through the provision of support for team members and their efforts (Fleishman, Mumford, Zaccaro, Levin, Korotkin, & Hein, 1991). Researchers have found that both task- and person-focused leadership are almost equally important in team effectiveness and productivity. This result provides support for the recommendation that leaders need to be trained in both types of behaviour as they both contribute and are needed for teams to be effective (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas, & Halpin, 2006).

The leader goes through a progression of various development roles: mentor, instructor, coach and facilitator (Kozlowski, Gully, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1996). It is important to foster all these roles if a manager wants to lead his team to success. Constructive leadership assists teams to drive above expectations by focusing on strengths and weaknesses. This process stimulates the best in each team member and gives him the opportunity to improve. Constructive leadership can be categorized to four ways: constructive atmosphere, constructive relationships, constructive communication and constructive purpose (Cameron, 2008). Constructive atmosphere is when positive emotions are flowing around the environment. An atmosphere like that has a positive effect (Mathieu & Zajac,

1990) and maximizes performance (Fredricksson, 1998; 2001). A positive relationship is when individuals communicate and act in positive way toward each other. The individuals show mutual respect in their actions. Constructive purpose is when team members feel that their being part of the team makes a difference; this applies for all cultures (Franl, 1959).

Team behaviour and team cohesiveness is the glue that holds the team together. A positive mood among team members can foster more cooperation, more participation, less conflict and stronger social cohesion (Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989; George; 1996). Team cohesion includes both social and task components. Social cohesion is when members of a team like each other, while task cohesion is when team members cooperate to achieve a common performance goal (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985). In a competitive sport like football, the manager's leadership and the relationship between the manager and team members are stronger factors for task cohesion than social cohesion. The reason for this is that the underlying goal is to elevate the team's climate, where team members can work better together to bring success and performance accomplishments to the team.

3. Research methodology

The analysis was constructed in two processes: qualitative study and quantitative study as is shown in Figure 1. In the first process, the qualitative study, questions were prepared by the authors. These questions were reviewed with an input from two former national team managers and two youth coaches. The questionnaire was revised according to the input. The final questionnaire included 32 questions about: preparation, strategy, stakeholders, the team members, the match day and other topics. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with the Icelandic national team's managers. Based on the interviews, qualitative data was reviewed by the authors through the framework of IPMA Eye of Competence. The focus was on the behavioural and technical results, but the contextual competences were excluded from the analysis.

In the second process, the quantitative study, one open question was inserted into the Survey Monkey website and sent out with an email to the players of the Icelandic national team. The question was: What in the training process of national team leaders makes the Icelandic national football team successful? The players were asked to state the key success factors that came to mind. The aim of the question was to receive feedback from the players on what, in their opinion, makes the team successful. The question was sent out to a total 31 players. A few of these players were not active then, but had been on the national team in the past. Forty percent, 12 individuals out of 31 answered the question. The quantitative results were categorized into sixteen success factors.



Figure 1 Research methodology: a graphical representation

4. Research result

Defining and making the working environment stable or routine was a new way of thinking in Icelandic football. This is what Hallgrímsson considers that Lagerbäck has brought new to the Icelandic football environment. From early stages of their cooperation, they divided the responsibility of leadership between them. Lagerbäck's main role at the beginning (as solo manager) was to prepare well-defined guidelines and structure for the team. Today, Lagerbäck has the overview of the games ahead and reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the Icelandic national team members. Hallgrímsson's main role is to analyse the next opponent and prepare the technical parts for the team. This process is done behind the scenes and usually between games. During this time period the football managers decide what players, exercises and tactics will be used in the game ahead. A lot of communication is done in-between games via internet, skype and phone. Since Lagerbäck lives in Sweden and Hallgrímsson lives in

Westman Islands, they do not meet each other until 7 to 10 days before a match. During that period, Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson have an intense work schedule. To lend structure to the environment, team meetings are well-defined. It is the standard to hold 5 such meetings: one to welcome, one about defence, one about offense, one about the opponent and one meeting about how they are going to play against the opponent. It is important to continually repeat what has been said at the meetings, so that everyone is fully aware of the tasks ahead. Regardless of the game result it is always the same routine so the team members always know what to expect.

Lagerbäck believes that a manager should never follow sport trends blindly. Instead he should focus on the skills each individual has within his team, so the player and the team can utilize that ability most efficiently. The development of the team should be done in small steps. The team needs to be ambitious but not overly ambitious, yet still sharing high expectations about their performance. When an individual is chosen for the team it is important that he supports the fundamental values. The players and the team behind the team have to support the values as they are the working instructions on how the team as a whole is to operate. The team's values are: hardworking, relentless, joyful, disciplined and focused. The team's long term goal is to reach the UEFA European Championship in France 2016.

In the preparation phase before each national game, Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson choose the 11 team members who will be the lead stars on the game day. Their decision is based on tactics, that is, which team member fits best for the line-up. In the working structure of the national team, each player knows that he might not get to play. He needs to be okay with that, putting himself aside and thinking about the team first. The Icelandic team members have extremely good characters and are willing to sacrifice themselves for team's success. So far no team members who sat on the bench have taken it out on other team members or on the managers. The reason for this might be that the national team has been successful. . It is necessary for every team member to understand their role but also to understand the other team members' roles. The better they know each other, the easier it is for them to cooperate. Careful attention should be given to each team member and if something needs to be corrected, it should be addressed constructively.

To build a good team, the manager needs to be patient and have a good estimation of the positive and negative sides of their team. The team members often can't see the whole picture; instead they focus on themselves or on their performance. It is vital that the manager never forgets that the team members are human beings with all kinds of behaviour. If a negative atmosphere rises, the manager needs to find the cause. Once the cause is understood, a solution can be found. In this process the manager needs to be frank with his team and give constructive advice. The manager may need to make tough decisions that some members may not agree with but at the same time he needs to build a strong relationship with his team.

Lagerbäck believes that team spirit is built on discipline. If you do not have discipline, you cannot get the team members to work well together. One of the main principles of the national team is: team members talk to each other instead of talking about each other. The team members need to respect and trust each other, even though they might not click together. If a team member does not like something, he needs to address it otherwise the atmosphere will become negative.

Most of the players in the national team play for foreign clubs. The national team usually arrives in Iceland 4 to 5 days before a match. Once team members arrive, they go straight to their hotel where they have an entire floor to themselves. The national team managers want to create an atmosphere where the team players can relax and feel at home. Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson think it is important to have them all together at the same location, because they have been working at different clubs all over the world and each country has a football culture that is slightly different. They believe that successful teams operate best within such a structured environment. Another reason for keeping the group together is for shaping a positive group dynamic. This way, team members can more easily bond together and discuss the upcoming game. The hotels have sport facilities for team members. They also have a big recreational area where the team members talk to each other, play computer games and enjoy themselves.

Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson consider the success of the Iceland national team all about the correct combination of different variables. First of all it has rather good players, players that are reaching the peak of their careers. The managers state that every player has a positive attitude, a strong character and enthusiasm to play for the national team. Then the managers explain about the team behind the team. They work well together, are especially skilled in their job and have wonderful relations with the players. This behind the scene team selflessly supports the players, working pro-bono. Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson themselves consider that they have a free role in their task; only the financial part has to be confirmed by Football Association of Iceland (KSI). The managers have developed a clear idea of how they would like the team to play and think they have skilfully communicated it. The managers consider

it important for the team members to know at all times what they, the managers are doing. According to the managers, Iceland has one of the best organized national teams in Europe but there is always room for improvement.

According to the managers it is important to include the interested parties in the process. When the team is doing well both managers and players get more opportunities; the managers get more respect and the players are more willing to play, the Football Association of Iceland (KSI) has more earnings as more tickets are sold, sponsors get better coverage and broadcast time and the stakeholders get more publicity. The Iceland team managers decided to include the media from the beginning and help the media write the news. Giving access to the team increases professionalism and positive news.

As previously mentioned, a Survey Monkey questionnaire was sent out to the Icelandic national team, with one open question: What in the training process of the national team leaders makes the Icelandic national team successful? Please state the key success factors that come to mind. The key success factors that 12 team members of the national team stated are: structure, discipline, preparation, mutual trust, mutual respect, repetition, experience, honesty, well-defined roles, professionalism, believe, communication skills, ambition, will to win, positivity and simplicity. These key success factors are shown in a graphical way in Figure 2. A national team shirt is used as a symbol for how often the national team mentions a particular success factor. The results are in line with the fundamental structure, which Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson have setup for the national team.

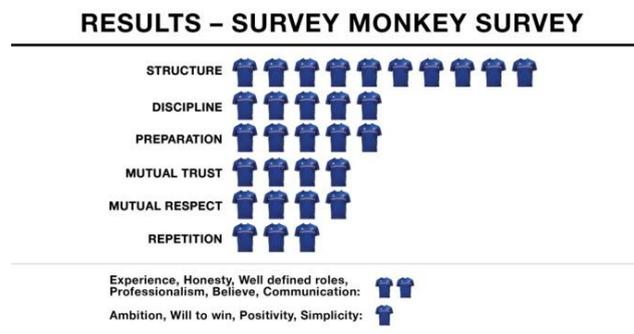


Figure 2 Key success factors in the training process of the national team.

5. Discussion

The structured environment is important for the sports professional to flourish. Therefore it is important for the manager to make the environment as predictable as possible (Burnes and O'Donnell, 2011, Carsons, 2013 and Elberse, 2013). This is what the Icelandic national team's managers were emphasizing by making the environment routine and structured. The structured environment is also the most frequently mentioned factor for achieving the success of the team, in the survey taken by the national team's players. In the corporate world, the project manager needs to evaluate the environment, before he decides whether it needs to be structured or not.

To achieve excellence it is paramount that everything falls into the right place at the right time. For a company in business it is important to choose members that fit into the culture or values of the company (Pinto and Slevin, 1987). This is what the Icelandic managers have done. The values affect how the team members are picked in the team. The project mission with its clearly defined goals has to be supported and understood by the whole organization (Pinto and Slevin, 1987). The Football Association of Iceland (KSI) is very supportive of the team and its managers and that is considered a success factor for the Icelandic national team by the Icelandic football managers.

In the national football environment, the key focus is on the team. Teams should be shaped and developed in small steps. Managers should estimate carefully what trends in their environment they follow and evaluate the skills of each member on the team. In the corporate world, Lean, Agile and Scrum, have been leading the trends for years. Project managers, similar to football managers should not follow trends. Instead, they should look within the team itself. The project manager, should assess the quality and skills of its resources, that is, the team members, and decide how to use them to the best advantage. It is important for repetition to be used frequently within group shaping, so team members are fully aware of the tasks ahead. It is very important for managers to foster the cohesion

within teams, which is why it's very important to keep the team members together as much as possible. In this way the team builds up mutual trust and respect; the open communication is the seed for success.

As mentioned earlier, the Icelandic national football team is led by two individuals. This is an unusual approach in football; normally it is one manager and one assistant. However, Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson have been able to make the national team very successful through their joint efforts. If we look further into their character, they seem to be both task-focused and people-focused. Through the combination of these qualities Lagerbäck and Hallgrímsson complement each other well. Not all leaders are born with both these qualities, but it can be learned through practice. Should there be two project managers within a team, who complement each other well? This is an area project managers need to look into more carefully. The team members should all work as a one person and display selflessness. Teamwork is above all. This is best demonstrated when the manager needs to take tough decisions, which could hurt a team member's feelings. Team members need to be humble when this occurs and think about the team's overall welfare.

There are limitations to this study. The in-depth interview is semi-structured and it could be that the authors are only getting what they are asking for. There is also the possibility that other researchers would categorize the results in a different way than the authors using the eye of competence. Broader studies related to the field are needed to support the findings. Therefore, while the sport provides a good testing ground, the absolute findings should never be directly applied to any business.

The authors decided to remove the teamwork element from the technical competences and considered it as more applicable as a behavioural competence. There is a suggestion from the authors to IPMA to include it the behavioural competence rather than in the technical competence section. Even though in real project management the behavioural and technical competences cannot be separated like that and the overall competency consists of the combined abilities. This was done in our case to be better able to review the project management of the Icelandic national team. The eye of competence provided to be very useful to review and compare the results and the authors recommend using it. The behavioural and technical competences of a project manager both have to exist in a project to be successful.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis is based on the initial research question: What can be learnt from the Icelandic national football team's managers in project management and in shaping group dynamics? The managers consider the success of the Iceland national team all about the correct timing of different variables. It is important to take into account all the variables that support the project success. It is important that the players are good. Every player embodies a positive attitude, a strong character and enthusiasm to play for the national team. What the project manager can learn from the football manager is to choose the team members according to the core values of the organization; connecting the workers to the strategy (the core fundamental values of the company), supporting and trusting the workers and leading them to success. The authors consider it significant that the project manager will take time to consider the organization needs and create the environment to support it within his team. One approach is to have a structured meeting schedule; for instance to develop the meeting schedule according to and throughout the life cycle of the project. The manager must have clear objectives and guide his team toward those targets, making sure that all team members have unified goal and trust and respect each other to carry it out. It is the conclusion of the authors that project managers can learn a lot from the Icelandic national football team's managers in shaping the group dynamics within a team. First, the project managers should look within themselves and discern whether they are more task-oriented or social-oriented. To build effective leadership, the balance between these two factors is important. The human factor within the project management is one of the fundamental parts of project success. Project managers need to be aware of the team's behaviour and how to address it. It takes time to build a good team; that is why patience is important. It is also very important to have the team located at the same place, when shaping group dynamics. In that way the team bonds better, becoming more confident of open communication. The project manager should foster cohesion within the team, because cohesion is the glue that holds the team together and in a way, makes it successful. The cohesion, includes both social and task components and there needs to be a balance between them. Team members need to respect each other and at the same time achieve common goals. The team is above all individual concerns.

It is the conclusion of the authors that a constructive environment is to be fostered within teams. The project manager should look at himself as a mentor or instructor of the team. Under his lead, the team will improve and

prosper in their environment. In this way, the team can see and feel good about how it is making a difference. The project manager should emphasize repetition and encourage open communication within the team, so the team members always have a clear understanding and freely discuss the tasks ahead. The football environment provides a good testing ground for project management; however fewer variables affect the outcome in football than in ordinary business dealings. The variables in the football environment can be found more in planning the strategy than in group dynamics. In these ways the authors conclude that the Icelandic national football team's managers are a good role model for project managers in shaping successful teams.

To summarize the answer to the question: What can be learnt from the Icelandic national football team's managers in project management and in shaping group dynamics? First and foremost the environment has to be well structured, goals and vision has to be clear and each individual within the team has to support the values of the team. Secondly the project manager needs to be aware of his leadership style and how he motivates his team. Last but not least, the leader needs to nurture the cohesion within the team.

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