

The Perfect Pass

EADA Basics Collection

The Perfect Pass

What the manager can learn from the
football trainer

Ed Weenk

Foreword by Carmelo Canales

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For Pau & Marc.

Seeing you run around pretending
you're Messi or Victor is truly touching.

Simple is the most difficult.

Johan Cruyff

They keep moving the cheese.

Spencer Johnson, M.D.

For [the manager's] job is work-very hard, demanding, risk-taking work. And while there is plenty of laborsaving machinery around, no one has yet invented a "work-saving" machine, let alone a "think-saving" one.

Peter F. Drucker

My definition of success is that's it's not about wealth, fame or power, it's about the number of shining eyes I have around me.

Ben Zander

About the quotes on the previous page:

1. A typical example of “Cruyffian”: a famous linguistic style existing in Dutch and Spanish, mastered and practiced principally by only one person, Johan Cruyff, without any doubt one of the best players and most visionary people in football history.
2. From: Spencer Johnson, “Who moved my cheese?”, G . P. Putnam's Sons, 1998
3. From: Peter F. Drucker, “Managing for business effectiveness”, Harvard Business Review, May-June 1963
4. From: Ben Zander, principal conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, in a TED-Talk in the TED-conference in February 2008 (see www.TED.com for the video)

Table of contents

Foreword

About the book

Let's play!

The trainer's big picture

Prepare the season

Prepare a game

Game-time!

Analyse game and adjust the tactics

Building a football legacy: long-term view

From the stadium's press room: epilogue

Appendices

1. All reflections together
2. Competitive advantage, big picture, alignment, coherence
3. Recommended reading and viewing
4. Sales & Operations Planning (S&OP)
5. "Doing without doing"
6. Balanced Score Card
7. SMART Indicators
8. About the author

Foreword

It is likely that some people with whom I shared my life with intensity in the past and who know my way of thinking may be surprised to find me as the writer of the foreword to a book like this one written by Ed Weenk. In fact, when the idea of writing the foreword was proposed to me, my first thought was: what does a prologue writer like me do in a book like this?

On the one hand, my professional experience of nearly thirty years as a management consultant and my period as vice president of Athletic Club de Bilbao between 2001 and 2004, seem to put me in the right conditions for relating to a book which connects the world of football with the field of business management. And on top of this, I am also a founding partner of the publishing company Libros de Cabecera ("*Bedside Books*"). So far, it all adds up.

However, beyond these objective facts, the truth is that I have been, and still am after reading the book, very sceptical about the usefulness of using analogies between the worlds of sports in general and football in particular with the complex tasks involved in managing.

Well, in all honesty I think that in relation to my initial position of scepticism, Ed's book represents the famous exception to the rule.

The Perfect Pass is a management book based on the healthy foundations of reflecting and questioning and it is an excellent tool for the manager who is willing to think in a structured and ambitious way about the challenges he or she is facing in their profession of making decisions in the field of business and enterprise. In the book there are about twenty reflections and almost seventy articulated questions about this thing that nowadays would be called a story about the reality of management, and I think they are very good ammunition for those who are looking for continuous improvement in their work as manager.

In short, I honestly believe that this is a great *Bedside Book*, in the multiple meaning of the term. It is a book that opens issues, rather than close them and I also think that it is one of those books that you keep near your desk just to review it from time to time, to reread a passage or refresh certain reflections.

It is true that after reading the book I'm still keeping a healthy scepticism about the use of analogies between sport and management. My first-hand experience with the management of sport organizations and the world of management is profound enough not to have it changed on the basis of one fortunate exception. Overall I think most of the time people overly simplify things when they try to use sports challenges as navigation guide for facing the world of business.

However, I think Ed gets the balance right. Using the parallelisms with the football coach succeeds in democratizing the starting point for different readers and serves as a guiding line for the main story, and it doesn't actually

limit the richness of it, nor does the comparison become too rigid. Moreover, the reader will find in the pages of the book more examples and references than which the world of sports by itself could offer.

It is very well possible that the reader may see somewhat idealized this figure of the trainer, who helps the author to articulate his message. In fact, I tend to think that not many coaches are particularly excellent in covering the different aspects and elements that are reviewed in the book. Especially, I do not think that the long term view is an attribute about which you can learn a lot from them, in general. But I believe that even this little inconsistency in the analogy can lead to additional food for thought that may be valuable for the curious reader.

Please allow me to encourage anyone reading this prologue to add the book to their collection of preferred management readings; I think it is worth it. It has definitely made me reflect, it has helped me to structure my own introspection and, especially, reminded me that even the most ingrained prejudices can be challenged. If besides this, the reader is also fond of sports and football, the reading is going to be even more entertaining without losing a bit of its conceptual soundness.

I have the feeling that those who choose to read the book of Ed Weenk will agree with me to catalogue it as one of their Bedside Books because it offers encouragement and useful ideas, relevant to executing the tasks of managerial responsibility and to the mental gymnastics that all improvement requires.

Carmelo Canales Abaitua (October 2012)

Management Consultant and partner of Libros de Cabecera

He was Vice President of the Athletic Club of Bilbao between 2001 and 2004

About the book

This is a book for and about managers and their fundamental role in a company. The world of football will serve as an example. The book is based on my personal experience, not only from project work and in-company training with a wide variety of companies of very different sizes in a range of very different industry sectors in different countries, but also from classroom teaching and tutoring of final projects in EADA business school in Barcelona, Spain, with students of numerous nationalities and at different levels (Master's, MBA, Executive MBA).

And as I have noticed in my work that my practical experiences, ideas and my passion for the field in which I work can actually be beneficial to others, I have decided to put some of those experiences and ideas on paper. I have done this in a similar way as I do in my work as a classroom instructor and freelance consultant; by putting things in a wider context and by asking many questions.

Obviously, a book of this type should offer the reader something of value. The guiding principles that I have had in mind while writing are the following: the book should expose a wide view, the *big picture*, it should be concise and of practical use for managers and executives, it should be easy to understand and *common-sense* should be a central concept. And above all: it should invite the reader to reflect.

As said, this is a book for and about managers and their role in companies, using the world of football as an example to discuss some of the concepts I believe to be fundamental. Let me just briefly explain why I have chosen to use football, because even though I have always enjoyed following and watching football to a certain modest extent, I wouldn't consider myself an expert, nor an absolute football freak.

However, I cannot deny that since I live in Barcelona, some serious degree of football fever has also touched me and found its place in my own daily life. Besides this, seeing the impact that football has in society in general and people's behaviour in particular, I think it's fair to say that football surely is a phenomenon that large numbers of people clearly do relate to. Moreover, most of us also have very clear opinions on the subject.

So, when thinking about which form to choose for the book, I came to the conclusion that using some of the commonly known elements of football could provide a simple and understandable basis for the topics I want to touch upon. In this book, I will use the world of football as sort of a metaphor for what happens in organisations.

I say sort of a metaphor, since I wouldn't want to claim that these two worlds are in fact 100% identical. It would maybe be more accurate to say that instead of a metaphor, I'll be using some analogies between football and business. In any case, I have found the analogies to be useful for explaining some of the fundamental concepts that I will be talking about.

I am aware of the fact that I'm not the first one to use sports in general or football in particular as an example to be applied to the business world. One only has to look at some of the many conferences and training programmes around the world, which are led by successful ex-athletes or sports trainers to know that there are many parallels between the two. However, most of these examples turn around concepts like motivation, perseverance or team-building. And since my focus is a bit different, I have taken the liberty of using the same setting of sports, but applied in a slightly different way.

The title and scope of the book

As said, I have chosen to use the world of football as a vehicle to discuss some concepts which I think are relevant for business and competitiveness, from the perspective and role that the MANAGER has in this.

In football terms, the final objective of a trainer would be make sure that his team successfully finishes the season, in terms of scoring goals and –of course- winning as many games as possible. Now, the far majority of the trainer's work is actually done before and after the games the team plays, because obviously the trainer can't create these beautiful passes nor can he score the goals himself. It's the team that actually has to do this during the games, and the purpose of the trainer is to prepare each game in such a way with the team and all others involved, that the players can then do the job in the best possible way in the moments when that's asked from them, delivering those *perfect passes*. During the game, the trainer's influence is much more limited, focussing on monitoring the game's progress and participating with advice or changes when he thinks the circumstances require it.

The analogy with the business world is that obviously the objective of a business is to consistently score goals and win games, i.e. generate and deliver profitable business in a sustainable way, now and in the future. And just as in football where the trainer isn't the one who creates passes or scores goals, in business the manager cannot do all the work by himself, that's precisely why he hires people into his company or team: so that they can be responsible for the execution of the work and the manager can focus on doing what his job-title actually says: managing.

And to a large extent, this is done by preparing his people in the best possible way for them to be successful in creating business opportunities, winning new deals or consistently delivering on the promise. Then during execution, the task of the manager should be to monitor and interject, but only if necessary. This, if the preparation has worked out well, should be significantly less often.

So that's what the book will focus on: on the preparation of the "perfect game", in other words everything that's done leading up to the season, the preparation of each game, the practicing of the perfect pass. But preparation also includes post-game evaluation and adjustments to the tactics, which basically is preparing for the next game, taking into consideration the things that have worked well and not so well during the last game.

Since in the end, the points for the championship are in fact won on the field during the game, I obviously cannot leave this part out and will not do so. But for the aforementioned reasons, the focus will be on the preparation of the perfect game and of those perfect passes, which is where I think the influence of the trainer, i.e. manager, is greatest.

Something similar goes for the long-term view, the characteristics that true “football dynasties” have and the secrets behind their long-term success. I will say something about this at the end of the book, because it’s an interesting aspect we cannot forget about.

I think there’s a lot that managers can learn about the way their own companies and teams function, by looking at some of the fundamental aspects we see in a football club and the team on the field out to beat the opponent. Therefore, by using these analogies in the book, I want to invite managers and students in the process of becoming managers to reflect and think about their respective businesses.

The central concepts

Clearly one of the central concepts that any company and every manager deals with directly or indirectly is creating and maintaining *competitive advantage*, which for me can be captured in the following three questions:

- What is my promise to my clients (“what”)?
- What should I be particularly good at to make this promise come true consistently, day-in day-out (“how”)?
- Why do the answers to these two questions form a winning combination, or in other words: why am I different/better at this than my competitors?

The term “competitive advantage” itself already implies that whatever a company does, the results always have to be put into the perspective of what the competition is doing. Therefore we normally speak of the objective to create competitive advantage, hopefully in a sustainable way, i.e. for the long-term. And I think it’s important to recognize that achieving competitive advantage is not so much a matter of desperately seeking *the* magical solution.

No, to get to this sustainable competitive advantage is much more a matter of a lot of consistent, hard and dedicated work. But even hard work is not enough, in addition to this it needs to be embedded in a wider view, the *big picture*. Call it vision, strategy, road-map or whatever, the important point is that it's there, visible and understood, so that the hard work of all goes in one and the same direction. For me this would then manifest itself in internal *alignment* between individuals and between departments, and *coherence* of organisational structure, competencies and decisions taken at all levels.

Obviously, with me being a practitioner and teacher in the Operations, Logistics and Supply Chain area, one of my main personal concerns is to see how a company's operations fit in with the big strategic picture. To which I would like to add, that I normally tend to use a very wide definition of what operations are.

Having said that, the experience from my practice leads me to believe that students, middle management as well as executives in many companies seem to frequently struggle with or forget about the big picture of their companies or departments. Many of them focus way too much on details of all kinds. By no means am I saying that we should forget about the details. On the contrary: as any practitioner has surely experienced (and suffered), it is almost always the case that in real life the devil is in these same details, so they certainly can not be ignored.

However, it doesn't make a lot of sense to enter too much into the details *without first* understanding or remembering that these details take place within a bigger context and then making sure that this big picture is clear. Only then moving on to make sure that the details actually fit in in the best possible way and that they bring us closer to where we want to go.

Although the saying that someone "can't see the forest for the trees" is normally used for situations of desperation and a feeling of being lost, I actually think that it also holds for people who don't necessarily feel lost between the trees, but still fail to see the forest.

So this book has been written as an aid to those who are interested in reflecting on the question of whether besides seeing all of those beautiful (or maybe not so beautiful) trees, they also maintain the view on the forest.

The perspective throughout the book is that of the *manager*, the one responsible for constantly making decisions and ensuring that his people's actions go in the right direction to reach the company's or department's objectives.

Although for the purpose of the book, I'd rather stay away from theory, I'd like to refer to some relevant pieces of it, since they might provide a simple point of reference to illustrate my main topics here. I'd specifically like to mention here the frameworks that have been developed by Michael Porter since the 1980's around *competitiveness*, *alignment* and *big picture*, such as the *value chain* and the famous *5-forces* model of competition in a sector. More about these concepts can be found in Appendix 1.

Eventually, a short comment on "competition". Although I'm well aware that it's certainly not true for all companies in all sectors, this book mainly concerns companies that have serious competitive pressures to take into account and therefore have to find ways to fight those competitive pressures by continuously improving and/or innovating. Again, in the football analogy, we are not interested in the competition where there is one dominating team that can more or less do whatever it likes without being in danger of letting the championship escape. Instead we take the view of a very competitive league in which there are many potential title candidates.

Objectives of the book

In a few words, the objective of the book is to provide some simple and easy to understand reflections that anyone in an organisation can apply in a reasonably short timeframe, allowing them quickly to get a good understanding of the *big picture* of an organisation and the direction it wants to go. Having established this broader vision, we can then evaluate if it's actually fit for getting there in the best possible way, in terms of internal *alignment* and *coherence* of people, infrastructure and processes.

After making these reflections, the manager should have a clear view on the status of his company and a good basis for setting priorities and defining concrete actions.

Why a book with reflections instead of solutions?

Instead of offering reflections, why haven't I chosen to offer clear-cut and simple solutions?

First of all, let me quote Peter F. Drucker, in his classic article on Managing for Business Effectiveness:

“I do not propose here a full-blown [theory] if only because I have none to give. Even less do I intend to present a magic formula, a “checklist” or “procedure” which will do the job for the manager. For his job is work – very hard, demanding, risk-taking work. And while there is plenty of labour-saving machinery around, no-one has yet invented a “work-saving” machine, let alone a “think-saving” one.”

I couldn't agree more, so I will also not offer this full-blown solution toolbox here for the same reasons. Better than that, is to offer the invitation to reflect upon one's activities and company, i.e. to *think*. Therefore, the book provides a number of questions to help structure this reflection.

And why the emphasis on reflection? Well, I believe that the best basis for designing, and deciding on adequate solutions, is a very clear understanding of the problem. And for me that starts with the *big picture*. Establishing this from a general vision, as complete as possible within the available timeframe, is in my opinion much more useful than trying to take a shortcut and going straight to the toolbox, looking for a specific solution. The big picture allows one to put things into perspective and set priorities.

And besides, had I focussed on solutions, the book would most likely never have been concise.

For whom?

The book is intended to be of practical use for General Managers, Management Team members, department heads, as well as students in Masters and (Executive) MBA-programmes, for existing businesses, as well

as new companies in business-planning stage, for industrial, as well as service environments.