

# team tactics

Creating a world-class football squad involves more than just throwing talented players together. But when it comes to building a team, many businesses could take a lesson from our national game, discovers **Helen Kelly**.

**T**he objectives in football are clear: score more goals than the opposition and you will take home the cup. But in business, things are not always so straightforward.

"Many companies think teamwork is first and foremost about people – get the right people and all else will be well," says Mike West, head of research and professor of organisational psychology at Aston Business School. "But evidence suggests you first need to identify what the task is, and be clear about it, because until then you cannot choose the right people."

### Talent scouts

Chris Philips, marketing director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Taleo, a talent management software and services company, says: "The best clubs will follow an ever-evolving group of players, sometimes for years. The clubs are constantly building relationships in the knowledge that they may want to sign a player two, three or four years down the line."

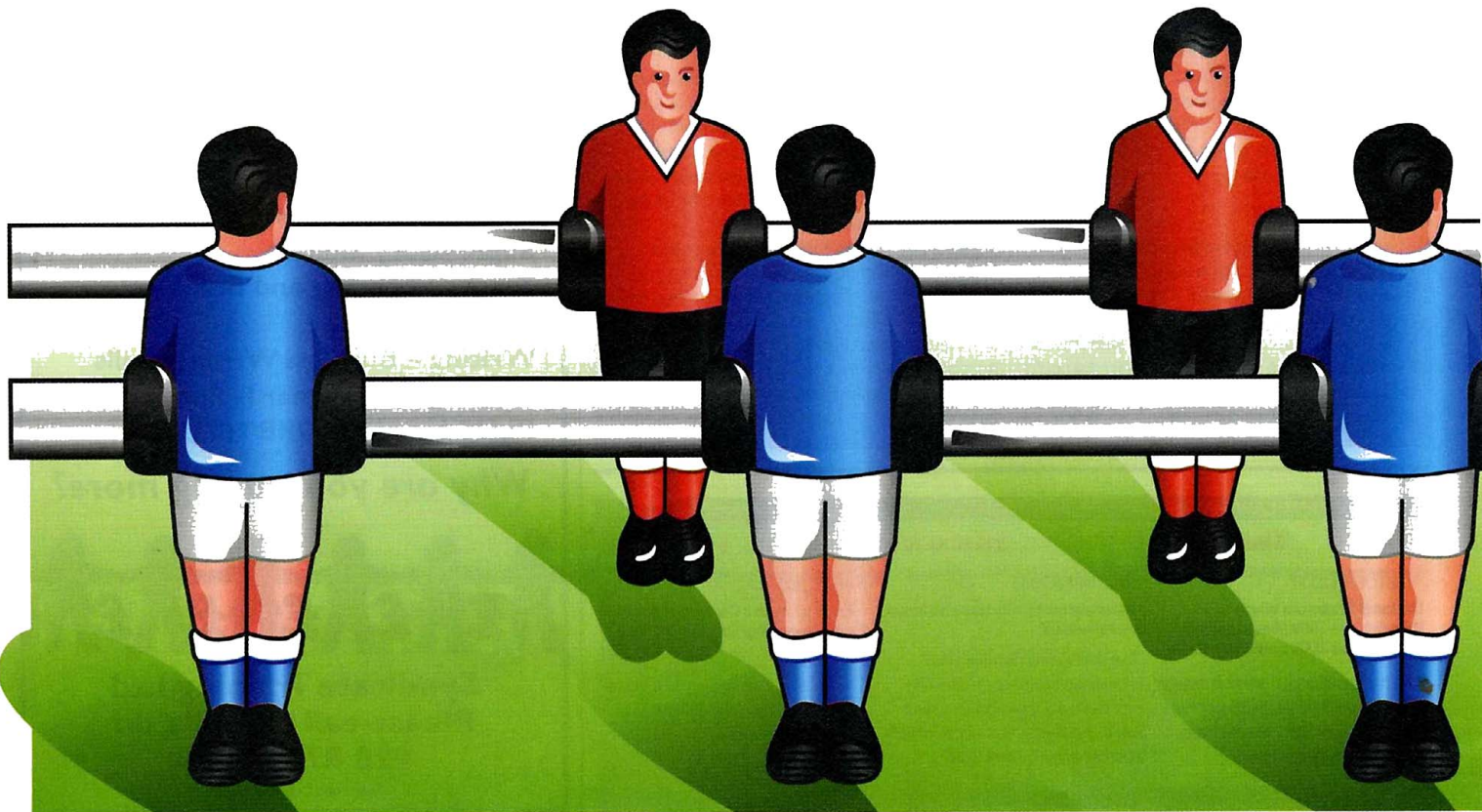
That is also happening in the business

world right now. Savvy companies gather intelligence about candidates who have specialised skills so that they can establish a relationship and be ready to engage with them when a position becomes available.

### The squad

Football managers have a clear view of what they are looking for in a player and how each individual will fit in with the team style. If the team is leaking goals, the manager will seek a strong centre back. If it is lacking creativity, an attacking midfield player could be the answer. Getting the right mix of talent and ability is crucial. Too many 'ball-winners' and the team will not score many goals. "Players must have the desire to make the group work well. If there are too many prima donnas and things do not go well then people start being defensive and blame others," says West.

Often, most creativity comes from taking a risk on an unknown player. Glenn Hoddle, when he was England manager, took a risk when he included Michael Owen in the England squad at the World Cup in 1998, and Sven Goran Eriksson is taking an even



bigger risk this year with Theo Walcott – a young player who has yet to play a competitive game in the Premiership.

“Of course it is risky if there is a person in a position of responsibility who does not have much experience,” says Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at Lancaster University. “But that is the point of having mentors and advisers – to make sure they are working within boundaries. Tesco did it when it appointed Terry Leahy as marketing director at 28. Now look at where he has taken the company [he is now its chief executive].”

## Teamwork

Players with fancy footwork, such as France’s Zinedine Zidane and Brazil’s Ronaldinho, may grab all the headlines, but great teams also feature players who serve important but less visible roles, like Claude Makelele or Gilberto Silva, who marshal the midfield for France and Brazil.

Many companies make the mistake of focusing only on the talented top 2% or 3% of the workforce – forgetting the hard-working people below.

Alert managers know that they must communicate the importance of working together as a team – that no-one is bigger than the club. If someone is acting out of line, no matter how big a star they are, that needs to be addressed. Manchester United’s manager, Alex Ferguson, was prepared to sacrifice star players Roy Keane and David Beckham for the good of the team after a series of isolated incidents, for example. “On a practical level, this is getting rid of an obstructive element,” says Robert Myatt, a director at business psychologist Kaisen Consulting. “But it also sends a strong message that this behaviour will not be tolerated.”

## Half time

Winning football teams are constantly talking – both on and off the pitch. Senior players will give advice and encouragement, and keep the squad focused on the game. “Many businesses get so caught up in going round the treadmill that they forget what they are there for,” says Myatt.

‘Half time’ is reserved for a frank evaluation of the play to date. Do we need to

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEAM MANAGER?



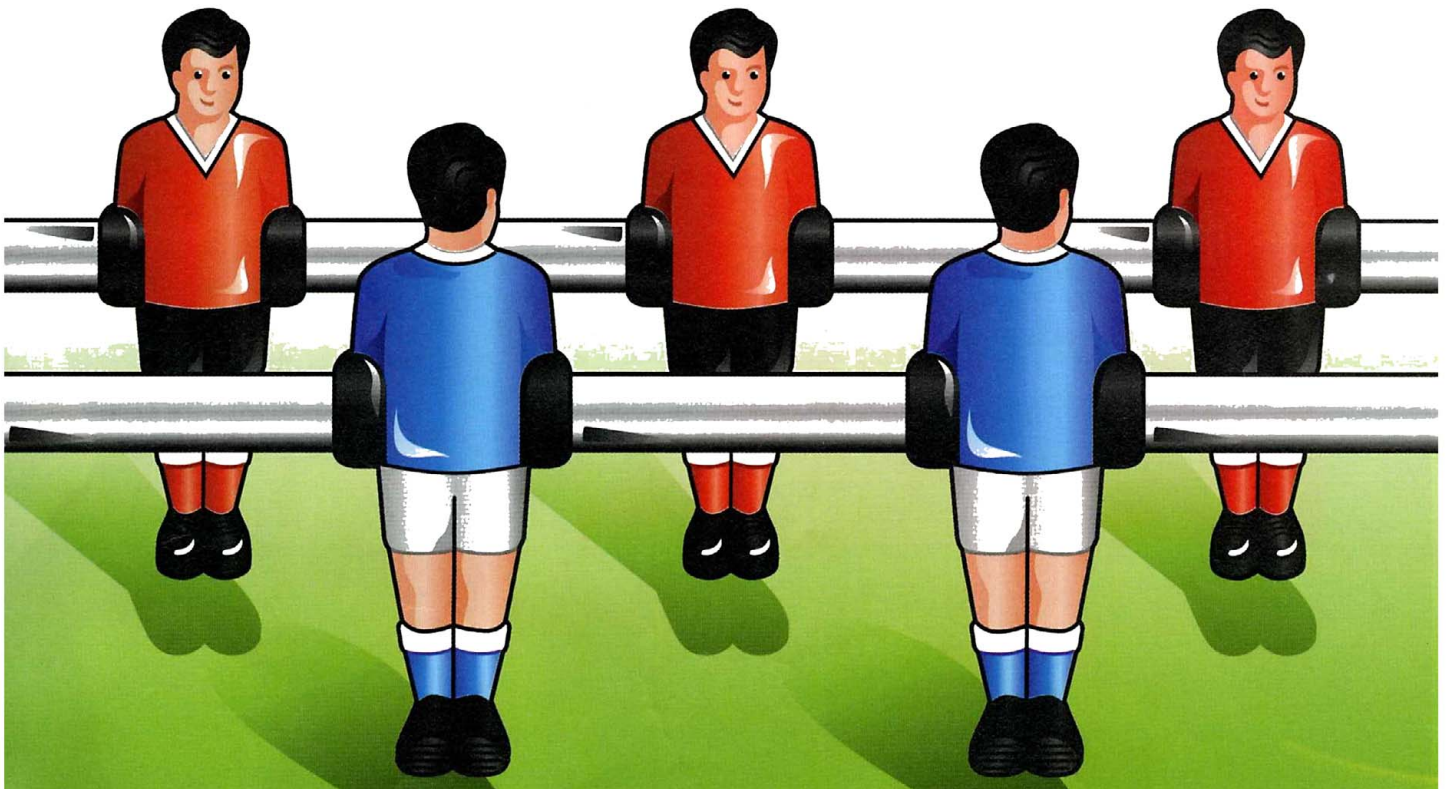
**Cary Cooper**  
Professor of organisational psychology and health, Lancaster University

“The best managers in football were not necessarily the best players,”

says Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at Lancaster University. “Alex Ferguson, Arsène Wenger and José Mourinho were good footballers, but not star players. So what does that tell you?”

“Really good football managers understand what they are good at and what they are bad at, and will buy in the people they need,” he says. “The best football managers will get a psychologist in if they are not natural psychologists, for example. In business, on the other hand, people pretend to be good at everything. Managers who fail are the ones who think they can do anything and don’t get help when they need it.”

“Corporate managers are also less passionate – they can be driven, but not often passionate. The drive is usually for their own personal advancement up the greasy pole, not the passion that ignites people whether they are successful or not. Football managers love the team, they love what they are doing, and they make everyone believe they are doing something important,” Cooper says.



change tactics, push more men forward in search of an equaliser, or sit back and defend the lead? All teams should take time out to review performance.

### Developing talent

Even the most successful clubs lose talent because it is not being developed, Philips says: "Just look at the number of players who leave a club because they don't get enough first-team football. This is a big problem with Chelsea, which has top international players who don't get a game every week." The same can be said for employers. "Typically, people leave companies because they don't see the right type of development opportunities," says Philips.

The BBC knows that offering the right mix of training and development can be crucial. It set aside £32m for training that

served 22,000 employees last year. Courses include core face-to-face training, e-learning, internal blog sites, discussion forums and both internal and external podcasting. Nigel Paine, BBC head of training and development strategy, says it works because the group "never thrusts [training] down people's throats, but waits until it gathers its own momentum".

### Substitution

A canny substitution at the right time can completely turn the game around, injecting the team with renewed enthusiasm. Ferguson did just that with Manchester United in the 1999 Champions League final when substitutes Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer both scored in the dying minutes to win the game 2-1. In a similar vein, BT Exact, the technology and

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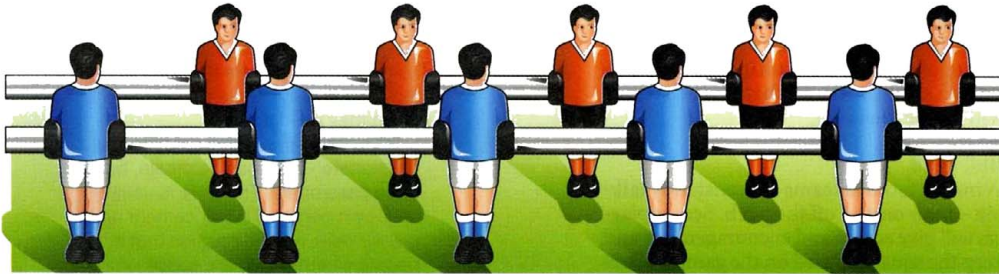
Chris Philips, marketing director EMEA, Taleo

services arm of British Telecom, has introduced nine-month rolling contracts. After that period, staff sit a formal review process, with a bonus attached. Overworked individuals have the option to take time out of a busy schedule or can be moved to a new project to meet business requirements.

### Winning tactics

Here are some simple steps that will help you stay on top of your game:

- Keep a cool head under pressure. Composure is vital in high-pressure matches. When Beckham kicked out against Argentina's Diego Simeone at the World Cup in 1998 and got himself sent off, it arguably lost England the match and the chance of winning the title.
- Be unpredictable. "Walcott will be unpredictable for his own team mates and the opposition," says Cooper. "That could be the real stuff of creativity. For him, being on a team at that level will really bring him on."



■ Foster diversity. Creativity is most common in diverse teams – be it age, style, gender, ethnicity or cultural background. Well managed, this will lead to higher levels of innovation and performance. "The key is to get a team to learn how to work together and to have a positive attitude towards difference," says West. "Differences can be uncomfortable. But when worked through in a positive, supportive way, they foster creativity and innovation."

### Full time

The most important element of managing a top team is to keep knowledge evolving. In football, as soon as the full-time whistle blows, the manager and coach will review the match to see what the team is doing well and what it's doing badly. "Teamwork is about constantly learning," concludes Cooper. "There is a huge amount of mythology about team working – just because we sit and drink coffee and eat cake doesn't make us a team. We should be constantly focused on improving performance."

## Case studies

### Turn the page

Practical examples of how organisations resolved issues of attraction, leadership, retention and succession planning on pages 22-25.

### WHICH TEAM TACTICS WORK BEST?



**Michael West**  
Head of research and professor of organisational psychology, Aston Business School

"Building a team that gets on well is not necessarily a route to good performance. However, building a team that performs well is a route for

people getting on. Of course, when people get on personally it helps morale and spirit. But it is a mistake to think you can build effective team performance by focusing on team relationships. Instead, be sure the team is clear about its objectives and each person's role, and focus on getting the job done."



**Kate Banks**  
Group talent manager, AXA

"A winning team must know where it is going and what it wants to achieve. Then it must work out how it is going to get

there in a formal manner. Individuals must have a strong belief that they are going to achieve their goals and must ignore the gremlins that say they won't. Have good self-discipline. If there is a setback, learn from it and move on. As you succeed – whether it is overall or smaller achievements along the way – then take the time to celebrate that success and enjoy it."



**Nigel Paine**  
Head of training and development strategy, BBC

"Managers need to recognise that the best teams are made up of people with different skills. The best managers do not hire people

who are all the same, and do not encourage team leaders to recruit clones of themselves. This is a really bad mistake. It is important to create space for teams to bond with each other – it always takes a bit of time to find the best ways to function."



**Caroline Dunk**  
Organisational development specialist, CDA

"When creating a new group, you need to understand the dynamics of the team. If there are too many of the same type of people

in the team, there will be friction between individuals and the group will not work. Instead of specific skills, look for learning competence – people who can learn new things are more likely to be successful. Emotional intelligence – knowing what you and others feel about the group and what to do about it – will help to keep the group together."