

**Leading through Football:**

**Sir Alex Ferguson's Lessons for HR Managers**

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### Playing Football in the Business World

Sports organizations, like every business structure consisting of individuals, regard their human resources as their most valuable asset (Beech, 2002). A significant number of common traits exists between a sports club and a business organization, such as the emphasize on a common belief, the desire to achieve a goal, the efficient management required to succeed, even the different hierarchical levels (Iconomesu et al., 2014).

April, Lifson and Noakes (2012) underline this correlation by stating that “sports teams are run like businesses”. The authors further suggest that, since both a sports club and a business organization share the same purpose of succeeding, we can assume that a leader of a sports team should demonstrate similar traits to a leader of a business organization. According to Old (2004), every organization is an arrangement of people who aim to achieve a particular purpose. While managers heavily depend on their people, they ought to know how to get the best out of them in the first place. The author continues by supporting that, today, the field of HRM both in sports and business, reflects a transitional change from the classic approach of ‘personnel management’, to a strategic one. The last approach, emphasizes not only on hiring the best individuals but “in making the best use of the employees’ reserve potential in the mental, psychological and physical spheres of their occupational activity, for the purpose of increasing instruction levels, working capacity and creative longevity” (Brathwaite, 2004). Likewise, multiple researchers (e.g. Ferris et al., 2007; Roehling et al., 2005; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Cohen, 2015; Jamrog & Overholt, 2004) insist that HR is an ever-transforming field, whose complexity continually grows.

Crust and Lawrence (2006) suggested that the manager of a sports organization offers “human capital” to the club. Continuing, they argue that the process of managing this human capital, whether in a sport or a business organization, is a complicated mission that requires the knowledge of the

manager's "multidimensional required roles". In this context, Brady et al. stated (2008) that hiring the right manager, is vital for any club's success. Furthermore, according to Men (2014), the employees are not only the organization's production force but they are also the organization's ambassadors to external stakeholders; those who represent the corporate values, behaviors and internal system. That is why they have to be managed effectively by an inspiring manager.

As both Vosburgh (2007) and Cohen (2015) regard the process of managing human resources as a vital function of every organization, this research will focus on the correlation between HR management and sports organizations. More specifically, it will emphasize how the HR field could benefit from the work and the leadership style of a football manager, Sir Alex Ferguson. The motivation behind this study is that in spite of the fact that Ferguson was a charismatic leader, his work in terms of management is underestimated. When it comes to managing human resources, people usually think of corporate HR managers as great role-models. However, the leadership style of football leaders like Ferguson, holds valuable lessons for the HR field.

At this point, it must be mentioned that the relationship between sports and Human Resources Management is not a new issue, as Chelladurai (2006) admits that teaching how the two topics can relate, has been happening for at least four decades. In this respect, I am placing the current research in this strand of inquiry.

Sir Alex Ferguson is the key figure of this research. Ferguson was the manager of the English football club Manchester United for 26 years, between 1986 and 2013 (Subramanian & Nizam, 2015). During his 26-year spell, Ferguson took the club to a new level of success, as he transformed Manchester United into one of the game's most decorated clubs and the most successful football team in England, having won the most league titles (Pandey, 2017). Basically, for 26 years Sir Alex Ferguson was in charge of the organization's human resources; it just happened that this organization was a football team.

In 2012, a case study by Harvard Business School professor Anita Elberse was developed around Sir Alex Ferguson's management style. Elberse and Ferguson have collaborated in teaching the case study to the Harvard Business School's MBA students, where Ferguson now holds a teaching position (Elberse, 2013). Moreover, Ferguson co-wrote with Sir Michael Moritz the book *Leading: Learning from Life and My Years at Manchester United* (2015), where he unveils his blueprints of success. It seems evident then that Ferguson has a lot to teach us about leading and managing organizations.

In addition, football, the most popular sport in the world, has long become an enterprise of global significance (Vilhelmsdottir et al., 2016). Having adopted several business characteristics and setting itself many trends in the field of management, football is a perfectly-match example for studying success (Szymanski, 1998; Scerri, 2017; Brady et al. 2008).

To highlight the sport's popularity, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) - the game's international governing body- indicated that one-quarter of the planet's population play football regularly, while an estimated number of more than two billion people have watched the 2010 World Cup in South Africa (Elberse & Dye, 2012). Due to this popularity, professional football clubs are in a position to produce colossal revenues that enable them to perform like companies having a large basis of shareholders (Müller et al., 2017). Likewise, as several football teams around the world are listed in the stock market (Floros, 2014), Boido and Fasano suggested in 2007 that football is the one sport that can influence in such significant levels the investor's mood.

Manchester United, one of those football clubs listed in the stock market (Aglietta et al., 2010), competes in the English Premier League. Premier League, the country's highest professional football league, broadcasts in more than two hundred countries around the world and has been transformed the last years into a multi-million industry (Bell et al., 2013; Madichie, 2009; Robertson, 2004). Since the 1990s, football clubs in the Premier League have enjoyed enormous incomes from multiple sources,

including merchandising, tickets, sponsorships and television (Szymanski, 1998). Only between 2010 and 2013, Clark (2010) estimated that the Premier League's sale of its broadcasting rights outside the country reached the amount of 1.4 billion pounds. Manchester United's makeover into one globally-oriented industry, mutually with the general transformation of the English Premier League, have played their part for the sport to step out of its traditional defined role and be perceived as a universal business institution (Olatawura, 2005; Porter, 2008).

Moreover, football can largely relate to multiple fields besides management and economics. Sir Alex Ferguson admitted that he even found some traits in military and history books that were relevant to football (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). In fact, Kellett (2002) admitted that not only does the analogy of sport and war does exist, but it is also a common phenomenon for football managers to use war and military metaphors when delivering a message. Also, there are available references where football relates to the fields of social sciences, psychology, medicine and biomechanics (Brink et al., 2018; Bishop, 2008).

Football, like business management and HR, has radically changed and has largely overcome its traditional form, as the sport's economic growth and scientific development indicate (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Football teams today employ a significant number of professional scientists, as they play an integral part in the teams' performance, while knowledge sharing between football managers and cognitive development during scientific seminars had also a significant impact on the sport (Bishop, 2008). New innovative training courses are also essential for football managers in order to fulfill their duties successfully, while at the same time, the English Football Association (The FA), has established a national initiative to increase awareness about the psychology of football (Pain & Harwood, 2004; Crust & Lawrence, 2006). Similarly, Laios (2005) argues that, indeed, the focus of football managers is now clearly based on scientific disciplines. The author further suggests that the managers today ought to



have a wider range of knowledge besides football as such, including sociology, psychology and human biology.

Likewise, HR managers are being called to respond to their department's changing process. Multiple researchers (Ferris et al., 2007; Roehling et al., 2005; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Cohen, 2015; Jamrog & Overholt, 2004) have underlined the field's transformational period and its ability to adapt to the new challenges. Besides, Vosburgh draws attention to the continuous needs of business leaders and HR professionals, in order to act in accordance to the "years of business evolution" (2007).

This paper aims to identify and explain the traits behind Sir Alex Ferguson's leadership model, the traits that created an effective leader who successfully managed his organization's human resources for more than two decades. Ferguson's managerial model could serve as a valuable case study for the HR field, as it could be beneficial for both HR professionals and managers. Today, both football and business organizations are witnesses in their respective fields' transformational periods where new challenges arise, technology break through is the norm and information holds the key to success. When human resources are managed efficiently, the organization has the potential of gaining a competitive advantage in the market (Ferris et al., 2007). As business leaders are trying to produce the best of their employees and gain this competitive advantage, football coaches aim to do the same for their football clubs (Brink et al., 2018).

The research will be based on bibliographical research, aiming to synthesize the plethora of available literature regarding Ferguson's leadership style. Although several articles previously written focused on the manager's model from a business and management perspective, this paper will examine Ferguson's leadership style from the HR perspective and focus on its specific implications.

In the chapters that follow, I first identify the key characteristics of the manager's model from primary and secondary sources and then, I link the evidence to the main HR theories and concepts. The extracting conclusions developed in the main part, will be the result of this linkage.

As mentioned above, the data collection process regarding the manager's style involve both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources, five of Ferguson's books that were written during his era at Manchester United, are rich in terms of the manager's experiences, failures, successes, lessons and personal insights. The secondary sources are divided into three categories. The first category consists of previous studies about the manager's leadership style, while the second group consists of biographies or autobiographies of former Manchester United players who have experienced Ferguson's approach. The last category of secondary sources involves research about football management or sports psychology with references to the manager's style and books or research about Manchester United between 1987 and 2013; the time when Sir Alex Ferguson was the club's manager. Lastly, I rely on HR concepts that put as the theoretical foundation of this paper, as explained in the subsequent chapters. The main motivation is that this research will link the sources efficiently and result in valuable, for the HR field, outcomes.

Sir Alex Ferguson was, for 26 years, an effective leader who managed to bring countless successes, multiple major trophies and enormous reputation to his organization (Silverthorne, 2015). He took charge of the organization at Manchester United's "lean years" (Ferguson, 1999) and not only succeeded as a football manager but also thrived in terms of management (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). His keys of success as a manager is the main research focus of this paper. How can business leaders benefit from Ferguson's approach? What can we learn from the management of top caliber athletes and who seek success through weekly doses of victory? What can HR managers take from Ferguson's approach as they seek to motivate and inspire employees? Given the fact that management is an ever-

evolving field, it is fundamental for its development to extract lessons from multiple sources and football, is a great example.

Stylianios Ioannou

## Reviewing the Profile of a Great Manager

“The name of the manager is irrelevant. The authority is what counts” (Ferguson, 2013).

### Literature Review

It was already mentioned that the relation between sports and human resources management, has been the subject of researchers and academics, for at least four decades (Chelladurai, 2006). Given that, there was a plethora of theoretical foundation for this research.

Several studies about HR as a management function offered the ability to identify the challenges that HR is facing and the possible gaps which the field could take advantage of in the future (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Roehling et al., 2005; Vosburgh, 2007; Ferris et al., 2007; Cohen, 2015). These articles focused on the field’s background and its historical roots. Although these theoretical approaches outlined the framework for understanding HRM, detailed approaches about its relation with sports were needed.

Crust and Lawrence (2006) presented a valuable view on leadership implications of football management. Moreover, they attempted to identify the traits of behavioral and interactional models that lie behind the leadership profile in football, while analyzing the modern football manager’s role. The studies conducted by Iconomescu et al. (2014) and Brady et al. (2008), brought the relationship between management and sports, to light. Both studies have examined the similar traits between the two topics from a football point of view and highlighted the importance of recruiting and managing for the team’s benefit.

Furthermore, Jowett’s (2005) work on the coach-athlete relationship, is vital in terms of understanding and defining what consists of the dynamic and successful relationship between an athlete and its manager. Jowett suggested that the three fundamental elements of a successful coach-athlete

relationship are closeness, commitment and complementarity. Closeness refers to the degree to which the athlete and the coach are connected. Commitment describes the volume of willingness from both sides to maintain their relationship over time, while complementarity reflects the interaction between the two, in terms of cooperation and effectiveness.

April et al. (2012) developed a study to examine whether there are common patterns between the Emotional Intelligence of business leaders and sports managers. The study provided an analysis of the Emotional Intelligence (EI) concept and identified the psychological characteristics that make leaders able to influence and empower those near them. Despite the fact that there were plenty of sources available about sports management, the authors suggested that the main problem with relating general leadership theories to sports, “is the failure to consider the unique characteristics of a sports team” (April et al., 2012).

Manchester United and Sir Alex Ferguson were the cases of multiple studies in recent years. For the study’s purpose, a significant number of available academic sources were examined and various outcomes were obtained. Perhaps the most beneficial resource was the book *Leading: Learning from Life and My Years at Manchester United* (2015) by Alex Ferguson and Michael Moritz. In the book, Ferguson reveals his formula of success by presenting personal stories and lessons from his 26-year spell as manager of Manchester United. The numerous similarities between the management of a football club and an organization, as presented by Ferguson, were remarkable and vital while framing the structure of this research. What is more important and worth mentioning, is that this book inspired at first place this study’s subject. Moreover, Ferguson’s storytelling and narrative ability familiarize the reader with management concepts such as recruitment, appraisal system, planning, feedback providing, employees engagement and employees satisfaction among others. The book’s contribution is noteworthy as it served as this study’s fundamental base.

Anita Elberse's close collaboration with Alex Ferguson resulted in a quite important bibliography about the manager's leadership style. In 2013, she analyzed the case study she had previously developed with Alex Ferguson and revealed the manager's key pillars of success. Elberse put Ferguson in the center of attention and presented how he managed to restructure the football team and become the man in charge of the entire club. In her work with Tom Dye in 2012, they reflected accurately how Manchester United's former CEO David Gill described Sir Alex Ferguson: "Steve Jobs was Apple. Sir Alex Ferguson is Manchester United" (Elberse & Dye, 2012).

Sean Silverthorne and his work on Alex Ferguson extended the bibliography around the manager's leadership style. What is more to his discussion with Anita Elberse where they explored the technical aspect of her case study, is the interview that Silverthorne conducted with Sir Alex Ferguson in 2015, where they discussed the manager's successful approach on and off the pitch. Similar to Silverthorne's work, in terms of familiarizing Ferguson's approach to the business world, are the studies of Hytner (2015) and Denton (2013), as both authors examined the manager's methods from a business point of view. Richard Hytner (2015) underlined the importance of making sacrifices in the pursuit of success, investing in strong personalities and obtaining an empathic approach towards the players – the organization's employees. Likewise, Alan Denton highlighted what he regards as Ferguson's key traits, including self-belief and communication, in his attempt to persuade business leaders that these elements are vital in their respective field (2015).

What sets this research apart from what was already written, is the fact that previous studies examined Ferguson's approach from management scope in general and in terms of running an organization. This study however, will emphasize solely on the manager's HRM approach and pinpoint the methods that could benefit the HR field.

Ferguson's books or books written about his work offered a unique insight into the manager's daily life, motives and challenges. Reading the books that tracked down his days in charge of Manchester United from 1986 until the fall of the curtain in 2013, provided a notable view on how he evolved, learned and managed to become an effective and successful manager. The same applies for the club's former players' biographies and autobiographies. The memories of Gary Neville (2011), David Beckham (2003), Rio Ferdinand (2014), Michael Carrick (2018), Norman Whiteside (2008) and Roy Keane (2014), provide a deeper and complete insight into their manager's approach -this time from the employees' perspective-, since they cover a wide range of Ferguson's era at Manchester United, having featured for the team from the 80s until Sir Alex's last game.

Bibliography about the theoretical framework of leadership, as well as leadership concepts and models were also required. Simon Sinek's *Start With Why* (2009) was enlightening in terms of understanding what makes the successful and truly inspirational leaders. Martin Luther King Jr., Steve Jobs and other model leaders, feature in the book as successful examples of those who followed a different approach; they started by first finding their WHY. Sinek developed what he calls the "Golden Circle". According to this concept, leaders must begin by identifying their core belief and ask themselves why their business exists. Then, they should answer the question of how their business aims to fulfil this belief, while the last step is to recognize their business' product and find what the company does to fulfil their belief. According to the author, the concept might sound simple but where most leaders or companies fail, is that they start with the "Golden Circle" backwards (Sinek, 2009).

"Level 5 Leadership" is a concept developed by Jim Collins (2001) and constitutes the result of a fifteen-year study on the traits that create a great leader. The first level describes a "highly capable individual" who makes productive contributions through skills, talent or knowledge to his/her work. The next level stands for the "contributing team member" whose special traits help the team succeed. Level 3 describes the "competent manager" who organizes a group of people effectively in order to achieve

specific goals, while Level 4 defines the “effective leader” whose ability facilitates the team’s attempts to utilize a certain vision. Finally, Level 5 Leadership according to Collins is the end-result of the previous traits, plus the unique characteristic of humility which makes the truly successful leaders stand out (Collins, 2001).

Storytelling as a leadership method to approach individuals, gain their interest and motivate them towards a common purpose, has been described as effective and beneficial. Among others mentioned below, Ready (2002) and Harris & Barnes (2006) have productively contributed to the bibliography around storytelling leadership, as they explored its benefits and analyzed both the concept and its impacts on the audience. At the same time, Kellett (2002) widened the concept of storytelling by suggesting that football analogies and metaphors can be used in military or management context, in order to deliver a message in a more understandable approach.

Employee engagement, as this research will develop in the next pages, plays a vital part in organizations when managers seek to enhance their employees’ commitment. Harter (2015) suggests that long-time employees possess a “deep specialist knowledge” about the organization’s know-how and values. The author further insists that these employees understand how to “get things done with a minimum of friction”, while at the same time their experience enables them to help the new colleagues or predict their behavior in potential situations. From their side, Macey and Schneider (2008) suggest that a behaviorally engaged workforce provide the organization with a competitive advantage, in an ever-changing world. This competitive advantage, however, will not be earned by just copying how other organizations are doing it. Instead, building and sustaining a unique culture of commitment within the company is what really provides the organization with the advantage of having increased performances through employees’ commitment (Beer, 2015).



Lastly, since effective recruitment is referred to be as one of the company's most crucial processes, Breaugh (2008) underlines that the research around it has increased dramatically in recent years. Indeed, Moran and Morgan (2003), Cappelli (2001) and Johnson (2019) among others have highlighted the attention that organizations need to pay when hiring employees. Despite that Cappelli's research (2001) focuses on on-line recruitment, the author suggests that using the organization's reputation and image is the first step when attracting candidates. That was the case in multiple Ferguson's signings when the manager attempted to "charm" the club's targets by referring to Manchester United's reputation and goals or by guiding them to the club's iconic facilities (Ferguson, 1999). Moreover, Sinek's approach when it comes to employee recruiting is that organizations must always hire people who reflect their beliefs, people that share the same drive as the company and those who are firstly motivational and then talented (2009).

### **Sir Alex Ferguson: From Shipyards to an Elite Football Manager**

Alexander Chapman Ferguson was born on December 31, 1941 at the heart of Glasgow's shipbuilding district, Govan. Ferguson clan's motto in Scotland has always been "Dulcius ex asperis", which translates as "Sweeter after difficulties". According to Alex Ferguson, this phrase guided him and can portray his managerial days in Manchester United: A lot of burdens and challenges at first, which ended in a triumphant way (Denton, 2013). He described the life near the Govan docks as hard, yet full of lessons. Before committing his entire life as manager of the English club, Ferguson was running two pubs in his local area in Scotland. As he reckons, "pubs taught me about people, their dreams and frustrations, in a way that complemented my efforts to understand the football trade" (Ferguson, 2013).

After establishing a notable seventeen-year-career in the Scottish football grounds as a prolific forward footballer, Ferguson decided to follow the managerial career. He worked for twelve years as manager in several Scottish clubs and the Scotland national football team, before attempting to take the

brave step, accept the managerial role at Manchester United and move abroad for the first time (Ferguson, 1999).

Gary Neville, a former Manchester United football player who spent nineteen years under Ferguson's orders, refers to 1986 as a year of historical importance, as the year when Ferguson arrived at Manchester and "started his revolution" (Neville, 2011). Ferguson took over Manchester United at the club's lowest point in history, since the tragedy of Munich air disaster in 1958 which costed the lives of eight club's players. The Scottish manager accomplished to turn Manchester United's fortunes around by restructuring the team's scouting system, prioritizing the development of the club's academies and emphasizing on efficient management (Hughes, 2014). In accordance with Hughes, Brady et al. (2008) underline that "as Liverpool's star declined, so rose that of Manchester United" under Alex Ferguson, whose approach restored the club's lost ethos and tradition.

From game one, an away defeat to Oxford United on November 8th 1986 until the closing fixture of his career, an away draw at West Bromwich on May 19th 2013, Ferguson transformed his team into "one of the most prolific trophy-grabbing machines in the modern game" (Hughes, 2014). In the meantime, he managed to win thirteen League titles, five FA Cups, four League Cups, ten FA Charities/Community Shields, two UEFA Champions Leagues, one European Cup Winners' Cup, one European Super Cup, one Intercontinental Cup, one FIFA Club World Cup and dozens of individual awards. (Ferguson, 2013). His trophy cabinet sizes nearly double of the next-most-decorated English football manager, making Alex Ferguson the most successful manager in the world (Elberse, 2013; Silverthorne, 2015). Moreover, during his time at Manchester United's Old Trafford, he was knighted in 1999 for his services to the game, the Old Trafford's North Stand was renamed as "The Sir Alex Ferguson Stand" in 2011 and a bronze statue of the Scottish manager was revealed outside the stand the following year (Mitten, 2008). Lastly, Forbes estimated that Sir Alex was responsible for eleven per cent,

or 385 million dollars, of the club's value of 3,5 billion dollars at the time of his retirement (Hytner, 2015).

### **Identifying Ferguson's Main Traits**

Although Taylor (2011) describes Ferguson as "a manager of uncommon ability", it is essential to make a first attempt to explore what characteristics lay behind this uncommon ability.

As the manager acknowledged himself, discipline was a fundamental element in both his career and life. Discipline is a value that was embodied in Ferguson from an early age since his father was working in the "cruel business" of shipbuilding. As he admitted, his father was taking him at school before the gates opened and that, maybe explains why as a manager he used to appear for work "before the milkman arrived" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

While former Manchester United football player, Gary Neville, suggested (2011) that the best managers like Ferguson "don't worry about getting wrong", Sir Alex conceded that he never spent much time looking back at a specific game or a result. Since this never happened to be beneficial, he was always looking on to the next game and the next challenge. This approach according to the former manager, enables company leaders to develop character and faith in their people (Silverthorne, 2015).

Silverthorne's work with Ferguson (2015) unveiled more of the manager's traits. Ferguson admits that although he was born with "something", a lot of personal characteristics like organization, recognition or communication were learned by himself en route to success. During his discussions with the team, he got into the habit of using his imagination a lot, since he did not want to deliver the same message to his players over and over again (Silverthorne, 2015). Scerri (2017), adds another element to Ferguson's qualities by stating that only he possessed great communication skills, but he was an emotionally intelligent manager too, who was always available to listen to his players and provide mental support.

Elberse and Dye (2012) argue that the manager's long tenure and accomplishments at Manchester United, provided him "a wider scope of control than any other manager", as Sir Alex managed to become "the ultimate decision-maker on almost every football-related aspect at United".

Michael Carrick, a former Manchester United midfield player who played seven years under the Scottish manager's orders, focused on Ferguson's "phenomenal capacity for preparing players psychologically" when stating that this approach motivated his teammates to give everything for the team (Carrick, 2018).

Lastly, in Elberse's 2013 Harvard Business Review Ferguson's Formula, the manager developed eight leadership lessons that epitomized his successful approach. He emphasized the importance of starting with the organization's foundation and creating a structure based on a long-term vision, as well as the essential process of rebuilding and refreshing the team. Setting high standards and the ability not to ever cede control, were two additional elements. Ferguson argued that matching the right message to the moment and relying on the power of observation, enabled him to motivate his players and observe them from a wider point of view. The sixth point he focused on, was the preparation to win, while he acknowledged that tactical analysis of the opponent and risk-taking were crucial allies in his desire to be victorious. Ferguson's last key for success, as admitted, was that he never stopped adapting. David Gill, Manchester United's former CEO, referred to him as a manager with "a tremendous capacity to adapt as the game has changed" (Elberse, 2013).

### **Characteristics and Responsibilities of a Successful Football Manager**

After examining Sir Alex Ferguson's traits, it is vital to consider the characteristics that consist of a successful manager and his responsibilities, according to the bibliography. Although there is a plethora of them, Arsenal Football Club's former manager Herbert Chapman, in an early attempt in the 1930s summarized the role of the manager as to "organize victory" (Brady et al., 2008).

Crust and Lawrence (2006) state that being a former football player, seemed to be the main qualification for a football manager, prior to the introduction of the “UEFA professional license in 2002”. UEFA professional football license refers to the certificate given by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), European football’s governing body, of the highest level of education of football coaches (Dvorak et al., 2011).

Elberse and Dye (2012) argue that even though the responsibilities of a football manager tend to vary from one club to another, the traditional “job description” includes the coordination of the club’s first team, the preparation of two dozen of players to perform in matchdays and the general overseeing of the club’s support staff, including assistant coaches and doctors among others. Based on how the players train during the week or on their fitness level, the manager is also responsible to choose who will feature in the matchday squad, to decide on the specific tactics that will be employed in the match and to deliver the team talks before to the game, during the halftime and after the match is over. The two authors, further suggest that in cases like Ferguson’s Manchester United, the manager is often tasked with setting up the entire football organization. In line with that, Baker et al. (2003) suggest that traditionally a manager “has a prescribed number of roles, which typically includes a planned, coordinated and integrated program of athlete preparation”.

Additionally, Chelladurai (2011) suggests that football managers should perform several behaviors in their pursuit of excellence, including the creation of a vision and the ability to communicate it effectively to the players, the personal recognition that a manager should provide to the staff, the emphasis on winning and the training of the team in both technical and emotional side. Likewise, it is indicated that a successful manager is in charge to define the team’s strategy, goals and vision, together with the task to create the right football environment within the team will succeed (Vilhelmsdottir et al., 2016; Burnes & O’Donnell, 2011).

Crust and Lawrence argued in 2006 that the position of a football manager “represents a stressful and turbulent occupation where individuals are publicly held responsible for a team’s performance”. While the authors admitted that the role of the professional football manager traditionally embraced a wide range of responsibilities beyond the actual role, modern football managers ought to understand their occupation’s various characteristics from a business perspective and embrace their role’s demands. In the words of Sir Alex Ferguson, “every leader has different characteristics and leads in his own manner. I suppose that’s true for CEOs of companies as much as it is for football managers” (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Identifying specifically what makes effective sports leadership is certainly not an easy process. As seen, football managers differ from one another, as each one operates under different conditions, having to perform different tasks. According to Walker (2018), when the reign of a successful manager like Ferguson is over, there is always a question raised upon his achievements. People see their victorious careers as laboratory results, designed with scientific greatness and argue whether there would ever be anyone like them. If in that case, this assumption is true, examining Ferguson’s leadership style earns much greater importance.

### **Elements of Successful Leaders**

Having examined what elements shaped Ferguson’s thriving career and the traits behind an effective modern-day football manager, it is vital to emphasize leadership on a wider scope and identify the characteristics that are embodied in a successful leader’s profile.

Burnes and O’Donnell (2011) cite leadership as “one of the most important human sciences” which, as already mentioned about football and HR field, “have undergone a sea change in the last 30 years”. According to the authors, true leaders are those who can adapt their leadership style and their approach to a variety of different contexts in which they may operate. Living in a fluid framework,

leaders must possess several other abilities such as to identify possible future challenges and revise their companies accordingly, to communicate their vision simply and effectively and to develop their employees instead of direct them. However, as the two authors suggested, the development of those abilities is not a simple process. Instead, it is an on-going cognitive journey in which, true leaders learn how to evolve. As Turk (2007) explains, true leaders do not just respond or react instinctively. They generate actions and lead through initiatives. Through their skills, intelligence and strong desire to win, leaders do not just declare that something should be done but make sure that something actually gets done.

Moreover, according to Swain (2016), truly inspirational leaders are self-aware too. They acknowledge their own strengths, weaknesses or defining moments and take advantage of them. The author, in his Harvard Business Review article gives the example of Terry Bradshaw, the former American football player. Bradshaw, who played as “quarterback” for the National Football League’s (NFL) Pittsburgh Steelers, was a gifted but arrogant athlete who paid little attention to his coaches during training. Although he possessed an enormous amount of talent, his attitude resulted in poor performances and the crowd’s rejection. After experiencing a football-related emotional shock, he acknowledged his false attitude towards his team and decided to cultivate a new profile. After admitting his weakness, the result for Bradshaw was to become one of the only three quarterbacks in NFL history to have won four “Super Bowls” (Swain, 2016).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is mentioned as a key contributing factor of effective leadership (April et al., 2012; Mayer & Caruso, 2002). High levels of Emotional Intelligence tend to develop empathy between the two-sided shape of leaders-followers and as a result of it, a strong bond which makes the leaders value the needs of others, above theirs. The ability to influence the followers’ behavior and their performance’s outcomes is also reported as a sign of a good leader, not to mention the tendency of developing strong teams and interacting effectively with them.

Vilhelmsdottir et al. (2016) introduce the concept of two different leadership styles. The “task-focused leadership” emphasizes on the processes’ end-result, the fulfillment of goals. Leaders in task-focused leadership are less people-oriented, while they use rewards, structure division and sources as tools to get things done. On the other side, “person-focused leadership” depends heavily on individuals to achieve its goals. Respect, motivation, vision and team’s needs are core values of this people-oriented leadership style. However, the authors suggest that both leadership approaches “are almost equally important in team effectiveness and productivity”.

Another important concept which defines the value of great leadership is Collins’ “Level 5 Leadership”, based on empirical evidence (2001). Level 5 Leadership is the result of the previous four leadership tiers’ combination. Level 1 refers to the “highly capable individuals”; the regular, talented and skilled individuals who are able to work effectively. At the second level, the talented individuals become contributing team members, who manage to utilize their skills in favor of the team. The next tier, Level 3, describes the transformation from an effective team member to a competent manager who oversees people and resources and facilitates the goal-achieving process. At Level 4, the structure has an effective leader who maintains the organization’s high standards and leads the team to meet its goals. Finally, Level 5’s “Executive”, is the one who embodies the company’s values and drives the structure with his/her inspiring personality. What defines most the Level 5 Leaders, is the “paradoxical combination of personal humility plus professional will”. (Collins, 2001).



### Key Takeaways from Ferguson's Approach

As explained in the first chapters, this study aims to identify the blueprints of Ferguson's successful approach. To achieve that, it was essential to compare the existing bibliography on Sir Alex Ferguson's leadership style with bibliography regarding football management and general leadership theories. The result was five main elements, divided into subcategories, that characterized Ferguson's 26-year career at Manchester United and also, mentioned in the bibliography as leadership qualities. At the same time, the results that will be developed here, intend to contribute to the HR field as the paper's content emphasizes on how a football manager succeeded in managing his organization's human resources.

#### Number One: Values-Oriented Leadership

"If they lose faith in your knowledge, they lose faith in you" (Ferguson, 2013).

#### *Know Your WHY*

In 2009 Simon Sinek presented the concept of the "Golden Circle". The Golden Circle is a model developed by Sinek and focuses on how a business can stand out from its competitors, by just emphasizing on what actually sets them apart. The concept's general idea is that every enterprise or leader, should start by identifying their "WHY", then moving on to find their "HOW" and lastly, they have to define their "WHAT".

"WHY" is defined as a question about the business' or individual leader's core belief: Why companies or leaders do what they do, their purpose and motivating power. Since it is their defining value, WHY is the most important message that a company or a leader can communicate. As Sinek (2009) says, "By WHY I mean what is your purpose, cause or belief? WHY does your company exist? WHY do you get out of bed every morning? And WHY should anyone care?" (Sinek, 2009). HOW is the

way in which companies or leaders do what they do. HOW can make an organization differentiate from competitors but not in the volume of WHY. Lastly, WHAT is most easily-defined part, since most organizations know the product they sell or the service they provide.

Sir Alex Ferguson was a manager that not only clearly knew his WHY but set it as the core of the organization as well. Sinek (2009) suggested that if leaders are not able to accurately set their WHY and communicate it effectively to the employees, then they should not expect them to embody the organization's values and beliefs. WHY, according to the concept, is an efficient way to motivate the team and bridge any possible differences, as it can work as a unifying factor. In Manchester United's example, this worked perfectly in the case of the club's former players Andy Cole and Teddy Sheringham. The two players fell out due to an incident during an international game in 1995, before Sheringham joined Manchester United and although they co-existed in the English club for four years, they were never in good terms. However, Ferguson's strong desire to win, along with his clearly stated WHY, created a successful and victorious football blend which won almost every available trophy in that period (Brady et al., 2008; McRae, 2018; Gordon, 2019).

Ferguson's WHY was to build a healthy football club that would dominate the game for many years and entertain its fans. From the day he took charge as manager of the club, he wanted to build a football team from the very beginning, knowing that he has set the foundations for a lasting project. As he admitted some years after his retirement:

I've always felt that it's impossible to field a great football team if you don't have a great organization. Most owners and managers mess around with team selection without any underlying purpose. They arrange everything back to front and are too impatient for quick results. Before you can field a great team, you have to build a great organization, and all the elements have to be assembled properly. (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015)

His HOW, the way in which he managed to achieve his WHY, was through rebuilding the whole structure, investing in the academy, revising the club's scouting system, recruiting the best players available and playing attractive football. Revising the established team's practices, facilitated Ferguson's efforts of leaving his mark on the club and established him as the team's ultimate decision-making leader. Once he stepped in as the new manager, Ferguson noticed gaps in the team's scouting network. After identifying the problem, he called in a meeting all the local clubs of Manchester and let them know that Manchester United "were there to do business" (Ferguson, 1992). The club's academies were another area which shouted for redevelopment. As per Elberse and Dye, Ferguson immediately set to revolutionize the team's youth policy which he thought "was a shadow of what a club of United's standing required". Moreover, he recruited new scouts to cover multiple areas of Greater Manchester and demanded them to bring into the team the best young talents (Elberse & Dye, 2012). This approach resulted in a continuous and fluent supply of young players to the first team, playing together attacking football. By doing that, the players were growing together and bonding in a way that created a team spirit (Ferguson, 2013).

Finally, the manager's WHAT was to win matches and trophies; an easily-defined mission. Sinek (2009) argued that since WHAT is the result of actions (HOW), leaders have to talk about their WHY and prove it with WHAT they do. Ferguson's records as manager of Manchester United rewarded his actions (HOW), as they achieved the vision (WHY) he had from the beginning. 38 trophies and 895 wins in 1,500 matches, established his organization as the most successful club in the country (Mitten, 2008).

The concept of the Golden Circle was perfectly paralleled to Ferguson's Manchester United by Richard Hytner (2015):

What you do, why you do it and how you prefer to do it need to be understood and embraced by all. Results mattered to Ferguson, of course. Winning was important. As important as the

what – winning football matches – was the how – playing attractive, attacking football. As for the why, Sir Alex Ferguson felt it was his job to sell a higher order idea.

### ***Self-Awareness***

As Goleman and his colleagues write (2002), a common characteristic of successful leaders is their self-awareness. Deep understanding of one's strengths, weaknesses, motives or limitations, arms leaders' personality with honesty towards themselves and confidence towards their needs (Goleman et al., 2002; Swain, 2016). That was one of Ferguson's primary characteristics, considering that he knew his abilities and understood that he was in charge of the organization. From day one at the club, Ferguson "was high on self-belief that if he had to transform Manchester United into one of the best in the business, he had to do things his way not the players' way" (Pandey, 2017)

When Manchester United's board agreed to a significant increase in Wayne Rooney's contract, Ferguson vetoed the decision since he did not think that a football player should earn twice what the team's manager was earning. Joel Glazer, one of the club's owners, asked Ferguson's opinion with the manager responding that no player should be paid more than the manager (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). As Pandey (2017) suggested, "his personality was higher and bigger than that of the players. That allowed him to earn the respect of the players and everybody else at the club". Ferguson highly valued that a tight wage structure should be maintained at his team since this was the key for making his position clear as the man in charge (Brady et al. 2008).

At another example, Ferguson cites an incident, indicative of his ability to establish his authority. The manager refers to a game he used to play with the team before every football match when he was trying to guess the opposite team's starting squad. One night, Ferguson made his usual prediction about who would feature for the opponents, only to hear out of a sudden that they had six changes in their starting squad. Sir Alex, who did not want to be humiliated in front of his players, seized the

opportunity. He started yelling that the opponents had the audacity to line up against Manchester United with their reserves, thinking that they would win. This immediate and bold action, enabled the manager to remain in his players' eyes as the man in charge, the man who is in control of everything. "It makes no sense to offer players an easy chance to tell themselves, 'The manager's lost it.' If they lose faith in your knowledge, they lose faith in you" (Ferguson, 2013).

### ***Leading from the Balcony***

Heifetz and Laurie (2001) use the metaphor of 'leading from the balcony' to describe how leaders must always maintain a big picture view of what is happening. "Getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony" is the process of taking a step back from the action and observing what is going on by focusing on the bigger picture. This process can be seen as a strategic plan which benefits leaders with the capacity of knowing what is happening around them (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Moreover, Searby and Tripses (2011) indicate that leading from the balcony enables leaders to evaluate their current practices or articulate future plans. Leading from the balcony is therefore a vital process as leaders gain the ability to observe interactions and behaviors in the midst of the action.

Several Manchester United former football players reported that Ferguson was able to observe everything that was going on at the training ground while never losing sight of the larger picture. The manager rarely went into the players' changing room but even so, they knew that he was monitoring everything from his office which was looking at both the training pitch and the players' car park. Although they could not spot him near the pitch, Ferguson always seemed to know the right moment to intervene and set the tone for the team (Whiteside, 2008; Carrick, 2018). In the same volume, Hughes (2014) stated that all of Ferguson's players believed that their manager knew exactly what they were up to, even if he did not. Sir Alex himself, argued that "a leader is not one of the boys. It is vital to keep some sort of distance" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). This sort of distance, the distance between the

“balcony” and the action, is what actually enabled the manager to observe the big picture and have a more accurate image of what was happening in the organization.

Leading from the balcony though, was not Ferguson’s initial approach. Rather, he tended to be heavily involved in training sessions or what Heifetz and Laurie (2001) refer as the “action on the dance floor.” He decided to take a step back after his assistant manager suggested that his scope would be widened if he kept some distance and allowed the coaching team to take more responsibilities. After distancing himself and getting to the balcony, the manager admitted that he saw things that surprised him. Being involved in the training sessions meant that his entire focus was on the ball but once he began overseeing everything from his office, he started observing the players’ moods, behaviors and habits (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Furthermore, this approach enriched his management skills. When seeing that a player was repetitively not having high-standard training sessions, the manager could meet with the player in his office and ask him if he was troubling with family or health issues. As Ferguson reckons, “I don’t think many people fully understand the value of observing. I came to see observation as a critical part of my management skills. The ability to see things is key” (Elberse, 2013).

### ***A Strong Will to Work Hard***

Ferguson’s work ethic is another fundamental element of his success as manager of Manchester United. The manager used to say that his own definition of “drive” was a combination of concentration, refusal to admit defeat and most importantly, a willingness to work hard (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Max Weber, the German sociologist who studied in depth the concept of work ethic, suggested that it finds its roots in the protestant ethic and the value of asceticism, who gave birth to capitalism (Miller et al., 2002). The authors on their side, support that work ethic is a motivational construct that reflects on one’s attribute, rather than religious behavior. Verifying their approach, Ferguson felt that the most important element of success is work ethic, as he possessed himself great levels of this value.

Sir Alex believed that the only way he was going to be successful was through working very hard and that is why he only missed three football matches out of 1,500 as the manager of Manchester United (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). According to his words, the manager's success is depending on the sacrifices he or she is willing to make: "Your life is devoted to being the best you can be, and also an example to everyone. So sacrifice is absolute. It's paramount, absolute" (Hytner, 2015). Being a perfect example for the company's employees will inspire them too, to make sacrifices for the organization's long-term success (Kotter, 2011).

### ***Disciplined Attention***

It has already been mentioned that discipline was embodied to Ferguson since he was a kid, due to the disciplinary character of his father. In the later years of his life and during his long spell as manager of Manchester United, Ferguson frequently demonstrated his strong will when it came to discipline and rules-following. The manager always valued the common good above the individual demands, even if that meant that he had to fall out with several of his players. As he reckons, "I placed discipline above all else and it might have cost us several titles. If I had to repeat things, I'd do precisely the same, because once you bid farewell to discipline you say goodbye to success" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Several researchers (Snook, 2008; Maccoby et al., 2004) argued that even stern leaders can gain great respect from the employees, as long as they, demonstrate genuine care about them or act as protective and security-providing figures. Snook provides the example of Bobby Knight, the former head coach of NACAA's (National Collegiate Athletic Association) basketball team, Texas Tech. According to the author, Knight's career was full of controversies about his firm personality but even so, he managed to inspire "tremendous loyalty and even love" from his players due to his caring approach (Snook, 2008).

In Ferguson's case, he frequently had to face multiple issues that occurred in the organization and were calling for difficult decisions. One of those severe issues which caused Manchester United's reputation, was the drinking problem that Sir Alex faced when he signed for the Manchester club. Manchester United had the reputation of a "drinking club" during the 1980s, as many of the club's football players were heavily consuming alcohol during weekdays; a habit that reflected on the team's poor results and was often the subject of the newspapers. Ferguson was aware of the club's bad reputation and once he signed as the club's manager, he gathered all of the team's staff in a meeting. In front of forty people that included football players, coaches and backroom staff, the manager expressed his opposition with what was established as "a drinking culture" and let everyone know that this problem had to come to an end. The manager had to dismiss many of the club's famous and fan-favorite players, such as Paul McGrath and Norman Whiteside that were reluctant to give up their bad habits but eventually, the drinking problem stopped (Ferguson, 1992; Ferguson, 1999). Sir Alex was clear on that:

Before I came to United, I told myself I wasn't going to allow anyone to be stronger than I was. Your personality has to be bigger than theirs. That is vital. (Elberse, 2013)

In another situation, the manager learned that three United players had gone out in town drinking on Boxing Day 2011, just a couple of days before a very important game against Blackburn Rovers. Despite the fact that Manchester United counted at the moment a significant number of injured players, Ferguson decided to drop the three for the game, although this decision was going to weaken the team further. The club lost the game, something that cost them three precious points and eventually at the end of the season, Manchester United lost the championship on goal difference to local rivals Manchester City. It was a huge blow but as the manager reflected, "in the long run principles are just more important than expediency" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). On this aspect, Simon (2006) presented the example of USA's 16th president Abraham Lincoln who struggled with countless difficult decisions that needed to be taken for the country's good. According to the author, great leaders are not only



those who are able to make difficult decisions but also those who can do so while being fully aware of the peoples' conflicting desires and potential controversies.

In the same context, Heifetz and Laurie (2001) recommended that different personalities and characters in the same organization, reflect their different experiences, backgrounds, values and beliefs within the workforce. While some managers demonstrate unwillingness to address the conflicting issues that disturb the organization, the effective leaders have to counteract any distractions. According to Jan Carlzon, the former CEO of Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), "the work of the leader is to get conflict out into the open and use it as a source of creativity" (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). The authors further suggest that denial, scapegoating or focusing only on "today's technical issues", are forms of work avoidance who undermine adaptive work. What has to be done, is to identify distractions when they occur and tackle them on time so that people will remain focused on the general good.

An extra example is the manager's conflict with Manchester United's superstar, David Beckham. According to Ferguson (2013), Beckham attempted in many ways to undermine his authority and establish himself as the team's first violin. After a controversial incident in the dressing room where two fell out, the player decided that it was time to say goodbye to his beloved club. Ferguson's words regarding this incident, are important to be mentioned as they highlight the importance for a manager to maintain his authority:

The minute a Manchester United player thought he was bigger than the manager, he had to go. I use to say, 'The moment the manager loses his authority, you don't have a club. The players will be running it, and then you're in trouble.' David thought he was bigger than Alex Ferguson. There is no doubt about that in my mind. It doesn't matter whether it's Alex Ferguson or Pete the Plumber. The name of the manager is irrelevant. The authority is what counts. You cannot

have a player taking over the dressing room. Many tried. The focus of authority at Manchester United is the manager's office (Ferguson, 2013).

### **Number Two: Recruit Personalities, Not Just People**

“You have to go and hunt for talent” (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

### ***Recruiting in the Talent Economy***

Over the last decades, bibliography on employee recruitment has increased significantly, as more researchers are giving attention to the topic (Breaugh, 2008). Recruiting employees is one of the very first processes regarding the HR field, having existed since “the first person agreed to be compensated for performing a task for another person (Cohen, 2015). Today, organizations are facing the usual “problem” of identifying and hiring the most qualified and best-suited candidate to fill an open position (Moran & Morgan, 2003). At the same time, they are called to manage the “talent economy” (Brady et al., 2008) since a significant number of talented job seekers is applying for the position.

Talent management according to Vaiman (2014) refers to an SHRM's (Strategic Human Resources Management) approach of “attracting or identifying, motivating, developing, and retaining organization's most valuable employees”, while at the same time ensuring that the deployment of these roles, adds value in the organization. The author suggests that the key challenge for talent management is to increase the employees' and especially the newly hired employees', contribution to the organization. Vaiman (2014) defines the “talented employee” as the individual who possesses high levels of skills, knowledge or abilities and is employed to fill a key role in the organization. He further supports that talented employees, when managed effectively have the potential to generate great value for the company. In contrast, Emerton (2010) suggests a collective definition of talent. According to Emerton, talent is not a singular trait that exists in an individual or an individual skill required to fulfil a

certain task. Instead, it is a collective capacity to generate value in the workplace, as well as the collective contribution towards meeting the company's goals.

Furthermore, Emerton (2010) supports that the organization's major task it is to discover talent both inside and outside its workplace, attract it and unlock it for the organization's benefit. According to the author, identifying talent "from different social and educational backgrounds" and the ability to manage it effectively is a successful leader's characteristic. In Ferguson's case, the manager hired a plethora of talented players from different national, cultural and social backgrounds and still, managed to bring enormous success and reputation to his organization (Pandey, 2017).

From football scope, one of the clubs' fundamental purposes is to recruit the best and most talented football players from all over the world (Chelladurai, 2011). Just like in HR where managing people efficiently is the most vital practice (Vosburgh, 2007; Cohen, 2015), in football too, every manager who seeks to become a successful leader, should value people as the most important asset (Turk, 2007). Müller et al. (2017) argue that the most critical decision a football club has to make, concerns which players to hire, since football players "are the most important investments in professional football" and can have a marvelous impact on a team's chances for succeeding. Likewise, Floros (2014) suggests that, since winning games could translate into financial rewards, hiring football players is an important route.

Sir Alex Ferguson expressed his first experiences as the manager of Manchester United regarding recruitment. According to Ferguson, until his arrival, the staff at the club took for granted that every talented young player in the area would sign for Manchester United, but instead, they were choosing the club's rivals, Manchester City. Ferguson accurately supported that it is unreasonable for an organization to expect that every gifted individual will be waiting outside its door with an application form, without the organization hunting for talent (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Based on that, several

researchers (Ferris et al., 2007; Cappelli, 2001) suggested that the company's reputation can enhance the applicants attracting process and act as the company's greatest marketing strategy. Treating employees fairly, communicating your success and other methods, could increase the company's reputation and thus, the ability to attract more recruits. Ferguson admitted that once the club started gaining success and collecting trophy after trophy, the calls from football players' agents offering their clients' services, became a routine (Ferguson, 2013).

### ***Your People Reflect Your WHY***

According to Sinek (2009), all great leaders share a common ability to identify good fits for their organizations and especially, people who believe what they believe. To further support this concept, the author referred to the example of Ernest Shackleton. Shackleton was an ambitious explorer who set out to explore the Antarctic in the early twentieth century. Although the hazardous attempt required a 1,700 miles trip from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea and would cost about 250,000 dollars, Shackleton proudly insisted that it would be the biggest polar journey ever attempted. The explorer sailed with a crew of twenty-seven men in 1914 but never reached the continent of Antarctica. Instead, they were trapped in winter, as ice surrounded the immobilized ship near the South Georgia Island. After months of being still on ice, Shackleton never let his crew down and understanding the new circumstances, set a new mission of reaching for help. Eventually, they managed to find help while all of the crew members survived the journey. What makes Shackleton's story remarkable, is his crew's loyalty and commitment. The explorer, with a simple advertisement in the newspaper, found the perfect fits for the job. He found people who shared the same passion as him. People who were as enthusiasts about the mission as Shackleton and literally followed him to the unknown (Sinek, 2009). Shackleton's example is a great and accurate confirmation that, if a leader wants to build loyalty and commitment, it is crucial to obtain a strong set of values. The key is not to hire perfectly-fit people with a specific skill set but to hire people

who share the same values as the organization (Emerton, 2010). The company should be clear about its beliefs and understand what value the candidate would add to the structure (Johnson, 2019).

According to Simon Sinek, many companies support that they hire only passionate people. The problem is that “almost every person on the planet is passionate, we are just not all passionate for the same things”. However, finding your WHY before starting recruiting, enhances the organization’s chances of attracting individuals who are passionate exactly about the same thing as the organization (Sinek, 2009). Likewise, Ferguson, a manager who clearly stated and communicated his WHY, wanted to build a team with people who mirrored his approach to the game. The manager proudly supported that he hired people “who were 100 per cent Alex Ferguson” and reflected his dedication and work ethic (Ferguson, 1992; Ferguson, 2013). Moreover, as reported by several authors (Pandey, 2017; Hughes, 2014; Silverthorne, 2015), Ferguson wanted to recruit “bad losers”, people who possessed the same obsession and determination of winning as him and were ready to embrace challenges. The manager mentioned an example of this approach, during a meeting with the fellow football manager, Jock Wallace, in 1991. Wallace, who closely monitored a training at Manchester United’s ground, mentioned to Ferguson that the team he saw, was not “an Alex Ferguson team”. The United manager admitted that indeed, there was a time when he was not true to his own beliefs and instead of acting, he preferred to avoid change and follow the existing pattern (Krick, 2003). Once another football manager, John Lyall, highlighted that Manchester United was not reflecting its manager’s personality, Ferguson decided to change and make sure that his team mirrored his character and beliefs (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

### ***Learning from Recruiting***

Besides the recruitment process as such, the recruiter’s experience has also attracted bibliographical attention the recent years (Breaugh, 2008). Over his many years as a football manager, Ferguson conducted hundreds of interviews in order to hire the most gifted available football players

and strength his team. As he reckons (2015), during his career he has developed “far more experience of being on the other side of the table-of being the interviewer rather than the interviewee”. Although a typical football-related interview may require to identify the interviewee’s qualities and character, his experience enabled him to “unlock” the interviewee’s personality and identify his ambitions, values and beliefs. Moreover, he used to search for signs in the individual’s body language such as eye contact or nervous hands, that could act as evidence of the interviewee’s character. According to Ferguson, the interviewer can pick up the signs of someone’s character, only by observing the interviewee’s behavior, reactions and body language (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Equally, multiple researchers (Lauer, 2005; Price, 2001; Cortez et al., 2017) suggest that expressions like eye contact, smiling and other non-verbal body languages from interviewees, can provide valuable knowledge on the individual’s character.

During those interviews, Ferguson wanted the interviewer to play an active part in the process. According to the manager, “interviews should not be a one-way street”, individuals ought to ask as many questions in order to know what their employer can offer them (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). In accordance with Sir Alex, Haimann suggested that in interviews, candidates should be given the ability to demonstrate their skills and express themselves. In order to achieve that, the author supports that critical-thinking questions should be raised, so interviewees have the chance to engage in active discussions with the potential employer (Haimann, 2020).

Lastly, Ferguson highlights the attention that managers should pay on newcomers. For football players who sign for a new team, everything is different for them. While they enter a whole new world where they most probably know no one, it is the manager’s responsibility to familiarize those players with the “local” culture (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). According to Emerton, newcomers in organizations have to learn about their new employer and especially the new context in which they are working. Without the manager’s support and encouragement, their performance is more likely to fall short of expectations, while everyone could start questioning their talent (Emerton, 2010). Chelladurai (2011)

also underlines the importance of having a manager who pays attention to each member, expresses appreciation for efforts, provides feedback and is totally supportive. Ferguson was a manager who used to pay personal attention not only to his players but to potential hirings too. David Beckham, Manchester United's former football player, described Ferguson's attempts to sign him to the club when he was just sixteen years old. Sir Alex knew everything about the teenager, he regularly telephones his parents and knew his brothers and sisters. In one of his attempts to persuade the football player to sign for the Manchester club, Ferguson invited young Beckham to join him on a match against London side West Ham and sit with him on the manager's bench. Ferguson's experience enabled him to know exactly how to convince an applicant join his side and most importantly, how to inspire the football player and trigger his ambitions. David Beckham has admitted, "Ferguson was everything to me" (Beckham, 2003).

### ***Number Three: Communicate Your Vision***

"Having a healthy, open line of communication with the boss is vital" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

### ***The Value of Storytelling***

Storytelling, as a practice of effectively communicating an individual's experiences, has been used for thousands of years. The Bible, the most recognized religious and sacred book, is maybe the best example of using storytelling to inspire or alter behaviors and core values. Stories and personal experiences can develop rich visual concepts in the peoples' minds, as "great storytellers invite us to walk the landscape that is created by this imagery" (Ready, 2002).

People learn from their experiences, as well as from experiences and stories of others. Given that verbal stories create deep-rooted messages, as long as languages have existed, there have been stories and storytellers (Harris & Barnes, 2006). The authors further suggest that most of us carry several versions of our experiences, while we communicate them to friends or relatives in the hope that they would be benefited. Moreover, it is well-known that multiple leaders, including religious, military,

political and business, tend to use stories, myths, allegories or metaphors to inspire their according followers. Perhaps that is happening because people want to listen to someone's story that can identify with. Likewise, it is suggested that listening to stories which make you feel connected to the speaker, generate a great sense of motivation and provide a moral purpose to your work (Grenny, 2017).

Sir Alex Ferguson is a natural storyteller. He has a unique charisma of communicating his stories through his remarkable memory even for the smallest pieces of information. His interests though, vary and go beyond football, as he is a huge wine lover, he owns racing horses, he is a jazz enthusiast and loves spending his time reading books. He even admitted that his interest in American military and political history led to identifying similarities between military history and football (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Feigen et al. (2020) insist that people can obtain valuable lessons from studying military leaders and strategies, given the fact that the word "strategy" which plays a central part in managerial leadership, comes from "strategos"; the Greek word for the general. Furthermore, Kellet (2002) underlines the relevance between sports and history or politics by suggesting that not only sports metaphors and phrases can be used in non-sporting contexts, but we can understand other concepts through their connection to sports too.

Former Manchester United captains Michael Carrick and Roy Keane, have both highlighted the storytelling ability of their former manager, as this ability was often used as a unifying factor. "The Boss was a master at telling seemingly random stories that were all linked by a common message – working hard – particularly if it was a big game", says Carrick (Carrick, 2018). The English former midfield player presented an incident that took place before a home fixture against Arsenal Football Club in 2010. The club invited the Chilean miners who had survived the awful experience of being trapped underground for 69 days in 2010, to watch the game. Ferguson seized the opportunity and spoke to the players about the mining background of Sir Matt Busby, Manchester United's legendary former football manager, and the strength needed to work underground. As Michael Carrick recalls, the speech had nothing to do



about football but it was a lesson about courage, commitment, character and the importance of sticking together. The club's former captain acknowledged that:

The Boss spoke passionately and at length in the changing room about the shipyards on the Clyde where his father worked. Sir Alex knows so much about history and he'd throw stories about the past into his team talks, about brave soldiers fighting for a cause. He would start off nice and calm and sometimes talk himself up into a whirlwind of aggression, like a heavyweight climbing impatiently into the ring (Carrick, 2018).

Roy Keane regards highly his former manager's storytelling skills, as he admitted that this was one his greatest strengths. At one case, Manchester United was playing against Millwall Football Club for the 2004 FA Cup final and according to Keane, Ferguson was preparing the players all the week about the game, paying attention to the opponents' playing style. On game day though, the manager spoke exclusively about his players and their diverse background. The manager made different points about every player, highlighting how far they have come to represent Manchester United in the country's cup final. Keane proudly admitted:

We were all playing in the Cup final. 'I'm from Mayfield, and I'm playing with Ruud Van Nistelrooy and all these other lads – Ronaldo, from Portugal. It's amazing that we're all together.' It wasn't about Millwall, and it almost had nothing to do with the Cup final. It was about us as a team. Ferguson always got it spot-on (Keane & Doyle, 2014).

Ferguson was always trying to find new topics to talk to his players about, as he never wanted to repeat himself or the players feel that the manager was going to deliver the same message they had heard before. On one occasion, after he attended a classical concert his Carlos Queiroz, his assistant coach, Ferguson decided to talk to the players about his experience and what amazed him the most. The manager praised the performance of Andrea Bocelli, the concert's conductor and underlined that as a

manager, he was trying to achieve the same things from his football orchestra: tempo, rhythm, harmony and control (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Indeed, watching how an orchestra works, is seeing leadership from a parallel perspective. The conductor though is a great example of how leaders can not only guide but also inspire the employees and set the tone for action (Karabell, 2015).

A story that Ferguson used to talk about to his players, was about large flocks of the Canadian geese who are able to migrate thousands of miles because of the way they work as a team. The birds at the front of the flock are the ones who take turns and guide the flock, while at the back there are birds who have the responsibility of dropping away from the flock in case an injured bird needs to be looked after. According to Sir Alex: "I was not asking them to fly for thousands of miles, I was only asking them to play 38 games of football" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Peter Guber addresses the idea of the "four truths of the storyteller". According to Guber, "for the leader, storytelling is action oriented—a force for turning dreams into goals and then into results" (Guber, 2007). The author supports that an effective story consists of four truths regarding the storyteller. For start, the teller has to be true to himself. The story that is going to be delivered, should reflect the teller's vision and must be consistent with his or her heart and mind; it should act as a mirror displaying the teller's open heart. Second, the storyteller has to be true to the audience. Listeners' demands and needs have to be answered and matched by the story, since they give the teller their time. The third truth is to the moment. As it will be developed in the next paragraph, the teller has to match the message to the time, adapt the story to the context in which it will be told. Lastly, Guber insists that the teller needs to be true to the mission, "devoted to a cause beyond self" (Guber, 2007).

### ***Match the Message to the Time***

Undoubtedly, an effective communication style is one of leadership's core elements (De Vries et al., 2009). Communication style is one of the most frequent answers that senior executives mention

when asked to list what they value as the most important skills a manager should possess. Moreover, while researchers hardly ever totally agree on the best leadership definition, most of them would admit that leaders are individuals who guide and inspire others through their communication style (Barrett, 2006). Communication however, is perceived to be an easy task for leaders. Baldoni (2004) indicates that although most people in managerial positions have the ability to speak, speaking is not the same as communicating. As stated by the author, communication as “a two-way process”, combines the ability of speaking, listening and communicating; a set of skills that require time to be developed.

Hughes (2014) supports that while great managers should spend most of their time observing, watching or listening, when they communicate, they have to make sure that “they deliver concise, useful information and they make the information stick”. On the same line, Baldoni (2004) suggests that when a CEO communicates an order or a speech, the message should reflect the organization’s beliefs and values, since effective communication is supposed to be established in the leader’s character or the organization’s culture. Baldoni further supports that communication’s purpose is to create a bond between employees and leaders, as it provides employees with a solid reason to support their leader. Consistent with Baldoni, Barrett argues that effective communication facilitates the process of getting things done in an organization, given that good communication skills develop understanding and trust between managers and employees (Barrett, 2006).

Ferguson admitted that during his long-spell career as a manager and having been in the player’s position too, he developed the ability of putting himself in the shoes of the listener. This trait enabled him to adjust his communication approach to every club’s stakeholder: owners, players, coaching and backroom staff and supporters (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). According to Zulch (2014), the ability to adapt your communication style or the use of a combination of styles to suit the circumstances, is another effective leadership characteristic. Sir Alex tailored his communication

approach to reach his players' different personalities and managed to know exactly what to say and when to do so (Silverthorne, 2012).

When delivering a message, the manager believed that the best way to ensure that the audience understands you is to deliver it in the clearest and most concise way (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Roy Keane, Manchester United's captain between 1997 and 2005, acknowledged that he never got confused about what the manager demanded from the players during his team talks, as his message was always fresh and direct. The Irish former football player admitted that "I must have heard him talk before a match close to five hundred times, and I always thought, 'Yeah – that was good.' I think that's amazing" (Keane & Doyle, 2014). Ferguson recalls his half-time talk at the players during the 1999 Champions League final, as one of his most effective speeches, given the final result. Manchester United was behind the score 0-1 against the German side of Bayern Munich, in their attempt to collect their third major trophy in the season. During the fifteen-minute break at half-time, Ferguson inspired his players by underlying that, "When that Cup is going to be presented, just remember that you can't even touch it if you're the losers—you'll be walking past it with your losers' medals, knowing someone walking behind you is going to lift the Cup" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Former club's striker Andy Cole, cited the speech as truly motivational, having said that, "I thought about what a great feeling it would be to actually lift that trophy, to know that you've achieved something you've wanted to do since being a kid". Fellow team-mate, Dutch defender Jaap Stam, acknowledged that Ferguson's speech "ignited a go-get-'em attitude which spread through the team" (Hughes, 2014).

### ***Encourage, Not Criticize***

Feedback is defined as information provided by an individual regarding aspects of another's performance. Thus, feedback is a consequence of performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Likewise, Wiggins (2012) refers to feedback as the information an individual receives about how he or she is doing

towards reaching a goal. Both Wiggins and Eurich (2018) agree that feedback is a key driver of our performance, as it possesses the ability to enhance it and lead to goal achievement.

However, providing feedback is not an easy task because the recipients are often stereotyped about it and are holding an aggressive or defensive position towards it (Dawson et al., 2018; Eurich, 2018). Moreover, Wiggins (2012) suggests that even if the feedback is specific and accurate, it may lose its value if the recipient is overwhelmed by it. Since “nobody likes to be criticized and especially not the superstars of football”, Pandey (2017) suggests that the provider should have the courage, honesty and politeness in order to deliver the feedback effectively and match it to the moment. After all, as Ferguson argues: “For a player – and for any human being – there is nothing better than hearing ‘well done.’ Those are the two best words ever invented in sports” (Elbersye & Dye, 2012).

Ferguson supported that Manchester United’s winning culture could only be maintained if he told his players what he thought exactly about their performance, in a climate of honest. While sometimes he would be aggressive, he understood that confrontation was not the answer because a player would counter-attack to his criticism (Ferguson, 2013). As Ferguson did, Maccoby et al. (2004) likewise acknowledged that the effective manager should not be afraid to communicate unpleasant truths. Sir Alex’s way of delivering negative feedback was by raising the player’s confidence after the criticism. He used to say to a player that his performance was below the required levels at Manchester United and then, end his suggestion with stating that it is also an underperformance “for a player of your ability”; that is what Ferguson described as “criticize but balance it out with encouragement” (Ferguson, 2013). The manager preferred to give his players a belief in themselves, instead of running the club “like Attila the Hun” (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). In this way, negative feedback can provide valuable lessons because after monitoring one’s performance, it alerts with vital changes that the individual should make (Eurich, 2018).

A key element of Ferguson's feedback providing was that he never criticized his players in public. That was a red line for the manager as he preferred to admonish the whole team's performance in front of the cameras, instead of targeting an individual player. Sharing the blame after an unwanted result, was his definition of "acceptance of collective responsibility" (Ferguson, 2013). The manager understood that after a ninety-minute game, his players had enough pressure and the last thing they wanted was their manager crucifying them publicly. Instead, he saved his criticism for the team's private training sessions (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

### ***The Art of Inspiration***

Eyal and Roth (2011) define leadership as one's ability to mobilize and motivate individuals to apply their resources and abilities for a specific cause. Effective leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr or Nelson Mandela managed to motivate other people through their own example to believe and take action towards a common goal. In accordance, business leaders, also have to motivate employees to give their best for the organization and its values (Maccoby et al., 2004). Simon Sinek argued that those who have the ability to motivate individuals, they provide them with a sense of belonging and thus, the followers "act not because they were swayed, but because they were inspired" (Sinek, 2009).

Sir Alex suggested (2015) that leaders usually underestimate their motivating power, maybe because they lack a strong personality. However, strong personality as Ferguson continues does not always refer to dominating every conversation or having a dictating presence. Instead, a strong personality is "an expression of inner strength and fortitude". Furthermore, the manager believed that any individual who aspires to become a great leader, needs to be a great a salesman as well; a person able to sell ideas both inside and outside the organization. The leader also has to be able to persuade people that they can do things they do not know or sell them the idea they can achieve undreamed success (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Simon Sinek too, insisted that organizations have to sell their ideas

first and then their products because ideas are what move people believe they need the product (Sinek, 2009). According to Chelladurai (2011), inspiring people to extend themselves to achieve a goal, builds confidence and commitment towards the manager.

Hocine et al. argued that autonomy support is key in terms of inspiring individuals, as it provides greater choice and encourages self-initiation (2014). According to the authors, when managers respect their employees' way of operating and trust their abilities, employees will perceive this autonomy support as a motivation to maximize their efforts. Rio Ferdinand, Ferguson's record defender signing, admitted that his manager was "a master of psychology, knew how to get the best out of every player and created an unstoppable winning mentality". Ferdinand admitted that one of Ferguson's main principles was to give his players the freedom of expression. His team talks were not about giving specific orders of how the players were exactly expected to move during the game but instead, he gave them confidence to play the way it expressed them (Ferdinand, 2014). Likewise, Ryan Giggs stated that before his team debut, the manager's words were clear: "Just go out and enjoy yourself" (Hytner, 2015).

Ferguson however, did not only inspire his players but opponents too, as his great career and the countless success he enjoyed, made him the role model of the successful football manager. Harry Redknapp, the English manager who spent 27 years on the bench, insisted that Ferguson is not just a regular coach but a great manager instead. In accordance, Portuguese football manager and winner of multiple trophies Jose Mourinho admitted that Ferguson's work ethic and ideas are what made him "to fall in love" with the English game (Mitten, 2010). In another example, Ferguson's reputation alone, was enough to communicate that his organization never gave up. Manchester United was playing away at Tottenham Hotspur in 2001 and Ferguson's side was behind the score 3-0 at half-time. Teddy Sheringham, the English striker who featured for Manchester United between 1997 and 2001, was then playing for the London side. Sheringham was well aware of Ferguson's winning mentality and knew that Manchester United was going to bounce back, due to this mentality. As Sir Alex admitted in his

autobiography, before the start of the second half, he heard Sheringham shouting at his team-mates “Now don’t let them get an early goal”. The final whistle, found the Reds on the winning side, having dominated the game 3-5 (Ferguson, 2013).

#### **Number Four: Strategy is an Ongoing Process**

“There was no resting on the status quo, even in the best times. The longer I stayed, the further I looked ahead. Regeneration was an everyday duty” (Ferguson, 2013).

#### ***Adaptability to Change***

The fourth main characteristic of Ferguson’s approach was his ability to look ahead and plan for the future. The manager possessed impressive adaptability to change, which enabled him to adjust his style to the demanding and continuous needs of the game. By embracing change and even being able to predict it, Ferguson was keeping an eye on the future; a future which he was shaping at the same time. The manager strongly believed that accepting change is the most crucial element of managing it. Sir Alex himself, when he was operating in Scotland as manager of Aberdeen Football Club, decided to get out of his comfort zone and accept the new challenge. Manchester United was calling and despite it meant he had to step into the unknown, as he recalls, not one moment he hesitated or doubted himself when accepting such a big challenge (Ferguson, 1992).

Change is a continuous process and thus, requires effective management (Sauser Jr & Sauser, 2002). The Greek philosopher Heraclitus, famously said “panta rei”, which means that everything flows and changes; nothing remains unmovable. Heraclitus’ phrase is even relevant today, living in an ever-changing society, where the growth of humankind depends heavily on our ability to follow and adjust to change (Kepensch, 2007). As we become more successful though, we tend to avoid change as we feel no reason to do it. Instead, we seem to maintain the status quo and continue with our familiar way (Goldsmith, 2008). Here comes the responsibility of the leader, since he is tasked with the duty to keep



people moving forward. Leaders may ask the group to change but in fact, they are the ones who should set the example by reshaping the existing state of affairs, as this process requires the detailed supervision “from leaders up and down the line” (Miller et al., 2002). Moreover, it is cited that the effective leader should not only be able to adapt his style to the changing circumstances but should do so while taking care of the people’s demands too (Zulch, 2014; Mayer & Caruso, 2002).

Burnes (2004) suggested that Kurt Lewin’s theory of change management is still relevant today, despite the criticism it gained during the recent years. According to Burnes, Lewin’s “3-step model” has played a vital role in terms of understanding and utilizing organizational change. Lewin suggested that the first step you should take to manage change successfully is “unfreezing”. Unfreezing refers to the process of identifying what needs to be changed, creating the need for change and ensuring that there is an effective leadership team, able to bring the change. The second step is “change”. Here, the team communicates the vision of change and inspires action by involving individuals in the process. The final step in Lewin’s theory is “refreeze”. Refreeze represents the reshaping development of stabilizing change and ensuring that the new state of affairs will be built to last (Burnes, 2004).

Ferguson admitted that he could not afford not to change, since there was no other option for Manchester United to be successful. The manager even admitted that he treated every new success as his first, in order to remain motivated and driven (Elberse, 2013). David Beckham who has worked under Ferguson’s orders for more than a decade, acknowledged that under the pressure of bad results and in the fear that the team’s game would may be outdated, Manchester United changed the way they played. According to his words, Ferguson was the most suitable manager to lead this change: “If any manager is going to make sure players don’t get distracted by dwelling on the past, it’s Alex Ferguson” (Beckham, 2003).

In one situation, the manager had a fight with the team's captain Roy Keane, during the club's pre-season training in 2005. Keane, an old-school football player, seemed to be reluctant to change and blamed his manager for obtaining a new behaviour:

When we were embroiled in an argument once, Roy said to me, 'You've changed.' I replied, 'Roy, I will have changed, because today is not yesterday. It's a different world we're in now. We have players from twenty different countries in here. You say I've changed? I hope I have. I would never have survived if I hadn't changed' (Ferguson, 2013).

Ferguson's ultimate plan was to establish for his teams a four-year cycle of change. As he admitted, Manchester United needed to change with the times. This four-year cycle of change would not occur at once but instead, needed perpetual work and balance. If you take a look at Ferguson's teams at Manchester United, you can observe this change. The club's squad during the early 1990s was muscular and almost all-British, while by the late 1990s it became more refined. A decade later, Manchester United "had a decidedly continental flair" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). In order to develop a modern-day football team, the manager had to offload several football players who were in their mid-thirties and invest in young and ambitious players. He also had to intensify the fitness tests, introduce a new disciplinary code and adjust his training sessions, according to the changing demands of the game (Elberse & Dye, 2012). Furthermore, another key characteristic of this approach, was that he categorized his players in three demographic levels: the youth, those between 23 and 30 and the players above 30 years. This method enabled Ferguson to have a clearer view of his team and visualize it three or four years ahead (Pandey, 2017). As former Manchester United player and academy product, Ryan Giggs, stated: "He's never really looking at this moment, he's always looking into the future" (Elberse, 2013).

Several researchers (e.g. Iconomescu et al., 2014; Sauser Jr & Sauser, 2002; Müller et al., 2017) have underlined the importance of technology in both sports and business organizations. In Ferguson's

case, the new and innovative practices have facilitated Manchester United's modernization. Pioneering in terms of introducing new technologies in British football, the team appointed a group of sports scientists to facilitate the coaches' work, launched the use of vests fitted with GPS sensors that allowed the analysis of body's performance, hired yoga instructors, installed Vitamin D booths to make up for the lack of sunlight in Manchester and most importantly, introduced a state-of-the-art training ground (Elberse, 2013).

Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky suggested in 2009 the concept of "adaptive leadership". According to the concept, adaptive leadership is not an authority-based action but instead, a practice that that can be done by anyone; it is "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009). The authors indicate that leaders first need to make a diagnosis of their organization. In order to do that, it is vital to "get on the balcony" and observe how their organization is responding to the challenges, to understand in depth the organization's norms and the forces within and lastly, to discover any possible structural implications. Then, the authors advise leaders to mobilize people and move towards an adaptive work. This mobilization could take different forms from the individuals, including raising questions about the challenges and the solutions, processing ideas, single change initiatives, even "a strategic sequence of efforts that engage different individuals and subgroups in different ways at different points in time" (Heifetz et al., 2009). The concept's general notion, as seen also in Ferguson's case, is that visionary leaders who understand the necessity of adaptive change, can mobilize and motivate employee in order to act and be part of this adaptive changing process.

### ***Never Rest on Your Laurels***

Goldsmith (2008) supported that if you want to make real change in your organization, first you have to wonder what you are willing to change and then, act immediately. Ferguson indicated that every

time his team was celebrating a success, new questions were arising in his head, regarding what was to be done next and how the team would manage to do it (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Effective leaders not only have to manage and bring change but they should convince their followers that their plan is the correct one to move them forward (Garvin & Roberto, 2005; Sauser Jr & Sauser, 2002). Their duty does not end there though, as they should plan the actions required to move the organization from the current position to the desired one, implement the plan, monitor its performance, assess whether or not the plan achieved its goals and if not, uncover the reasons of the failure (Parker, 2004). Equally, Kenny (2016) suggested that the plan should be carried out systemically and the leader have to feel responsible for the whole team's actions. Likewise, a football manager is tasked with the same responsibilities, as the elite sports businesses require a great deal of planning (Chelladurai, 2011).

In 1997, just a few months after his team completed the domestic double by winning the championship and the FA Cup, Ferguson insisted that "The last thing you can do is rest on your laurels – you are only really as good as your last match" (Ferguson, 1997). Silverthorne (2015) argues that Ferguson always preferred long-term planning over the short-term, as he believed that by investing in young, ambitious and motivated players, you guarantee for the organization far more success in the future. However, this success did not come at ease, as seen in the previous pages. Ferguson had to take hard decisions that seemed to be costly in the short term, but sustained the club's values and improved the discipline in the dressing room over time (Hytner, 2015). Instead of following what he described as "the results-driven industry" of football, the manager preferred to rebuild the club and invest in its long-term success (Elberse, 2012).

Still, despite his days of triumphs, Ferguson experienced moments in which he doubted his team's and his own ability. The small, trophy-less gaps in Manchester United's reign, forced Ferguson to

revisit his plan and adjust it to the new circumstances. These backsteps proved to be essential as they worked as a psychological boost for the manager who argued that “I’d been looking at yesterday, instead of working out what the club needed today and tomorrow. Once I’d sorted that out I was able to set my sights correctly and get to grips with the job” (Ferguson, 1997). Every time the manager experienced those “phases of seismic change” (Ferguson, 2013), he was getting more motivated and ambitious. In 2002, after the club’s first trophy-less season since 1998, Sir Alex decided to step down and retire. However, after his family’s intervention, the manager decided to fight back:

Once I had decided I would be standing down, I stopped planning. The minute I reversed that policy, I started plotting again. I told myself: ‘We need a new team’. The energy came back. I started to feel that thrust about myself again (Ferguson, 2013).

#### **Number Five: Invest in Individuals, it Benefits the Team**

“The job of a manager, like that of a teacher, is to inspire people to be better” (Elberse, 2013).

#### ***Emotional Intelligence***

Individuals’ emotions and psychology can influence in great levels one’s sports performance and thus, it is vital to study the emotional and psychological state of athletes (Laborde et al., 2011). It is cited that the field of sports psychology is about facilitating athletes’ efforts to improve their performance by altering the way they think and behave (Gilmore et al., 2017). The authors further suggest that although many people believe psychology does not have a place in sports, the great tension football players are experiencing due to the desire of winning, creates the need of having individuals who influence the athletes’ performance. Equally to this approach, Laborde et al. (2016) insist that understanding and regulating athletes’ emotions is vital when having football players who have to cope on daily basis with stress and competitive pressure.

Mayer and Caruso (2002) take this approach to the next step and support that managers are those who are tasked with this responsibility. According to the two authors, managers who are able to consider accurately their employees' emotions, are those who are often in a better position to change them effectively. Since our interpersonal relations are governed by emotional information and behaviors, being able to understand this information and what impact it has on the organization's employees, is what makes an individual, an emotionally intelligent person. Those emotionally intelligent persons, according to Mayer and Caruso, tend to build "real social fabric within an organization", while individuals with low emotional intelligence levels are more likely to create problems within the company. Moreover, managers who can be characterized as emotionally intelligent, are reported to communicate more effectively with other individuals within their organization (Mayer & Caruso, 2002).

On the same level, April et al. (2012) suggest that since Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a key trait of effective leadership, leaders with high levels of EI, tend to form stronger relationships with their followers and are more certainly able to consider their followers' personal needs. Regarding this trait, Hytner (2015) supported that "understanding each player's unique character dominated Ferguson's thinking. Leaders blessed with world-class talent need world class emotional agility". Likewise, Hughes referred to Ferguson as a man "with an impressively high IQ and an astute appreciation of what makes other people tick" (Hughes, 2014).

### ***The Individuals as Part of the Team***

Sir Richard Greenbury, Marks and Spencer's former chairman, once referred to Sir Alex as the best "man-manager" in British industry (Brady et al., 2008). The manager himself acknowledged that it was not enough for a team to have the best football players in the country on an individual level. What was more important, was to have someone that excelled at management and able to get the best out of

them. As he admitted on the issue, “You can have the best collection of footballers ever, but if there is no-one driving the bus, you’ll not get there” (Mitten, 2008).

Ferguson was the one driving the bus of Manchester United, leading the club’s efforts. He understood the importance of management and as Michael Carrick admitted:

Sir Alex always wanted Manchester United to do things with a touch of class, and he went out to know all the members of staff, their families and backgrounds. The great man at the top cared for everyone at Manchester United, so everybody gave everything to the job (Carrick, 2018).

Having obtained this approach, it is not strange that all his players were united under his orders, fighting for the club’s beliefs and values. Cristiano Ronaldo, the sport’s mega-star, refers to Ferguson as his “father of football” (Hytner, 2015), while Michael Carrick insisted that the players were always going to give everything for the club, as the manager’s “insatiable hunger set the tone for everyone” (Carrick, 2018).

According to Turk (2007), the effective leader develops his project based on his knowledge of the individuals’ capabilities, characters and skills. Sir Alex, as mentioned above, had a deep knowledge of his players’ characters and acted accordingly. Patrice Evra, Manchester United’s former French defender, presented an example during a game against Tottenham Hotspur. Manchester United was leading 2-0 at half-time with Evra having an amazing game. In spite of this, Ferguson started yelling at the player of not following the managers’ orders. Evra was furious about Ferguson’s comments but after having a personal conversation with him, Sir Alex explained that he reacted in such manner only because he wanted to deliver an indirect message to some players who were not focused and knowing that Evra had a strong character, the manager used him as a scapegoat (Ivett, 2020).

As suggested, the manager also had a special and careful way of delivering the message to the players that were not included in the match-day starting eleven. For the players, it was irrelevant

whether they were not going to play because the manager was resting them for the next game or if their personal abilities did not match the specific game's strategy; thus, the manager had to be very careful when delivering the news. According to Sir Alex, the wrong way of doing it was to say directly to a player that he looked tired or out of shape. Even if that was true, the criticism was going to have the opposite results, as it would most probably devastate the player. Instead, as he insisted, Ferguson would mention to them that despite they were left out the match-day team, it was the squad in total that was going to win the championship and not only the ones that featured in a specific game. Likewise, when signing a new player, he was trying to boost his attitude by suggesting that only the greatest players were playing for Manchester United and the club was expecting them to stand to the occasion (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

### ***Fostering an Engaging Environment***

The concept of employee engagement in the organization's processes is a quite new issue, as according to Macey and Schneider (2008), multiple HR consulting firms started in the recent years providing advice on how it can be created and enhanced within the workplace. Anitha (2014) refers to employee engagement as the level of involvement and commitment employees have in their organizations. When employees are engaged, they are more likely to be aware of their responsibilities towards the organization, its values and its business goals and also, motivate their colleagues alongside the same direction. Also, highly engaged employees usually go beyond their formal job descriptions, as they want to perform more in order to facilitate their organization's goal achieving process. Anitha further suggests that the employees' positive attitude towards their workplace and its values, creates an emotional connection between the two sides (Anitha, 2014). Beer (2015) insists that incentive rewards such as individual bonuses or medical schemes can only create a transactional relationship between the employee and the employer, while a strong sense of belonging, fairness or engagement, develop true commitment and loyalty.



Communication is a vital element of creating an engaging environment for the employees, as it is the basis of a healthy relationship in the workplace (Harter & Adkins, 2015). The authors suggest that the most effective managers are those who aim to create a workplace where employees feel safe and also, those who make a considerable effort to get to know their employees and provide help for issues of both their work or outside-work life. Employees regard appreciate the communication between them and their manager and especially the kind of communication in which the manager is interested in what happens in their everyday lives (Harter & Adkins, 2015). Ferguson was this type of manager, as he was always available to listen to his players' concerns or thoughts and the players from their side, respected and trusted him. As he recalls, every day around noon his office was busy with people wanting to see him. His players used to chat in private with the manager about family problems or delivering an issue that occurred in the dressing room; something that Ferguson appreciated as it meant that the players really trusted him (Ferguson, 2013).

Anitha (2014) suggested that, since when employees' efforts are appreciated leads to higher engagement levels, leaders are responsible for delivering the message that their efforts play a vital role in implementing business success. Ferguson acknowledged (2015) that at Manchester United, he always tried to emphasize on people "who worked behind the scenes and were our unsung heroes". As he admitted, some of those people including the laundry team or the grounds-men, were part of the club for more than any other player, "they outlast the governments and, at United, they provided continuity and a connection with our heritage" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Moreover, according to Anitha (2014), appreciating employees' work and communicating success as a collective win, are two additional elements that increase employee engagement. Ferguson believed that success should be celebrated with all those associated with the organization and contributed to it. That is why after the team secured a new trophy, the manager gathered together all the club's human resources at the training ground and toasted their success with a glass of champagne (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Employees need to feel included in the organization's processes and know that their opinion is valued. The effective manager provides this inclusion by sharing information with the team and is open to suggestions (Turk, 2007). In the same aspect, Kim (2006) considers listening and valuing what the employees have to say, as a huge motivational factor for them. When Manchester United played against Leeds United in 1992, Sir Alex joined the players in the dressing room and listened to some of them raving about Eric Cantona, the French striker of Leeds. Steve Bruce, then Manchester United's captain, was highly impressed by the opponent's abilities and Ferguson, who had great respect for his captain's opinion, admitted that "those comments planted a seed, which soon afterwards led to us buying Cantona" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Another vital aspect of engaging the employees is allowing them to be part of the organization's decision-making processes. When a new strategy is designed, it is very important to hear the opinion of those who will be later called to implement it, since this fosters a teamwork environment (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007; Hocine et al., 2014). Sir Alex stated that before important games, he used to solicit the opinion of the club's captains or particular players that were going to have a specific mission during the game. In 1996 Manchester United qualified for the FA Cup final against Liverpool; United's arch-rivals. The manager acknowledged that he spent a significant amount of time with Eric Cantona and Peter Schmeichel, planning on how they were going to deal with Steve McManaman, Liverpool's biggest asset. Cantona suggested a specific strategy, which Ferguson adopted and resulted in a silent game for McManaman and a day of triumph for Manchester United. Nearly two decades after the incident, Ferguson, as a truly effective leader, insisted:

Eric's advice was crucial. It didn't matter to me that he had come up with the idea rather than a member of the coaching staff or myself. It just made a ton of sense. It wasn't as if I was chasing honours or looking for personal glory or seeking to be the font of all wisdom. I just wanted the team to win (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

Harter suggested that long-serving employees are the company's knowledge bearers, since their many years in the organization have fostered a deep understanding of how the company works and how important is to achieve its goals. Moreover, their knowledge enables them to influence their colleagues' behavior or anticipate how they are going to respond in a potential incident (Harter, 2015). Ferguson argued that during the 2000s, he was lucky enough to have several of those knowledge bearers in the team's squad, in the likes of players "who had known no other world than United" such as Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs and the Neville brothers. Those players, as said by Ferguson, came to understand the club's beliefs and acted as transmitters to the younger players (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015). Similar to Harter (2015), Ready (2002) suggested that leadership lessons are best learned from those who are well respected and trusted within their organizations. Ferguson believed that every leader has different characteristics and leaders in his own manner and this applies for both a CEO or a club's captain or manager. As a result of this belief, he paid significant attention to who he was going to choose as the club's next captain since he wanted the captain to be a person who inspired trust and respect, who would be able to lead the rest of the players in the field and he would manage to effectively communicate the manager's ideas to the players (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

## Conclusion

This research tried to identify the main characteristics of Sir Alex Ferguson's leadership style and examine them from a Human Resources Management (HRM) perspective. In order to do so, it was vital to emphasize the relationship between business and sports. As already seen, football and management share several traits and can relate to each other quite easily. Maybe one of their main similarities though, is that both fields have undergone a similar course through the years, having experienced vast changes which forced them to evolve and adapt to new circumstances. Ferguson highlighted this relation by suggesting that a football team, just like any other organization, needs to be well run and to make sure that its values are effectively embodied in its system. Whether the product is a company or a football team, is irrelevant; what is important in every occasion is to make sure that "the pieces of our product -all the different players- fit together" (Ferguson & Moritz, 2015).

According to the literature, effective leaders combine a number of characteristics including the ability to manage talent, to be self-aware, emotionally intelligent and able to inspire their followers or employees. Football managers from their side should demonstrate the same elements since their main purpose is to achieve their goals through managing productively the team's human resources. Sir Alex Ferguson, Manchester United's manager from 1986 to 2013, joined the team at one of its lowest points and managed to bring to the club dozens of trophies, countless successes and enormous reputation. Ferguson leadership style's key elements as presented in this paper, were the result of relating the literature about the manager's work with what was already written about the profile of a great leader.

Ferguson's first key characteristic as examined was that he established a values-oriented leadership style; his values and character were guiding his approach. The manager was self-aware, he had solid trust in his abilities and never hesitated to apply discipline in the dressing room. Besides that, according to Simon Sinek's "Golden Circle" (2009), by identifying his mentality in the organization's

beliefs, all his actions were focused to sustain and even enhance these values. Moreover, his leading-from-the-balcony approach provided him with a wider view of the team's image, something that facilitated his control preserving. Lastly, his strong will to work hard, is what drove the team's efforts and is also something that was reflected on his player's attitude. The second key takeaway from Ferguson's model was his recruitment style. The manager spent great attention in recruiting not only talented players but players who also reflected his character; those who valued the team above individuality and were hard-workers. As seen however, recruiting a player is just the beginning, since every manager needs to pay specific attention on how the team welcomes the new members and guides them in order to be part of the total. The third element was the ability to communicate. Sir Alex possessed a unique capacity to deliver every message effectively and at the perfect time. This ability was greatly enhanced by his storytelling skills, as his experienced background enabled him to deliver messages or feedback through a vivid and illustrative manner. Planning was his fourth characteristic, as Ferguson never stopped organizing how he was going to take his club to the next step. Sir Alex possessed a charisma of being able to adapt to the new circumstances, while at the same time he was keeping an eye to the future. The ever-changing circumstances demanded continuous work and reviewing your strategy. Investing in individual's psychology and needs was the next key element of Ferguson's model, given that Rio Ferdinand (2014) cited his manager as "a master of psychology". Sir Alex was an emotionally intelligent manager whose sympathetic style towards the players' psychology enabled him to excel in management. What was more important is that his approach and leading style hugely inspired his players to give everything for the club's sake. Furthermore, it was seen that engaging long-serving employees who carry valuable knowledge about the organization's system, proved to be not only vital but also beneficial for the new employees. Furthermore, it turned out that giving voice to employees or providing recognition about their efforts, enhances their commitment levels towards the organization.

These were the five major characteristics of Ferguson's successful leadership model as emerged from the research. Brady et al. (2008) have underlined in the most accurate way that football is the "quintessential for modern-day talent-dependent business". Talent is overwhelming the business world, as it does the football world. However, talent alone is not enough if the organization seeks succession. Talent needs to be managed. Football mirrors all the issues and concerns of corporate management and at the same time, offers solutions that could play a crucial role in the organizations' problem-solving processes (Brady et al., 2008). Sir Alex Ferguson's leadership style is a case study with plenty of lessons to provide to corporate managers and aspiring leaders of any field. More future studies correlating HRM with sports or any other issue outside the business world would be beneficial for the field as they offer a different perspective on HR.

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