

Leadership in football in the COVID era

Neil Doncaster and Sue Bridgewater

1. Introduction

The advent of COVID-19, a droplet-transmitted coronavirus pandemic which affected the world in 2020, has put many countries into a state of lockdown. Public health guidance identifies large spectating crowds as increasing the risk of the virus spreading. Moreover, fans may be unable to travel within or between countries to attend sporting events. As a result, a wide range of sporting events (including the 2020 Olympics and Euro 2020) have been postponed and many leagues and competitions globally have been cancelled.

Whilst many sporting competitions resumed in the summer and autumn of 2020, a second wave of the virus resulted in a second set of lockdowns and restrictions. In late 2020, the situation remained very fluid.

The consequences of the pandemic for sport have been many and various: participation in grassroots sport has declined, and a range of community and elite sports organisations have faced financial challenges given the disruption to match attendance and the impact on broadcast and sponsorship revenue.

Whilst the possibility of a global pandemic had been discussed for many years, the timing of and pace at which the pandemic escalated was unprecedented. This type of unexpected event is sometimes referred to in research as a “black swan” event; that is a very rare occurrence. We live, however, in a turbulent global context in which advances in global travel and technology development – our connectedness with other countries and regions – mean that the capacity to manage and lead in these types of unexpected and unpredictable situations is increasingly important, not

just now, but also going forwards.

Whether the nature of the “black swan” event is an extreme weather event, a pandemic or a technology failure, the nature and challenges of effective leadership in what has been described as our VUCA context¹– Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous – is likely to present new challenges and require different skills and capabilities of football’s leaders.

Qatar and MENA region, as other regions around the world, have had to adjust in light of COVID-19. Strict containment measures helped to limit the impacts of the first wave and policy and institutional measures have supported households and businesses but the impacts have diverged across the region as MENA faces economic and social challenges arising from the pandemic.²

This case study interviews a range of football leaders to explore the challenges and decisions which have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers insights into the governing body, club and personal-level implications of leading during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as broader lessons for leadership in a VUCA context. The case study then compares the impacts and responses that are seen in Europe with those in the MENA region to highlight potential challenges and issues for sports

¹ Bennett, Nathan and Lemoine, James, What VUCA Really Means for You (Jan/Feb 2014). *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 92, No. 1/2, 2014

² OECD June 2020 <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396/>

and football managers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is a VUCA context?

In the words of Bennett and Lemoine (2014): “VUCA, short for *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity*, [is] a catchall for “Hey, it’s crazy out there!”

The use of VUCA to describe the increasingly turbulent context in which sports and businesses operate, was used as early as the 1980s and is described as dating back to the Cold War Period.³

Among the criticism of the increased use of VUCA to describe a turbulent and unpredictable context is that the four dimensions are different to each other in how much can be known and anticipated, and in how each might be managed:

- **Volatile:** Unexpected, unstable or of unknown duration
- **Uncertain:** Despite lack of information, cause and effect are known
- **Complex:** Many interconnected parts and variables
- **Ambiguous:** No precedent, causal relationships are unclear, unknown

unknowns.

³ Bennis, WG and Nanus, B (1985) *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*,

These dimensions vary in terms of:

- How much can you **predict** the outcome of your actions (P) (Low to High)
- How much do you **know** about the situation (K) (Low to High)

Using these dimensions:

Volatility	=	High P, High K
Uncertainty	=	Low P, High K
Complexity	=	High P, Low K
Ambiguity	=	Low P, Low K

Based on this, it seems that leaders and organisations might better be able to prepare for some of these than for others.

Volatility: This might encompass events for which organisations can plan contingencies, which we know are likely to occur and for which we might perhaps see warning signs e.g. economic recession, security incidents, extreme weather. Perhaps the easiest of the four dimensions.

Uncertainty: We know a lot about whatever this is, but we cannot always predict very well when this will occur e.g. earthquakes.

Complexity: We can predict that which might pose challenges, but do not always

know which, if any, of the many moving parts in a situation will create challenges e.g. hosting a major sporting event.

Ambiguous: We neither know much about, nor can predict these types of situations. Perhaps therefore the hardest to plan for or anticipate.

If we were to apply VUCA to the tragic COVID-19 pandemic, different aspects of this would emerge under each heading:

- ***Volatile: Unexpected, unstable or of unknown duration***

A global pandemic has long been predicted, so many governments had plans for some kind of pandemic response and associated healthcare contingencies.

- ***Uncertain: Despite lack of information, cause and effect are known***

As it became clear that COVID-19 was a Coronavirus spreading through droplets, some aspects became clearer, although how contagious, the specific nature of this coronavirus, its impacts and best treatment are still becoming better understood.

- ***Complex: Many interconnected parts and variables***

Many different countries are suffering, they are at different stages of the disease spread, they have different structures and different stakeholders engaged in their efforts to manage the illness, test people and to create future vaccines. People move between countries and hindsight shows how contagion has spread between countries perhaps through tourism, or types of social or economic activity.

- *Ambiguous: No precedent, causal relationships are unclear, unknown unknowns*

Whilst the basic nature of the illness is known, new factors emerge, such as who is worst affected, how the illness evolves and impacts individuals, the nature of infectiousness and how long the antibodies last. The word “unprecedented” has been frequently used in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 “Black Swan” events

A parallel field of research describes unpredictable and unanticipated events as “black swan” i.e. very rare events. The Black Swan thesis comes from the work of Taleb (2007).⁴ Taleb's "black swan theory" refers to unexpected events of very significant size and consequence. These events are seen to be extreme “outliers” i.e. beyond the normal expectations of history, science and other expert fields and they have very significant impacts.

Taleb’s definition of a Black Swan event is that:

- The event is a surprise
- It has a major effect
- After the first recorded instance of the event, it is rationalized by hindsight, as if it *could* have been expected; that is, the relevant data were available but unaccounted for in risk mitigation programs.

⁴ Taleb, NN (2007) *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, New York: Random House and Penguin Books

In anticipation of Black Swan events, Taleb suggests use of an extreme form of scenario planning called a “barbell” model. Named for the weights lifted by a weightlifter, Taleb suggests putting more emphasis / more weight on either end of the barbell.

2.3 Scenario Planning and “Barbell” models

Scenario planning is a planning technique which has its roots in military strategy.⁵

The technique depends on identifying “key uncertainties” in the context of businesses and organisations. Based on these, a range of different “possible futures” is developed. These might include:

- A **mid-range scenario** which assumes that current trends will continue to develop gradually i.e. that things will proceed as planned
- A **“best case”** scenario in which trends develop in very positive ways to offer the best possible context and outcomes
- A **“worst case”** scenario in which trends develop in very negative ways to offer the worst possible context and outcomes.

Taleb’s Black Swan “barbell” model argues that the best-case and worst-case scenarios should be pushed to the extreme ends of the range of possibilities and should encompass outcomes which are considered very improbable, so that a broader range of unanticipated events can be predicted and planned for.

⁵ Leemhuis, J (1985) “Using Scenarios to Develop Strategies” *Long Range Planning*, 18, 2: 30 - 37

Schoemaker, P.J.H. ‘Scenario planning: a tool for strategic thinking’, *Sloan Management Review* 36(2) 1995, pp.25–40

2.4 Leadership in a VUCA Context

As can be seen from the above analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic as a VUCA event, the ability to plan and lead organisations faces enormous challenges from this type of event.

Transactional or “visionary” leadership theories place emphasis on the importance of creating visions, purpose and values for organisations which those in the organisation can follow. Research highlights the importance of congruence – the “fit” between the values of leaders and the organisations they lead.

Yet leadership in very fluid situations, or during unprecedented events, requires frequent shifts in strategy, people, processes and systems. This is referred to as “agile leadership” in which leaders recognise and anticipate the need for change and are able to develop and implement strategic responses quickly.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) highlight the need for “resilient” leadership in VUCA contexts. Resilience is not only the ability to continue to lead in difficult circumstances in which others in the organisation may need more support and direction than in more normal times. It also requires personal resilience, as the leader may face extreme personal demands. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders and their families may not only face increased organisational, but also many additional personal, pressures.

3. Methodology

This case study is based around interviews with three leaders in football and their

experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data have been collected in primary interviews with key informants from within football governing bodies and clubs within the men's and women's game.

These interviews will be analysed in the context of the literature reviewed in this case study to draw lessons not only for leadership of football during COVID-19 but more broadly for leadership in a VUCA context.

4. Insights from football leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic

4.1 Interview with Jonathan Ford, Chief Executive of the Football Association of Wales ("FAW")

Background

Welsh professional football was suspended on 13 March 2020 following a large rise in positive tests for COVID-19 in the preceding week, including the English Premier League (Arsenal FC) manager Mikel Arteta, who tested positive on 12 March. The initial suspension of the game in England and Wales was due to end on 4 April. That was then extended to 30 April as the crisis escalated. The Welsh Premier League season was curtailed by the FAW on 19 May, with league finishing places and UEFA competition places allocated on a 'points per game' basis. This resulted in Connah's Quay Nomads FC being awarded the Welsh Premier League championship and being nominated by the FAW as Wales' sole UEFA Champions League club for season 2020/21. Consequently, the runners up, The New Saints FC, went to court to challenge the decisions of the FAW, but lost.

Welsh Premier League Season 2020/21 commenced on 11 September 2020 but has been disrupted by the Welsh 'lockdown'. At the time of writing, it is anticipated that the Welsh Premier League season will restart from 9 November.

Interview

NAD: When the virus started to pick up in March this year, in Scotland we suspended all football from 13 March. Did you do the same in Wales?

JF: There was a UK-wide lockdown, but it wasn't actually prohibiting sport being played. Major events at the time were still allowed. We took it upon ourselves, before Boris Johnson and the Conservative Government decided to go to a national lockdown, we took it upon ourselves to cancel football in our country. The English FA were in dialogue with us and we, together with them, took the decision that we would postpone all domestic football that was taking part in Wales. Interestingly, the national lockdown came soon afterwards, but it was very much led by football. The Six Nations (rugby union competition) was supposed to be carrying on. That Friday, when we pulled football, the next day Wales were supposed to be playing Scotland in the Six Nations. The actions of football, leading the way, meant that they had to cancel their event as well. The important thing is that football has led the way, as far as going into lockdown was concerned. That's when a lot of the panic buying started. People started realising, "if the football's not happening, it must be serious!". I think a lot of the panic buying started as a result of their normality of their Saturday afternoons being curtailed, they realised it was such a big thing. But then you can flip that around, and say, hang on a minute, surely sport and football has got a major role in society of bringing normality back when we get out of lockdown and we can

get back to playing football on a regular basis and get back to living our lives in a more regular way.

NAD: Having postponed matches in March, in Scotland we ended up curtailing the season, by way of a written resolution of our clubs, which curtailed the season for the lower leagues immediately and gave the League's Board of Directors the power to curtail the Premiership season at a later date, which it then did later on, following consultation with all Premiership clubs. What was the situation in Wales?

JF: There were several postponements. The first postponement was for a three-week period. That was followed up by another postponement, then a third one. Eventually we got to about May, and we realised that the reality of us being able to complete our season wasn't going to happen. We had an awful lot of dialogue. We had conference calls with all club representatives, across Tiers One, Two and Three, of the men's and women's game, but eventually the National League Board made certain recommendations and those recommendations went to the FAW Board. In our particular case, we decided to curtail the season. We agreed that there wasn't an alternative format to bring that season to a close, and so the decision we made was not only to curtail the season, but also that a 'points per game' system would be used to determine the eventual winners, the promotion and relegation places, and of course the places in European competition for season 2020/21.

NAD: Did one of your clubs challenge that decision in the courts?

JF: Connah's Quay Nomads FC were the champion club. This was the first time in many years that The New Saints FC had not been champions. They were four points behind Connah's Quay Nomads, having played the same number of

games. Because the money available from qualification for European competition is so good, ultimately The New Saints FC decided to take us (the FAW) to court and challenge that decision. They challenged the decision through the High Court and several months later, several hundred thousand pounds of legal fees later, I am pleased to say that the FAW won. They weren't challenging the decision to curtail the season. They were challenging the decision to not use an alternative format to determine final rankings, e.g. a one game play-off between Connah's Quay Nomads FC and The New Saints FC to determine the winner of the league. They challenged the notion that we didn't re-evaluate our decision as we slowly emerged out of the initial lockdown. And they challenged the points per game system. But I am pleased to say that we went to the High Court, made our representations, and the decisions that we made were upheld in the High Court, and Connah's Quay Nomads FC remained the champion club and the Welsh representatives in the UEFA Champions League for season 2020/21.

NAD: What have you done ahead of the new season, 2020/21, to foresee and plan for a similar eventuality later this season?

JF: First and foremost, we all hoped that we wouldn't be in that situation. And we all hoped that we would be in a situation where crowds were coming back. So, as you can imagine, you don't start a season with necessarily the idea that the season will be postponed or curtailed. Clearly the schedule always has a little bit of wriggle room in it with regards to the idea that there may be some postponements. But we very much hoped that we would be able to play out our entire season. The good news for the Welsh structure is that we already play a 22-game schedule, which takes us to what we call the 'split', and then at the 'split', the top six teams go into the

top half, and the bottom half are fighting for the 'wild card' place for the final European place and to try to avoid being relegated. So there is still a lot to play for at the bottom, but the idea being that we could, if push came to shove, look at our season as a 22-match schedule and not just the normal 32-match schedule.

NAD: Is it fair to say that this has been a continually uncertain and fluid situation and would it be fair to say that different or particular leadership skills have been required to lead the FAW through this period?

JF: Yes, I'll be honest, it's probably been the most challenging period that I have ever had in my professional career. You just can't write this year. Every time you think there's going to be some normality, it just changes. Every time you think you've got a little bit of stability, it changes. Every time you think you're coming out of this pandemic, it reappears. Every time you think you're going to have a pilot programme to bring fans back, and then have fans back permanently, it changes. So, it's been a really challenging time, so many false starts, so many U-turns, that you really have to be resilient and take people with you.

NAD: So how do you make decisions in those circumstances, given that the data on which you base decisions may either be unavailable or may be changing very quickly?

JF: The key words that I'm going to say are collaboration and consultation with others. There are times that you need to use your executive powers and make executive decisions, sometimes that are unpopular. But there are other times, especially when you're talking about a league which is a combination of a series of clubs, you very much need to be in a situation where you can make those decisions

with, hopefully, the majority of clubs aligned with the decision you are making. And in some cases, even giving them decisions to make amongst the club groups themselves. I think that's a very important part of it. So, it very much slows down the decision-making process, makes it a very much long-winded process. It means you spend a lot more time in communication with those clubs, but having stakeholder representative groups, whether that's club groups, league groups, player groups, referee groups. They have been the thing that we have relied on heavily during this pandemic period

NAD: Finally, do you think that the role of football leagues, clubs and governing bodies has changed at all, given the current situation? Has it made broader, social role of football more pronounced or more important, do you think?

JF: I'd like to say yes. I don't think necessarily the UK and devolved governments see that in quite the same way. I do understand that we have got a public health crisis and that public health decisions are of paramount importance, but I do think that football and sport have a massive role to play. If you think about just bringing fans back for a pilot scheme, we've got probably one of the best examples of how we can do that, using e-tickets, track & trace systems, temperature checks at the turnstiles, social distancing within the stands. As long as the fans behave themselves so, when a goal is scored they don't all jump up and hug each other in jubilant celebration, we can probably bring a very good test case for the government to bring larger crowds back. Likewise, from a health point of view, our sport is primarily played outside, it's a soft contact sport. Arguably, we can bring sport back in a much more controlled manner than pretty much any other sport and certainly far better than park football or recreational sport. So, I very much hope that the UK and

devolved governments see our role, not only in society, but also within communities and, probably most importantly, public health. The likelihood of people who are healthy and active, who have got good respiratory systems because they're running around pitches, they're very much less likely to suffer badly from a respiratory illness such as COVID-19.

4.2 Interview with Lisa Fallon, former Head Coach of London City

Lionesses

Background

London City Lionesses is a fully professional women's association football club based in Dartford, England.

For season 2019/20, the team competed in the FA Women's Championship – the second tier of English women's football. The club was founded in May 2019, as an independent breakaway club from Millwall Lionesses.

Lisa Fallon was appointed as Head Coach of London City Lionesses on 27 May 2020. She stepped down from her role on 9 October 2020 for family reasons.

Upon Lisa's departure, a statement from the club said that "the club have fully supported Lisa in trying to find a workable solution. Sadly, this has not proved possible. Whilst obviously disappointed in the eventual outcome, the club fully respect and support Lisa's decision. Lisa Fallon has made an outstanding contribution to the London City Lionesses in a very short space of time. Although Lisa will not be able to see her plans through, the club is a better place for Lisa having been part of it."

Lisa Fallon said: "It is with a very heavy heart that today, I step away from my role as Head Coach of the London City Lionesses due to family reasons. Being appointed as Head Coach at this club was both an honour and a privilege – and was a very proud day for my family. I thank everyone at the club sincerely for their understanding in me prioritising my family's needs at this time. With my family based

in Dublin, and the team based in London, the logistics of travelling to meet the needs of both – whilst in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – are no longer viable.”

Interview

NAD: Can we start by giving me some background and how you came into the role at London City Lionesses?

LF: My background since 2010 has been in men’s football. I worked with Cork City men’s team in Ireland. I started off as an opposition analyst and progressed eventually to first team coach. I was with the club for five and a half years and we went from being a mid-table team to league and cup double champions of 2017 and I also worked with Michael O’Neill as part of his support staff with the Northern Ireland men’s national team from 2013 all the way up to the end of 2017. I would have done all the motivational videos that Michael had for the team and I would also have done some training and opposition analysis for the Euro 2016 campaign. During that time I did my A Licence and then went on to do my Pro Licence and then at the end of 2017 I was approached by a man called Jim Gavin, who at the time was the manager of the Dublin men’s Gaelic football team (the “Dubs”). Gaelic football is a big sport here in Ireland. He asked me to go in as part of his backroom team with them – probably the most successful Irish sports team, actually. I was in working with them, juggling the three balls, Cork City, Northern Ireland and the Dubs. Back in 2013, I would have been the first woman to manage a senior men’s team in Ireland. I went on to do my Pro Licence with the Irish FA and finished that in 2018.

That's my background. And then in 2019, I met Emma Hayes (the manager of FA WSL club, Chelsea Women) at a conference about female coaches and as a result of that I ended up going to work with Chelsea Women, up until the pandemic.

It was as I was coming to the end of that role that the opportunity came up with the London City Lionesses to go in as the Head Coach. Chelsea Women was the first time I had worked in women's professional football, but prior to that, all of my development years were in men's professional football.

NAD: When the virus started to have a big impact on the game, in March 2020, where were you at that point?

LF: Sunday 1 March 2020 was the first day of the international break, so we all went our separate ways. Players went off on international duty and everybody had a few days off. We were due to return on Thursday 12 March – which was the day that Mikel Arteta (of Arsenal FC) tested positive. And then Chelsea men had a positive case. And then the following day, Friday 13 March, football closed down. Everyone was told to stay where they were. So, I was at home in Dublin at that time, on the international break, when the full lockdown happened.

NAD: So, you have been in Ireland, broadly, ever since then?

LF: Yes, and then when the London City Lionesses role came up, I flew over. It was a very surreal experience. There was nobody in Gatwick Airport, no cars, no taxis, no buses, car parks empty, the whole airport closed down. I flew over, met them, got the role and, as a result, had to start looking at how we would get the players back into training. I had to do an assessment of the whole scenario and how we would create a safe environment and get the players back in, not just from a

physical perspective, but also from a mental perspective, because the whole lockdown had quite a significant impact on players' mindsets and their levels of vulnerability – and staff as well. We had to be very conscious of integrating players and giving them the confidence and belief to come back into an environment that would be safe. Not only that, but we had to amend the players' behaviours and training in the training environment, at food times, at changing times, and then obviously we also had to try and have an impact on the players' behaviours away from the pitch. Some of them had part-time jobs with London City, how they integrate with their families - there was a responsibility to protect the team 'bubble'. And then the actual nuts and bolts of the training session, the sanitisation of the areas that the players were in, looking at everything that we would normally do through a different lens – to make sure that the environment was safe, to get games back on.

NAD: How quickly after that did you decide that this was going to be difficult, in logistical terms, for you?

LF: It was really once the season started. The hope was that the situation would settle. But as we moved through August into September, the situation was escalating as opposed to settling. We all hoped that, after the lockdown, things would settle down and we could learn to live with COVID-19. But actually, what happened was that we had a massive spike (in cases) and we are still living through that at the moment. The problem I had then was that the things I had been doing in May, June, July and August were OK at that time, but as passenger numbers began to increase in the airports, there was less space on planes, you were sitting beside people, as opposed to being able to socially distance. In the airport, instead of maybe 30 people on a flight, you were now standing in a queue with 200 people who

have just got off a flight from Spain, who have decided to go on holiday. It was more the behaviour of other people that started to make me feel vulnerable and make me feel that I was at risk by having to travel. By having to travel, I was having to put both the team and my family at risk.

NAD: How do you feel now about stepping down from your role with London City Lionesses, for you personally, which must have been a massive decision?

LF: It was a huge decision. I had worked so hard to get to that point, to be able to become a head coach, and I had big plans. We had done a huge amount of work. But it really came down to simplifying the decision, instead of making it a complex decision. The beauty about football is that there is always another game. I learned that at the start of pandemic. I had been relentless for ten years. Going through my B Licence, to my A Licence, to my Pro Licence. And then I finished my Pro Licence and three weeks later I started the League Manager's Association's Diploma. The commuting. I was all over Europe. In that time, we had 26 games in the UEFA Europa League, in the UEFA Champions League, we had 51-game seasons, winning leagues, cups, I was working with different teams, juggling balls, juggling the family!

The start of lockdown was the first time I had to breathe and go and reflect. What was really interesting was, it made me realise that football is such an all-consuming industry and role – but at the same time, what I learned in lockdown was to have balance, or to be able to achieve better balance in my life. That was the one thing I decided, as an outcome of COVID-19, that I would go after in my life. I would be pretty good at that anyway. But the problem with this situation was that balance wasn't possible.

NAD: It is interesting that you think that balance is possible in a football leadership role, because my sense is that for probably everyone that I am aware of in a leadership role in football, it is all-consuming. Balance is almost an impossible dream.

LF: Well, the thing about pursuing excellence, and this is what we do in high-performance sport, where margins matter and wins determine livelihoods and people's jobs and revenue for clubs, there's so much at stake with every result. However, what I learned over the past 18 months, and this is something I changed personally as a result of work I did with the League Manager's Association, and from other people's experiences as well, was that my football role does not define who I am. The type of mother, the type of daughter, the type of person, friend, mentor, coach – that's what defines who I am as a person. But my job title and my job role does not.

In the last number of years, I have encountered a lot of people in football who, when they lost their job, suffered huge loss. It was like losing a person. I made the decision that whilst football is hugely, hugely important to me – that it will never define who I am. Because I have also seen how ruthless the game is towards people – people who could be years and years and years in the game. I always remember chatting to ***** (former international men's player) about it. He was on my Pro Licence. He said, the day after he retired as a player, the phone stopped ringing. His words were: "I went from being somebody to being nobody." It really resonated with me.

And I worked with ***** (former manager). He got sacked, very ruthlessly. I know the game is ruthless. I know what goes on in the game. But the impact it had

on him was phenomenal. For me, I made the decision that, yes, I would give everything to my job – and I always do. But, at the end of the day, in my last moments, or whatever way life decides my time is done, I know that my football role will not be what defines those last moments. It will be my family that I'll want around me, and probably not all the brilliant people that I've been fortunate to work with in my roles or jobs.

I have learned that it's important to have that family time. I think what the pandemic will teach people, and the way that we've revolutionised the way that we work, where people have suddenly learned that you can do a lot of stuff away from the office. You can do a lot of stuff online. It's not the same. And obviously you have to have your contact time with players. But what we have learned is that we can have twenty minutes a day to go and do a bit of exercise and it won't compromise the job. You can come home at 6 o'clock in the evening and put your phone on flight mode 'til 8 o'clock, and the world will not stop. And you can be in a fresher place, you can make cleaner decisions, you can remember stuff. I suffered from memory loss, was so consumed and tired. Some days my brain would be so overloaded. I have learned, in this time, that I am actually a cleaner thinker. I am able to make better decisions. I am able to see things, remember things. When I sit down with a player, I can really engage with that player for those 15, 20 minutes.

What I have learned is that it is possible to have, and to achieve, balance. I think it's a mindset and it's a decision. I have learned that my quality of work hasn't diminished as a result of taking an hour or two a day to look after my own health, both physical and mental. In fact, if anything, it has enhanced me and my ability to work and my clarity of work. So, I do think it's possible to achieve that.

In terms of this decision, the commuting was my balance. Because I had done it for the year at Chelsea, I knew it was possible and it wouldn't impact on my ability to do my job – and it meant I was still able to have good quality time with my family when I was home. The problem then was, with COVID-19 then factored in, the context of the situation had changed and the commuting, instead of me now having the balance, the commuting was leaving me vulnerable to picking up the virus, because it was taking me out of the bubble. It was putting me in environments where I couldn't say that I was certain I would be alright. That was the problem for me, was the commuting – which had to happen, because that was the way I had operated for two years.

In football there is always another game. As soon as the final whistle goes, for the last ten years, it was straight onto the next game. This time round, I learned that there is always another game, so I can take time out. I can have that time to make sure my family get through this and to make sure that everybody gets through this well. And I know that, in January, if we have a vaccine, I can just step back into the game and the game will still be there. And the game won't have fallen apart because Lisa Fallon wasn't in it. The game will continue, as it will when the game sacks me.

Was I gutted that I had to step away from a job that I really believed I could do well in? Yes. But for me, it was a case of, right now, in this moment in time, I just had to look forensically at the situation and zoom in. Have the helicopter vision, what is the bigger picture, but I have to be able to zoom back in and go, ok, right now, who needs me most? My team or my family? Because, if there is another lockdown, I am going to have to choose between them, for a month or six weeks potentially. And that made the decision easy.

I have a lot more to give to the game and more to do in the game. When the time is right, and hopefully that's soon, I will be ready...

4.3 Interview with Mark Palios, Executive Chairman of Tranmere Rovers

FC

Background

Mark Palios is an English chartered accountant, football administrator and former professional footballer.

He played in the English Football League as a midfielder for Tranmere Rovers FC for nine years and for Crewe Alexandra FC for three years. For season 1981/82 he was Crewe's leading goal scorer. In the latter part of his career, he captained Welsh club Bangor City FC, including in the European Cup Winners' Cup.

Alongside his football career, Mark qualified as a chartered accountant with Arthur Young and ultimately became a senior partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers, specialising in business turnaround situations. In 2003, he was voted Turnaround Financier of the Year, by the Turnaround Finance Group, and given a Lifetime Achievement Award. He then changed direction, resigning from PwC to become the English Football Association's Chief Executive in July 2003, where he sought to apply his business skills in the field of sports governance.

Mark's successes at the FA encompassed refinancing of the organisation, including Wembley Stadium, and the successful overhaul of English football's disciplinary process, which resulted in speedier hearings and lower costs. Palios earned a reputation for making tough decisions when necessary, including a decision to ban Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand from the England team to play against Turkey in a crucial European Championship qualifier in 2004, after Ferdinand failed to take a drugs test.

Following his decision to step down from the English FA, in August 2014 it was announced that Mark and his wife Nicola were taking ownership of Tranmere Rovers FC, with Mark taking the role of Executive Chairman of the Club. Tranmere were relegated from EFL League Two to the National League at the end of Mark's first season as Chairman, in May 2015. However, victory in the play-off final against Boreham Wood FC on 12 May 2018 took Tranmere Rovers back to the EFL.

A year later, in May 2019, further play-off success against Newport County FC saw Tranmere Rovers promoted back to EFL League One.

English professional football was suspended on 13 March 2020 following a large rise in positive tests for COVID-19 in the preceding week.

At that time, Tranmere Rovers were within the EFL League One relegation zone, but with a game in hand on their nearest rivals and on a run of three successive victories.

The subsequent cancellation EFL League One fixtures due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the season could not be completed, and a vote was taken by League One clubs on 9 June to resolve promotion and relegation issues on a points per game basis. This meant that Tranmere Rovers were relegated to League Two for the 2020/21 season.

Mark Palios said that the decision was unfair and that he was considering legal action as a result.

Interview

NAD: You came to Tranmere Rovers with a reputation for 'business turnaround' situations and crisis management? In that context, how did you view the events of this March and beyond?

MP: When I was with PwC, I started to develop the whole approach to 'turnaround'. For that, crisis management is the starting point of any turnaround. We have to look at where the club had come from when it entered into COVID. Over the course of the five and a half years that I have been involved, I had been turning round the club and had also been changing the business model. There are two separate exercises going on there. Has turning round the club been done? Yes, I think it has. And the acid test of that is: "have we got the resilience to withstand a run of bad luck?" Yes, we were relegated to the National League; yes, we got back at a cost of money that wasn't in the original plan. You then start to look at what happened in the more recent past: we had a complete collapse of the pitch in the middle of the season; we had COVID turn up; so we lost gate income. We had a demotion, I won't call it a relegation, on 'points per game'. On the 15th or 16th of March, I did Malthus 1, which was a project that was designed to enable us not just to survive, but to thrive in COVID. To ride out COVID whilst keeping momentum.

If I do a turnaround, I do it in three stages. The first stage is to create a breathing space. The second stage is to use that breathing space to extract the organic potential – we call it "putting lipstick on the moose". And the third stage is to get a capital transaction – so you can sell it, get investment or so forth. We got investment in September last year (2019). That enabled me, when we came into COVID, and because of the confidence that our investors had in us, we actually got the cash to redo the pitch. That is the first part of the story – because on the 16th of

March I was doing all the figures. And we knew pretty much on that day that if we had no gate income between then and the end of season 2020/21, we could pay all of our contractual liabilities.

NAD: Not many clubs can say that!

MP: No, and that is part and parcel of what resilience is about: do you have enough reserves on the balance sheet to do what you want to do? Admittedly I had to take out from that some of the money that I had aside for projects which continue to develop the club 'off the park'. So, at this point in time, it was always about balance i.e. supporting what was 'on the park', and then improving the balance sheet in two ways: taking out debt and getting income-producing assets into the footprint of the club. So, a 3G pitch at our training centre; a refurbishment of our Recreation Centre; other assets that we were in negotiation with the council to take over etc. But we had a number of projects that we were planning at the start of COVID. But the overall project was: could we keep the momentum 'off the park' and thrive? From a political perspective I have been pushing the idea of a wages cap, in the belief that this is good for the game overall; but equally for us it makes a lot of sense.

I had to do quite a lot of the media stuff that I was doing to push things forward. I had to get the balance right, from a leadership perspective, of getting people settled down to the fact that this was a club that wasn't in crisis as a consequence of COVID – but having said that, at the same time take steps along the way that led people to support the club.

In the first week, from the 16th March, I knew what the plan was across all areas, including keeping the fans engaged and getting season tickets renewed and

suchlike. The first phase of that was massively important, which was to get the pitch rebuilt. We had a pitch that had collapsed through age. We put in an SIS, stitched pitch, through John Mallinson. On 19th March, we negotiated the price. It was a five-week pitch reconstruction build and a seven-week growth – so that's 12 weeks, or three months. I said that we were facing lockdown that weekend, and I said to John, "Can you do your reconstruction in two weeks instead of five?" He said: "I can do it in three." And I said, "Do it in two" and he stood up, shook my hand and we went for it.

On the Friday (the 20th) we got hold of the materials and over the weekend, you may recall that there was a debate about whether people could work or not. We had contingency plans for his contractors to be isolated in the stands, sleeping at night in the ground, if we needed that. And on the Saturday morning, the 21st, 8am, they were all there with the diggers, and John said: "Do you want me to do it?" And I said "Yes, rip up the pitch." At that time, we were supposed to be coming back (to play) on 3rd April. People thought I was mad. We had a contingency plan if we had to play, we could play away from home. The issue was that this was a massive statement, to everybody. I kept it quiet for a bit, because I thought people would ridicule it. Eventually it was getting out, fans were asking what was happening at the ground. Then it became a cause celebre, because it was a pitch that was maligned by the political agenda of the women's game at the time. Liverpool FC's women's team played at our ground and we were unfairly dealt with by a lot of the media. Suddenly we were getting a state-of-the-art pitch, constructed in the teeth of COVID. It really focussed the fans and actually uplifted them, because they realised that we were planning, quite positively and confidently, for life after COVID.

NAD: There are echoes in that of you refurbishing all the hospitality lounges at your stadium when you first took over at the club.

MP: Yes, change management always has an element of symbolism. Going back to the project, phase two is to extract the organic potential, that was the very visible sign, some symbolism. We had done a lot more to extract the organic potential, which was a bit more discrete, the international business for example. It is an element of the potential of the club, which we have extracted. So yes, the pitch was a massively symbolic element. It showed the faith of our investors, who, because of the way we explained things to them, were quite happy to put in a million pounds to enable us to build the pitch. And we then moved on to the rest of what happened through COVID.

In the summer, of course we had the points per game (relegation). We were harshly dealt with, probably the club most harshly dealt with. We knew that we were going to get out of it (the relegation zone), because of what we had done in the transfer window. We had won three games on the trot away from home and we were three points behind the club above us, with a game in hand. We were 'voted out'. That was a complete disgrace. Football has been poorly led. I sit on the ECB's Audit & Risk Committee. I can see what they're doing there. It's the job I used to do – crisis management. I can see the incompetence of the football authorities, I can see the structural flaws that allow a vacuum to exist, and I can see that that vacuum gets filled by self-interest. And in that self-interest, we were done down. I produced a system that attempted to mathematically draw up what football people knew and felt 'in their water'. And it produced a result that every football person could recognise.

That was six to eight weeks of solid effort. It was massively disappointing, what I call the 'fraud of the football family'. The point was, as long as I fought the fight, and the fans knew I'd fought the fight – the issue was to capture that anger, which the fans have, not make us a victim, but to use it to fuel us going forwards on all the other stuff that we were doing. In the meantime, the programmes that we had, around the financial elements that we wanted to drive, we kept on driving them; we didn't mothball the projects that we were going to do: a 3G pitch, the three-quarters of million refurbishment of the Recreation Centre, the lift for disabled supporters in the main stand, taking over a sports centre on an estate in one of our heartlands, which the council couldn't manage, and so forth. The intention was always to keep that momentum 'off the park' and, at the same time, the League had decided that we were going to start playing again on 12 September. We only had ten players in contract – partly by dint of the fact that we didn't know whether we would be in League 1 or League 2. So, we had the advantage that we didn't have a massive squad. But equally we anticipated that there was going to be movement in the player salary market due to the (salary) caps coming in. That wasn't as significant as we had predicted. But we still put together a squad that we believed was a really good squad for the coming season, and we think is a better squad than we had last year when we went into League 1. At the same time, just to add a layer of complexity, (our manager) Micky Mellon was approached and went to Dundee United. So, we had to recruit a manager.

All the time, trying to keep the enthusiasm of the fans, bearing in mind the fact that the fans were suffering as well. There were various programmes that we ran, which created fan involvement. One of those was as a consequence of our linkages with Indonesia. We moved away from Puma, who give you four basic patterns for

shirts. We are all white, so there's not a lot you can do with it. I actually threw it out to the fans and said, "You design it". So, we had a design competition, they voted on it – this was engagement of fans. We then engaged all of the volunteers. They came down and tarked up the ground. Feeding off the back of the fact that we had a fantastic pitch, we asked, "Do you want to help us tidy up the ground?" So, there were lots of programmes to engage fans. That's part of the potential of the club.

One of the big things we did was to refocus the community element. We have driven this partly because we can get paid, can get commissioned, by the council and the health authority. A football club is a more efficient delivery vehicle. That's what we were doing. By September, we had done, together with partners, 35,000 meals to vulnerable people. Fans had contributed. So, we had about £50,000 or £60,000 of cash that came into the club, which we then used to do that.

By September we had done about 1,000 support calls to people who were isolated, with mental health issues. So, there was a massive community movement as well. All of this was planned in March. We just delivered it. Subsequently, I have done another Malthus plan, and I have a final Malthus plan in front of me now. This includes: what are the liquidity requirements, what are the sources of finance, what's the balance sheet bill, what are the projects, what's the media wrap-up and the brand development? One of the things I did think we could do was help to develop the brand by, in the time of crisis, really 'living' the community. The phrase is "Football's gone away, but the community hasn't."

All of this requires the cooperation of the staff. We did, in the summer, when our fate was determined by the EFL voting to demote us, lose a million quid. We made twenty people redundant. We have worked like hell since then to make sure

there are no more redundancies. There are more we could make – but we haven't. We've shared the work out. We've shared the load amongst the staff. The staff have been great.

NAD: That's incredible Mark. Given the way most folk have been running around with their 'hair on fire' over the summer, the fact that you're able to plan and foresee things as early as March... I don't think many people had that clarity of thought then. Is there anything that you did that you now regret, or anything that you didn't do which, in retrospect, you might have done since March?

MP: It's hard... What I can't explain to you – it's my job. If you're looking at a multi-stakeholder environment whereby you have a broken business and you've got to persuade people to support it, but also look at the operational elements that you need to change as well, it's what I used to do. It's what I designed when I was in the City (of London). For me, although I am fairly active and motivated, lots of people said that in the early days of COVID, I was walking round and enjoying it. Absent the seriousness of the situation, it's actually an important point. When I was in the middle of the Rio Ferdinand situation (at the English FA in 2003), and the press came hunting for me on the first day or two, I made a real effort to walk round all the floors and talk to people normally and be visible. Actually, coming into the office here, I was getting on with all my projects and people did say to me that it made a massive different, because I wasn't hiding from it – I was getting stuck into it.

Those positive messages were massively important because you have got to get the balance right between keeping people's heads up and actually being realistic. When we were relegated (to the National League), I thought: "What can I say?". We

had gone out of the league for the first time in our history. I love an alliteration, so I went: “it’s devastating today, but not disastrous tomorrow”.

I had written a plan. I had got up at 5am the next day and written the plan. You just need to bring the people along with you. I say this to many people: if you are in a situation in business and you don’t focus on your priorities and you don’t drive it home with a ruthless focus, in a benign market, in a benign industry, you just make less profit. And nobody really notices. But if you’re in turnaround, you’re in resource-constrained conditions, and you haven’t got the time, the people or the money. If you don’t focus on your priorities, and deliver, you die. You get a laser-like focus on your priorities. So, when I sat down with my plan, I constantly focus on my priorities. My November priorities are: (i) revisit the organisation structure; (ii) the education strategy – we have a very successful education business; (iii) driving all the projects; (iv) manager – I’ve got to get him recruited, and then (v) the 2021/22 squad. Why am I doing the 2021/22 squad now? I tell you why I’m doing that: because that’s immediately saying to people that if I sign two or three players for 2021/22, we are looking positively towards next season. Again, it’s just lifting people’s heads up and saying, yeah, we’re going places. Football processes is a longer-term issue.

And then the budget. We budgeted three scenarios in the first week. One was no play at all to the end of the 2020/21 season – and that was something we could manage. The second one was starting football in September. And the third one was starting to get fans in stadia in January 2021.

We did all that in the first week. So, we knew exactly where we were. The only change to that was the EFL deciding that we had to play on 12 September,

which meant that we had to get the full squad in earlier than we had anticipated. We constantly refined the financial optics that we had, so we were always comfortable. On day one I could say, look, we're ok. I may have to cancel some of the projects, but we're ok. We're still carrying on 'off the field'. It's tighter, it's harder, but I can reallocate that cash, in extremis, to fund revenue deficits. And that's without any rescue fund from the EFL, which will come in as 'bunce'.

If I look at where we are in addition to that, I was always moving to revalue the ground. Our next set of accounts will show net assets of £24million, which is largely the revaluation of the stadium. What's gone on hold is third party equity investments in the club, from big international businesses.

If we want to be more than a League 1 club – absent structural change in the industry, which may come - I can show that we will never get in a position, on a sustainable basis, whereby we can play in the Championship and stay in the Championship for more than two or three years, in our current stadium. We need to move. We haven't done it yet, but Liverpool City region and the Council are looking at funding a feasibility study for a route to a new stadium. We have projects down the road, which have been parked. But the immediate short-term projects we are going ahead with.

People have said they want to hibernate to survive. I said no. We want to manage COVID and thrive.

5. Discussion

Clearly protection of health and safety is paramount and must be a priority. As can be seen from the points raised by the interviewees in relation to COVID-19's impact on football in the UK, managing this fluid and unpredictable situation has brought a number of challenges.

This section compares these with some of the impacts that COVID-19 has had and might have in MENA and the ways in which these might be managed and anticipated.

Event cancellations and postponements

When restrictions on travel or social and economic life are imposed, as has been the case in Europe and MENA, it has not always been clear how long the restrictions will need to be in place. In March 2020, in Europe, some football and other sports competitions were suspended in the belief that these might be able to resume perhaps by the summer. Whilst some competitions, such as the English Premier League, did eventually resume in July 2020, others such as the Welsh and Scottish Leagues were cancelled for the remainder of 2020.

Similarly in Qatar, the QNB Stars League was suspended but returned to action with new protocols according to guidelines from the Ministry of Public Health; these included COVID-19 testing of technical and playing staff, workshops to explain and discuss new protocols with those involved in the restart of the QNB Stars League season and precautionary measures in co-operation with the Ministry of Public

Health.⁶

Some tournaments were, however, cancelled as a result of the pandemic, for example FIFA Club World Cup 2020. Moreover, cancellations and delays to the scheduling of matches has caused a backlog of games. AFC was forced to cancel FIFA World Cup qualifying matches for 2020 which will mean more qualifying matches being played in 2021.⁷

Impact on competitions and schedules

In the cases where the 2019-2020 season was delayed, it is expected that this will have a “knock-on” effect for the start of the new 2020-21 season. In addition, other competitions regionally and globally have resumed at various different dates and stages - for example, Al Sadd resumed its AFC Championship campaign in September 2020 with all West Zone matches being played in Doha between 14th September – 3rd October. Before this, Al Sadd played its last match in the AFC Champions League in Doha on 18th February 2020.

What impact might it have that some clubs are fitting in these additional “delayed” matches? The complexities and considerations in scheduling and hosting of the QNB Stars League (QSL) matches were addressed in a press release on the League’s website in September 2020 <https://www.qsl.qa/en/news/press-release-qatar-stars-league>.

⁶ <https://www.qsl.qa/en/news/protocol-first-phase-resumption-training-and-qnb-stars-league-action>

⁷ <https://www.scmp.com/sport/football/article/3097054/qatar-2022-covid-19-sees-afc-call-world-cup-qualifiers-rest-2020>

and in an excellent and informative interview with Mr Ahmed Abbasi,
Executive Director of Competitions and Football Development at QSL:

<https://www.qsl.qa/en/news/interview-mr-ahmed-khellil-abbassi-executive-director-competitions-and-football-development>.

Communication and co-operation with multiple stakeholders to mitigate and manage impacts

As can be seen in the interview with Mr Abassi, the resumption of the 2019-20 QSL football season involved co-ordination with a number of key stakeholders. These included the Ministry of Public Health, Aspetar Hospital, Ministry of Interior, Qatar Red Crescent, Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, Qatar Football Association, players, and technical, administrative and medical teams, who all worked together to facilitate the successful resumption of the league championship.

Impacts of COVID-19 on sponsorship and other business relationships

In September 2019, Qatar Stars League signed a new sponsorship deal with Doha Bus Company alongside the title sponsorship relationship with QNB.⁸

Around the world, COVID-19 has potentially impacted on sponsorship relationships at least in terms of their activation. For example, if fans are unable to attend matches, then fewer fans might see advertising or other activation of the sponsorship. What challenges might adjustment to COVID-19 protocols have for

⁸ <https://www.qsl.qa/en/news/qatar-stars-league-signs-sponsorship-agreement-doha-bus-company>

sponsors, clubs and leagues?

In its review of the impacts of COVID-19, SportsBusiness highlights the fact that not all leagues and sports around the world have been impacted equally by the pandemic. For example, NFL, the largest league globally in terms of commercial revenue, was less impacted than many other sports as its season had finished before the worst impacts of the pandemic. Tennis, however, had most of the major summer tournaments ahead. Roland Garros was postponed until September 2020 with up to 60% of its usual attendance expected to be possible with social distancing measures.⁹ In the UK, however, fans were only allowed back in limited numbers in late 2020 and are still restricted in some regions. These differing levels of attendance have a number of impacts both on matchday revenue – which is important for financial sustainability of sports – but also for broadcast and sponsorship revenue.

Summary

The interviews in this case study and contextualisation of these to MENA identify a number of issues:

- Leadership is complex in a sports organisation even in more normal times. There are many different components to running a successful football governing body, club or team and these also differ and vary between the individuals

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/tennis/53268001>

because of a range of factors including resources, level (league), type or organisation.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on sport and football. The interviews and discussion of MENA identify a number of unique challenges and impacts for each context but also similar themes in: impacts on competitions and calendars; the need to work together with multiple stakeholders; to put in place new and changing measures to protect health and well-being in the light of the pandemic.

- There are likely longer-term implications for how we work, how football operates, and what plans and contingencies football organisations and leaders might institute going forwards given the experiences of this pandemic.

- The interviews and examples show how fluid the situation can be in a VUCA context both within MENA, UK and globally. What might be an appropriate decision or action at one point, might need to be altered or reversed soon after with changes to what we know, or what guidelines are put in place. Moreover, the guidelines and impacts have been different for different sports – for example NFL being relatively little impacted given the dates of its season – and given different infection and mortality rates in different countries and regions.

- The interviews and examples highlight the need for resilient and agile leadership styles in football in the face of high the high volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Case Study Questions

6.1. Evaluate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for football.

Where has it posed the greatest challenges for sport and football? If you were a consultant hired by a football organisation, which, if any, of these challenges might you address, and how would you propose to do this?

6.2. What were the greatest issues faced by the interviewees in this case study?

What types of issues were these? E.g. context, leadership, planning, resourcing, scheduling, personal etc.

6.3. Compare and contrast the impacts of COVID-19 on football in England and Wales with football in MENA. To what extent are the impacts similar and different between different countries?

6.4. What, if anything, can we learn from the impact of COVID-19 on football? What would you recommend in order to improve resilience against this and other VUCA events?

6.5. What do we learn about the challenges of leadership in football during COVID-19? Does this differ from football leadership in more normal times and, if so, how?

Teaching Note

6.1. Evaluate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for football.

Where has it posed the greatest challenges for sport and football? If you were a consultant hired by a football organisation, which, if any, of these challenges might you address, and how would you propose to do this?

Students might well have their own understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on football. There are a number of important issues within the case study, for example, how fluid the situation has been, and how quickly those working in football have had to be in developing and implementing strategic responses. Students would be expected to identify the points which they can see in the interviews.

There are a number of ways in which the student might structure their analysis to help this to be an evaluation rather than a list of points.

How might the external context be understood in this situation. Might it help to use PESTLE analysis ie: what is political ie: policy responses, what is the economic aspect, what are the social factors eg: health and well-being which come into play etc.

Given that the case study refers to VUCA contexts and Black Swan events, students might also consider whether VUCA might be used to analyse the impacts of the pandemic and, if so, what is known and what, if anything, might be predicted at any

point in the developing situation.

6.2. What were the greatest issues faced by the interviewees in this case study? What types of issues were these? e.g. context, leadership, planning, resourcing, personal etc.

Students are asked here both to consider the points raised in the interviews, but also to categorise and to synthesise from the interviews the factors eg: whether these are to do with the context (the external environment), leadership, planning, resourcing etc.

There is no single right answer. Students would be expected both to identify factors in the interviews and to make a valid attempt to structure and classify these but can choose which classification system they wish to use.

6.3. Compare and contrast the impacts of COVID-19 on football in England and Wales with football in MENA. To what extent are the impacts similar and different between different countries?

The interviews relate to the impacts of COVID-19 on football in the UK context. Students are asked here to compare and contrast the factors that they have identified in Questions 1 and 2 with the impacts of COVID-19 in the MENA context.

There are a number of ways in which they might do this. They might use the context

factors in a PESTLE for Q1 and consider whether the same context / external factors impact on MENA countries eg: UK had a series of lockdowns and football leagues were suspended. Fans were not allowed to enter stadia. In some European countries, such as Germany, fans were allowed to return in limited numbers. What has been the situation in MENA, what is it now? Have there been any changes in strategies and actions as more was known about COVID-19? Are there differences in the approaches taken in different MENA countries?

6.4. What, if anything, can we learn from the impact of COVID-19 on football? What would you recommend in order to improve resilience against VUCA events?

This question partly refers to COVID-19. Students might well identify learning from responses and implications for football from the current COVID-19 situation. They are also asked, however, to broaden this to consider VUCA events more broadly. These may not all arise from similar aspects of the external context or have the same or comparable impacts. For example, international air flights were grounded more than once across Europe and Canada during the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland given the dangers to aeroplanes from volcanic ash getting into the engines; typhoon Hagibis caused postponement and cancellation of matches during the 2019 Rugby World Cup tournament in Japan. Students might consider what other kinds of VUCA events might be possible, what impacts these might have and whether there are ways to plan and anticipate for these eventualities eg: what if there is a major sandstorm such as that of 2015 which impacts on hosting of a major sporting event. What might be the implications? What if anything could be

done to anticipate? What would organisations know and be able to predict, based on previous major sandstorms? What might they **not** know or **not** be able to predict?

6.5. What do we learn about the challenges of leadership in football during COVID-19? Does this differ from football leadership in more normal times and, if so, how?

The case study identifies leadership approaches such as transformational or “visionary” leadership and agile leadership. It also refers to the organisational and personal dimensions of leadership. Students might identify a range of challenges for leadership. For example, is it possible to be visionary without clear knowledge and visibility of what will happen next? What are the challenges of leading and setting direction in these circumstances? How might decisions be made in the absence of full information or in the face of rapidly evolving situations? Students might also consider the personal impacts - is, for example, the leader is trying to manager their own personal as well as organisational challenges.

Students might argue either that leadership during COVID-19 is, or is not, more challenging and they might agree or disagree that it differs from leadership in more normal times. They might discuss leadership in football more broadly, and whether it differs from leadership in other fields of endeavour. All of these responses are valid. Good answers will provide justification of their viewpoints.

7. Additional Activities

7.1. Identify the characteristics of an “agile leader.” What attributes and skills do you feel that such leaders need? Can you identify examples from within the MENA and sports contexts?

7.2. Develop a set of scenarios for sports in MENA. What do you consider to be the key uncertainties that might affect the context for sports (globally and regionally) moving forwards: e.g. technology changes, changes in sports revenue, social factors such as mobility and travel post COVID etc.

Use these key uncertainties to create a mid-range, best case and worst case scenario for the context surrounding your sport, sports event or sports organisation.

7.3. Using Taleb’s notion of the “barbell” model, revisit your best-case and worst-case scenarios to consider if there are further possibilities at either end of your range of probabilities, which you should take into account to anticipate potential ‘Black Swan’ events.

7.4. Use the VUCA model, taking each of Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous and identify aspects in the context surrounding your sport, sports event or sports organisation which might fit under each heading.

Evaluate the ways in which you might plan or prepare for any of the VUCA factors you have identified.

a) Are there any gaps in what your sports organisation knows about context factors that might impact upon it in the next one to three years?

b) What do you predict could change in the context surrounding your sport.

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