



The Case of the Football Club Rosenborg in the Norwegian Region Trøndelag – Insights from a Regional – Global Organizational Model Emphasizing how Improvisation can lead to Outstanding Results using insights from “Total Football” and “Flow Theory”

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Abstract: The Norwegian football club Rosenborg is used as the empirical setting in the article. Improvisation and good routines are the foundations for success in the soccer field is a finding in this piece of research. We link improvisation to “total football” and “flow theory” as means to achieve high performance using a regional-global organizational model as our illustration. We focus on qualitative methods when interviewing the former coach Mr. Niels Arne Eggen and former top players. For this purpose we use thematic analysis and secondary sources to gain deep insights.

Keywords: Total football, Flow theory, Improvisation, Routines, The regional-global organizational model, Norway, High-performance teams

1. Introduction

1.1 Knowledge Management

Football can be regarded as an integrated part of the knowledge society. This means that the degree of unpredictability is high in both when it comes to strategies and in tactics. In this landscape, it becomes important to take an entrepreneurial posture, building on strong performance incentives. Hence, better use of existing knowledge and more effective acquisition and assimilation of new knowledge becomes a business imperative.

In the search for new knowledge, a football team might be willing to question, disregard and even overturn existing knowledge (Kuhn, 1970). Creating new knowledge requires theory building and conceptualization, experimentation and testing. This process will also involve mistakes and dead ends in accordance with research principles from the Plato school and the Aristotle’s Lyceum (Lloyd, 1970, pp. 66-67). We define knowledge as “justified true beliefs” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) linking the knowledge concept to innovations in the practical managerial settings, distinguishing between explicit and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962, 1967).

Unlike traditional factors of production such as capital and property knowledge is a resource contained in the human mind. Creating and sharing knowledge can neither be supervised nor being forced out on people. Such activities can only take place when individuals cooperate on a voluntarily basis (Hayek, 1945). There are number of conceptual avenues that can be followed when studying knowledge as a source of competitive advantage. We use an approach form derived from evolutionary economics as we consider knowledge being dependent upon routines (Nelson and Winter, 1982) illustrated through “set of norms” and “theories in action” (Argyris and Schon, 1978). In line with research on new organizational forms, we believe on strong degree of decentralization is a requirement in decision making processes. (Hayek, 1945). This argument suits nicely into the Norwegian culture where equality between people is a main characteristic.

1.2 Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship becomes an important concept as coaches of football clubs are in the frontline of finding new ways to use organizational design and strategic thinking as weapons to achieve a competitive advantage. Being entrepreneurial allows a football club to be responsive to opportunities both in the soccer field and in the business world. Being entrepreneurial means being nimble and flexible, open for new opportunities. It also means to be ready to reassess past choices and change direction as opportunities are explored and exploited. Schumpeter (1947) described entrepreneurial activities as being essentially chaotic processes suggesting that “the entrepreneur destroys the equilibrium with the gale of creative destruction”. Over more than seven decades, researchers have struggled to come to grips with entrepreneurial activities within the constraints of a conventional Newtonian paradigm. Researchers have attempted to apply linear approaches when it might have been wiser to focus more on complexity and turbulence, using more sophisticated models of organizational design and strategic thinking. We regard this as an interesting research area.

Football clubs can illustrate this argument as they have to react to surprising moves in the football field (Moutouori, 2003). An error can create unbalances and create a possible advantage (Bjurwill, 1993), a situation familiar for experienced executives in the business world never taking anything for granted. This argument has parallels to game theory illustrated through the classical work of Von Neumann and Morgenstein (1944) called *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. The contribution made game theory as an interdisciplinary research field, having great effects on practical life of business after World War II, for example in oil, gas, shipping and corporate finance, just to mention some examples. In this environment football clubs had to be brave and ask why they existed at all, as Coase’s (1937) did in his evergreen article called *The Nature of the Firm*, leading the professor to win the Economic Nobel Prize in 1991. His contribution was to highlight how executives intervene in markets, hopefully leading to handsome economic returns. According to Williamson (1985), another Economic Nobel Prize winner, argued that the vertical boundaries of the firm are not only determined by transaction costs but also of the surrounding environment. War time experiences encouraged not only the development of new tools and techniques in organizational design and strategic thinking but also, in the view of some observers, the use of formal thinking as a guide for management decisions. The first decades after World War II were the golden years for economic growth souring to levels of historical weights making a market oriented way of thinking as the vogue in the knowledge economy. Drucker (1954), writing about this period, argued that “management is not just passive adaptive behavior; it makes means taking action to make the desired result come to pass”. He noted that economic theory had long treated markets as impersonal forces beyond the control of individual entrepreneurs and organizations (Drucker, 1954). Action matters in business and in football. Our research suggests that without a strong leadership it will not be possible to achieve excellent results in the football field.

2. The Rosenborg Success Story Explained

2.1 A Short Description of the Golden Years from 1998 until 2002

In brief, winning the national series thirteen times in the period (from 1992-2002 every year) and becoming Champions of the Norwegian Cup five times in the same period is outstanding, even measured after international standards. From 1995 to 2002 the club qualified every year for the Champions League tournament reaching the quarter-final in the season 1996-1997 and winning the group stage in season 1999-2000.

2.2 Managing Improvisation through “Total Football” and “Flow Theory”

We believe that it is possible to relate routines to improvisation. We define improvisation as “the conception of action as it unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive, effective and social resources” (Cunha et al, 2002, p. 99).

2.2.1 “Total football” as a Concept

“Total football” was developed by the legendary Dutch coach Rinus Michels and the player and later coach Johan Cruyff. “Total football” was pioneered by the team Ajax and the Dutch national football team back in the 1970s.

“Total football” was later exported to Barcelona FC when Rinus Michels moved to the club and later was accompanied by Johan Cruyff (Wilson, 2008; Winner, 2000). “Total football” can be regarded as Dutch innovation spreading to Barcelona F.C. and to other great European football clubs. Based on arguments of diffusion it can be regarded as

natural that “total football” should spread to the region of Trøndelag in Norway, being a center for football for decades with Rosenborg as the leading club.

Wilson (2008, p. 37)) notes that; ““total football” is the label given to an influential tactical theory of football in which any outfield player can take over the role of any other player in a team. You make space, you come into space. And if the ball doesn’t come, you leave this place and another player will come into it”.

2.2.2 “Flow Theory” as a Concept

A collective mindset seems to be a requirement for teams to function in good ways (Eggen and Nyrønning, 1999; Simensen, 2005; Skrede, 1992, Rise, 2016), where building trust both in the team and in the environment is essential. Flow theory can be linked to insights from psychology. In soccer it is important to have a positive attitude towards other players of the team and of course towards the coach. Being an excellent soccer player needs of course a certain degree of inner strength (Bakker, 2005, 2008).

3. Introduction to the Regional – Global Organizational Model with Contributions from Chaos Theory and Closer Description of Managerial Cognition

3.1 Introduction to the Regional - Global Model

In this article we focus on the Norwegian region Trøndelag, being a center for football. We use a regional approach to explain the success of Rosenborg as a football club. We believe that a regional approach can determine performance both in the business world and in football clubs.

It might be argued that regions play important roles with the focus on a possible independence of the Spanish region of Calalunia as an example. We see the same tendencies in Tyrol in Austria and parts of Northern Italy. After right wing parties had success in the national elections in Italy in 2018 it is reasonable to assume that regions in the north will try to use more economic and political power to get more independence at the expense of the government located in Rome.

In order to survive and grow in world where regions play more important roles, football team can benefit from paying attention to trends in the global knowledge economy supporting entrepreneurial activities (i.e. Brandley et al. 2000) where flexibility may be an option (Sennett, 2002). The growing globalization is reflected in the ease in which resources transcend national boundaries. We are of the opinion that there are dramatic changes in the speed of innovations and customer preferences making it crucial to react rapidly on opportunities. This is true in the business world always in the stage of change.

The same might be valid for football clubs. They become more globalized with regard to buying and selling players. The elections of coaches show the same tendency often having a worldwide focus in the recruitment process, quite common when a multinational corporation is in search for a new CEO/President.

Authors have gone far to promote clearly defined organizational design model when focusing on performance as flexible organizational structures provided by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1994) and the N-form structure introduced by Hedland (1994). Our research is related to these lines of through as football clubs struggle for excellent performance in the global knowledge economy at the same time as the region where they operate can be regarded as a mental home (Syvertsen, 2017).

This thinking should be in line with the times we live. We want to be a part of a global community (“global village”) at the same time we wish to a part of the region for developing and protecting our identity and culture.

In order to better understand regional dynamics, using scholars within economics are of the opinion that innovation research can explore multi-dimensional processes more in detail (Binz et al, 2014; Bunnell and Coe, 2001; Carlsson, 2006). The previous neglect of multi scale inter relatedness has received critical comments from Hssinik et al (2014) claiming that research has underestimated the complexity of business situations. We agree with this point of Hassink et

al. (2014) that business situations in the literature are often not studied in-depth leading to superficial insights, being of limited help for business executives.

3.2 A Focus on Chaos Theory

Organizational phenomena are frequently so complex that techniques from natural sciences, psychology and business administration are so complex that existing theory are often inadequate in order to find good management solutions. The use of human senses and direct involvement in the concrete situations in organizations can shed new light when searching for new knowledge. In our research we focus on chaos theory. Chaos theory pays attention to reality can be regarded as a result of a complex, dynamic, non-linear and unpredictable environments and internal structures and systems. Chaos theory can made sense as standardizations become more difficult in times of increased complexity and turbulence (Gleick, 1987, Hassard and Parker, 1993).

The field of chaos theory was pioneered by Lorentz (1963) who studied the dynamics of turbulent flows in the weather system. It is when a system is in a state of chaos that it is most vulnerable to butterfly effects, which states that small causes can have large effect on the final outcome. The butterfly effect represents a challenge since prediction of initial conditions for a system can never be known to complete accuracy, neither the weather nor in soccer. Chaos theory can in our point of view, in contract to much of the writing on chaos theory, judged from a humanistic perspective focus ing on bounded rationality as a concept (Simon, 1978). This logic breaks with the neo classical economic thinking assuming that actors take decisions in a rational manner which is hard to believe given the way decisions are taking in the world of organizational thinking where chaotic situations might be more common than often assumed (i.e Mintzberg, 1990).

The use of practical knowledge dates back to the early human history, laid the fundamentals for civilized societies, with a focus on craft work, in this case illustrated with football both as an analytical tool and almost as an art. Our research shows that academic contributions are of limited help when understanding the dynamics in the football field. Practical knowledge often gives more fruitful insights. Our findings support this reasoning. In the years before the first and second industrialized revolutions, close personal contact was important. The technological developments of the eight tenth century, and particularly those of the nineteenth century, led to the emergence of machines and in the decline man power of a source of value creation. In the knowledge economy, the renaissance of practical work might again become critical for winning in markets with stronger competition. We believe that personal contact to a large extent can determine the Rosenborg success story in the years from 1988 until 2002, where the coach Mr. Nils Arne Eggen was a primus motor.

3.3 A Managerial Cognition

Mental processes play important roles in soccer field building on managerial cognition. The foundations of cognitive psychology were in part a response to a development of an overly behavioral focus in management science. Rejecting central theoretical tenets of behaviorism, cognitive scientists emphasized the analysis of intervening mental processes as mediate responses to the environment (Huff, 1997).

Several managerial cognition scholars have responded that research has failed to find empirical evidence of the relationship between managerial cognition and organizational outcomes (Meidl et al, 1994; Jenkins and Johnson (1997).

The construct of bounded rationality (Simon, 1978; Foss, 2001), which suggests that actors are unable to take decisions in a completely rational manner due to the fact that they are constrained by fundamental information processing limitations, is a pillar in the development of modern cognitive theory.

4. Closer Description of the Research Project

4.1 A Historical Analysis of Rosenborg Football Club

In Habermas' (1990) opinion:

“A historian will not be able to limit himself in his explanations to a logic of action that incorporates the hermeneutic understanding of meaning, for the historical context is exhausted by the mutual intensions of human beings. Motivated actions are embedded in a quasi-natural context is exhausted by the mutual intensions of human beings. Motivated actions are embedded in a quasi-natural contexts that is mediated by subjectively intended meaning, but not created by it”

Kuhn (1972) introduced the concept of paradigm shift in order to focus on change of thinking, leading to better soccer results as routines as gradually improve at the same time as it might be possible to unify theories that might be seen as contradictorily. In this research project we focus on chaos theory and managerial cognition trying to unite concepts and theories with the shortcomings in the academic world in mind. A gradual shift in paradigm can make it possible for us to shed light on previously unexplored research areas which might be to new knowledge. Kuhn (1972) combined analytical frameworks from natural sciences on one hand and more psychological views in the other hand when studying how scientists can be embedded into a sociological framework on how scientists operate in teams.

In a similar manner, we focus on collective processes in this research project relating high performance to “total football” and “flow theory” as concepts again focusing on collective dimensions. Sound empirical research begins with a strong grounding of related literature, identifies a research gap, and then proposes research questions that can address the gap. According to Howe and Eisenhardt (1990) research questions should drive research design and not the opposite. Platt (1964) warns about becoming “method oriented” rather than “problem oriented”.

We have paid attention to these advises by having an applied approach in the current study. As applied researchers theory *per se* is of limited value because we believe that theory should confirm or reject the claim found in the problem statement not being a value in itself.

4.2 Methodological Foundations

4.2.1 The Methodological Position

The methodological position our research is reported from a phenomenological paradigmatic point of view as it seeks to explore factors that that can explain the Rosenborg success story. This holistic view implies that social phenomena are regarded in totality in order to obtain deep, rich and comprehensive insights (Gummesson, 2000), paying attention to both psychological and economic variables building our reasoning on contributions from Cyert and March (1963) and Thompson (1967).

4.2.2 The Use of a Qualitative Research.

We used an exploratory research approach because it was a candidate to gain insights of factors that can explain the Rosenborg success story. Qualitative methodologies are appropriate and adequate for building substantive theory in a particular area of inquiry. Qualitative data are likely to be superior to quantitative data in depth, density and vividness of information (Van Mannen, 1983).

According to Silverman (2005, p, 349) “the point of qualitative research is to say a lot about a little”. The important role played by the subject in qualitative research has been emphasized by Merriam (1998, p. 205) who argued that in qualitative research “researchers seek to describe and explain the world as those in the world experience it”.

4.2.3 The Research Design Process

In order to give further information of the research design process, we focus on the selection of interviews, the information gathering techniques and the analytical processes necessary so that conclusions can be drawn.

The selection of interviewees. Mr. Nils Arne Eggen and selected players from the golden years 1988 until 2002 were interviewed. The players are kept anonymous based on the fact that they did not want publicity after many years in the spot light.

Before the interview we had conducted deep analysis into secondary sources, In Nils Arne Eggens book “*The strong leg. Interaction as a source to success*” (Eggen and Nyrønning, 1999) is a good introduction into the Rosenborg philosophy. The same is the case of Simonsens book “*Strong leg heritage*” (Simonsen, 2005) and the historical analysis of Rosenborg from the foundation up to present times (Svardal, 2007).

We have also benefited greatly from contributions of Løfdali (2014) and Rise (2016). Ola Rise latest publication of Rosenborg (Rise, 2016) has been of great help in understanding the internal culture in the club, written in an honest and direct way, in line with the culture of Rosenborg and the region of Trøndelag.

Thematic analysis used as an information gathering technique. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the interview material. This is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In contrast to other types of qualitative analysis thematic analysis is not bound to theoretical or epistemological frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis was performed through several steps, and can be summarized in that the data is taken through the process of coding to establish meaningful themes. The actual analysis is not a linear process in the sense that the analyst goes back- and forth between the data and the codes, as well as between the themes and the codes Braun & Clarke (2006).

A theme was defined as patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). During the process of theme development themes were continuously revised, meaning for example that some themes would be subdivided and others would be combined with the purpose of fitting the data. This step of the analysis therefore involved more interpretation.

According to Esterby-Smith et al (1999, p. 71), the “most fundamental of all qualitative methods is that of in-depth interviewing, by conducting in-depth interviewing obtaining depth knowledge following the advice by Mc Cracken (1988) letting respondents tell their own stories. We maximized the yield from the interviews by taking advantage of this “opportunistic” approach. Principles from snowball sampling were used “perhaps the most common form of purposely form of sampling, asking each participant or group of participants to refer to other participants” (Meriam, 1998) leading to alternative points of view and possible also deeper insights. Personal contact was used a method, combined with secondary sources, gaining benefits of triangulation in the data collection process (Jick, 1979).

5. Discussion and Recommendations

This is probably the first study using a regional-global model when analyzing a football club. Neither have we discovered that managerial cognition combined with chaos theory in studies of football clubs.

We distinguish between findings of practical character (5.1) and theoretical contributions (5.2)

5.1 Practical Findings in the Research Project

Our research confirms that both the concept “total football” and “flow theory” can explain the success Rosenborg achieved in the years from 1988 until 2002.

5.1.1 “Total football” related to Rosenborg as a Football Club

The practical steps for winning a match was confirmed in this research project, in line with principles from Dutch football back in the 1970s (see also Bakker et al, 2011).

By stepping into a play mates position meant that was possible to get increased respect for the other person in accordance with principles from “total football”. It also means that players managed to get a stronger sense of system interactions, that is, what it takes to win a match (Winner, 2000, p. 70), supporting a collective mind set (Winner, 2008, p. 228).

Endsley et al (2003) write that a high level of situational awareness means that a situation can be predicted and the players are one step ahead of the situation. Good habits become a routine in accordance with research conducted by Nelson and Winter (1982). In a similar way Mr. Nils Arne Eggen brought a sense of simplicity into complex situations as a good school teacher having the players in mind of his analysis. This personal way of approaching the players can to a certain extent explain the success of Rosenborg also outside Norway.

5.1.2 “Flow theory” related to Rosenborg as a Football Club

Flow is defined as; *“that holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement”* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975 p. 36). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) and Jackson and Marsh (1996) identified nine characteristic that are the fundament of flow. Balance between challenges and skills, fusion of action and consciousness, clear goals, immediate feedback, concentration and focus on activities, feeling of control, loss of self-consciousness and time distortion.

Our research supports the findings of the above mentioned researcher. Mr. Eggen emphasized strongly a social support for the players. This thinking is very much in line with a Norwegian way of taking decisions. For foreigners this leadership style might be regarded as “soft”, but many times it leads to good results both in business and in the football field. So why change formula that often gives the desired outcomes?

Norway is a small country with a population of a little more than 5 point.2 million (2017 figures). The importance of networking to get things done will determine the degree of attraction within regions) where spreading information from one region to another region becomes a critical component in order to achieve success for the individual organization. (i.e. Reve and Sasson, 2012).

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

Our findings show that the Norwegian concept “samhandling” can explain the success of Rosenborg in the time period from 1988 until 2002 (5.2.1). However, our findings are more related to practical knowledge in the soccer field and the leadership of coach Eggen than found in academic writings. Secondly, our findings suggest that the regional-global organizational model can be of relevance for Trøndelag and for Rosenborg.

5.2.1 “Samhandling” as a Concept-when Practice Explain the World Better than Academic Contributions

Based on the writings of Steiro and Torgersen (2013) we found that the concept “samhandling” to a large extent can determine the success of Rosenborg.

We regard the concept “samhandling” as a collective phenomenon that can explain team performance. The concept is deeply rooted in our culture building on social democratic traditions after World War II being a dominating force in daily life in Norway up to this day.

“Samhandling” was also a concept used by Mr. Eggen when we interviewed him as he has expressed in a number of interviews in the public for many years, so was the case for former players interviewed focusing on collective dimensions of being a part of the Rosenborg team.

This finding is accordance with the work conducted by Chandler (1963) showing that business executives were many decades ahead of academics when pinpointing the need for coordination when the client market became more advanced in times with better economic times, particularly after World War II, in times with strong growth in the industrialized world.

Thompson (1967) managed to include new perspectives on management in a larger organizational contexts, breaking academic ground, much in the same way as Spanish soccer teams and the national team to a certain extent has dominated soccer in the last decade both in Europe and that the global scale.

When Mintzberg (1983) finished his work called *Structures of Five* (1983) through the use of structural analysis organizational thinking took a large step forward, just as Rosenborg did in the time period from 1998 until 2002, and

later. In this period Rosenborg as a club became more professional and more scientific, in line with changes in the Norwegian society in a time period with solid economic growth with high incomes in the national economy. In such times it is easy to assume that self-confidence increased in the region of Trøndelag, maybe leading to stronger belief in thinking and acting regionally.

5.2.2 The Regional – Globalized Organizational Model Makes Sense for Rosenborg as a Part of the Region of Trøndelag in Norway

In times with increased complexity and turbulence we introduce the regional-globalized organizational model as new in order to illustrate how football clubs might organize their activities.

The regional globalized organizational model is newly introduced a couple of years ago by the first author of the article. In spite of the model's shortcomings at an early research stage it can have validity for the study of Rosenborg. The football club is very much a part of the region of Trøndelag, however with more foreign players than in the past. The global football family is as always in a stage of flux, changing as opportunities arise, or disappear. We are of the opinion that the model might shed light on how challenges of globalization can be linked to organizational models.

6. Conclusion

In the current study we have examined the way Rosenborg played could be explained using total football and flow theory as means. Our hypothesis is confirmed. We have analyzed repetitive structures creating meaningfulness and establish common ground for good performance in harmony with how good routines can become institutionalized being transferred from senior players to younger ones as tacit knowledge. These principles can be seen as a fundament for creating “samhandling” (interaction) as a deeper form of collaboration. This enabled Rosenborg not only to establish a strong common ground at the conceptual level but also use it in tactics in the soccer field. More research on “samhandling” is without doubt needed.

One limitation of the study is that interviews were conducted years after the achievements in the soccer field, leading to possible problems of validity. Memory is after all selective. Certain facts might be forgotten. We are aware of the danger of group think as both the coach and the players might have a tendency to reach consensus as to how a story is told (Janis, 1972)

Future research might benefit from linking the regional-global organizational model to chaos theory moving management thinking from a reductive perspective to a holistic one focusing on entrepreneurial activities at the regional level. We believe that future research using chaos theory can be combined with using system dynamics and game theory bringing in new dimensions in theory development. The relationship between theory development and managerial practices was a nice part of the research project. We believe that this avenue can be followed in future research projects.

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