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Four factors to consider when setting up your starting eleven

When a football $\square$ team runs out onto the pitch, the coach or team manager has to pick a “starting 11”. The best 11 players that the coach thinks will achieve the outcome of the game for that specific team they are playing against (usually to win).

This starting 11 can be dynamic and is picked from a squad of players. The squad can (and usually does) contain up to 30 individuals all vying for the opportunity to be picked.

There is a nice tension within the squad. Players naturally want to be picked in a starting squad. It gives them pride. It's fun to play rather than just sit on the bench. It's an opportunity to showcase their skills and talents not just to their immediate team, but the wider world. The more a player is able to play consistently well, the higher the impact and value to their career and the team they are playing for.

The concept of a starting team and a bench is not actually foreign to business. It's very normal to see **this concept occur in management consulting**. Growing a squad is important to ensure freshness and optimal performance on any particular task at hand.

This is where formations and starting 11's come into play. As a coach, picking your starting 11 and the formation you want to play is one of the most important (if not the most important) strategic decisions you have full control over.

There are so many different formations in football. All serve different purposes and outcomes. Some are more attack minded. Some are more defensive. Some enable high speed. While others centre on possession.



Credit: Eighty Five Points

<http://eightyfivepoints.blogspot.com/2019/11/using-data-to-analyse-team-formations.html>

Which formation is the right one you ask? All of them and none of them. It depends on your objective. It depends on the opposition. It depends on the players that you have at your disposal. There are so many factors that are

considered to help a coach figure out the best use of the players to fit into a squad formation.

Don't you just start you best 11 players? Yes and no. There is a great saying in football,

"A champion team will always beat a team of champions."

It's a popular saying often repeated in sporting and other contexts. I remember hearing it said by numerous sporting coaches and CEO's alike.

The saying proclaims that a team of good players who have played together, bonded and share a common team goal will defeat a team of assembled superstar players who prioritise their individual goals over those of the team. In today's rapidly changing and disruptive world, it's a very applicable concept.

Let's face it. Innovation, just like sport, is hard work. It requires optimal-performance, coaching and leadership if your team or organisation is going to be successful. And every innovation leader needs a optimal performing innovation team to deliver desired innovative outcomes.

So how do you pick your starting 11 in business?

Just like there are many factors in a football game, there are many factors in a team to consider. From my experiences, I have found the following few basic elements:

- Teams or squads should not be bigger than 11 direct reports in size
- Always have a multi-disciplinary team
- 70/30 split between highly experienced vs slightly experienced
- Mix of leadership styles

No more than 11 in a team?

Yes. This may sound controversial, however hear me out. I'm specifically referring to direct reports. So if you're a senior executive, it makes sense to have 11 people that may be team leaders themselves reporting directly to you.

If you're a team leader, having 11 people report to you makes it manageable on all accords. I believe a good leader would always ensure that they can provide quality one-on-one time with their direct reports on a frequent (monthly) basis. In an average working month, you have about 20 working days. Having 11 direct reports means you have 11 one-on-ones each month. Why? I believe it's the team leaders role to be the coach. Just like in football, the coach is managing the squad of 11 and coaching them to be the better versions of themselves. The coach isn't the one kicking the ball on the field. The coach has the wider field of view. The "strategic" lens so to speak. It's their role to motivate, educate, navigate and help the team make better decisions on the field. In business, it's no different.

As a team leader it's often difficult to provide you full attention to more than 11 humans (I say often, as some people are phenomenal people jugglers!). Even in football, the head coach or manager has a coaching staff of about 11. These include assistant coaches, nutritionists, medical staff etc that are all there to help with the development and growth of the team. While on match day, the coach is focused solely on the starting 11 and the 5 or so substitutes made available.

Multi-disciplinary teams

This may seem obvious to some, however I've experienced many times the separation of disciplines into their own teams. I don't prescribe to having "siloes" disciplines because just like in a football team, you don't have a team of just defenders or a team of just attacking forwards. My view is that

an effective squad is always multi-disciplinary.

Each member of the squad understand the importance of the other roles and how the inter-play between the different skills helps achieve the outcome of the game. So too in business, I see the inter-play between various functional areas having equally important impact when applied with each other.

A multi-disciplinary team provides a diverse view towards discussions and promotes healthy innovation. In my view this applies to both delivery teams and leadership teams.

What disciplines should be in a team or squad? Well it depends on what you have available and what the objective of the squad is for a particular project or period. Having a variety of disciplines available is key. These functional areas are the centres of excellence for growing those disciplines and work to provide team members to be deployed into any squad needed. Squads are dynamic, just like in football and are set up for specific match days. Sometimes you need a squad that is playing counter-attacking. Sometimes you need squads that are defensive in nature. These can be applied to problem outcomes in business too. If you're looking to set up a new innovation product, you may need a squad set up that is focused on fast paced data driven iterations. In a future blog post I will provide some template squad formations!

70/30 split between highly experienced vs slightly experienced

Experience is important.

There's no doubt that a quality education can make a positive impact; however, the reality is that your education is only one part of the equation. Is experience really that important? Yes, "proven work experience" is important. VERY important.

Proven work experience is so important in demonstrating your ability to work effectively as part of a team, or independently to achieve successful outcome; you should begin accumulating that work experience as early in your career development process as possible.

It's why I believe a solid mix of "seasoned" experience coupled with "fresh" enthusiasm will be a good recipe for success in the operations of the squad. Football does this all the time. **Liverpool came from behind** in a Champions League Semi Final to beat Barcelona 4-3 (on aggregate) to proceed to the final. One of the key reasons for this was the mix of experienced and in-experienced players.

The experienced players provided stoic guidance and leadership, coaching the inexperienced towards an unforgettable victory. The in-experienced players provided flair and innovations that come from new thinking. This same approach applies to business teams and creates a win-win situation.

Mix of leadership styles

Titles don't define leaders, behaviours do. It's why in football, leadership is not primarily defined by who has captaincy in the squad. Rather leadership is a mandatory requirement to even be picked for the squad! With only 11 outfield positions available, skill alone does not guarantee you a spot. A good squad manager will seek to find individuals that show leadership within themselves and to others in the team.

Everyone can be a leader. It doesn't matter if you're leading yourself, a team, or the entire company. What superpower would you choose if you could have one? The idea of letting go of our limitations for just one moment and thinking more about what we could be seems possible only in the hypothetical. But magical things can happen when we apply this mindset to our leadership aspirations.

Within any squad having a mix of these leadership superpowers and aspirations ensures that a positive growth dynamic is enabled. I recently came across an [excellent tool](#) that helps teams understand the mix of leadership styles and then actively helps the team figure out efficiencies and improvements.

The styles of leadership within a team help define the culture of the team and work towards successful outcomes. If everyone in the team displayed the exact same leadership styles, there will be significant gaps in capability and effectiveness that you'd obtain from diversity. A mix of leadership styles ensures all dimensions of team culture are taken into account when trying to solve problems, resulting in a more well rounded and thoughtful outcome.

These four factors are just my thoughts based off my experiences. I'm currently actively applying these in [AgriDigital](#) as the company is on the journey of hyper growth and on track to be the next billion dollar business. From my perspective, setting up a winning mentality and culture through the factors listed above is a fundamental component of business success.

My Background

In my previous career experience, I was a professional football coach. I coached at the highest level in youth development, with Football Federation Australia's High Performance Program. I'm currently the Chief Technology Officer at AgriDigital, having previously worked in management consulting and other high growth businesses and executive roles.

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