

# The appliance of science?



Image by Monica Volpin from Pixabay

Following the defeat of the England Rugby Union team at the hands of Ireland in a warmup to the current World Cup, leading commentator Stuart Barnes wrote an article in The Times on Monday 23 August, sharply critical of the coaching team and style of play.

Words such as ‘authoritarian’ and phrases such as ‘dwindling reserves of initiative’, ‘micro thinking’ and ‘no big picture’ peppered the first paragraph. The team’s initiative was seen as ‘battered into submission by a naïve management’. One telling sentence suggested that player George Ford stuck rigidly to a game plan ‘at some cost to his reputation as England’s freest rugby thinker’. It speaks volumes.

Equally, the article goes on to mention an earlier England situation when the coach at the time allowed the game-plan to be too loose. It prompted the comment that ‘England didn’t have a clue’ against some major world teams.

However, this earlier situation – in 2007 – did trigger a response. The team sat down and came up themselves with a narrower game-plan. This apparent insubordination helped in ‘forcing the team to think for themselves’. Before the defeat that prompted the article, Ford himself spoke of ‘player responsibility’ but the words did not seem to be resulting in deeds. ‘Blind loyalty’ and ‘coach power’ were the culprits.

Anyone who watched the first-round World Cup match against Argentina

last Saturday will have been thrilled how, in the face of losing a key player to a red card in the first 3 minutes, Ford (and the team) rallied with many periods of less conventional play. It resulted in Ford himself scoring 24 out of a 27–10 win against a strong side that had numerical advantage. It was a convincing result against considerable adversity.

Rugby Union is beset by increasingly detailed rules, bringing uncertainty to players and drawing comments about inconsistency in refereeing. The playing environment is increasingly complex, uncertain, ill-defined.

If there is complexity in the mix, what might the science of complexity have to say?

Complex systems evolve. They adapt to changes in the environments they face. More, they need the freedom to adapt. If the ways they evolve are dictated rigidly from afar, the resulting solutions may be less than effective. They may have unintended consequences. After all, it is the people at the coalface who must do the digging!

Barnes's rugby analysis suggests, however, that too much freedom can also result in negative outcomes.

One implication of complexity science is that command and control is not always the best strategy when things get volatile, uncertain, complex or ambiguous. Rather, leadership that sets appropriate boundaries for action and decision making will more likely allow the right degree of discretion within an agreed, overall game plan. It makes space for adaptability and improves agility. It generates

creativity and independence when faced with change.

Who knows how the England team will progress in their upcoming World Cup matches?

The evidence of the most recent game against Argentina offers a glimmer of hope for the team's fans. Time will tell!

Maybe the application of principles drawn from what for some may be an obscure science has a place in organisational and work life as much as it does in sport?

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