

'Brains Trust': A Study of European Football Club Structures



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European Football Club Structures/Brains Trust

How do you run a European football club? It is a question with many different answers, depending on the philosophy and objective of the ownership group, and also the financial resources at their disposal, but nonetheless, there are still some key principles -- a thread of crucial elements -- to which the most successful clubs adhere.

In European soccer, there are different challenges than in US sports. There are no salary caps at the top level, the game operates an open transfer market with players at all levels sold to the highest bidder -- no player draft -- and there is the annual possibility of relegation or failure to qualify for the most lucrative and prestigious competitions such as the UEFA Champions League.

The senior management teams must also negotiate and comply with cross-border regulations inside and outside the European Union, including the impact of Brexit on the recruitment of players and coaching staff in the Premier League.

All of these challenges can be obstacles to success, which is why the most successful and progressive teams attempt to operate by sticking to the key principles detailed within this document.

Current Leadership Landscape*

- Most European teams operate with a '**Brains Trust**' model
- **68% of teams have an operational Chairman/CEO** who is heavily involved in football related decision making
- **84% of teams have a Sporting Director or equivalent** with more than 7+ years experience
- **First time Sporting Directors** such as Paolo Maldini (AC Milan), Sebastian Kehl (B. Dortmund) and Julian Ward (Liverpool) **had an experienced CEO already in place** when appointed
- **Bayern Munich, RB Leipzig, Man City and Lille all have ex-Players as their Sporting Directors** but operate within a wider organisational structure and **report to a CEO/President on all football related decisions**
- Similarly **Inter Milan and Tottenham Sporting Directors come from a scouting background** but have an **experienced CEO/Chairman involved in all football related decisions**
- **Barcelona and Real Madrid have experienced Presidents** in place (both in their second stints at the club) while **PSG currently have ex-Sporting Directors acting as advisors and co-sharing responsibilities**
- **AS Monaco's Sporting Director, Paul Mitchell drives all football related activity** while **Atletico Madrid** have Andrea Berta as Sporting Director reporting to the CEO with **Head Coach, Diego Simeone heavily influential in all decision making**
- **AS Roma, Arsenal and Man Utd** are the **only clubs** currently with **first time executive leadership** (i.e. CEO & SD)
- **Chelsea** have **added four key members** to their new structure under the guidance of Todd Boehly while **Juventus are undergoing a restructure** across sporting and business operations

* This refers to the 19 teams below



Build Consciously & Deliberately

The key decision makers in European football teams are, principally, the Owner, the Chief Executive, the Sporting/Technical Director and Manager/Coach.

Some teams operate with all four, others have a smaller leadership structure drawn from those roles, but it is increasingly rare for a club Owner/Ownership group to run the team on a day-to-day basis. In 2023, 68 per cent of teams have an operational Chairman/CEO who is heavily involved in football-related decision making, while 84 per cent have a Sporting Director with 7+ years of experience.

The key is to build a roster of talent in the front office, led by the CEO, to enable the project to be broad based and resilient enough to cope with change, either forced or due to occupants of those positions moving elsewhere.

Organisational outcome should not be achieved or disrupted by one person, so build a model of leaders with specific individual responsibilities, but ensure that the organisation can move forward smoothly if change is required.

The Manchester City senior management structure is an example of an ownership model building consciously and deliberately for the long-term.

Acquired by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi in a £210 million takeover in Sept 2008, the club's new owners appointed Khaldoon al Mubarak as chairman within a month of taking control of the team.

Al Mubarak retained the existing CEO and Manager, but a new Coach was hired in Dec 2009. In Sept 2012, Ferran Soriano was recruited as CEO and a month later, Txiki Begiristain, the former Barcelona Director of Football, arrived at the club to perform the same role at the Etihad Stadium.

By the start of 2023, Al Mubarak, Soriano and Begiristain remain in their positions -- Soriano and Begiristain's Barcelona connections were crucial in the 2016 hiring of former Barcelona Coach Pep Guardiola as Manager -- and City have enjoyed the most successful decade in their history after Al Mubarak devised his blueprint, of mirroring the structure that delivered great success to Barcelona in the late-2000s, and followed it through those key appointments.

68%

Have an operational **Chairman/CEO** heavily involved in football-related decision making

84%

Have a **Sporting Director** with 7+ years of experience.

Team/Model	Last Structural Change	Chairman/CEO/President	Sporting Director or equivalent
 New Leadership	2022	Vinai Venkatesham CEO	Edu Sporting Director
 New Leadership	2022	Todd Boehly Chairman	Christopher Vivell Technical Director Laurence Stewart Technical Director
 New Leadership	2022	Billy Hogan CEO	Julian Ward Sporting Director
 Stable Leadership	2012	Ferran Soriano CEO	Txiki Begiristain Director of Football
 New Leadership	2022	Richard Arnold CEO	John Murtough Director of Football
 Stable Leadership	2021	Daniel Levy Chairman	Fabio Paratici Managing Director, Football
 New Leadership	2022	Giorgi Furlani CEO	Paolo Maldini Technical Director Frederic Massara Sporting Director
 New Leadership	2021	Pietro Berardi CEO	Tiago Pinto General Manager Mauro Leo Sporting Director
 Stable Leadership	2018	Giuseppe Marotta CEO - Sport	Piero Ausilio Chief Sports Officer
 New Leadership	2022	Maurizio Scanavino CEO	Francesco Calvo Chief Football Officer Federico Cherubini Sporting Director
 New Leadership	2021	Oliver Kahn CEO	Hasan Salihamidzic Sporting Director
 Stable Leadership	2022	Hans Joachim Watzke CEO	Sebastian Kehl Sporting Director
 Stable Leadership	2022	Oliver Mintzlaff CEO	Max Eberl Sporting Director
 Stable Leadership	2017	Miguel Angel Gil CEO	Andrea Berta Sporting Director
 New Leadership	2022	Joan Laporta President	Mateu Alemany Director of Football Jordi Cruyff Sporting Director
 Stable Leadership	2009	Florentino Perez President	Jose Angel Sanchez CEO
 New Leadership	2022	Ben Lambrecht CEO	Paul Mitchell Sporting Director
 New Leadership	2020	Olivier LeTang President	Franck Beria Director of Football
 New Leadership	2022	Nasser Al-Khelaifi Chairman & CEO	Luis Campos Football Advisor Antero Henrique Sporting Advisor

Throughout European football, the most successful clubs have all taken a similar approach. Atletico Madrid have also enjoyed the club's most successful period with an axis of CEO (Miguel Angel Gil), Andrea Berta (Sporting Director) and Diego Simeone (Coach).

Some have succeeded despite regular change in one area -- Coach/Manager -- but the presence of long-serving CEOs and Sporting Directors minimises the risk of change.

For example, between March 2012–March 2022, Chelsea hired seven different Coaches and won 10 major trophies, including two Premier Leagues and two Champions Leagues. Despite the change of manager, Bruce Buck (Chairman) and Marina Granovskaia (Senior Director) remained a consistent presence in the boardroom. Buck and Granovskaia left Chelsea following the sale of the club by Roman Abramovich to Clearlake Capital in May 2022.

Stability is Key

Stability at the top of any sporting organisation is crucial. While stable leadership is not a guarantee of success, a team is more likely to achieve and/or exceed its goals with certainty and stability at the top of club.

Manchester City have an average of 15+ years experience within their current leadership team and the club has won 12 major trophies, including 5 Premier League titles, during the last 10 years.

Real Madrid has won 5 Champions Leagues and 4 FIFA Club World Cups in the last 10 years. Although Real have regularly changed coaches, club President Florentino Perez and General Director Jose Angel Sanchez have amassed more than 17+ years experience together at Santiago Bernabeu.

Atletico Madrid (15+ years experience of senior leaders), Inter Milan (24+ years) and Liverpool (10+ years) have all enjoyed significant on-field success alongside stability within the club hierarchy.

Leadership Experience

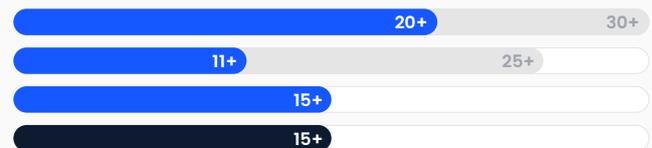
Atlético Madrid, Real Madrid, Inter Milan

Years Experience:

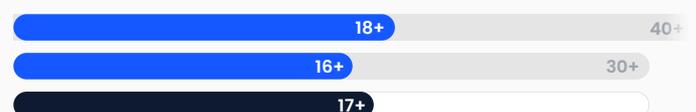
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CEO
Sporting Director
Manager
Avg. Leadership Exp.



President
CEO
Avg. Leadership Exp.



CEO
Chief Sports Officer
Avg. Leadership Exp.



Leadership Experience

Career Experience

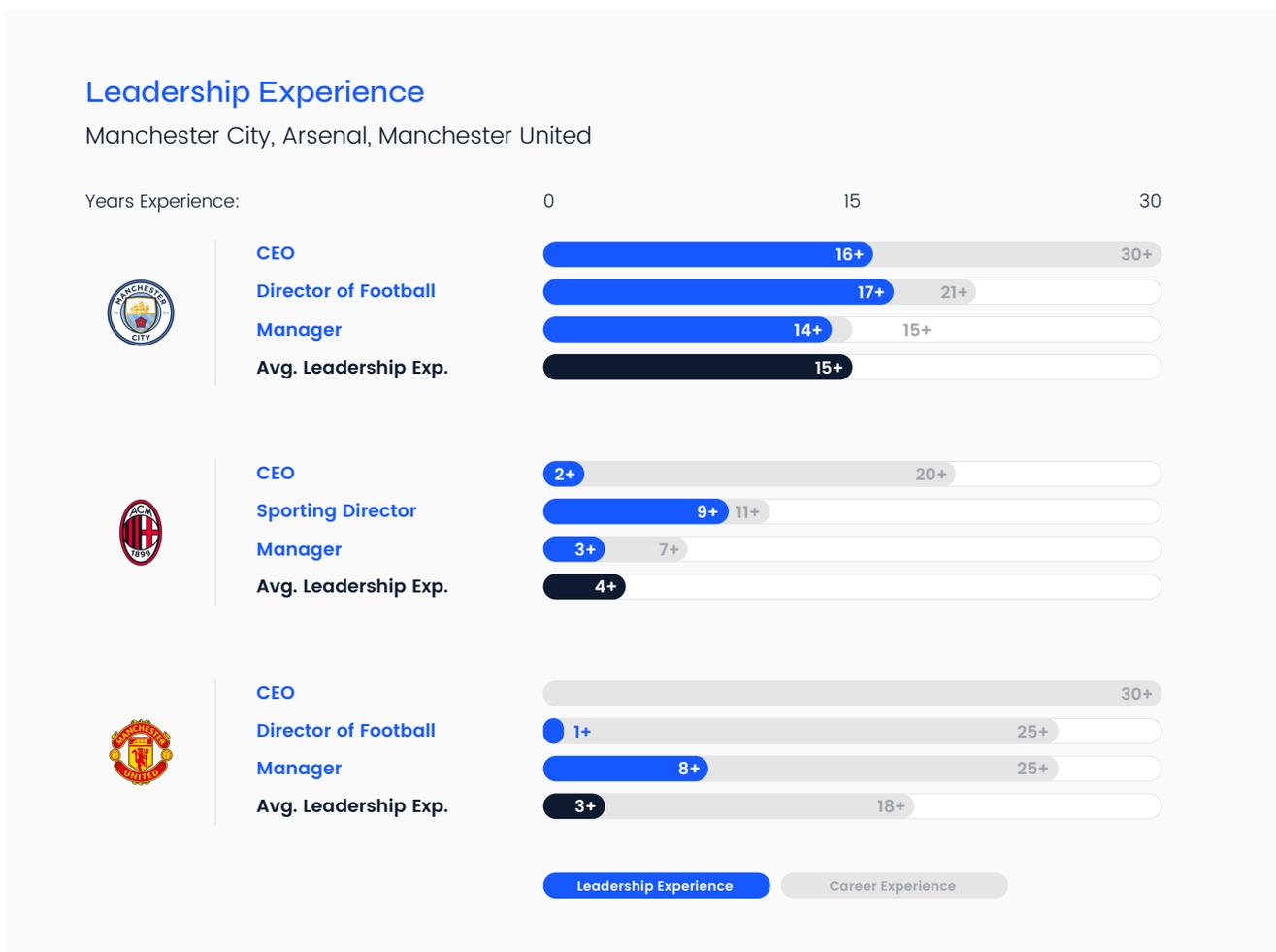
And while Tottenham Hotspur has not won a trophy since 2008, the stability provided by chairman Daniel Levy, who is the Premier League’s longest-serving chairman following his appointment in 2001, has coincided with the club building a new world-class, multi-sport stadium and establishing itself within the English top flight’s so-called ‘Big Six’ alongside City, Liverpool, Manchester United, Chelsea and Arsenal.

The flip-side of having a stable hierarchy can be seen in the performances in recent seasons of leading teams who experienced upheaval in senior positions.

Arsenal, who have been absent from the Champions League since 2017, are now beginning to show the signs of stability after losing three previous leaders within the space 12 months following the departure of CEO Ivan Gazidis (2008-2018), chief transfer negotiator Dick Law (2009-2017) and manager Arsene Wenger (1996-2018).

Under Coach Mikel Arteta (appointed 2019), CEO Vinai Venkatesham (2020) and Edu (Technical Director 2019, promoted to Sporting Director 2022), Arsenal started 2023 at the top of the Premier League and on course to be crowned champions for the first time since 2004.

Manchester United, the Premier League’s most successful team, have not won the domestic title since 2013 and started the 2022-23 season having not won any trophy since 2017. In 2022, United changed CEOs (Richard Arnold replaced Ed Woodward), hired a new manager (Erik ten Hag) and promoted Head of Football Development John Murtough to the role of Director of Football.



Experience Matters

Manchester City, Real Madrid and Liverpool -- three of the most successful teams in recent years -- all benefit from a wealth of experience in senior positions.

Clubs who have been less successful during the same period have tended to be those with inexperienced people in key roles, although the dynamic can be successful if at least one element of the senior structure is filled by an experienced figure.

Manchester United are perhaps the greatest example of how learning on the job can be a huge risk for the leaders of a football club.

Back in 2013, manager Sir Alex Ferguson (1986–2013) and CEO David Gill (2003–2013) stepped down at the end of the 2012–13 season having worked closely together during a successful period in the club's history which saw United reach three Champions League finals (winning one) and win 6 Premier League titles.

Ed Woodward was promoted from his role in charge of United's commercial team to succeed Gill, while David Moyes was appointed as Manager, having never previously won a major trophy or managed in the Champions League.

City, Liverpool, Real and Chelsea, prior to the 2022 Clearlake takeover, all enjoyed great success while being led by experienced figures.

Tottenham have enjoyed growth on and off the pitch under chairman Daniel Levy, while RB Leipzig, a club formed as recently as 2009, have become a leading team in the Bundesliga and regular participants in the Champions League under the long-term leadership of an experienced CEO (Oliver Mintzlaff) and Sporting Director (Max Eberl).

Experience must be balanced, however. If an experienced Coach is hired by inexperienced decision makers it can create misalignment, particularly in the area of recruitment and pressure being applied, either directly or through the media, to be more active with player recruitment.

In Sept 2022, Chelsea's new owners replaced the experienced, Champions League-winning Coach Thomas Tuchel with Graham Potter, an English Coach with no previous experience of managing a Big Six team.

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Build A Brains Trust, Not A Unicorn Model

Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger are two of the most celebrated and successful managers in the history of the Premier League. Ferguson won 13 Premier Leagues and two Champions Leagues during a 27-year reign as manager, while Wenger won three Premier Leagues and seven FA Cups during his 22-year spell as Arsenal manager.

Although both Ferguson and Wenger worked with a chairman / CEO, both men had absolute control of their team's recruitment and philosophy. But in a sporting sense, the Ferguson / Wenger figure has become a unicorn -- a mythical figure that does not exist in the modern environment.

The most successful teams now operate with a brains trust model, making decisions based on a blueprint that has been created and then executed with a Manager/ Coach who fits the operating model and understands and accepts the division of responsibilities.

The brains trust model should protect against the pitfalls of a short-term view, but also balance the short against medium to long term outlook.

A CEO will appoint the Sporting Director/Director of Football, who in turn will recruit the Coach/Manager who best fits the vision of the CEO. The Coach/ Manager will then play a role in identifying talent to improve the team, but responsibility on the finding those players will lie with the Sporting Director.

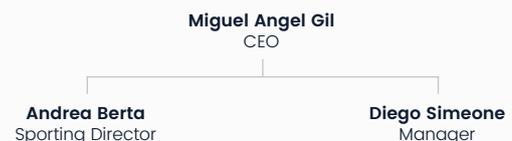
During the Ferguson/Wenger era, the Manager would often fill roles that are now the responsibility of three, four or even five people.

This approach also protects against the potential black hole of a unicorn figure leaving the club and the upheaval that can follow, experienced by United post-Ferguson and Arsenal post-Wenger.

Leadership Structures



Atlético Madrid



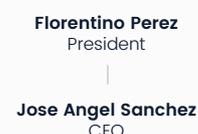
FC Bayern Munich



Manchester City



Real Madrid



Summary

1. The Value of Experience

The results over recent years of Europe's leading football clubs point to a clear thread of experience and stability coinciding with success and the opposite being true for those teams who have benefited from neither.

Manchester City are the prime example. They have experience in all senior positions, long-term stability and a world-class Coach in Pep Guardiola. In so many ways, City have the perfect model.

Real Madrid, meanwhile, have enjoyed success with a variety of different Coaches working under a hugely experienced leadership team.

2. Be Patient, Trust the Process

Clubs including Chelsea and Manchester United are now in the early stages of their new structure. Chelsea are spending significant sums on several players, hoping that the investment bears fruit and delivers long-term growth and success, while United appear to be mirroring the structures that have delivered success to City and Liverpool.

No process can be a quick-fix. Manchester City's owners took almost four years from buying the team to having their senior structure in place, but the personnel they hired were the right appointments and have spent over a decade delivering success to the club.

3. It's a Team Game off the Pitch Too

Past performance cannot be a guarantee of future success, but the fundamentals are clear -- hire experience, ensure stability and build a brains trust of talent to take the club forward and protect against the loss of any one individual.

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