Soccer Club Culture: Everything You Need To Know

Directors of Coaching (DOCs) are notoriously time-poor. Focusing on everything from coaching recruitment to defining the club's sporting philosophy leaves little room for anything else. That can make it easy to overlook less tangible aspects of sporting success, in particular, club culture.

It might sound like a vague, nebulous term, but the internal culture of your club or organisation has a huge impact on the way your coaches and players behave, and the standards they expect from each other. In short, no DOC can afford to ignore it.

In this guide, you'll find answers to an array of club culture-related questions, including:

- What do we mean by "club culture" and why is it so important?
- Where does your club's culture come from and how much control do you have over it?
- What can be done to address a negative, ingrained culture?
- What are the steps to building a new culture at your soccer club?
- How can you motivate your club during difficult times?
- What is your soccer leadership style and is it suitable for your club?

What is 'club culture'?

Club culture is often referred to in a negative way. A poorly-performing team might mention dressing-room bust-ups as a reason for disappointing results. Outside of the sporting arena, we often hear talk of a 'toxic' culture at major corporations. But at its heart, club culture should be viewed in a positive light. If you get it right, your job as DOC will be easier and you'll encounter much less friction. Consider the following definition from sport psychologist Jim Taylor:

"A culture is the expression of a team's values, attitudes, and beliefs about sports and competition. It determines whether, for example, the team's focus is on fun, mastery, or winning, or whether it promotes individual accomplishment or team success. The culture is grounded in an identified sense of mission and shared goals - for instance, the goal of qualifying for a regional championships or winning a state title."

The language within this definition is overwhelmingly positive. As a DOC, why wouldn't you want to instil a sense of shared goals and achievements in your coaches and players?

With that in mind, we've put together a list of our favourite soccer coaching apps, detailing their strengths, compatibility, pricing and key functions.

How does team culture develop?

Whether or not you've done anything to influence its development, your club or organisation already has a culture. Broadly speaking, it develops and adapts in two ways:

Organically

Left to their own devices, your players will build their own shared culture, based on the behaviours and personalities of individual members. A club culture that develops naturally often proves to be the strongest, but there are some significant strings attached. There's a risk that the culture will be shaped by a core group of players - or sometimes even around a single dominant individual - at the expense of everyone else, which can lead to feelings of alienation. If that subset of players becomes more focused on their own importance than on what's best for the club, this situation can quickly produce a toxic environment.

Actively

It's often more effective - and less risky - for the DOC and their coaching team to take an active (but not dominant) role in shaping club culture. Hold open discussions with your players; encourage them to think about the type of atmosphere in which they'd like to play. Which values and behaviours do they believe are most important? What standards would they expect to be held to? Guide these conversations by offering insights into your own experiences and beliefs.

By building culture collaboratively, you stand a much greater chance of gaining buy-in from players. After all, there's little to be gained from a top-down approach that excludes the opinions of the very people you're seeking to engage.

The benefits of building a positive club culture

Instilling a positive club culture offers benefits on and off the pitch. Here are some of the biggest reasons why a DOC should focus on shaping the culture within their club for the better:

Creating a safe environment for players

It's all too easy to forget that soccer is meant to be fun. From international stars to amateur enthusiasts, everyone got into the game because they enjoyed it. If your players are afraid of repercussions for making a mistake, or dread coming to training because their coach acts like a military drill instructor, you're unlikely to get the most out of them on the pitch. Instead, players - particularly at younger age levels - should feel free to express themselves, and should look forward to matchday. Concentrate on building a culture that takes collective responsibility, rather than looking for scapegoats.

Bringing in new sponsorship

If your club stands for something positive - whether that be promoting an inclusive environment, fostering a strong sense of teamwork, or simply bringing groups of youngsters together to have fun - you'll find it easier to lure potential sponsors. That makes a big difference when it comes to retaining and recruiting coaches, buying new equipment and improving training facilities.

Encouraging your team to fight for each other

To be clear, fostering a positive culture isn't about forcing your players to be best friends with one another. In any large group of people - and especially in a competitive environment such as sport - there will be those who simply don't get on. This doesn't have to be a problem, provided you get the culture right and everyone knows what's expected of them.

To take a high-profile example, former Manchester United and England forwards Andrew Cole and Teddy Sheringham famously never spoke to one another off the field. Despite this, the rock-solid culture instilled by manager Sir Alex Ferguson ensured that both played integral roles in their club winning the Premier League and FA Cup multiple times - not to mention becoming the first English team to lift the Champions League trophy in 15 years during the 1998-99 season.

Attracting skilled coaches

The job of a newly recruited coach is made far easier if they walk into a positive dressing room on their first day. It means they can instantly start to have an impact in training and on matchday, rather than having to spend weeks - or even months - rebuilding a damaged and toxic environment. If you can demonstrate to potential new recruits that you've worked hard at building a strong, inclusive culture, it makes it far more likely that they'll want to be a part of your club or organisation.

Tips for Introducing and Maintaining a Positive Club Culture

Look behind the scenes at any successful sporting organisation and you'll find all the hallmarks of a positive club culture. Players fighting for a unified cause; a sense of accountability; a lack of selfishness or ego. For all those reasons and more, instilling a positive culture should be one of the top priorities for any DOC.

We've spoken previously about the importance of defining and building the culture within your club. Now, we'll give you the tools to begin making those changes.

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Is it too late to change a negative, ingrained culture?

There are many reasons why a club's culture can turn negative (if it was even positive to begin with). A poor run of results leads to finger-pointing; one or more dominant personalities start to take charge of the dressing room, leaving other players feeling excluded; the coach feels embattled and lashes out at their players. It can feel like the club is in free-fall, with little you can do to halt the downward trajectory.

This scenario certainly isn't unique to age-grade soccer. Even the best teams in the world can be affected. Take the All Blacks, widely regarded as one of the most successful teams in history across any sporting code, with an astonishing 77% Test match win ratio. After a rare defeat in 2005, a group of senior players led their team-mates on a drinking binge - an event that Head Coach Graham Henry later described as "totally unacceptable".

Identifying that the All Blacks' famed culture had become toxic, Henry and his assistant Wayne Smith - along with the team's captain, vice-captain and other coaching staff - resolved to fix it. As Smith explained: "We changed the paradigm, creating a leadership group, creating more accountability, giving more ownership, and [implementing] dual management of the team." After a disappointing quarter-final exit at the next Rugby World Cup, the All Blacks responded by lifting the trophy in 2011 and retaining it four years later.

So what does this tell us? Firstly, no amount of historic success can make a team immune from the effects of negative culture. Secondly, by identifying this negativity and taking decisive steps to change the status quo, it's possible to transform it into something much more positive.

Steps to building a new club culture

So you've identified that the culture within your club or organisation is in need of improvement. Be realistic with your expectations; it won't happen overnight. But by following these steps, you'll be laying the necessary foundations for positive cultural change.

Identifying a 'leadership group' (and trusting their decisions)

Introducing and maintaining a new, positive culture requires buy-in from players and coaches. It's simply not something that a DOC can define and enforce from the top down.

To give your cultural changes the best chance of success, your first step should be forming a leadership group of players and coaches. Consult them on any and all big decisions, and learn to trust their judgement.

Again, the All Blacks have demonstrated the benefits of this collaborative approach. Graham Henry recalled an occasion when his then-captain Tana Umaga urged him to stop giving pre-match team talks, freeing up time for the players to get into the right headspace.

"They needed to focus on what they needed to do," Henry explained. "They didn't need [me] yelling in their ear. I had been team-talking for 30 years, and I thought it was bloody important, and he thought it was a bloody waste of time. He was dead right, and thank God he told me. I could still be doing it!"

Defining and building on your existing club culture

Every club - and the age-level teams within it - already has a culture of some description. Focus on defining it with the support of your leadership group. Ask them:

What are our shared beliefs?

What are our most important values?

What behaviours do we expect from our team-mates and colleagues?

What is our vision for the club, and is our current culture holding us back?

You'll probably find some elements of your current culture are positive, and others less so. Rather than rewriting the rulebook, work with what you've got. Concentrate on enhancing those positives, building them into a set of defined cultural values and behaviours, while holding up the negatives as examples of behaviour that is no longer acceptable.

Setting joint performance goals

One of the best ways to get everyone pulling in the right direction is to establish some clear shared performance goals - perhaps with a club-wide incentive up for grabs if they are achieved.

Giving your players (and coaches) a 'bigger picture' on which to focus should help to avoid a sense of negativity creeping back in after two or three successive defeats. Similarly, you don't want positive sentiment to be based largely on a short-term run of good results.

Importantly, your goals should be in line with your newly defined club culture. If your shared values are all about encouraging players to have fun and express themselves creatively on the pitch, your goals shouldn't revolve around win/loss ratios and league positions.

Additionally, as with any major decision that affects your players, be sure to get input from your leadership group. This will encourage the wider playing squad to rally behind your new goals.

Permitting 'positive' conflict between players and coaches

Conflict is often seen as an outright negative, but if the culture within your club is strong enough, it can become an overwhelming positive.

Rather than shying away from difficult conversations, encourage players and coaches to voice their grievances with one another - provided it's done in a constructive manner. Not only does this stop negative sentiment from boiling away under the surface (before inevitably erupting down the line), but it also encourages a joint approach to solving problems.

Perhaps most importantly, allowing conflicts to be aired in a positive way - through honest, constructive discussion, without causing offence - demonstrates that you trust your players. Granting them autonomy off the field will encourage them to think for themselves and find solutions on the field.

How To Motivate Your Soccer Club Following A String Of Poor Results

In October 2019, Andorra's national soccer team finally recorded their first ever European Championship qualifying win.

They had lost every single one of their previous 56 qualifiers – a run of defeats stretching back to September 1998 – before edging to a 1-0 victory over 10-man Moldova. Outside of the Euros, Els Tricolors were on a 15-match winless streak.

Every DOC who has endured a lengthy run of bad results should feel delighted for Koldo Alvarez, Andorra's manager for the past nine years. His side may be ranked 139th in the world, but they battled through their poor form and came out the other side (albeit temporarily – they lost their next match 2-0 to Iceland). He kept his players and coaches motivated when many managers would have simply through in the towel.

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Why DOCs should strive to keep coaches and players motivated

"Form is temporary, class is permanent."

It's a cliche that's often trotted out to explain a string of unsatisfactory performances and results.

As with so many cliches, there's a kernel of truth to it. Good players and coaches don't become bad overnight. But when you're standing in a losing dressing room, this message is easily forgotten.

Defeat can become contagious. All too often, one team's poor form can have a knock-on effect that damages confidence throughout a club or academy.

For the DOC, fighting through a winless streak requires a calm head and the ability to motivate coaches and players. They need to believe that if they concentrate on doing the right things – choosing the right passes, moving into the right spaces, shooting at the right time – the results will come.

5 creative ways to motivate soccer teams

Your job would be much easier if everyone was motivated by the same things.

Unfortunately, that's not the case. Some players need an arm round the shoulder; others need to be fired up by criticism. Some need to be left to their own devices; others thrive within a structured environment.

However, if you're struggling to motivate your club following a disappointing run, the following techniques are a good starting point:

1.) Create a positive environment

It's far easier to motivate players and coaches if the environment at your club is positive and supportive.

In a positive environment, everyone at the club will naturally rally round and battle through a string of poor results. There'll be no pointed fingers, just honest conversations designed to improve performance.

None of this is possible in a negative environment. Scapegoating becomes the norm, which makes it far more challenging to drag your way out of a slump in form.

2.) Plan engaging, varied training sessions

Even the best, most carefully planned training sessions lose their effectiveness over time. Players can easily lapse into "cruise control" or switch off completely if they already know what's coming next. If you end every training session with a series of sprint drills, players may start to unconsciously "hold something back" to make the sprints easier.

At worst, over-repetition of training sessions can be demotivating to players. And it's unlikely to motivate coaches either – after all, no one wants

to give the same instructions over and over again.

The Coaching Manual can help you keep your training sessions fresh. We have a vast catalogue of professional-quality training sessions for your coaches to tap into, whatever age group they're working with or level they're coaching at. Check out our [1v1 pressing masterclass,](#) led by former Manchester United manager David Moyes, for an example of the content available to our subscribers.

3.) Set clear objectives

Particularly when you're working with coaches and older players, realistic and achievable targets can be a major motivator. Best of all, these objectives can help to keep their minds focused on the bigger picture rather than fixating on a couple of poor performances.

Be sure to set goals that are easily understood and relevant to the entire team. Maybe you'll challenge them to keep a certain number of clean sheets over the course of a season, or to finish in or above a certain league position.

Whatever objective you choose, use it to inform future training sessions. For instance, if you're challenging your team to defend more effectively as a unit, you'll need to run plenty of drills around closing down the opposition, marking key players, and defending set pieces.

4.) Recognise and reward positive behaviour

Having identified your objectives, it's up to you and your coaches to ensure they remain at the front of your players' minds. One of the most effective ways to do this is by recognising and rewarding behaviour that's in line with these objectives.

Let's continue the example about clean sheets. This objective gives you an opportunity to applaud players for making a standout contribution to their team's defensive efforts.

Maybe a winger tracked back, closed down their opposite number, won the ball and started a counter-attack. Or maybe a defensive midfielder shut down the threat of the opposition's most creative player. Contributions such as these should be applauded, reminding the team of your objective and motivating individual players to raise their game.

5.) Remember to make it fun

Perhaps most importantly of all, never forget that soccer is meant to be fun. Losing a succession of games can seem like the worst thing in the world to your young players, but it really isn't.

Be sure to keep training sessions entertaining and interactive. Remind teams of their past successes, and continue to celebrate positive behaviours, even if they didn't produce results on the pitch.

And look at it this way: when times are hard, you have the best opportunity to build a strong, supportive, positive club culture. If there are improvements to be made, you'll be able to identify them far easier during a losing streak.

Soccer Club Leadership Styles: Which One Is Best For Your Club

As the DOC, you're the key decision-maker at your soccer club or academy.

You have the final say on a wide range of sporting and operational matters. Recruitment, staff development and coaching philosophy are just some of the areas within your remit.

Essentially, you're involved in almost everything that happens at your organisation. Your style of leadership will therefore have a huge impact on people throughout the club, from coaches to administrative staff, to other members of the backroom team, and even the players. By extension, it will also have a massive effect on your club culture.

But what is your natural leadership style? How are you perceived by the people beneath you? And would a different approach yield better results?

What are "leadership styles", and why are they relevant to soccer clubs?

Think back through the history of soccer.

From Manchester United under Sir Alex Ferguson to Juventus under Giovanni Trapattoni, every successful club has been underpinned by a strong leader. A leader whose players and staff intrinsically understood what is expected of them in any given scenario. But the way those managers instilled a winning environment within their respective clubs – in other words, their leadership styles – varied significantly.

There are three traditional types of leadership style that can be seen across all levels of the beautiful game, from amateur sides to elite clubs. Whether or not you're aware of it, your own leadership style will almost certainly fall into one or more of the following categories:

• Autocratic
• Democratic
• Laissez-faire

Your style will affect the way you communicate with your coaches and players, your attitude to the game, and the way you respond to challenges. So it's in your interest to take the time to define your methods and consider their impact on your club or academy. With that in mind, we'll now take a more in-depth look at each leadership style.

What is autocratic leadership?

Well they…

- Tend to make all the decisions
- Are motivated by completing tasks quickly and effectively

The classic soccer manager. Whether loud and aggressive or quiet and contemplative, autocratic leaders shoulder the burden of responsibility for the vast majority of decisions. They're unlikely to react positively to being offered advice; they know best, and their approach is the correct approach. Anyone that suggests otherwise is a potential threat to their leadership.

Unsurprisingly, autocrats tend to be poor delegators. They crave control over every aspect of the club, so on the rare occasions that they do delegate to a member of their team, it's likely that they consider the task unimportant and not worthy of their attention.

As with all three leadership styles, there are pros and cons to the autocratic approach.

On the plus side, it tends to be highly effective in making quick decisions and imposing them across a large coaching team and playing squad. The sort of person well-suited to steering a club through a crisis, such as a relegation battle.

However, on the flip side, autocratic leaders do little to promote independent thought in players and coaches. In fact, they may actively oppose it. This inevitably leads to friction; consider the number of high-profile players who were swiftly sold by Manchester United during the reign of Sir Alex Ferguson, a classic autocratic leader.

To continue this example, the departure of an autocratic leader can leave a gaping void at the club. Coaches and players who were used to being dictated to suddenly find themselves without a safety net. It's little surprise, therefore, that Manchester United have struggled so much since Ferguson's retirement in 2013.

# What is democratic leadership?

Well they...

- Tend to share decision-making responsibilities
- Are ready and willing to delegate key tasks

Democratic leaders are happy to discuss important decisions. They may form a leadership group of senior coaches and players to regularly talk through key plans and scenarios, and to help them define future strategy.

Whereas autocratic leaders are often vehemently opposed to sharing responsibility, democrats actively welcome delegation. In fact, they may use it as a tactic to help them develop stronger relationships with figures throughout the club. The theory goes that by apportioning ownership of key tasks to a group of people, the group will therefore work harder and grow closer, buoyed by their shared purpose.

Democrats tend to be better than autocrats at building a sense of unity within a club. Coaches and players are trusted to contribute toward the decision-making process, which naturally makes them feel more invested in the group and the club as a whole. Additionally, democrats are often able to make better decisions by considering a wide range of opinions, rather than just their own.

However, democratic leaders are less well-suited than autocrats to taking rapid action to solve a timely problem. The democratic approach naturally creates bureaucracy, which can be a major roadblock to fast decision-making.
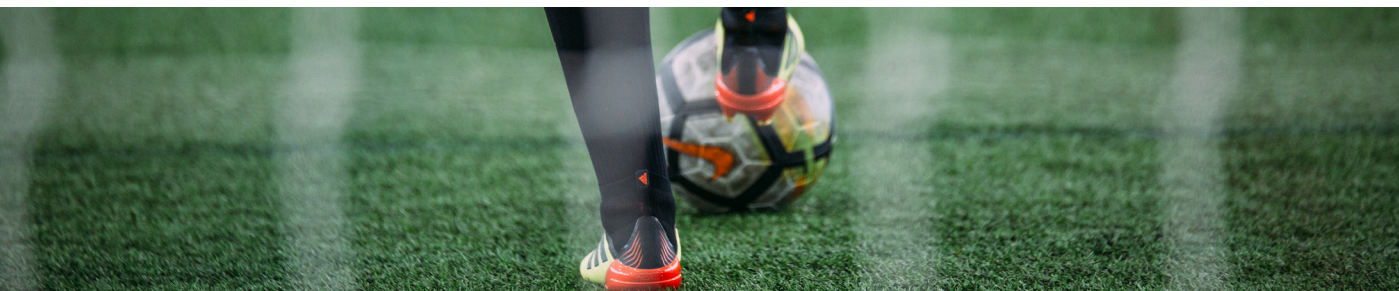
What is laissez-faire leadership?

> **It takes a bold leader to willingly implement the laissez-faire approach.** More often, it happens organically, with players and coaches taking matters into their own hands because they've lost faith in the leader's vision or ability to guide them.

When executed effectively, this approach essentially becomes a supercharged version of democratic leadership. Rather than making decisions themselves, the leader becomes a conduit for enabling the playing or coaching group to make their own decisions. This can be extremely empowering, with everyone at the club sharing equally in successes and failures.

However, the downsides are significant. With no ultimate decision-maker, groups can quickly become unfocused and unmotivated. Arguments are frequent, and it becomes all too easy to simply throw in the towel when mistakes are made.

Kevin Keegan's Newcastle United team are a fine example of the pros and cons of laissez-faire leadership in action.

During the first half of the 1995-96 season, Keegan's approach – essentially, assembling a potent attacking team and allowing them to dictate structure and tactics on the fly – worked wonders, amassing a 12-point lead at the top of the table by February.

But the signing of holding midfielder David Batty and attacker Faustino Asprilla in the February transfer window forced Newcastle to shift away from the simplicity of a 4-4-2 to a more complex 4-2-3-1 formation in order to accommodate the new acquisitions. With a lack of direction from their manager, the team struggled to adapt, were shorn of their attacking edge, and ultimately lost the title race.

Which leadership style is right for you?

None of the three leadership styles is innately better than the others. As we've shown, each has its major strengths and key weaknesses. So which is right for your club?

The answer is to blend the best parts of all three while attempting to steer clear of the weaknesses. Natural autocrats should learn to delegate more effectively; democrats should strive to streamline the decision-making process; laissez-faire leaders should understand when they need to give coaches and players some slack, and when they need to step in and tighten the reins.

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