Football is about talent.

The talent that a professional football club attracts, recruits, develops, engages and retains is their key ingredient to success. While professional football clubs realized that long ago, the corporate world claims to understand the importance of effective talent management, with CEO’s regularly stating it to be their key priority. In reality a lot of companies seem to be struggling with it, when you look at the news that regularly report on widespread low employee engagement at the workplace.

So what can the corporate world learn about talent management from professional football?

Professional football and the corporate world share a similar set of objectives when it comes to their players, respectively employees. Both want to attract and hire the best of them, keep them sufficiently happy to make them deliver high performance, develop them to get better and last but not least to retain them. And it is proven in numerous surveys that effective talent management, which works towards these objectives, is a major contribution to business success.

Talent Management is an end-to-end process that encompasses the entire employee life cycle which translates business objectives and strategy into how an organisation manages its employees.

1) Developing talent from the beginning: Football clubs attract, recruit and develop talent from a very young age and make use of talent management for the individual and the team from the beginning. Corporate talent management is often not aware who their talent is. They find talents often only late in their career and then develop these individual talents - often ignoring younger employees. And it should be them as well, who should be told what it takes to become a future talent to be noticed by management.
2) Engaging with the right people to attain team goals: Often the best players on a team are receiving the most support by the team despite the fact, that they often have certain attitudes and passions which can be difficult to handle. You often hear of difficulties to incorporate superstar divas into the team without affecting their performance. What counts for a football club is their performance in the team. A structured integration where each talent understands how they can grow and benefit from playing on the same team as a super star diva usually addresses issues that could arise. The lack of a structured integration often leads to similar problems in companies. It is necessary that also all other talents know how they can grow and benefit of playing on the same team as a super star diva. This is valid in football as much as in the cooperate world.

In the corporate world people with attitudes and passions are unfortunately often excluded and the saying "it is cold on the top" is unfortunately often true. Imagine the possibilities if this were to change in the corporate world on a larger scale.

3) Identifying with the brand and adding value: In attracting the best players it is important to have a good brand image in the football world. More so, it is important to realise that your players form part of that image. FC Copenhagen had during the 2008 and 2009 season two Czech National team players under contract and the European football world was wondering, how a club from the relative small Danish Superliga managed to attract them. The first Czech player who was hired and relocated with his family to Denmark was fully supported with the relocation and integration of him and his family into the new country. There was also a structured approach to jointly define the objectives and his role in the team. It was vital that the player could identify with the club’s image, had the individual attention and was aware of his personal development opportunities. All through a structured approach to jointly define objectives. He became an Ambassador for FC Copenhagen who loved his job, the environment and the clubs structured relocation approach. So when his national team mate, looking for a new club, asked him, he was telling his good integration story and he made his choice.

The two talented Czech players raised the performance of the whole team and the organization not only with the help of their own performance but also by placing high demands on the environment and their teammates’ performance. Their attitude also encouraged other talented players and the youth players at the academy to perform better.

Talent looks to join companies with values that are representing their own. In the corporate world your employer brand image is becoming ever more important with social media and websites like glassdoor.com creating an unprecedented transparency about how work and life is inside a company. The majority of people looking for qualified jobs use nowadays the internet and friends and contacts to research a future potential employer before making their choice to apply for a job. More focus on how you manage your talent, its happiness, engagement, development, performance and retention is what is needed to create the employer image that you want to attract the talent that you want to hire.

4) Feedback, at the right time: Performance management in the corporate world is typically based on annually or bi-annually formal performance reviews, where past performance is discussed and objectives for the following year are set. In football these performance assessments take place several times a week during training and on match days. Besides constant informal feedback, you receive weekly evaluations and every three months reviews of your development and objectives. As a football player your performance is constantly monitored and fed back to you. And once or twice a week, you get the crucial verdict if you are in the starting line-up or sit on the bench. In addition to
the performance feedback that the coach and team management give, it’s the media who evaluate your performance and share it even on TV, the web and in print.

Is it impossible for the corporate world – with not just one but many teams – to give the same attention to their individual employees? Could the middle managers and team leaders play a role in the informal feedback on the job throughout the year?

A culture that encourages informal feedback helps employees to stay focussed and makes the annual performance reviews less of an unwelcome surprise. In addition the regular performance reviews should focus more on the individual talent of the employee and identifying ways how the company can support them to develop their full potential on the job. In such a high performance culture as in football clubs it is important to give attention to the individual needs of your players, all your players. The super star diva will have different needs than a young player or a foreign player that just joined and last but not least the players in the squad who do not get to play regularly. A talent wants to contribute and wants to make a difference. Therefore the individual goal-setting process in football takes into account the players, their individual needs and shortcomings into their detailed development plans. All those are aligned and support the ultimate objectives of the club, e.g. develop talents, winning trophies or play European cup football. Setting a talent development plan together with the talent and sticking to it is of utmost importance and something many companies tend to fail with.

5) Value of relocation support: Employee Mobility is an integral part of talent management, often used to develop competencies and skills of employees. In football Mobility plays a role, when hiring a foreign player or a player from a domestic club elsewhere. It is often a long and challenging process to assign a player and includes often three parties that agree such a deal, the two clubs involved and the player. But after the financial discussions are done, it means that a player has to move with his family to a new city, often on very short notice. With the increasing internationalisation corporate talent management also has to include international transfers. If you are aiming your international talent to be able to not only lead and handle negotiations involving other cultures or negotiations but also people management, both experience and research shows that the chances of success of your talent are diminishing if you do not provide a proper cultural training and relocation support for international transfers.

Else Christensen, Managing Director of Relocare Group, Denmark states that “An attraction and relocation plan should always be based on the expected output from your newly transferred talent. The three key questions in this context are “How long is the employee expected to stay?” "How quickly should he or she be able to perform?”; "What are their goals and how will they achieve them?” A good relocation plan will include those elements.” Experience from Denmark shows, that assistance with the personal matters such as leisure activities in the relocation plan is crucial for retention and that cultural training really matters for sharing knowledge. For years relocation has been about providing a fast start - Talents go where they can grow to shine.

Else Christensen says that “Scientific research shows that job content and professional development are the most important aspects of accepting a job abroad, but right after that comes a good personal life. The job content is the main reason to attract - but the lack of a good personal life including their families is often the reason why people leave sooner than expected. Unhappy people can’t focus on the job.”

Companies sending employees across borders need to pay attention on improving the lives of international assignees and their families, to enable them to be able to focus on their jobs and to retain them. It is therefore necessary to make the satisfaction of your assignees a top priority while developing mobility strategies that define policies, processes and structures which manage the multiple challenges of international assignments.
6) Retaining high performers: In football as in the corporate world it is important to retain your high-performing players, respectively employees. At the same time, these are the ones who have the best chances to score a job in another club, respectively company. Life-long employment with the same company is a thing of the past and patch-work careers have become the norm. The same holds true for the comparatively short careers of active football players. FC Copenhagen managed with their structured talent management, where defined individual development plans and caring attention to all their players lead over time to success to retain several local and foreign players, who ended up being with the club for 5-6 years. They even managed to recruit several Danish players, who after several years abroad returned home successfully.

The bottom line is that if employees love their work and the environment you have created for them, they will perform better and continuously help you to achieve the results you wish for. Despite obvious differences between a football club and the corporate world, the lessons to care more for the wellbeing of your employees by the use of jointly defined objectives and a structured talent management approach, are worth being studied, to see how they can improve the success of a company.