



Case Study

Team Management Profile

Hunting as a pack



The re-emergence of Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club into the sunlit uplands of the Premier League has much to do with the distinctive style of manager Nuno Espírito Santo. But what will keep it there is a new and more dynamic leadership and management approach throughout the club – from doctors and sports scientists to sponsorship and ecommerce experts. As Wolves is discovering, the success of a football club rests on more than its players and coaches. The Team Management Profile has played a starring role in the turnaround.

Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club – ‘Wolves’ – has a long and proud history. Formed as St Luke’s FC in 1877, the club was a founding member of the Football League in 1888, and has played at Molineux Stadium since 1889. The 1980s and 1990s were a turbulent time, characterised by phases of financial crisis, decline and rebuild, and between 2003 and 2012 Wolves was twice promoted to the Premier League, only to be relegated to League One the following season. Through all this, fans, players and club staff remained faithful, united by a sense of ‘happy mediocrity’ encapsulated in the motto ‘Wolves Ay We’ – in other words: ‘We’re Wolves, aren’t we?’.

But in 2016 everything changed. Chinese investment group Fosun bought the club, with the intention of making it an integral part of its ‘Happiness Pillar’, and embarked on a major investment drive, in terms of both financial support and ambitious leadership direction. The fact that everyone got behind the change is testimony to the vision and character of chairman Jeff Shi; to the open and receptive nature of the club itself; to the appointment of Nuno Espírito Santo as head coach; and, last but not least, to the appointment as head of HR (now HR director) Zoe Brough, who implemented a management development programme that had the Team Management Profile at its heart.

From the start Shi had high aspirations for the club – both on and off the pitch. He wanted Wolves not just to get into the Premier League again, but to stay there, in no lower than sixth position. And he wanted the club to become more commercial, and less dependent on football for the enjoyment it delivers and the money it makes. He never denigrated the ‘family atmosphere’ that had long characterised the club, but he described the transition he wanted everyone to make as ‘moving from a village mentality to a city mentality’.

Realising he needed to be close to the action, Shi moved himself and his family to the UK





from Shanghai in 2017, with Brough joining the club in early 2018, the year Wolves re-entered the Premier League. Shi was in a hurry to change things and took the view that if people weren't 'on the bus' then they weren't right for the new era – a philosophy in-keeping with the Fosun culture of dynamism, ambition and entrepreneurialism.

But Brough, though she bought into Shi's vision, believed people needed an opportunity to prove themselves. "There'd been no investment in people, no management training, no vision, no sense of 'what great looks like'," she says. "People were satisfied with poor performance and they had low expectations because they'd never been given the chance to see that they could do things differently." Brough had form. She joined Wolves after three years as HR manager at Manchester City. "I know what people can do once they have a vision and values to work with, and get investment in, and honest feedback on, their development," she says. Shi listened to her advice, and she knew she could work with his desire to 'take small steps quickly', seeing the opportunity for some significant quick wins on a journey of incremental change.

When she joined, the first ever head of HR, she was on her own for eight months. "I just rolled up my sleeves and got into it," she recalls. "I spent all day every day with managers and staff, going back to basics, asking them what things were like, what they wanted to see. It must've been a bit weird for them suddenly having this person digging into their lives, particularly given HR's reputation as 'the fun police'. But the culture of friendliness really helped: everyone really embraced me."

Vision, values and competencies

The club was already on a roll: it was on course to re-join the Premier League, it had bought some fabulous new players – like Porto prodigy Ruben Neves – and a series of focus groups were underway with fans, staff, players, coaches and the community to determine what the club's values should be. The discussions distilled five key values –

progression (at the heart of everything), unity, determined, humble and bright – and a 'One Pack' strapline. After launching the values, Brough ran a series of workshops with the leaders in the club, from both the Molineux stadium and the Compton training ground (Shi was keen to get more integration between what had always been two distinct groups), to determine a collective view on what role-model behaviours were required to drive the new culture – embodied in 'the Wolves spirit' – down through the organisation.

“ The Team Management Profile was everyone's favourite bit of the management development programme

These values and behaviours were embedded into recruitment, onboarding, appraisal and reward processes, and reinforced in a peer recognition scheme whereby role-model exemplars are celebrated every month by respected club captain Conor Coady.

Once the new culture and mindset were identified and understood, and behaviour had started to change, Brough turned her attention to the competencies 'great' managers in Wolves would need in order to meet Shi's ambitious targets. She brought in the Lemontree Leadership Consultancy team, led by director Helen Hinds, a licensed practitioner in the Team Management Systems (TMS) profiling tools. Hinds facilitated a workshop for the leadership team, which led to a competency framework with four core elements: leading and managing self, leading and managing individuals, leading and managing the team, and leading and managing operational performance. An overriding competence was to be 'Wolves savvy' – that is, understand what matters to the Wolves business. Hinds and Brough turned this framework into a 180-degree tool that allowed the management team to benchmark their effectiveness and then built a Wolves Management Development Programme (MDP)

to teach the tools and skills necessary to embody those competencies.

There were a number of elements to the 12-month programme, which ran as a pilot for 16 top managers in 2018-2019. First, all participants completed their 180-degree competency assessment, and arrived at the start of the programme with an individual tailored development plan for the year. Three residential modules were interspersed with coaching provided by the Lemontree team, and 'realignment' meetings with their own line managers, to help them focus on the specific competencies they needed to develop. At the end of the year they reassessed their competency skills using the 180-degree tool.

Fundamental to the MDP was understanding 'what great looks like'. Brough and Hinds arranged private visits for the participants to venues such as St George's Park, home of the Football Association (FA), and Olympic gold medallist Chris Boardman's Performance Centre, for inspiration.

Then they all did the Team Management Profile...

The Team Management Profile

The tool was an obvious choice to underpin the MDP given its power in building awareness of self and others – which is, points out Brough, "an indispensable first step in learning how to manage yourself and others better." She continues: "Importantly, it demonstrated to everyone that it's ok to have 'blind spots' or areas where you're less strong – even in the field of elite sport. It's important to own them and build bridges to compensate for them, but they don't mean that there's something wrong with you."

The participants were highly receptive to the Team Management Profile, particularly since they'd fully engaged with the idea of progression by the time they did it. In fact, says Brough, "it was everyone's favourite bit of the programme." When Hinds got everyone on their feet doing the exercises – like standing



on a line with those with a more Extrovert preference at one end and those with a more Introvert preference at the other – there was a lot of laughing and eye-rolling as people started to better understand why their relationships with others were as they were. “There were some people who couldn’t wait to go off and discuss their Profiles and how they could improve their relationships based on what they now knew,” recalls Brough. “That was really encouraging.”

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But what did the spread of preferences for the team as a whole tell Brough and Hinds about the make-up of the management team at Wolves?

Most people were clustered on the Organisers side of the Wheel: when related roles were taken into account as well as major ones there were 11 Assessor-Developers, 16 Thruster-Organisers and ten Concluder-Producers. The pair weren’t surprised: “Football works on a repetitive annual cycle, and it’s fast moving, so you bash out what you need to bash out, quickly. You have to do that or you’d have no games,” says Brough.

But when it came to the rest of the Wheel, the picture was more concerning for them. There was just one Creator-Innovator, one Upholder-Maintainer, two Controller-Inspectors, one Explorer-Promoter and no Reporter-Advisers – and the numbers increased only marginally when people’s related roles were taken into account.

“We were clearly less strong at evaluating what we’d done, so we just continued doing the same things without reflecting how we might do things differently – with better results,” says Brough.

‘Doing’ is clearly important: “If everyone was

on the other side of the Wheel, we’d not be able to put match days on,” says Brough. However, “being in a perpetual cycle of doing without reflecting” was affecting performance. “Understanding the whole process helped us to see where and how to redress the balance. We don’t want to lose the energy we have, but we do need to challenge ourselves, be critical, explore different things, and encourage innovation and entrepreneurialism.”

The Team Management Profile work provided ample material for individuals to explore in the one-to-one coaching sessions, as well as helping to inform Brough and Hinds’ coaching approach.

Reaping the benefits

The club has already reaped considerable benefits from the programme – and in some areas there is “quite definitely” a causal link between the work done and improved performance, both on and off the field, says Brough.

“Everyone has the same attitude and mindset now, they’ve bought into the vision and new direction, and performance is now measured by new criteria – including coming up with ideas to move their own areas forward,” she says. “There’s a common language and reference points – when we ask ourselves what great looks like now, we know.”

The simple fact of spending time together has been invaluable, she adds. “For example, the head of ticketing and the head of physio, who are based on the two separate sites, got to know each other and find out about each other’s day-to-day challenges and motivations. They’re no longer a mystery to each other. As a result, there’s a much better sense that we’re all one team, and we’re more open and communicative and mutually supportive.”

But there are tangible benefits too. There’s a bigger fan base, higher-profile sponsors (there’s a new partnership with Sure, for example, which sponsors players’ training kit), and record retail sales as a result of attention

to and investment in the club’s ecommerce offering – “it was previously ‘mail order’,” says Brough, “now we ship worldwide.” They’re also developing an e-sports department, which takes them into the new area of professional gaming, and launched a Wolves fashion brand at a roof-top catwalk event in Shanghai in the summer of 2019.

Steve Morton, head of commercial at Wolves, leads the team that’s bringing in new sponsorship deals. His role has narrowed to become more focused on sponsorship, something he initially found difficult, but quickly found empowering. “I was given licence to try new things, with strong internal support,” he says. “Our team was challenged to act and feel like an independent company, which meant reducing our reliance on external agencies. And this was in a difficult economic climate, where we were largely working remotely – which is particularly tough for sales people who are used to being out and about. I also had to mentor eight new staff who joined the sponsorship team during lockdown.”

“ Being in a perpetual cycle of doing without reflecting was affecting performance

But he rose to the challenge. In September his team secured a partnership with Aeroset, an aerospace-parts provider, as Wolves’ official shirt-sleeve sponsor. The deal was innovative on two counts: it was the first time an aerospace company had partnered with a Premier League team, and Wolves delivered the deal without the help of a third party.

Morton admits he’s had to ‘reinvent’ himself – and was helped to do so by the MDP, including the Team Management Profile. He has a Split Wheel – his major role preference is Thruster-Organiser and his two related role preferences are Creator-Innovator and Assessor-Developer. There were two significant ‘aha moments’, he recalls: “One, as a Thruster-Organiser I can sometimes misinterpret

people's feelings and I realised I maybe wasn't interacting with others as well as I should be. Two, I discovered I was quite Introverted in terms of how I thought and communicated, so the coaching focused on how to put my head above the parapet and develop 'a more extrovert approach' in order to take advantage of opportunities."

On-pitch performance

But how have the MDP and Team Management Profile influenced performance on the field? On the face of it, you might think the team's improved results (they've been in the Premier League for the past two seasons and look set to remain there next season) are down to the efforts of Nuno and his fellow coaches, along with some high-profile new signings. But that's only part of the story: these visible agents of success are underpinned by unparalleled levels of collaboration and trust between players, coaches, the medical team and the club owners.

One of the distinguishing features of Wolves is that it has one of the smallest and fittest squads in the Premier League: in their first season Wolves had the lowest level of injuries of any team in the league's history. "In 2018-2019, the season Nuno took us into the Premier League, we had just five injuries," says club doctor Matt Perry. He explains that Wolves missed just 146 days to injury that season, 17% of the mean value for the other 19 clubs, which was 862. In comparison, the most days lost to injury by a club during the 2018-2019 season was 1385. Wolves' contribution alone significantly reduced the Premier League mean to 826..

This year there are a couple of long-term injuries, so Wolves figures will regress towards the mean. "That good year was an outlier," he says, "although the overall picture last year saw us again with the lowest rate of any club when related to matches played."

Wolves achieve this feat by having a small dressing room: "We have 12 senior outfield players and six youngsters developing at the beginning of the season, so everyone feels needed all the time. When we go to a match every first-team player is on the bus," explains Perry.

The link between the small squad and the low level of injuries is causal, he continues. Every player feels valued, so works hard to be at the top of their game all the time – but they do so because the team relies on them rather than that someone else is breathing down their neck waiting to take their place. And the fact that every player is valued is reflected in an unusually collaborative training and medical regime.

Wolves uses a training-led model, not a medical model, explains Perry. In essence, the medical staff prepare every player every day

to ensure they are fit to train, and then let the coach know about any weaknesses so they can take account of it in training. After training, the staff will work on the problem. "The only time we ever take them out of training is if they aren't well enough to get outside, and even that's through the coach's permission," he says. "So a guy has a sore ankle, we do a bit of mobilisation, some treatments, some pre-activation, then he reports to train; the coach sees him working, if he has a problem the training is adapted by the coach, then we treat him in the afternoon. Everyone feels good about it. The player doesn't get a piece of paper giving him a diagnosis and a prognosis, because that can limit him."

Perry takes no credit for the approach: when Nuno introduced it on his arrival (with six fellow Portuguese coaches) in 2017 Perry admits he was "terrified" by the idea of ceding control of a 'patient' until they were fully fit. "But they were patient, taught us, trusted us, got buy-in from the players, and we've all evolved. The coaches understand their responsibility to keep the players fit and healthy, the medical team has a responsibility to ensure the players train, and the players trust us."

“ It's about understanding what you bring to the table, and then bringing out skills in others that make you effective as a collective. If you're all similar you just fall down the same rabbit holes

What Perry should take credit for, however, is the third part of the puzzle: within the club it is seen as a shared duty to ensure the players stay fit and healthy. Until two years ago Perry was medical adviser at the Premier League, and while he was there was influenced by a number of colleagues, including occupational health practitioners, to encourage an emphasis on the duty of care of the medical team, and the employers' corporate duty of care, which had long existed in employment law.

"My thought wasn't original," says Perry. "Other industries have a better-developed approach to researching injury than football, where individual clubs still have no collective responsibility for player welfare but instead are in competition. There is a perverse incentive to 'sweat the assets'. But I felt football authorities (the FA, Football League and Premier League) should work with the PFA [the players' union] to insist on safe systems in clubs. There's still some way to go on this."

An extremely modest man – "it's not rocket science to see occupational health and sports medicine as twin 'duties of care' in professional sport" – he nevertheless admits that he's "logical and eclectic when it comes

to putting disparate ideas together into a conceptual model that works across different disciplines." And he's able to do this, he continues, because "I sit on the boundaries of different disciplines, so I've had to see things from lots of perspectives."

He wasn't surprised then, that when he did the Team Management Profile he came out as having a 3-way Split Wheel – Creator-Innovator, Controller-Inspector and Thruster-Organiser. "I've done other psychometric profiles, but I was interested in how well this one 'got' me," he says, adding that it reflects his personality and experience. A former GP, he points out that he's had to be adaptable, responsive, able to synthesise different ideas to solve problems, and to communicate in simple terms.

What also struck him as different about the Team Management Profile was that it doesn't highlight areas that are not your preference as 'something to be fixed'. "It's about understanding what you bring to the table, and then encouraging and bringing out skills in others that make you effective as a collective. If you're all similar you just fall down the same rabbit holes."

The Team Management Profile revisited

In November 2020 Brough and Hinds ran a Team Management Profile workshop for the 22 most senior managers in the club: new people had joined the ranks, and Brough wanted to show everyone, including Shi, what the management population now looks like. Not only was the team Wheel more complete, but a practical exercise provided a text-book illustration of the benefits of a diverse team.

In 'the restaurant exercise' Hinds split people into three different groups and gave them 20 minutes to come up with a plan for setting up a restaurant 'in six months', from concept to opening its doors. Participants didn't realise that two groups were made up of people from two different parts of the Wheel, and that the third was representative of the whole Wheel. It came as no surprise to Hinds and Brough that two of the groups focused, respectively, on 'north of the Wheel' tasks like coming up with the concept, and 'east side' aspects like hiring staff, creating menus, getting tables and chairs, while the third group covered all the bases, from research, through execution, to checking everything would work.

For Scott Sellars, head of the Wolves Academy, this was "the eureka moment" – even though he'd done the Team Management Profile previously as part of the MDP. "That exercise really brought home to me the value of a diverse team," he says. Sellars is one of the few senior managers at Wolves whose preferences are south of the Wheel: he's a Controller-Inspector with related role preferences of Concluder-Producer and Upholder-Maintainer.

It's an unusual Profile for a leader, says Hinds, but for Sellars, understanding his Profile validated his approach. "The way I work is to create a framework and constantly check, inspect and challenge what's going on – why we succeeded and why didn't – and I'm very evidence-based. I think that's why I have a good reputation for developing people," he says.

Nevertheless, he embraced the opportunity to learn and augment his approach – not least to fulfil Shi's ambition to make the Academy self-sustaining. "I learn through experience, including mistakes, so I used the coaching on the MDP [with David Rogers from Lemontree] as a sounding board as much as anything," says Sellars. "Academies can be cosy environments. Everyone's now much more accountable for developing more elite players on whom we can get a return."

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Given Covid restrictions, the November workshop was virtual. It took a lot of organising, but there were some clear benefits to the online medium. Max Fitzgerald, head of media, is the sole Upholder-Maintainer among senior managers. He is also quite Introverted. "In a wider group, I typically take a back seat, and tend to speak only when I feel strongly about something," he says. "But in this virtual forum everyone was involved, which meant the 'ideas people' didn't just run away with it. Maybe it's less easy to hide online, but I also think people feel less intimidated."

Fitzgerald has done the Team Management Profile twice and gained a great deal from it. "At Wolves most people are on the opposite side of the Wheel from me, and are constantly pushing forward: I'm the one who says 'I'm not sure about this' or 'have you thought about this'. Doing the Team Management Profile made me feel my position was vindicated. Also, understanding that the role I play is important, and at the same time learning to work more constructively with people who have different preferences, has helped me progress."

Fitzgerald works closely with Russell Jones, general manager marketing and commercial growth, and, he admits, "there used to be

some negative energy, based on his frustration about my lack of quick action, and me feeling that he moved things too quickly before fully evaluating the benefits and pitfalls." Each now appreciates the other's value: "A project would never get off the ground if I was managing it, but he needs someone to challenge him to prevent him rushing ahead so fast that things are missed and mistakes made," says Fitzgerald. "Even being able to talk to each other about it was extremely helpful."

The Team Management Profile has also influenced Fitzgerald's approach to hiring: "Both Russell and I have tended to hire in our own image. For example, my team is very harmonious, we have shared goals and get on inside and outside work. But we're sometimes too cautious about trying new things. The next time I recruit I'd like to go for someone who's more disruptive, will ruffle a few feathers, so we can move forward faster. We're 'an enterprise' now, not a football club, and every team has to look at ways to diversify."

Looking ahead

The next phase of the MDP kicked off at the end of 2020. A pilot, it will take the form of a three-month intense one-to-one mentoring programme, built and provided by Lemontree, for three key senior managers, focusing on what they need to do to become 'even greater' in their roles, and honing a more entrepreneurial edge. Shi is not resting on his laurels – he wants Wolves to win the Premier League and to become an international brand – and nor is anyone else.

The focus now is on 'growing the capacity for growth' throughout the club, says Hinds: "Even having redoubled their efforts, the senior leaders can only do so much on their own: giving them the tools to unlock their teams' performance will lead to exponential growth."

There's a keen appetite among the club's senior managers for Team Management Profile workshops for their own teams. For example, after a restructure, the 'sports science and medicine department' now spans both the Academy and First Team departments, and Perry wants to ensure that Academy staff get the same levels of support for their personal development and strategic direction as everyone else. "Also, hierarchy can be counter-productive in professional teams:

each person needs to work out how to work together rather than be told," he says. What's more, the team is embarking on a series of big projects, and Perry wants to ensure that each project team is as complete, in terms of preferences, as possible.



Brough pays testimony to the club for embracing change so wholeheartedly over the past two years. "Football is tough, and Wolves has had more than its fair share of highs and lows, but the staff stayed resilient and passionate," she says. "Then we came in and planted a few seeds about how things could be different – and the club is now in an entirely new place, in terms of its vision, energy, and pace, from where it was two years ago. People are looking outwards."

They're still Wolves – but they're a much hungrier pack.