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Mind games? Learning from Jose Mourinho about improving team performance. Plus a timely lesson from Alex Ferguson

Mourinho, now at the helm of Chelsea Football Club, is known for his personality and style, and for winning – useful traits for a leader. We can also learn from his approach to improving performance. Mourinho, along with Andre Villas Boas and other younger managers, appears to be more focused on unlocking the power of mind than just on physical and tactical skills.

Their aim is to push much of what the players do into habit – procedural memory which is less conscious – freeing the mind to think and decide better and faster. For example: with training sessions lasting 90 minutes, body and mind create a habit of delivering performance for the length of a match. (When Villas Boas' Tottenham started losing goals in the final minutes of matches, he introduced unexpected interventions at the end of 90 minute training sessions – to create extra focus in the dying minutes. They stopped making late errors.)

Managers delegate to the team for a match – they have to stand and watch while events play out no longer under their control. Things don't always turn out as planned – they need players to make the right decisions, adapting and being creative when need or opportunity arises. "We promote decision-making by developing instinct", said Mourinho.

How can this apply to leadership teams and the way senior people work in organisations?

- **Make the routine, more routine, so you can forget about it:** If meetings start on time, have a widely understood set of standards on agendas, chairing and behaviour, then the mind is freed up to focus on productive discussion and decisions. Being tough about ways of working can appear to some as bureaucratic and trivial. Good discipline and habit can increase freedom and creativity for real priorities.
- **Plan team development sessions around real work:** When designing leadership forums, offsites and workshops, use them as safe moments to do real work in new ways. Introducing new approaches to issues and decisions creates habits to take back to day-to-day work. For example: introducing the voice of stakeholders directly into the room, or looking at multiple options for a decision and not just Yes/No. Teams also need unstructured downtime together but that is better done with regular dinners or drinks.
- **Improve the quality and speed of responsiveness:** We work in a less-predictable, faster-moving world. We must rely less on the certainty of planning, research and set pieces – and be better at scanning events, and responding in ways that support goals and purpose. Clear delegation, with clear boundaries, and training for improved decision-making, all help.

If Mourinho is the new 'old man' of English football, what of Alex Ferguson, retired elder statesman? He is, maybe, seen as the Jack Welch of soccer: a long, unbeatably successful tenure and a style that may belong to the past. A flurry of business-related Ferguson publications includes predictable themes and 'lessons': create an 'always win' mentality; never lose control (even of your bosses!); defend your team (and boss) in public: be tough but fair; put succession planning and development of talent first; and continually evolve.

Perhaps Ferguson's most practical advice - for business leaders - is on timely feedback. If he saw a player underperform, or disappoint him in other ways, he provided feedback immediately (and usually privately) and then moved on. That way everyone is always looking forward, is never in any doubt and is building their confidence. Timeliness is everything.