

SOCIETY

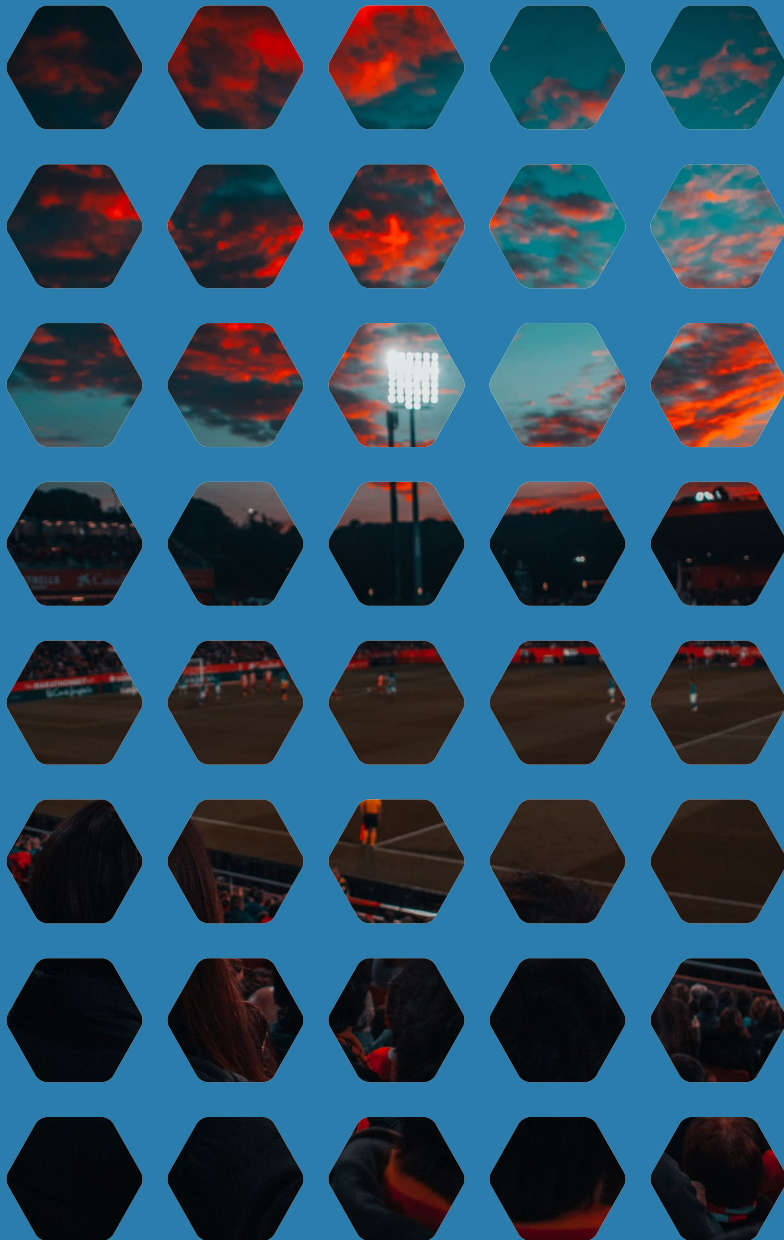
WINNING TEAMS NEED BOTH DIEGO MARADONA AND FRANZ BECKENBAUER

THE SPORTS WORLD NEEDS CREATIVE
FREE-THINKERS AS WELL AS STRUCTURED
INNOVATORS



Martin Carlsson-Wall

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In this article, I argue that organizations can become winners after COVID-19 by broadening their view of creativity and changing how they make decisions. To accomplish this, a model for paradoxical decision-making is introduced. Learning from the sports world, winning teams embrace tensions and contrasts. To secure the full potential, they create a culture where players similar to both Diego Maradona and Franz Beckenbauer¹ feel at home.

How social distancing has forced sport organizations to do “creativity a la Maradona”

On May 9th, the sport and TV-journalist Johan Croneman wrote an article in Dagens Nyheter (the largest morning newspaper in Sweden) with the title “I am in mourning, life without sport is meaningless”. Echoing the frustration that many supporters in Sweden felt (and surely all over the world), Croneman described his emotions caused by COVID-19 as:

Of course I knew that sports played an important part in my life, but hardly up to this extent. I am in mourning. I read, I watch films and TV, but the void is a bottomless hole. It is not easy to admit that you have been so deeply dependent on this spiritual superficiality, but there is nothing to do but surrender. My life without sports is meaningless. Old games are no comfort.

In early May 2020, the sports world was in chaos. Many club presidents, athletes and supporters were in doubt. Would their club (or sport) survive the pandemic? Still, as the saying goes, “necessity is the mother of invention”. In this article, I want to highlight acts of creativity in terms of crisis and how organizations both within and outside the sports sector can learn from these and become more innovative.

¹ When references are made to Diego Maradona and Franz Beckenbauer, I am primarily referring to their careers as soccer players and the creative acts they performed on the pitch.

In the academic literature, creativity in times of crisis is linked to a concept called bricolage. Being inspired by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, bricolage can be defined as “making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005 p.333). The bricoleur is an individual that “makes do with the resources at hand” and often comes up with unconventional but often highly innovative solutions. Using a sports analogy, this is “creativity à la Maradona”.

During COVID-19, we have seen several impressive acts of bricolage. For example, in North America, an early example was the virtual draft conducted by the National Football League (NFL). Between April 23-25, the NFL hosted the annual draft in a virtual format. Broadcasting from his private home, commissioner Roger Goodell worked with the opportunities offered to him. Instead of a luxurious event in Las Vegas, the more low-key draft was described by both media and fans as a smashing success. In terms of viewers, the virtual draft had 55 million viewers, a 35 percent increase from 2019 and it was perceived as more authentic and real. Summarizing the event, Sam Farmer, a journalist at the Los Angeles Times wrote:

The NFL has a problem with this draft format: It's better than the old way. Now the league has to figure out how to incorporate this authentic, not-too-perfect style into the glitzy extravaganza typical drafts have become.

In Sweden, Hammarby Football Club has demonstrated several acts of bricolage during the crisis. Under their slogan “Today I Am Strong”, an early project was to deliver food boxes to hospital staff. Rallying their restaurant partners and asking their supporters to donate money, the club quickly sold more than 4,000 food boxes². On Hammarby’s website, one could read:

² One of the first clubs to deliver food boxes to hospital staff was AIK Football, Hammarby’s rival in Stockholm. In the middle of June, they have sold over 8000 food boxes.

In these times when cooperation and support are more needed than ever, we want those who stand in the front line of this pandemic fight to be carried forward by strong winds.

Another act of “Maradona creativity” was the song “We’ll See You Soon Again”. Composed by the two fans Magnus Carlson and David Ritschard (both professional musicians), the song was released at the end of May and created a lot of positive energy within the Hammarby Football community. In addition to the food boxes and the Hammarby song, the club has also sold virtual tickets and engaged in several other acts of bricolage.

However, similar to a soccer game, the enthusiasm of “Maradona creativity” can sometimes become too much. An example of this was the televised “internal game” that Hammarby organized at Tele2 Arena on April 24th³. Commenting on the event, Jesper Jansson, the Sporting Director of Hammarby Football, said to the media before the game:

We try to be creative during this period and have different competition elements during the training sessions to increase the pace and energy among the players.

At first, media and fans were positive. If Swedish citizens can follow social distancing recommendations in restaurants, why not broadcast a normal training session and give the fans something to talk about? As an additional feature of “the game”, Zlatan Ibrahimović, Sweden’s best soccer player of all time, would be participating. During the spring of 2020, he had acquired a minority stake in Hammarby and was now training with the team while waiting for the Italian league to start, to

³ I write “games” in quotation marks because normal games had been prohibited by the Swedish Public Health Agency. What Hammarby Football claimed was that the difference between practicing 11 against 11 on the training ground was very slight compared to practicing/playing on Tele2 Arena. It was in their interpretation “a training session that was moved to Tele2 [Arena] and broadcasted”. The debate on whether it was a game or not was also addressed by the commentators. For example, in addition to changing the playing time to 30 minutes x 3 and not 45 minutes x 2, one commentator also noted that some players did not wear shin pads and that they moreover did not tackle each other.

resume his position in AC Milan. However, journalists soon started to question the game. Was this too creative? In a press conference, the Swedish State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell said:

Our rules are clear: there should not be any games on a senior level. What you then define as a game and not a game ... I leave that question to the Swedish Football Association and the Swedish Sports Confederation. But the rules are very clear.

Responding to questions from the media, the General Secretary of the Swedish Football Association, Håkan Sjöstrand, firmly stated that there was no room for creative interpretations:

There is a pandemic going on right now and then there is no room for creative interpretations and trying to find loopholes that can risk a negative outcome. It is very important that we act in a responsible way and with a broad margin keep within the authorities’ decisions and recommendations. I assume that everyone has understood this.

We therefore see that creativity is a fine balancing act. On the one hand, one needs to be innovative and think outside the box. On the other hand, similar to a soccer team, if one gets carried away and lets “Maradona” dictate the game, this can result in unexpected negative surprises.

Balancing different types of creativity – a model for paradoxical decision-making

To balance contrasting styles of creativity, academic research has highlighted the need for “selective bricolage” (Baker & Nelson, 2005). While it is important to have players like Diego Maradona who can improvise and do the impossible, winning is also dependent on having structured players like the legendary defender Franz Beckenbauer⁴.

These more traditional innovators are very important because they provide creativity in relation to long-term systems and processes (Duy-medjian & Rüling, 2010). Instead of constantly engaging in unconventional acts, winning teams therefore carefully select when and how the bricoleur(s) should act.

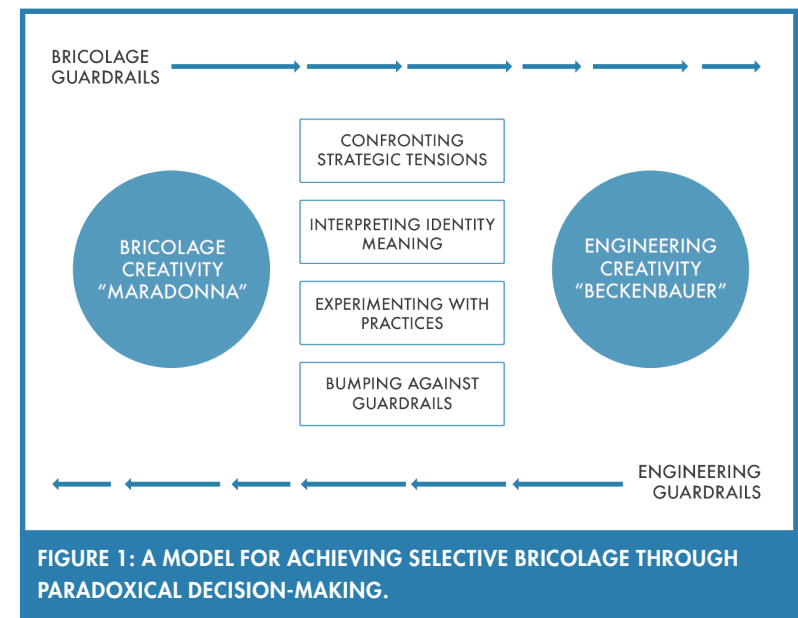
Figure one describes a model for how selective bricolage could be realized. A central part is to go beyond the message of “balance is important” and instead focus on how this is done. A first step is to actively confront strategic tensions. In this case, we have discussed strategic tensions in relation to two different views of creativity (bricolage vs. engineering), but strategic tensions can also be related to space (physical vs. digital) or time (short-term vs. long-term). By actively confronting and exploring strategic tensions, energy is released and organizations learn about different perspectives (Smith & Besharov, 2019).

The first step leads to a second step called interpreting identity meaning. When organizations like Hammarby Football start to explore strategic tensions it normally leads to reflections about the organization’s identity. Historically, Hammarby has been a club closer to bricolage and “creativity à la Maradona”. Coming from the working-class neighborhood of Stockholm, the club has stereotypically been called bohemian and rebellious. However, during recent years, a strong trend towards professionalization has been seen. This more “Beckenbauer” type of operation has caused internal discussions about the club’s identity. Some stakeholders have argued that this change is needed, while others have felt that the club’s soul could be in jeopardy.

To avoid a strategy that is too much focused on either bricolage or engineering, paradoxical thinking emphasizes the continuous experimentation of practices. This means that a more incremental and bottom-up focus is preferred. For example, to balance a more data-driven

⁴ Similar to Diego Maradona, Franz Beckenbauer is one of the best players in the world of soccer. Known as “der Kaiser” (the emperor), Beckenbauer has won the World Championships both as a player and as a coach. During the 1970s he was the top defender in the world and after his career was over, he has worked as both the head coach for the German national team and as the President for Bayern München. Both on and off the field, Beckenbauer has been known for his systematic yet still creative way of playing and leading his teams.

approach in making decisions, it can also be important to allow for some unconventional and more “crazy” practices in how the club is run. A bump in the guardrail sets in motion a process of learning and reflection. Why did the “Maradona” or “Beckenbauer” perspective become too dominant? What aspects were the result of systematic decisions? Which aspects could not have been anticipated before? An important part here is to realize that a bump in the guardrail can be an opportunity for learning. Similar to a car that bumps into a rail, it is easy to see the negative aspects. However, by retaining curiosity long-term benefits can be substantial (Smith & Besharov, 2019).



Three ways to create a winning team

To summarize this article, I offer three recommendations that can hopefully help to inspire organizations to become more creative and innovative.

1. Identify the creative profile of your players – do you have both Mara-

dona and Beckenbauer on your team?

Given that creativity comes in different forms, a first recommendation is to do an inventory of your “players”. By this, I mean all the employees of your organization. The success of Hammarby Football in recent years highlights the combination of both “Maradonas” and “Beckenbauers”. For example, the addition of a sports analytics team has shown how new “Beckenbauer” players have been added while many of the fans still seem to identify themselves more as “Maradonas”. For example, it seems that both Magnus Carlson and David Ritschard created something very novel and unconventional with their song “We See You Soon Again”. Furthermore, as in soccer, some individuals might be able to take both roles. In some settings, they might be more “Maradona”, while in other settings they might contribute with more long-term Beckenbauer creativity. Regardless, by identifying the creative repertoire of your team and ensuring that you have both types of creativity, you have taken a first step towards becoming a winning team.

2. Apply a paradoxical decision-making process where tensions are embraced

The second recommendation concerns decision-making. If you have both “Maradonas” and “Beckenbauers” tensions and conflicts will most likely occur. However, instead of seeing this as a problem, successful teams find ways of leveraging the creative friction that is produced. As the model describes, paradoxical decision-making involves four concrete steps. Except for confronting strategic tensions, it also deals with interpreting identity meaning, experimenting with new practices and bumping into the guardrails. An important lesson is to make balancing concrete. It is not enough to just say that a balance between “Maradona” and “Beckenbauer” is needed. Instead, successful teams engage with the paradox, experiment with the two contrasts and assign individuals that guard each perspective. Except for the concrete steps, part of applying a paradoxical decision-making process can also be to alter the metaphors and analogies used. For example, in this article I have com-

pared Diego Maradona and Franz Beckenbauer because they highlight two distinct ways of playing soccer. In future articles, I could explicitly use female pioneers such as Pia Sundhage or Megan Rapinoe. By using different metaphors and analogies, new perspectives and ideas are mobilized which can further make the team more creative high performing.

3. Put social intimacy at the center of strategic development

The final recommendation concerns the importance of social intimacy. During COVID-19, social distancing has made us learn to live in a digital society. We are now better at working digitally, shopping digitally and communicating digitally. Within academia, “Zoom” is perhaps the most commonly debated word these days. However, even though digitalization has taken many steps forward, social distancing has also highlighted the need for social intimacy. Within the sports world, social distancing has made it impossible to play many team sports and many supporters miss the physical experience of standing in a full arena. Since a physical event can mobilize all senses, I predict that the physical experience will continue to be the gold standard in many “experience industries”. However, what the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us is that the physical experience needs to be developed. When the digital experience is developing, it is critical that organizations also pay attention to the physical experience. In line with paradoxical thinking, it is not “either/or” it is “both/and” when it comes to combining digital and physical experiences. Here, I predict that both sport organizations and other organizations need to extend their benchmarking horizons. In my research, I have noticed that sports clubs often visit FC Barcelona and Real Madrid rather than go to Disneyland to learn about world-class experiences. To stay competitive, future benchmarking outside your own industry or sector will most likely yield interesting findings.

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