

The case of Messi: lessons in economics and management

I wanted to write this article in a few years' time, with Messi leaving Barça on good terms to go to Newell's, the team where he has always said he would like to play the last few years of his career. But, in view of the recent developments, I have decided not to wait. It is not my intention to thank him for the moments of happiness that he has given us Barça fans and many other football fans alike, because I would lack words. Nor am I writing to ask him to stay. Rather, I would like to highlight some lessons in economics and management that can be drawn from his story and from the point we have reached.

The first lesson is that Messi reminds us of the importance of everyone having the opportunity to develop their talent and passion. Messi had such an opportunity despite his humble origins and a hormonal problem that stunted his growth. No doubt he was lucky that this problem arose when he had already caught the attention of a club capable of financing that treatment. A few years earlier, he would not have found anyone willing to do so and perhaps he may not even have become a professional footballer. He also had the fortune that his passion was football, a sport that does not require large investments in order to play. Indeed, it is no surprise that many of the world's best footballers come from humble origins.

What we should ask ourselves is how many Messi-calibre physicists, doctors, engineers and mathematicians we are missing out on because many children do not have sufficient opportunities to discover their passion and reveal their talent. This happens in developed countries, but even more so in developing ones. I suspect that a monumental amount of talent is being wasted: there are many more Golden Ball winners with humble origins than Nobel Prize winners.

Messi also illustrates the importance of perseverance and the values that underpin a strong work ethic. Part of his success can likely be explained by innate physical conditions that are well-suited to playing football, but no doubt they are not so different from those of hundreds of thousands of people across the globe. The most important difference lies in the work that the player has put in and the sacrifices made over many years. His perseverance, discipline, ambition to better himself and competitive drive is what made the difference. It seems that Messi was not a great free-kick taker, but he practised to improve his technique and went on to become one of the best in the world. He is a player who cannot stand losing or feeling that his team has not put up a fight. All of this has led him to be one of the best football players ever... and no doubt also to the point of wanting to leave a club where he feels he can no longer give his best and win. Messi reminds us how essential it is to instil so-called soft skills from childhood, both in school and in the family. Clearly, someone did a great job with him.

Finally, his career and the present juncture underscore the importance of the team. Messi alone has not been able to win systematically. As Michael Jordan once said: «Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships». To win championships, a star must be surrounded by a great team and a good coach, someone who prepares the players tactically, physically and mentally. Meticulous planning at the club level is also necessary, because teams need to be renewed in order to maintain excellence and a sufficient competitive grip – a complex task as it is difficult to push for changes in a winning team. The same is true in the business world: when a great company stops innovating because it resists cannibalising itself, it might as well start writing the epitaph of its brilliant trajectory.

Who would have said that, in addition to football, Messi would teach us lessons in economics and management? Thank you, Leo, for everything.

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