

LEADERSHIP

OK we didn't win the World Cup but Gareth Southgate offers solutions for local leadership



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The disappointment of England losing the World Cup semi-final to Croatia does not undermine the fact that Gareth Southgate has raised the bar for international football management.

His calm and self-effacing manner, coupled with his inspirational leadership, has won admiration from football fans in many countries.

Here in England Southgate has become an enormously popular public figure. His influence already extends well beyond the world of sport, not least because of the rapid expansion of the hilarious Twitter movement 'GarethSouthgateWould', which provides hundreds of amusing suggestions on 'What Gareth would do' in all manner of situations.

Can we draw any lessons for local leadership from the 'Southgate approach' to leadership and management?

Some will answer 'no'. They will argue that managing a national football team is entirely different from exercising effective place-based leadership. For a start, the overall objectives of leadership are far more straightforward in sports management. The metrics for measuring success are pretty clear – basically adhere to the rules of the game and win against opponents.

In contrast, local leaders are required to pursue multiple objectives and respond creatively to a wide range of expectations and pressures. The metrics for measuring performance are contested



Inspirational leadership can lead to expectations being exceeded

and power struggles between competing interests are endemic. Moreover, different interests will disagree over whether a given policy outcome is good, bad or indifferent.

Notwithstanding these important differences I believe the Southgate approach to leadership provides three pointers for local government politicians and managers.

First, his leadership style is collaborative. Fabio Capello, England manager from 2008 to 2012, was, for sure, previously an exceptionally talented footballer and a successful club coach. But his leadership approach was very top-down. Indeed, he had a reputation as a disciplinarian and was criticised for not allowing his senior players to have tactical input. As England manager he was less than successful.

The leadership approach adopted by Gareth Southgate could hardly be more different. He is very strong on listening and on motivating the whole squad, coaches and staff.

For example, in interviews he almost invariably refers to the important contribution of players in the squad who have not appeared on the pitch, explaining that their solid commitment to work on the training ground enables

whoever ends up playing for England to be better than they otherwise would have been.

Second, Southgate is emotionally intelligent. He understands leadership is first and foremost about feelings, and he recognises that successful leaders need to make an emotional connection. His leadership approach has shown that if people are respected and feel valued they can perform at an unprecedented level.

His success in enabling such a young team to perform so well stems from the way he has cultivated a culture of common commitment and an emphasis on positivity. In interviews and discussion he demonstrates not only his advanced tactical knowledge but, just as important, he comes across as warm, light hearted and liberating.

It is possible you could say the same about Sven-Goran Eriksson, England manager from 2002 to 2006. While the Swedish manager was always courteous and friendly, he was criticised for being unenthusiastic on the touchline. His deliberate 'ice cool Sven' body language backfired.

In contrast, Southgate knows when to damp down the feelings on the touchline.

But he also knows it is important for the manager to let it all out when the team does well. Southgate is certainly soft spoken but he can also shout very loudly when the occasion demands.

Third, Southgate recognises that effective leaders do not simply focus on the leadership of their own organisation. In more than one interview he has noted how proud he is to be "part of a team that has a chance to affect things that are bigger than football".

By his squad and team selections, as well as through his personal leadership style, Southgate is contributing to the national debate about what it means to be English in 2018. It would be misguided to believe a successful multi-ethnic national football team can put an end to racism in any given society, but sport can play a role in shaping national feelings of identity. Southgate is very aware of this and believes football can play a role in uniting people.

My definition of leadership is 'shaping emotions and behaviour to achieve common goals'. This definition draws attention to how people feel, and it emphasises the collective construction of common purpose.

Many political and managerial leaders in local government now recognise the importance of the three 'Southgate approach' criteria. They are committed to collaboration; they are emotionally intelligent; and they are fully aware of the larger purposes guiding their leadership efforts.

Even the most accomplished place-based leaders can learn from studying how Gareth Southgate leads the English national football team.