

# Cogitare et volvere

## Thoughts & Reflections

### Weak-Link or Strong-Link: Board Composition and Recruitment

Board composition and its relevance to performance is a well-traversed subject. But what is less well traversed is the question; is your boards composition predicated on 'Weak-link' or 'Strong-link' theory? What is this theory and why may it be important for boards to understand?

Research by Anderson and Sally<sup>1</sup> into what matters most in football asked, which is more important: how good your best player is or, how good your worst player is?

As it transpires, what matters most in football is how good your worst player is. Football relies on every player utilising their unique skills to support and collaborate with other players to score. If there are five perfect passes, followed by one bad pass, it is like the five perfect passes never existed. Anderson and Sally concluded that while your No. 1 player is important, upgrading your No. 11 player brings more reward (won games). In games where the final score can be 2-1 or 3-2 little mistakes (a missed pass) are the difference between winning and losing.

Passing the ball in football is an excellent metaphor for the constructive debate and questioning occurring in the boardroom. Directors add their own unique view and touch, before the ball (topic) passes (picked up) to another director, and so on, until the discussion/questioning culminates in a final flourish by the striker (chairperson), who delivers the consensus/decision (goal).

In contrast, basketball, is a strong-link sport. In basketball it matters more how good your No. 1 player is. If four players are average and the fifth is Michael Jordan or LeBron James, Michael or LeBron will still score. A basketball teams' overall performance relies on the strength of its strongest player. Unlike football, the mistakes of the weak players are not as costly.

In the context of a board, Michael or LeBron are avatars for the dominate director, except that in basketball, if Michael or LeBron miss, everyone knows. Their failings are obvious. But on a board if the dominate director forces a decision through that is wrong. No one knows who was responsible, because of collective responsibility and the cloak of silence that wraps around board decision making. More on this topic another time.

Michael and LeBron are often credited with winning games single handed. Whereas Lionel Messi's final flourish relies on his team to put him into a position to score. Football is a weak-link game, basketball is a strong-link game. Successful organisations use weak-link *not* strong-link board recruitment practices. Basing recruitment on a weak-link strategy does not mean foregoing that brilliant director. But it means assessing the boards requirements to ensure a depth and breadth of skills/knowledge, etc., across the board team. Weak-link recruitment adds long-term (succession) and short-term (performance) value. Is yours a weak-link or strong-link board?

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<sup>1</sup> The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer Is Wrong

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