

## Fact Sheet – Lessons in Leadership (Bill Shankly)

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I'm not a massive football fan these days, enjoy watching the odd game or two, but moreover I find the whole football business fascinating and I think we can learn a lot for leaders at the highest level in any sport. As a lad I supported Stockport County my hometown and Liverpool, mainly after watching the 1974 FA cup match. Now I know football is very tribal and some reading this will have already started to turn off as they don't like Liverpool, but please read on as this is more about Bill Shankly's leadership and the lessons we can draw from that.

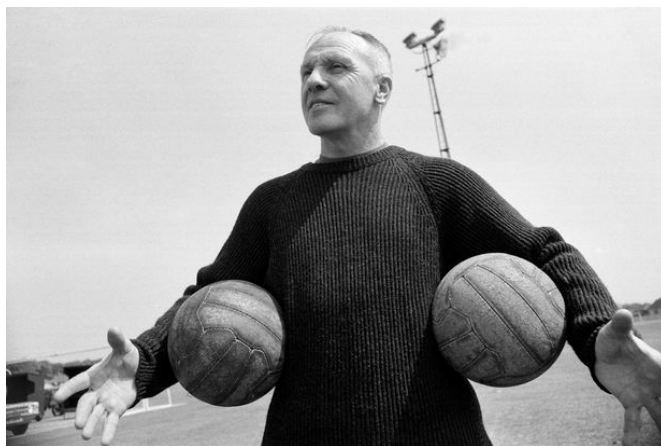
At the time of writing this Liverpool FC had just won the Club World Cup for the first time, the present holders of the Champion's League, and not wishing to tempt fate seem to be on target to become the most successful club in English history soon. But the modern era template and culture were set some 60 years ago.

When Bill Shankly took over as manager of Liverpool Football Club in December 1959, the club were languishing in 10th position in the second division of English football, the memory of their last first division title in 1947 fading fast. By the time Shankly retired in 1974, he had restored the club to the first division, winning 3 league titles, their first 2 FA Cups and the UEFA Cup. More importantly, Shankly laid the foundation for continued success that would turn Liverpool FC into the famous global sporting brand they are today. His influence in revolutionising the entire culture of his organisation from top to bottom is possibly comparable only to Steve Jobs at Apple in the modern era.

The 'family' Shankly instilled is evident stronger than ever today. You can't get a ticket for an away match unless you have been to a significant number of home matches; and most of those are season ticket holders. Jurgen Klopp at the end of away matches always walks down to the travelling fans and thanks them, always. Play together, lose together and win together, it has built Liverpool into the team it is today. What lessons can we learn from such inspirational leadership.

### Lesson one - Great leaders act like everyone is watching

Huddersfield Town's home match versus Cardiff City in October 1959 was watched by 18,367 people.



Little did Bill Shankly, manager of Huddersfield Town, know that two spectators who had purchased tickets to ensure that they were sitting as close to the home dugout as possible were Tom Williams and Harry Latham, Chairman and Director of Liverpool Football Club respectively. Despite the fact they watched Huddersfield lose, they also watched Bill Shankly command and cajole his team, encouraging his players to be first to every ball. Bill Shankly did not realise it at the time, but he was making his 90-minute audition to be the manager of Liverpool Football Club.

**Lesson one:** Great leaders must always act like great leaders - you never know who is watching and who is being inspired.

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### Lesson two - Rome wasn't built in a day

Shankly lost his first match as Liverpool manager 4-0. He lost his second match 3-0. It wasn't until the end of the 1961-62 season that Shankly managed to get Liverpool promoted but once he had they were ready to overcome any obstacle and won the first division title in 1964.



**Lesson two:** It's unrealistic to create an all-conquering team overnight - the goal is incremental improvement day by day - Shankly famously said, *"You must believe you are the best and then make sure that you are."*

### Lesson three - There are consequences to failure

Shankly gave all players at the club an equal opportunity to impress when he arrived, but when those players couldn't secure promotion he brought in new recruits and utilised younger players from the club's academy - the message was clear to his playing staff - you will be helped and coached but you must perform, or you will be replaced.

**Lesson three:** Be prepared to act and if necessary relocate or remove people that are not helping achieve the overall goals you have set. Delaying a hard decision like this only gets harder with time.

### Lesson four - Leaders must set the standard

On Bill Shankly's first day training his players, he told them to begin running laps of the training pitch while he handed out an empty sack and a trowel to each of his seven coaching staff. The players watched as Shankly and his staff walked back and forth across the pitch picking up every loose stone, weed and pebble. By the end of the exercise they had filled the eight sacks. The implication to the players was obvious - from this day forward the standard has been raised - only the best will be acceptable to Liverpool Football Club.



**Lesson four:** Set the standard high and uphold it. If you want your maintenance teams to be the best in the world, make sure the hanger or depot is clean, tidy, organised etc.

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### Lesson five - Leaders embrace innovation

Shankly completely changed the way Liverpool trained between matches, introducing high-tempo, short-passing five-a-side games which forced the players to adapt to his intense 'pass and move' style. Shankly also created the 'Sweat Box' - a small roofed squash court like wooden structure, where two players intensely played the ball against the end wall, honing their touch and bringing them to peak fitness in the near sauna like structure (a similar style sweat box is used by Borussia Dortmund today). Shankly also changed Liverpool's kit from red jersey, white shorts and socks to an all red kit in the belief that a vision of all red would intimidate opponents, despite the fact that Liverpool had played in red and white for the previous 60 years.

**Lesson five:** Continually embrace new ideas, even ones that seem odd at first look.... never adopt the maxim 'that is how we have always done it'.

### Lesson six - Great leaders should obsess over their customers

At the end of his first week in charge, Shankly met with the Board of Directors with a list of demands having evaluated the situation. The directors expected a list of new players to be read out, instead Shankly requested funds to upgrade the toilets used by the fans at Liverpool's stadium, Anfield. "The current ones were a disgrace he outlined,"



some not even flushing - not good enough for the supporters of Liverpool, the best

club in the World. Shankly realised that he needed to improve service to the club's supporters if they were to get behind the team. He personally returned every fan letter written to him - most replies were short and to the point - but they became the prized memento of many a fan (a simple search online shows examples of these letters) and inspired unwavering loyalty.



In Tesco's just yesterday I found I was continually getting battered out of the way by the in-store pickers, those staff charged with picking our online shop contents ready for delivery – these pickers couldn't care less that their customers were struggling to get to the butter – they were hell-bent on getting their own baskets picked and so reaching their targets, set by a manager no doubt, who is operationally reaching a target set, but missing the wider customer loyalty goal. Leaders keep their focus in the right place, their customers.

**Lesson six:** Understand how your business makes money and therefore who your customers truly are, understand both your external and internal customers, then...treat them like royalty and they will become your adoring fans.



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### Lesson seven - Leaders always find the positive in a situation

Liverpool had been on a crusade to win the FA Cup and had yet to do so when Shankly took over. They reached the semi-finals in 1963 but lost 1-0 to Leicester City. The disappointment was intense but by the start of the following season, Shankly had adopted the Gerry and The Pacemakers cover of *'You'll Never Walk Alone'* as the unofficial club anthem. The club's supporters continue to sing the song before every home match to this day.



Shankly used the motivation of the defeat by Leicester as fuel to continue on his quest to win the FA Cup. A dream he achieved in 1965. All leaders will suffer setbacks, but great leaders use them to learn what is still required to succeed - "Walk on, Walk on, though your dreams be tossed and blown".



How many times do I see managers, in their desire to meet operational targets, doggedly chasing KPIs and fiercely chastising those that don't make the grade, either a pass or a fail mark being given. KPIs are simply a measure, how we act from the measure we receive determines leadership!

**Lesson seven:** Leaders ensure their organisation learns from mistakes or missed targets. Plan, do, review, LEARN.

### Lesson eight – Know when to be tough and when to show caring

Shankly oversaw 15 seasons at Liverpool. In this timeframe he was forced to jettison and marginalise players who had served him loyally as they naturally aged and came to the end of their careers. Professional sports can be cruel and to remain on top, Shankly could not afford to keep players beyond their peak. He famously dropped Ian St John in the autumn of 1969 for a match against Newcastle without forewarning, St John having been a stalwart of Shankly's side throughout the 1960s. Ian St John recalled hearing that he had been dropped by a journalist in the stadium lobby and knew instantly the implications for his Liverpool career.



Shankly had been assistant to Andy Beattie at Huddersfield Town before Beattie got the sack following relegation and Shankly got his opportunity to manage the team himself. Beattie would be in and out of football during the 1960s and Shankly would later employ him as a scout at Liverpool - Beattie would repay the favour by scouting Kevin Keegan for Liverpool - a future European player of the year.



As leaders we have to take tough decisions at times, we have to keep the business focussed on the customer and the ever-changing landscape that is presented. Most leaders are not in the margin-driven world of top sports clubs but even still we have to keep mindful that technology, new methods,

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competition, trends all require our attention all the time. If we are not changing and constantly evolving in business we are dying. Darwin once quoted, “it’s not the strongest that survive, it’s the most adaptable!” Sometimes people who served us well in the past are going to struggle in the ‘new world’, don’t hang on and hope they will change, they won’t.... But also find a kind way to change the order.

**Lesson eight:** Keep the strategic focus and know how and what you need to do to achieve your strategy. Be tough, be caring, but always – be kind.

### Lesson nine - Leaders create followers, that create future leaders



Shankly kept the incumbent support staff when he took over at Liverpool and introduced a democratic style of leadership with his the casting vote once all opinions had been aired. The management team would meet in a small office that housed the club's supply of football boots, giving rise to Liverpool's legendary 'Boot room'.

Following Shankly's retirement, his assistant, Bob Paisley went on to take over the team and built on Shankly's success, and arguably built Liverpool's bastion of invincibility – in the process winning 3 European Cups during a 9 year reign. In turn, his assistant, Joe Fagan took on the mantle, followed by Kenny Dalglish - a player originally signed by Shankly.



**Lesson nine:** Great leaders empower their followers to continue the success of the organisation beyond their own spell at the helm.

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### Lesson ten - Align your personal goals with your professional goals, you are unstoppable

"Liverpool was made for me and I was made for Liverpool", Shankly famously remarked.

A deeply devoted family man to his wife and daughters, the position of manager of Liverpool aligned



Shankly's personal and professional lives perfectly - he now had sufficient income to support his family without worry and at Liverpool, he had found a club that matched his personal career ambitions of winning the biggest prizes that football had to offer. With his personal and professional goals aligned, Shankly was ready to revolutionize Liverpool by his sheer force of will.

**Lesson ten:** Harmonise your personal and work life – if there is stress between the two, you will risk your mental wellbeing in the long-term, and be very unlikely to succeed. My motto, if it doesn't feel right – move!

