

# Of seizing opportunities and the English Premier League

AS a senior management member of a large organisation, I'm often asked this question by many millennials and young aspiring leaders: "What advice do I have to offer in their aspiring careers amongst the thousands in the organisation?"

Everyone has ambitions and for young aspiring millennials, they are no different. In fact, they are now even more ambitious than I was at their age and rightfully so, given they can relate to real experiences they would have seen in many successful CEOs or entrepreneurs over the last two decades plus the fact that their parents are probably more educated and are in a position to inspire and motivate them.

However, many start by aiming for the sky. They set their sights high and dream of achieving their ambitions, but most fail to do one main thing i.e. stay focused and prepare themselves.

In my organisation, we hold many engagement sessions. When this topic arises, I constantly relate it to the English Premier League (EPL). In this analogy, the EPL is just a reference as I'm convinced the same principle applies to all successful football leagues across Europe or anywhere else in the world.

Michael Calvin, author of the book *No Hunger in Paradise* notes that "out of all the boys who enter an academy at the age of nine,



less than half of 1% make it or make a living from the game". He goes on to add that of these, only 180 of the 1.5 million players who play organised youth football at any one time make it as an EPL professional player. That's a success rate of 0.012%. So what is it that these 180 footballers do right?

There are various factors to achieving success in professional football, but in this context, two stand out as key points i.e. one – work hard and be disciplined to sacrifice, and two – stay focused and keep sacrificing. Why?

From the millions of aspiring footballers, some make it to the next level and this number still goes into thousands. A smaller group then graduates and progresses into the Under-18s (U18) and Under-23s (U23) of their respective clubs. But how do the two success factors relate to opportunities? For these aspiring U18s and U23s, it is then about their level of preparedness and the timing of opportunities. Like us all, we never know when opportunities knock on our doors. For them, it could be an injury to the first team player, a suspension, a change in tactic or special circumstance as we

most recently witnessed when Liverpool fielded its U23 team for the senior 4th round FA Cup replay against Shrewsbury. These are opportunities. But for any player to perform and live up to expectations when such opportunities arise, he must first be prepared. Footballers have to be disciplined and dedicated. Behind all the fame and fortune is a strict regime of personal sacrifice and practice.

It's the same in any career opportunity. Focus on your goals, be disciplined, sacrifice and work hard. Read books to widen your knowledge. Ask questions to understand how and why. Research the internet for benchmarks and comparisons. Remain focused on your goals and what you need to do to achieve them. Keep doing all these, repeatedly.

Repeatedly meaning reading different books, asking different questions to different people to understand different perspectives. Strive to expand your knowledge until the subject or matter becomes second nature. Even when you reach this level, stay focused until such time when the opportunity does present itself and you will be prepared.

In life, opportunities do not come often but when they do, be sure you are ready to seize it. Back to the analogy of the U23 or reserve players. When an opportunity is presented to them to feature in the first team, those who

have worked and practised the most will have a better chance to live up to expectations. For these players, they work their socks off in anticipation of the opportunity. When it does come, that's where their performance is reflected in all the countless hours of practice.

In the corporate world, this is no different. You cannot control the timing of opportunities, but you are in control of how you can prepare yourselves to face such opportunities.

Over the years, I have seen many people being appointed to various positions but failing to deliver because they weren't ready for the role. Granted, leadership has many facets, but being competent and technically skilled will certainly enhance your position.

Having said this, there are also other considerations for one to be successful. The astrologers will tell you about your stars, luck and timing etc, not to mention personal talent and intelligence, which I believe are also relevant. Whether or not you wish to believe these, it is up to you. One thing for sure, I know these other considerations are beyond our control. What is within your control is to work hard, focus and prepare yourselves. Good luck!

*Jerome Hon*  
MICPA member,  
chartered banker, Maybank group COO