

# COACHING LESSONS FROM SIR ALEX FERGUSON

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# COACHING LESSONS

From Sir Alex Ferguson



**T**he Mount Rushmore of coaching legends finally has its fourth member – Sir Alex Ferguson. Alongside, say, Vince Lombardi, John Wooden and Scotty Bowman, Ferguson will be remembered as one of the most successful managers of all-time and certainly at the top of the football/soccer ranks. With his slightly surprising retirement last year, he left behind a Manchester United club that is now valued at \$2.3 billion thanks in large to the 13 English league titles and 25 additional titles won in his 26 years at Old Trafford.

Like his brethren in this small elite fraternity, Sir Alex leaves behind a legacy of not just coaching tips but organizational leadership principles. Anita Elberse, Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, set out to capture these lessons when she interviewed him last year during his final season.

Published in the October edition of the Harvard Business Review last year, Ferguson highlighted eight of his key philosophies.



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1

**Take the long-term view** – By taking a multi-year future view of success, Ferguson was given

the opportunity to re-build an entire club from the ground up. He admits that luxury of time is not available to most managers today, but it was key for him to develop the talent of his younger players. “I knew that a focus on youth would fit the club’s history and my earlier coaching experience told me that winning with young players could be done and that I was good at working with them,” said Ferguson. “So, I had the confidence and conviction that if United was going to mean anything again, rebuilding the youth structure was crucial.”

2

**Don’t be afraid of change** – With the conviction that those who stand still get run over,

Ferguson was never shy about deciding when to move a player off the roster due to age or lack of production. “He’s never really looking at this moment, he’s always looking into the future,” said Ryan Giggs, a 22 year veteran of Man U and one of Ferguson’s early students. “Knowing what needs strengthening and what needs refreshing – he’s got that knack.”



3

**Always set high expectations** – When it came to training or preparation, Sir Alex expected players to

give 100%, but even more from his star players. They set the tone for the rest of the team and their effort was contagious.

**“Superstars with egos are not the problem some people may think,” claimed Ferguson. “They need to be winners, because that massages their egos, so they will do what it takes to win.”**

4

**Remind the team who is in charge** –

While some players remember Ferguson as a father figure, helping them through difficult times, he also left no doubt who the manager was. Without this authority, there would be chaos in the locker room. “If the day came that the manager of Manchester United was controlled by the players, then Manchester United would not be the Manchester United we know,” said Ferguson.

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5

**Find the right words for the situation**

– Discipline was important in the Man U locker room,

but there was an understanding of the ups and downs of life at a top club. Ferguson needed to balance his tough talk with words of encouragement. “No one likes to be criticized,” Ferguson reminds us.

**“Few people get better with criticism. Most respond to encouragement instead. For a player or any human being, there is nothing better than hearing ‘Well done.’”**

6

**Winning is the only option**

– Tiger Woods has always made winning every tournament a public goal.

For him there is no purpose of entering an event if you don’t expect to win. In the same way, Ferguson has always been “in it to win it.” Letting the mind imagine any other possibility sends a player down a path of settling for less. As he explains, “Winning is in my nature. I’ve set my standards over such a long period of time that there is no other option for me—I have to win. I expected to win every time we went out there. Even if five of the most important players were injured, I expected to win.”

7

**Learn about your team by watching**

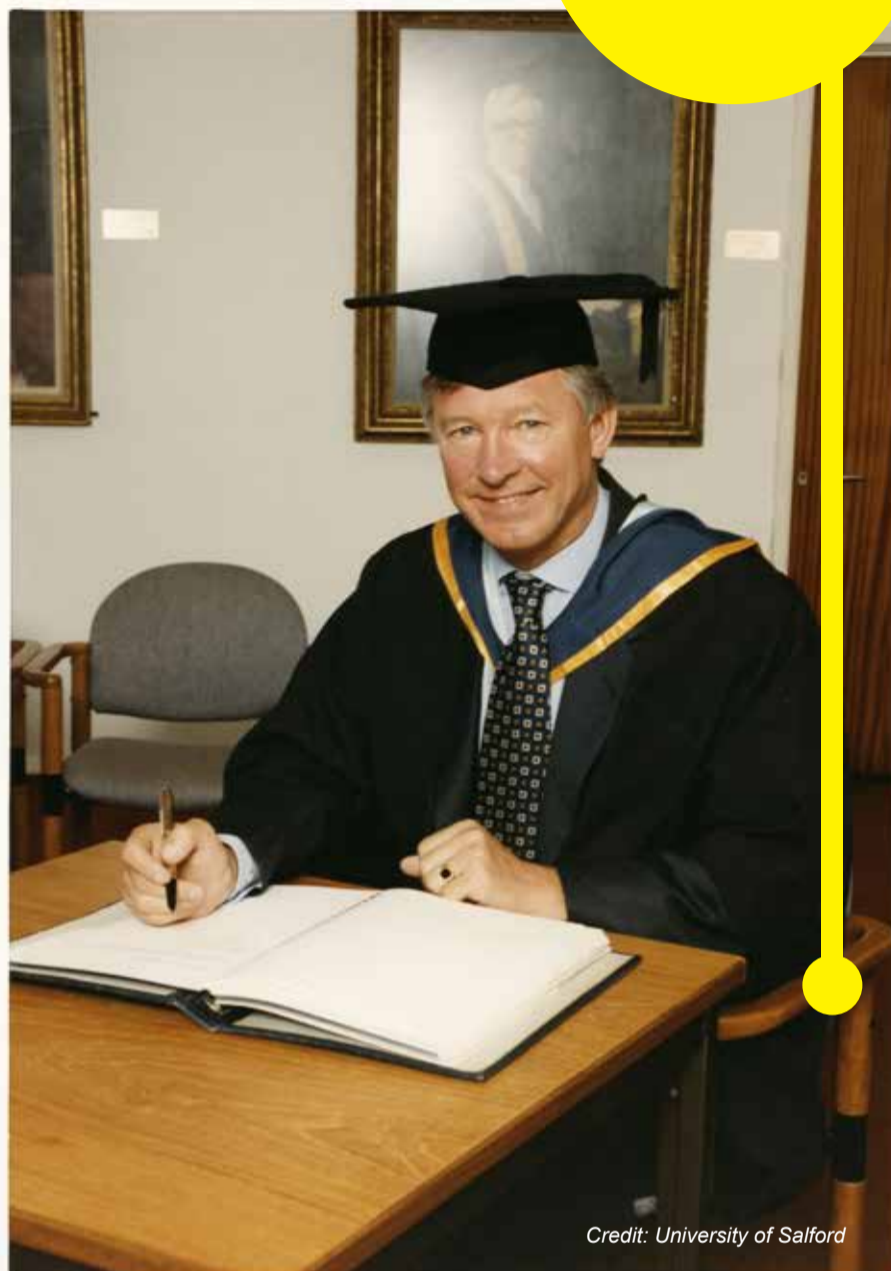
– Most managers or coaches feel a need to constantly

control everything, including training sessions, meetings and player interactions. Ferguson was the same way until his assistants asked him to delegate more duties to them. He objected at first, but then learned how valuable it could be to stand to the side and just observe. “It didn’t take away my control,” said Ferguson. “My presence and ability to supervise was always there, and what you can pick up by watching is incredibly valuable.”

*Credit: Andrea Sartorati*

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**“Winning is in my nature. I’ve set my standards over such a long period of time that there is no other option for me—I have to win.”**



*Credit: University of Salford*

8

**Constantly adapt to new ideas –**

Much has changed in the game in the 25 years since Sir Alex took charge. Just as he was not afraid to overhaul his roster, he also was an innovator bringing in new concepts like GPS training monitors, yoga, and having an optometrist on staff. “Most people with my kind of track record don’t look to change. But I always felt I couldn’t afford not to change. We had to be successful – there was no other option for me. I would explore any means of improving.”



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