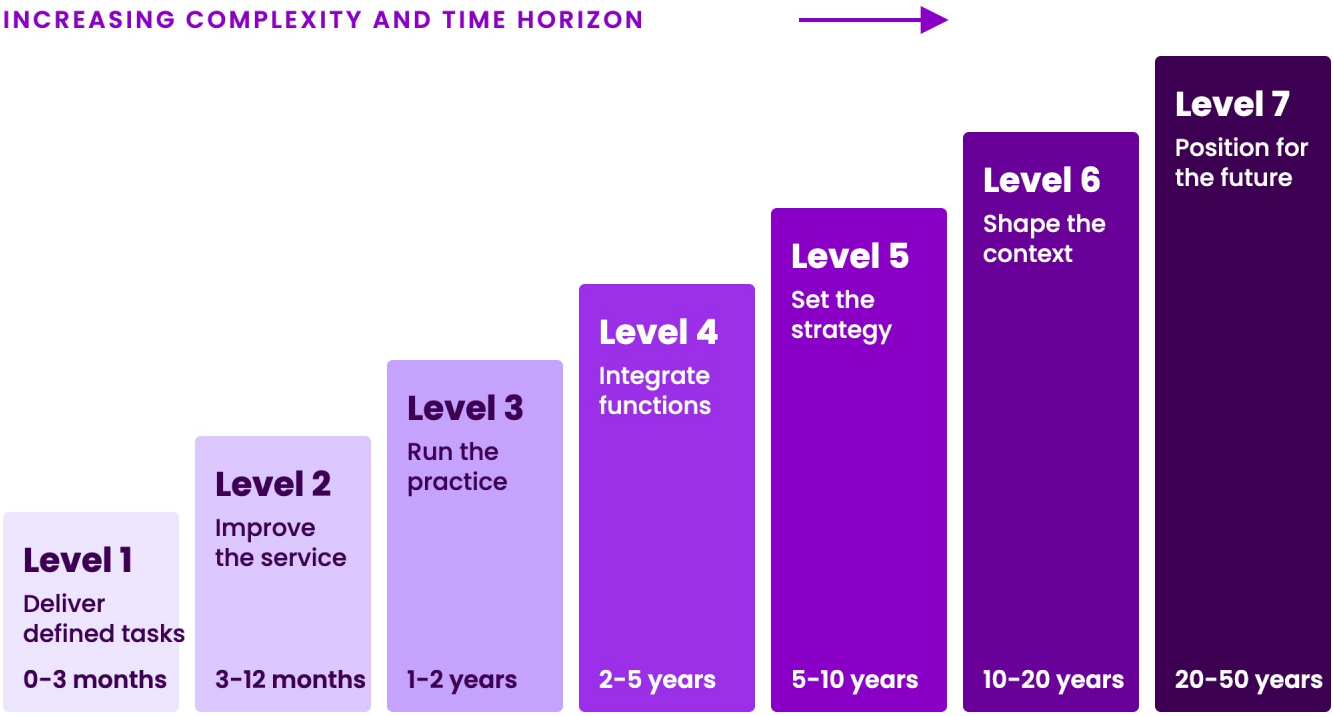
Manchester United

What if the problem isn't just the manager?

What one of football's biggest clubs can teach us about organisational structure, leadership capability and having the right people in the right roles.





Manchester United have changed managers, spent enormous sums on players, appointed new football executives and repeatedly attempted to rebuild the foundations of the club. Yet sustained success in the post-Sir Alex Ferguson era has proved remarkably elusive.

For supporters, the debate has become familiar. Is the manager good enough? Are the players of the required standard? Have the right people been appointed to oversee recruitment? Does the club have the right football leadership? And are those making the biggest decisions actually equipped to make them?

These are legitimate questions. But perhaps there is a more fundamental organisational issue worth exploring.

What if Manchester United's challenges run deeper than the quality of the players or the manager? What if the real question is whether the club has the right organisational structure, and the right leadership capability at every level?

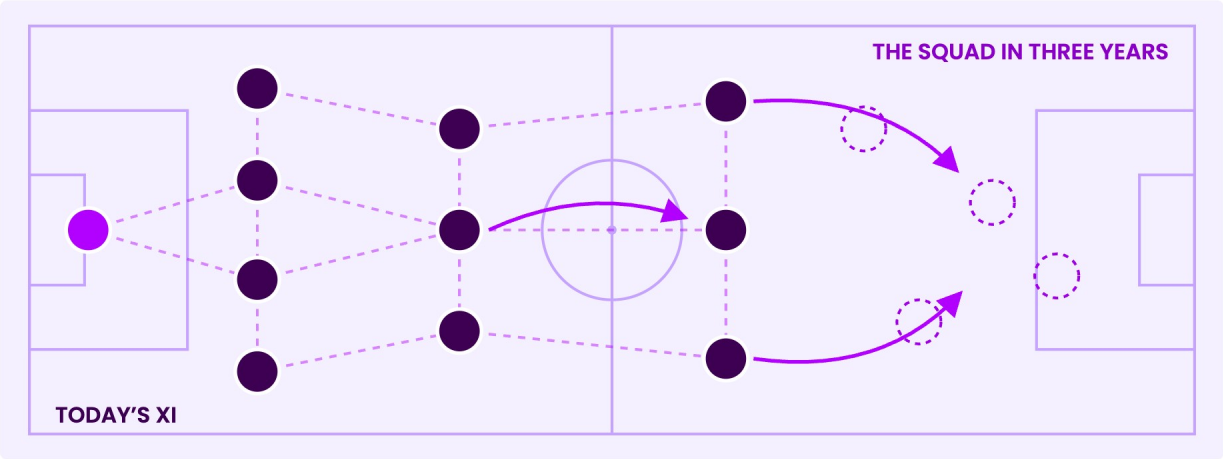
This is where the principles of Levels of Work and Stratified Systems Theory offer a particularly interesting perspective. And the implications extend far beyond football.

01 The Ferguson factor: one man, multiple levels of responsibility

For 26 years, Sir Alex Ferguson was the defining figure in Manchester United's football operation.

His responsibilities and influence extended well beyond selecting the team, developing tactics and managing players. He helped shape the club's football philosophy, influenced recruitment, developed successive generations of players, built a culture of competitive excellence and maintained success through numerous squad transitions.

In many respects, Ferguson was managing far more than a football team. **He was helping to run an entire football system.**



Winning on Saturday while building the squad of three years' time: two different types of work, one person.

He needed to deliver results on a Saturday afternoon while simultaneously thinking about the composition of the squad three or five years into the future. He needed to identify emerging talent, develop future leaders, manage established stars and ensure that the club remained competitive through successive periods of change.

These are fundamentally different types of work. Some require immediate operational decisions. Others involve integrating multiple functions, balancing competing priorities and anticipating longer-term organisational requirements.

Ferguson's technical knowledge of football was only part of the story. His success also reflected an ability to manage a remarkably broad and complex leadership mandate.

When he retired, Manchester United lost an individual who had integrated a wide range of football leadership responsibilities over an extended period.

Replacing that contribution was always likely to involve more than appointing another talented coach.

02 Understanding Levels of Work: not all leadership roles are equal

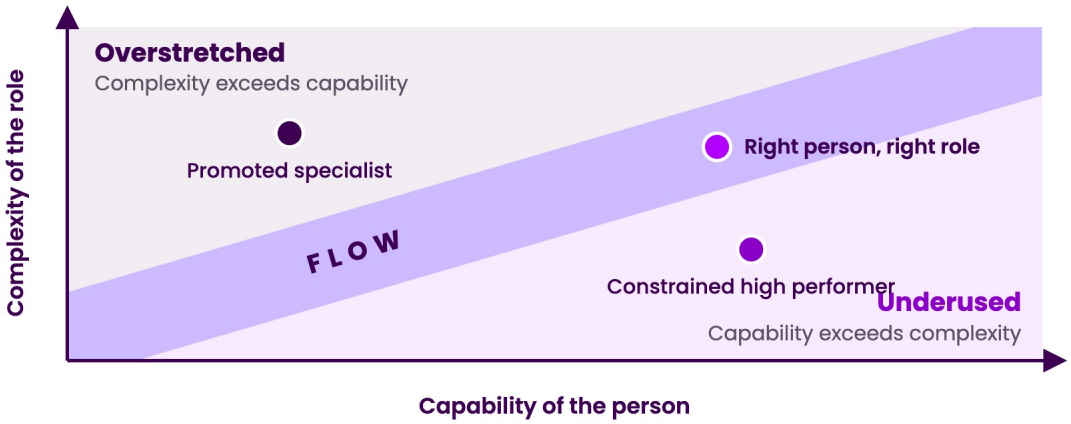
Levels of Work, drawing on Elliott Jaques' Stratified Systems Theory, provides a framework for understanding the different levels of complexity within an organisation.

Different roles require different levels of cognitive complexity, judgement, integration and decision-making. A specialist may solve defined technical problems. A manager may coordinate several interdependent activities. A more senior leader may integrate multiple functions, reconcile competing priorities and establish conditions for longer-term success.

Importantly, the complexity of a role is not determined by its title, salary, experience or public profile. It is determined by the nature of the work and the decisions for which the role is accountable.

Equally important is the distinction between the complexity of the role and the capability of the person occupying it.

A role may require Level 4 complexity, but that does not automatically mean the individual appointed to it has the capability to operate effectively at that level.



When capability matches the complexity of the role, people work in flow. A mismatch either way leaves them overstretched or underused.

03 A very different game since 1986

Ferguson took charge in November 1986. The game he left in 2013, and the one his successors inherited, had changed almost beyond recognition, and every change added complexity to the work at the top of a club.

Recruitment is now a global operation, and signing a player is only the start: integrating people from different football cultures into one team is complex work in its own right. Commercial growth brings funds, but it also brings trade-offs. A lucrative pre-season tour of the United States or Asia competes with preparation time and player recovery.

Clubs now operate in a wider system: an expanded Champions League, cross-border partnerships and multi-club ownership groups that develop and move players between countries.

	1986	TODAY
Talent market	Mainly British and Irish players	Scouting across every continent, then integrating players from many countries, languages and cultures
Money	Gate receipts at the core	Broadcast, sponsorship and commercial revenue, transformed by the Premier League and Sky from 1992
Calendar	Mostly Saturday afternoons	Football on almost any day of the week, with heavy squad rotation
Europe	English clubs banned from European competition from 1985 to 1990	An expanded Champions League, central to revenue and reputation
Leadership model	The all-powerful British manager	The continental head coach, working alongside a sporting or technical director
Governance	Light-touch oversight	Financial rules, high-profile breaches and a statutory regulator

Governance has become a Level 5 issue in its own right. Recent seasons have seen clubs in England and Italy deducted points for breaching financial rules, and one of the largest financial cases in Premier League history is still working its way through appeal. The Football Governance Act 2025 has also created an Independent Football Regulator, with a licensing regime and a code of corporate governance for clubs.

The work that once sat with one manager now demands more roles, more integration and stronger governance. The question is whether structure and capability have kept pace.

04 Manchester United through a Levels of Work lens

Modern football clubs have increasingly separated responsibilities historically concentrated in the hands of the traditional football manager. The football operation may now involve a CEO, Director of Football, Head Coach, recruitment leadership, academy leadership and technical specialists.

In practice, genuine Level 6 work, shaping the wider sporting and commercial environment over a 10 to 20-year horizon, is rarely seen in football. Even at the top of the game, ownership and board work typically sits at Level 5, which makes the quality of that work, governance included, all the more important.

LEVEL	ROLE	PRIMARY COMPLEXITY
M5-H5	**Ownership / Board**	Governance, regulation, long-term positioning and major investments
M4-L5	**Chief Executive Officer**	Club-wide strategy; football, commercial and financial integration
L4-M4	**Director of Football**	Recruitment, academy, coaching and long-term football strategy
L3-L4	**Head Coach**	First-team performance, tactical systems and squad development
L3-L4	**Recruitment / Academy Leadership**	Talent identification and development pathways
L2-L3	**Specialist Coaches / Analysts**	Specialist expertise and performance delivery

These allocations are illustrative hypotheses, not formal job evaluations of Manchester United or its employees. Level 6 work is rarely seen in football, so no role is placed there. Bands show the position within a level: L = Low, M = Mid, H = High (for example, L3 = Low 3, M3 = Mid 3, H3 = High 3).

05 The right people in the wrong roles?

One of the recurring criticisms directed at Manchester United has concerned the quality of appointments throughout the club. Supporters and commentators have questioned managerial selections, recruitment decisions and the suitability of individuals appointed to important football leadership positions.

These debates often focus on experience, reputation, football knowledge or previous success. But from a Levels of Work perspective, there is another consideration: **does the individual have the capability to manage the complexity of the role they have been appointed to perform?**

This is not necessarily the same as asking whether someone is intelligent, experienced or technically knowledgeable.

A highly successful coach may possess exceptional tactical knowledge and interpersonal skills. Yet leading an entire football operation may involve integrating recruitment, academy development, performance science, coaching philosophy, financial constraints and long-term strategic objectives.

Success in the first role does not automatically demonstrate capability for the second. The same applies to a Director of Recruitment promoted into broader football leadership, or a commercially successful executive assuming responsibility for a complex sporting organisation.

Previous performance, technical expertise and leadership capability should not be treated as interchangeable.

06 Capability gaps can exist at multiple levels

Capability misalignment does not have to be confined to one individual or one leadership position. It can potentially exist across several levels simultaneously. Imagine a football club in which:

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Struggles to establish a coherent long-term strategic direction.

DIRECTOR OF FOOTBALL

An excellent recruitment specialist who cannot integrate the broader football operation.

HEAD COACH

Tactically accomplished, but struggles with multi-season squad development.

These are hypothetical scenarios, not findings about Manchester United's employees. Their effects can nevertheless be cumulative. A capability gap at one level may create problems for the roles below it.

Gaps at several levels can undermine the translation of resources and expertise into sustained performance.

Because symptoms often appear at the operational level, the wrong people may be held responsible. The Head Coach may carry public accountability for poor results even when underlying causes sit in recruitment, squad planning or strategic leadership.

Equally, the Head Coach may genuinely lack the capability required for the role.

The challenge is distinguishing between a performance problem, a structural problem and a capability problem.

07 The Director of Football and Head Coach: a test of structure and capability

In principle, the Director of Football should provide longer-term integration of recruitment, academy development, football philosophy and squad planning. The Head Coach should be accountable for developing the playing system, managing the squad and delivering first-team performance.

Two conditions are required for this arrangement to work.

1 Differentiated roles

The Director of Football should add complexity beyond reviewing or approving the Head Coach's decisions.

2 Matched capability

Each individual must possess the capability required by their respective role.

A Director of Football operating at Level 4 should be capable of integrating interdependent football functions, managing competing priorities and making decisions with longer-term consequences. A Head Coach operating at Level 3 or 4, depending on the role design, must manage the corresponding complexity of first-team leadership.

A poorly differentiated structure can create conflict between capable individuals. A well-designed structure can still fail when leaders cannot manage their responsibilities. When both structural and capability problems exist, the consequences may be particularly significant.

Clubs use the titles Technical Director and Director of Football in different ways, and the people appointed to them can come from many different types of role. That variety is a reason to define the role by its work rather than by its title. An illustrative profile, built from the Level 4 work the role should do, might look like this.

ILLUSTRATIVE ROLE PROFILE

Technical Director (Level 4)

Purpose	Integrate recruitment, academy, sports science, data and coaching philosophy into one coherent football strategy, within the club's financial and regulatory limits.
Time horizon	Two to five years: several transfer windows and more than one head coach.
Key accountabilities	The multi-season squad plan and playing philosophy; recruitment and player trading strategy; academy pathways into the first team; head coach succession, including a live shortlist; the link between the Board and the football department.
Capability indicators	Integrates several functions rather than excelling in one; balances results now against long-term squad value; builds systems that outlast individual signings or coaches.
Watch-outs	Appointing on reputation as a player, coach or recruiter alone; a role that only reviews the head coach's decisions; unclear decision rights on signings.

08 Why experience and reputation are not enough

Football clubs, like many businesses, frequently appoint leaders based on previous achievements. A successful manager at one club is recruited to another. An outstanding player moves into coaching. A successful sports recruitment specialist is promoted into a broader strategic role.

These appointments may succeed. But past success alone does not establish capability for work of greater complexity.

A manager who thrives where recruitment and organisational direction are clearly established may struggle when expected to shape those elements personally. Someone who excels at identifying individual talent may not be equally effective at integrating an entire talent development system.

In succession planning and executive selection, performance in a current role and potential for more complex work are related, but distinct, considerations.

09 Why changing the manager may not solve the problem

When a football club underperforms, the Head Coach is often the first person scrutinised. Sometimes this is appropriate: the coach may lack the required capability or may be making poor decisions.

But changing the manager is not necessarily the solution if the underlying challenges sit elsewhere.

What if recruitment is not delivering the right players? What if football leadership cannot integrate its functions? What if strategic priorities are unclear or authority is fragmented? What if several people occupy roles whose complexity exceeds their current capability?

A new manager may bring fresh energy and an initial improvement. Yet if the organisational conditions remain unchanged, the same difficulties may reappear.

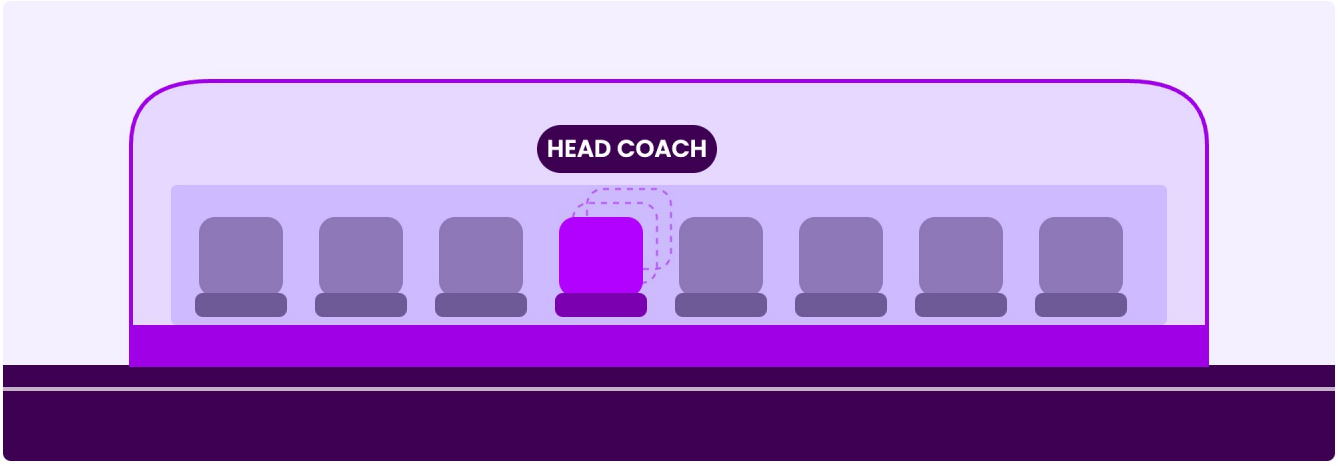
Sometimes the person needs to change. Sometimes the structure needs to change. And sometimes both need to change. These are different problems requiring different interventions.

10 Replacing a successful manager: a test for the Board

There is a related question that receives far less attention: how a Board replaces a successful manager. Departures are not always planned. A manager may be poached by another club at short notice, leaving the Board to make one of its most important decisions quickly and in public.

When Ferguson retired in 2013, his successor was appointed on his recommendation. Whatever the merits of that appointment, it illustrates a wider risk. When succession rests on one person's judgement, rather than an agreed role profile and a considered process, the club's future is tied to that judgement.

The Levels of Work lens raises two questions. Is the Board clear about the level of the role it is filling, and how that role has changed? And does the Board itself have the capability to make that judgement?



The dugout is the most scrutinised seat in the club. It is rarely the only one that matters.

Succession planning for the dugout should start long before the vacancy does. A shortlist, a role profile and clear decision rights are cheaper than a rushed appointment.

11 What would a proper organisational diagnostic reveal?

A diagnostic would seek to:

01	Establish the complexity of key roles
02	Assess whether individuals have the current and future capability to meet those demands
03	Examine whether managerial layers add distinct value
04	Clarify decision rights
05	Test whether the structure and leadership capability support a coherent football strategy

It could reveal poorly designed roles, capability gaps, constrained high performers or areas of strong alignment. The value lies in establishing evidence rather than relying exclusively on perceptions, reputations or short-term results.

12 The lesson for every organisation

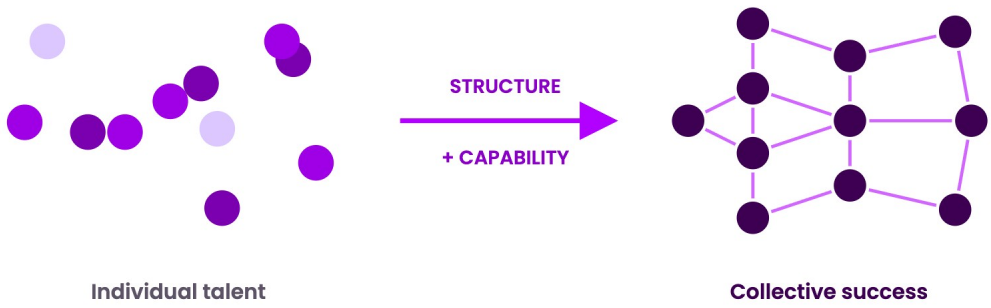
Manchester United is interesting because leadership decisions and performance outcomes are scrutinised publicly. In most organisations, similar questions are asked behind closed doors.

QUESTIONS EVERY BOARD SHOULD BE ASKING

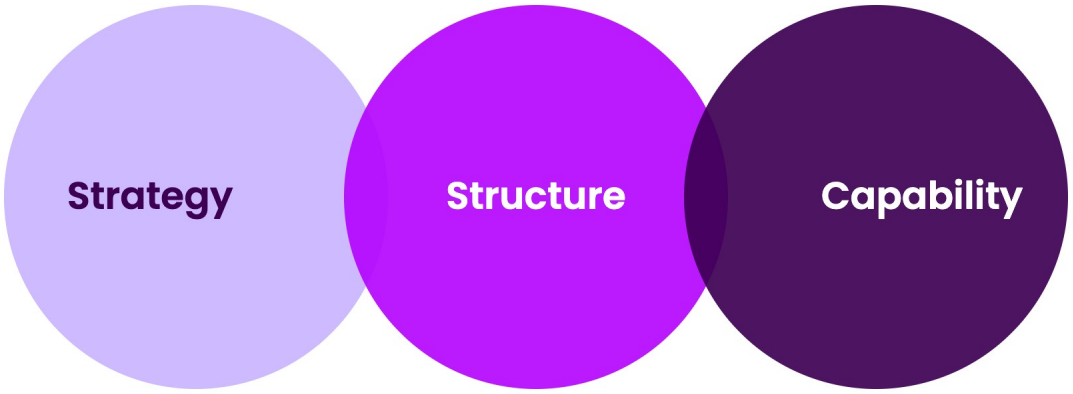
- Is our CEO capable of leading the next phase of growth?
- Can our executive team translate strategy into results?
- Are General Managers operating at the complexity their roles require?
- Have technically excellent people been promoted into leadership roles for which they may not yet have the required capability?

An organisation can recruit exceptional people, invest in development and articulate an ambitious strategy, yet still struggle if role complexity, individual capability and organisational structure are misaligned.

At Purple Talent Solutions, we believe effectiveness depends on the alignment of three things.



Talent becomes results only when the structure and the leadership capability around it are right.



What the organisation seeks to achieve

How work and accountability are organised

Whether people can manage the complexity required

A well-designed structure cannot compensate indefinitely for insufficient leadership capability. Highly capable leaders cannot always overcome flawed structures.

Neither will deliver sustained success without coherent strategy.

13 Perhaps Manchester United is asking the wrong question

The debate has often centred on who should be the next manager, which players should be signed and which individuals should be replaced. Those questions matter. But perhaps the more fundamental questions are these:

Q1 Has the club designed the right football organisation?

Q2 Are the right people occupying the right roles?

Q3 Do those individuals have the capability to manage the complexity of their accountabilities?

We cannot answer these definitively without a detailed examination of the club's structure and leadership capability. They are nevertheless precisely the questions organisations should ask when performance falls short of expectations.

Purple
TALENT SOLUTIONS

Manchester United may need the right manager. But, like any organisation, it also needs the right leadership capability at every level, within a structure designed to turn individual talent into collective success.

ABOUT PURPLE TALENT SOLUTIONS

Purple Talent Solutions helps organisations align strategy, structure and capability through organisational design, Levels of Work analysis, leadership capability assessment and succession planning.

HOW THIS ARTICLE WAS PRODUCED

This article was written by Purple Talent Solutions with the support of AI tools, which assisted with drafting, editing and design. The ideas, analysis and final editorial judgement are our own.

IMPORTANT NOTE

This independent article uses Manchester United as an illustrative case study. It is not based on an internal organisational assessment and does not represent an evaluation of the capabilities of any individual at the club.

LET'S TALK

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