

Messi Lessons – Why stars fail in new environments



WEEKLY LEARNINGS 2023

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Lionel Messi is one of the greatest footballers of all time. What a difference two years have made in his life! He led Argentina to a World Cup win in 2022, but in 2023, his club PSG doesn't want him. Worse, they disciplined him and suspended him from training since he went to Saudi Arabia to fulfil his role as their ambassador.

This got me thinking in terms of why stars fail in new environments. Here's what I put together.

1. Stars whether they are players or managers of football clubs do well in one club and fail badly in another club. Take Manchester United, they got a string of star managers after Alex Ferguson, and none lasted long. Taking over from a long-serving leader is always a challenge. It does not matter if the leader was good or bad, longevity always poses a hurdle.
2. Ronaldo was the return of the prodigal son and failed at Manchester United, even though he had a great first stint there. Why? Things had changed. Alex Ferguson took Ronaldo under his wing when he started there, when Ronaldo returned, he was a big star and no one could nurture him and his ego.
3. There is an old saying that not all trees grow in all soils. That's very true of talent.
4. In a survey done of more than 20,000 new hires, 46% left in 18 months because they couldn't fit in. So, you have a one in two chance of getting a new hire right. The old HLL terminated the services of many management trainees, and these people who were asked to move on did very well in other industries and companies and some of them went on to being CEOs in advertising agencies etc.
5. Every company alludes to a 'culture', but the word means different things to different people. A better definition of culture for me is – "culture is the way things get done in the company." This is more like the work DNA, there are four or five things which matter in a company.
6. New Hires also fail because the metrics are too narrow. For example, the PSG metric for Messi was winning the Champions League. In the case of Advertising Creative and Servicing people, the metric is either getting a big client or winning big awards. When things fall even a little short, the stars move on.
7. 89% of new hires fail due to a DNA mismatch and only 11% fail because of a skill mismatch.
8. Let me give you a few DNA examples.

9. In one company, no one ever challenged senior managers or was intellectually honest in meetings. That made people compliant and not critical thinkers. So, the DNA of the company became one set of conversations in the meeting room with the boss and one set of conversations outside the meeting room which bordered on gossip. This DNA created a bunch of sycophants.
10. In another company, there was zero focus on profitability, and everyone was rewarded for delivering volume at any cost. This builds mercenaries. Mercenaries want to hit home runs by hook or by crook. Mercenaries turn turncoats very quickly. See what's happening with the Wagner Group and Russia. This company had a Wagner culture. The sales head of this company overspent his trade budget by millions in one year and gave a shock to the system.
11. In another company, the DNA was about doing the best for the organization. Nothing else mattered. The system systematically took out all performing leaders with poor behaviour. When the DNA is only about the well-being of the company then things are simple.
12. I think tenure in corporate roles is getting shorter. This creates its own set of short-term behaviours, and everyone is fine with it. True change needs fundamental rewiring and cleaning out the old blood group. Very few companies are cognizant of this.

So, next time you hire a star, think deeply about these topics of DNA, narrow objectives, and bad behaviour.

Messi is a sad story, where the PSG bosses and the PSG fans treated him badly. It's more a reflection of the PSG culture and less of Messi the footballer.

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