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With Blatter gone, the hard work of changing FIFA culture starts now

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Time for a remodel. EPA/Ennio Leanza

As Sepp Blatter reluctantly heads for the exit, many football supporters think the job of cleaning up FIFA is done. In reality, it is only just beginning.


The departure of Blatter following continued allegations of corruption is without a doubt an important step to changing this kleptocracy. **But getting rid of a tarnished leader is often the easiest part of cleaning up an organisation.** The hard part is actually resetting the routines of the entire




organisation. Transforming the tone for the top is something which a new leader can do with the help of a few clever PR advisors. But **cleaning up the mess in the middle takes much more time and effort.** 


Despite all the back slapping following Blatter's re-election as president of FIFA last week, this is an organisation in deep crisis. The majority of its executive board have been suspended while they are investigated for corruption. The US attorney-general is investigating various charges of corrupt dealings. And the body count of construction workers mounts as the facilities for the 2022 World Cup appear out of the desert.



Top FIFA officials (past and present) are under arrest for corruption. EPA FILE 

Clean break?

It is tempting to see Blatter's resignation as a clean break. I'm sure we will be told that with the old guy gone, a new era of moral integrity will dawn. If only it were so simple. Blatter is by no means making a swift exit. **He will stay on until the next president can be elected – which could be ten months away. This will give this 21st-century Machiavelli time to re-engineer the FIFA court in his favour. It might even include a come back in another guise such as “honorary president”.** 

But even if Blatter does release his grip on power, and is replaced by a genuinely new regime, then real transformation is going to remain difficult. When a new president is appointed, they are likely to come in under **a mandate of cleaning up corruption. There will be speeches filled with fine words like “integrity”, “accountability” and “transparency”. There will be inquiries to unearth the extent and underlying causes of unethical behaviour.** 

There will also be further **scapegoating** as representatives of the older regime are weeded out and replaced with new officials with clean bills of health. **There may be some expressions of “profound**

regret” about the “unfortunate mistakes” of a few “rogue individuals” who “tarnished the good name” of the organisation.



Even if there are these changes in personnel and policy, ensuring this drives a change in practice is going to be another matter altogether. Turning new ethics policies into practice usually proves to be a difficult, if not impossible task. Often the moral clean-skins brought into the organisation are politically naïve. They don't understand the byzantine political processes on which the organisation they are joining run.



They introduce policies that look like “best practice” to the outside world but appear practically unworkable within the organisation. As a result, policies often remain gathering dust on the shelf until the auditors appear. Then the organisation will be a paean of virtue, at least while the auditors are on site. For example when Anthony Jenkins took over as CEO of Barclays, he came with a background in retail banking, but has struggled at times with political wrangling involved in driving culture change through the American investment banking division.

Culture change

Alongside the challenge of putting rules into practice is the even tougher question of how you might change the culture of the organisation. Typically, large organisations like FIFA have highly ingrained cultures which provide members with the unofficial rule book they use everyday to make decisions.



These rules are not learned in the classroom, but around the dinner table, in the hotel bar or in the hallways where old hands tell newcomers how things “really work around here”. This cultural knowledge is subtle, difficult to interpret, and often hard won. People take years to learn it – so it should come as no surprise that it often takes even longer to unlearn it.



The difficulty of turning around a morally tarnished organisation is by no means unique to the world of football. In the past few years, we have witnessed many other important institutions suffer their own ethical scandals and attempt to reintroduce more ethical cultures. These include banks following the financial crisis, the UK parliament following the members expenses scandal, the NHS following various scandals about patient care, the BBC following allegations of sexual abuse by its employees, the police following evidence of racism among members of the force.

The sad reality

Each of these organisations has tried to deal with its own scandal in its own ways. But in each case, a similar ritual of atonement happens each time. Senior leaders are scapegoated, and new leaders appear on the scene brandishing codes of ethics and promising a culture change process. This often leads the public to think that the job has been done.



The sad reality is that this is only the beginning of a longer process. The big lesson from each of these cases is that you cannot change the ethics of an organisation by changing its leaders, changing their speeches or changing the rule book. Sending middle managers on ethical training courses for a week is also unlikely to cut it. Transforming culture takes a concerted effort which can last for years.





The end of an era. EPA Keystone

Change is possible

It is often difficult or impossible to change people's deep-seated values in organisation. The real key to transforming culture is altering the rituals, routines and daily practices of the organisation. This means changing the unofficial way people go about doing things.



This might sound rather abstract, but it has been achieved in other contexts. For instance, unsafe working practices were once endemic within the oil and gas industry in the UK. As soon as a new worker arrived on an oil rig, they would be taught to ignore the health and safety rules and to do even the most dangerous tasks without safety precautions. Today all this has changed.

It took constantly reinforcing health and safety routines in all parts of the organisation. If you visit the headquarters of BP or Shell, you will be told about all the health and safety procedures. This is not because an office block in London is a dangerous place. It is because the organisation takes every opportunity possible to remind its employees that health and safety matters. They have built health and safety into the daily routine of the organisation.

It's just one example and is by no means perfect, but changing an organisation like FIFA will involve doing something similar focused on anti-corruption and cronyism. While replacing top leadership might show the outside world change is happening, re-engineering the routines of the organisation is where the genuine rebirth is likely to come from.

 FIFA 2015 FIFA arrests 

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