

## Story: The wisdom of crowds – the co-produced football club, and what we can learn from it

In 2011 Leonard Brody, the co-owner of Coventry City Football Club, put forward the idea that Coventry fans should be able to ‘text a sub’ during a match – so that the fans could have players replaced or tactics changed. Brody had asked himself the question, ‘How do you engage fans more in the game and get their input in the process?’ Surprisingly, the fans were not happy with the idea because, despite being given more power as a result of the proposal, they sensed this was the wrong kind of engagement. It’s the type of ‘co-produced’ approach that seems like a nice idea, but is actually an abdication of leadership which undermines the manager. Good co-production is about supporting people in having more say (like the many fans who have places on the boards of their clubs) not about saying ‘over to you’ and hoping for the best.

Brody’s approach was taken up several notches by ‘MyFootballClub’. This was an online group that attracted enough paying members to buy the non-league club Ebbsfleet United in 2008. Members of MyFootballClub were excited by the chance to ‘co-produce’ transfer policy or team selection, and things went well at first, but then problems struck. Members hadn’t been given all the powers they’d been promised. Many stopped voting or cancelled their memberships altogether. In 2013, with the club relegated and money troubles biting hard, a foreign investor bought the club outright. A utopian idea about co-producing the running of a sport club ultimately led to disillusionment.

Crucial to both Coventry and Ebbsfleet stories is that power sharing and co-production can only work when they play to people’s strengths. It isn’t possible for fans, some of whom actually lived abroad in the case of MyFootballClub, to make tight calls such as whether an injury is small enough for a player to play through. As the manager of Ebbsfleet said in frustration, “It’s not just about picking the side from a living room. You are dealing with human beings!”

Football teams and local government are obviously different but these examples show how co-production, while a fantastically powerful approach if done well, should always be chosen because of the additional creativity or insight it allows participants to bring rather than as a default choice.

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