

FROM THE FIELD



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PLAY IT SAFE

THE TALENT SYSTEMS DON'T TOLERATE



Focus Point

This isn't a piece about football.

And it's not really about management either.

It's an observation from the field — the real one and the corporate one — about how systems choose what's convenient today and lose what matters tomorrow.

Talent doesn't disappear. It gets silenced.

And when no one emerges anymore, we find the most convenient explanation: "There's just no talent out there anymore."

Maybe the problem isn't who's missing.

It's what the system is no longer willing to tolerate.

The meeting room is tidy, quiet. On the wall, well-crafted slides scroll by: *Leadership Pipeline, Talent Development, Future Leaders, Shadow Board*.

The words are right. Reassuring.

Then come the questions.

Did we hit the target?

Are we on track with the plan?

Any material deviations?

Leadership stays in the slide title. Everything else is there to show we're in control.

It's all about alignment, deviations, exceptions. Neat words, full of reassuring neologisms, delivered with confidence by people who rarely stop to question what they actually mean.

That's when, almost unbidden, a football pitch comes to mind. Any pitch: faded lines, parents behind the nets, the coach giving instructions to the kids.

Two distant worlds, it would seem.

Yet they speak the same language.

There too, the unspoken objective is clear: win now.

Who plays, who sits out, who gets "waited for" and who doesn't. Not out of malice. But because the system rewards decisions that reduce immediate risk, even as they silently erode what should be maturing tomorrow.

So we select what's visible.

At work: clean performance, aligned behaviour, operational predictability. On the pitch: physical readiness, intensity, standardized execution.

Real talent almost never aligns with what the system can tolerate.

It's not faster. It's not stronger. It's *different*.

In the touch that doesn't bounce away.

In the move that breaks the pattern.

In the dribble attempted where no one would dare.

In a passing lane others don't see.

And it's often the first to be corrected.

"Keep it simple."

"Play it safe."

"Don't take risks."

In the office, the vocabulary changes. The substance doesn't.

"Follow the process."

"Not the right time."

"Better to align."

Let's say it plainly: we're not looking for talent. We're looking for obedience with a better résumé.

Talent isn't rare. It's inconvenient. It doesn't fit the mould. It doesn't obey on command. It's not predictable.

The system doesn't know how to invest in what it can't control.

Being corrected repeatedly, talent internalizes.

It doesn't improve: it adapts.

It learns when to try and when not to. It learns which moves are tolerated. Above all, it learns one thing: that putting yourself out there has a cost.

On the pitch, this process is imperceptible. The dribble that's no longer attempted. The play that kicks the problem down the road. The safe choice that doesn't expose.

At work, the same thing happens. It's not disengagement. It's learned caution.

People stop proposing unsolicited ideas. They wait for someone else to go first. They learn to stay within the lines, because stepping out doesn't pay.

Talent isn't defeated. It's educated into giving up.

Luka Modrić said it simply: *"Strength will never beat technique."*

Yet if you look at development systems — in sports or in business — strength almost always wins. It wins because it arrives first, because it's measurable, because it's reassuring.

Talent requires time. And time, in systems driven by the short term, is an inconvenient variable.

There's a deep misconception at work: the idea that talent can be *built*. Something to teach, standardize, replicate, as if it were a tool.

But talent isn't the tool. You learn to use the tool. Talent is the hand that knows what to do with it.

Everyone can learn to hold a brush. That doesn't make them Picasso.

Then there's the moment everyone knows but rarely talks about.

Foul in the box. Penalty. Silence.

The coach asks who's stepping up. Eyes drop. Someone fidgets with their shin guards.

It's not cowardice. It's learned behaviour. They've learned that making a mistake isn't part of the journey: it's a risk.

That's when a line we all know comes to mind: *"Nino, don't be afraid to miss a penalty kick."*

A line we happily sing along to.

But that you'll rarely find posted in an office. Or in a youth team's locker room.

At work, it happens later. But it happens the same way.

I know brilliant managers — thirty, thirty-five years old — who've stopped raising their hands. Not because they can't decide, but because they've learned that deciding without cover doesn't pay.

Talent doesn't become mediocre. It withdraws. Silently.

And when the system notices something's missing, it always lands on the same explanation: *"There's just no talent anymore."*

Then come the signals that don't make noise, but accumulate.

For years we call them coincidences, unlucky cycles, less gifted generations. At some point, they stop seeming random.

Take Italian football. For decades it wasn't defined by technical purity or the aesthetics of play. It was something else: organization, sacrifice, toughness, control.

Yet within that context, outlier figures emerged. Out-of-the-box talents: technical, creative, sometimes slight, often fragile, certainly not aligned with the system.

Francesco Totti. Roberto Baggio. Alessandro Del Piero. Antonio Cassano. Gianfranco Zola. Vincenzo Montella.

Not products of the system. But grown within it. Tolerated more than sought after.

Exceptions that system, back then, could still bear. Could still wait for.

Today those figures seem to belong to myth. Not because talent has vanished, but because the system that should have recognized it is no longer willing to accept what challenges it.

Excellence doesn't disappear overnight. First it stops being cultivated. Then it stops emerging.

We don't lose them as adults. We extinguish them as kids.

Here the dynamic becomes almost circular.

Like in the story of the mirror, the system looks at itself and asks for confirmation. It wants to be told everything's fine. It won't accept the idea that it was the one to break the chain. It won't accept the hardest defeat: having eliminated what it couldn't control.

So the narrative becomes convenient: *"There's no talent anymore."*

And the system uses it as proof it was right all along.

Talent is there.

It's in the person at the bottom of the list who no longer raises their hand.

It's in the kid who stopped attempting the dribble.

It's in the manager who figured out that proposing costs more than it's worth.

It's there, in silence, waiting for someone to say that putting yourself out there isn't a mistake anymore.

It's time to say it.