

Building a red wall of effective stakeholder engagement

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The story of the Welsh national football team has been one of growing success in recent years. Attendances of home and away matches have been on the rise for years, and they have become famous for their red wall of supporters.

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) has been at the forefront of supporter engagement. It has managed to create a genuine and powerful relationship with supporters and one which has coincided with unprecedented success for the national team.

The FAW's commitment to stakeholder engagement and the value it puts on it is evident in the five-year plan it introduced last year, which is guided by six key principles:

- good governance
- stakeholder engagement
- insight-led and effective reporting
- staff training and development
- performance management
- effective and insight-led communication.

Turning the corner

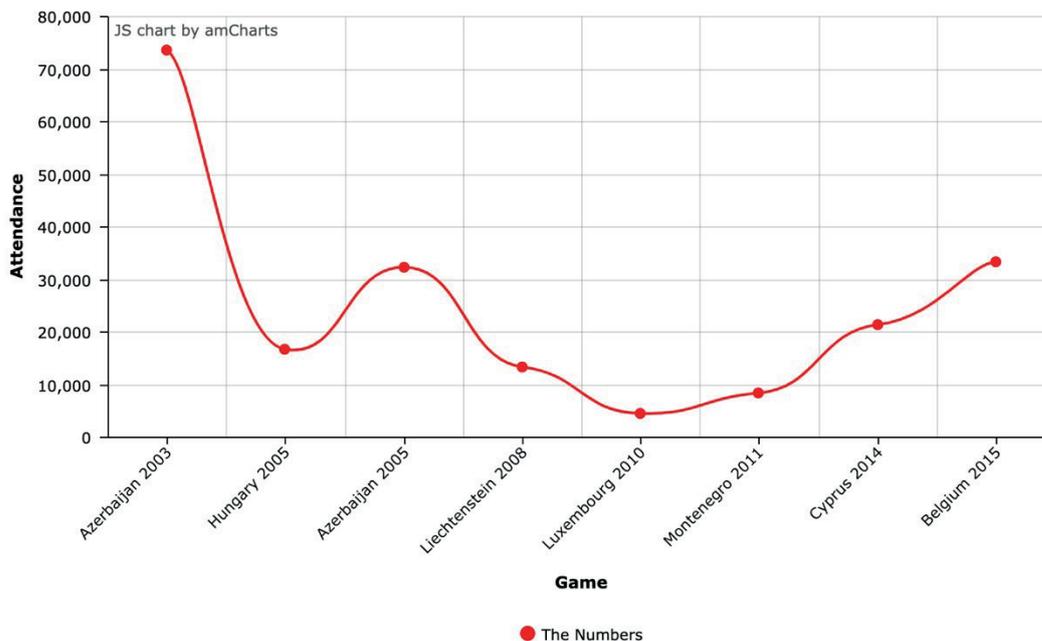
In 2009, following years of declining attendance, the FAW were forced to make some critical decisions, including leaving the national stadium of Wales.

The Principality Stadium is one of the world's greatest sporting arenas. Right in the centre of Cardiff, with its steep banks designed to make spectators feel like they are on top of the pitch, impeccable sightlines from every seat, and specially insulated and shaped to maximise the acoustics, it is one of the most atmospheric stadiums and has become a symbol of Welsh identity and of passion for their national teams. So why did the FAW leave?

Practicalities

The decline in support was startling: from almost maximum capacity crowds of 73,500 and 73,411 for Wales' games against Azerbaijan and Finland in 2003 to 17,106 and 22,000 for the same fixtures in 2008.





The declining number of fans attending the games was creating a vicious cycle. Declining attendance figures meant less revenue for the FAW through ticket sales and matchday income, which, for one of the poorest national football associations, was an existential issue. One repercussion was less money being available for the grassroots game to nourish and support the future of Welsh football.

A fresh start

In 2009 the FAW brought in Jonathan Ford as its new chief executive, who immediately set out on a path of reform with a focus on fan engagement.

Ford's view was that it is better to have a packed 33,000 stadium than a half-empty 74,000 stadium. It was a bold move. The FAW needed to address the experience of supporters attending Welsh football matches. Moving stadiums was a signal of this intent – and of a fresh start.

Good engagement

Engagement is a term that captures a multitude of practices involving contact between two entities. There are different types and forms of engagement.



Boards know that the relationship between their organisation and its stakeholders is critical to success, and yet many organisations, and their boards, neglect stakeholder engagement, or do it poorly, and have an inadequate understanding of relations with stakeholders and the stakeholder's perception of the organisation. Support for a person, organisation, institution, government – anything – boils down to engagement.

For the boards of sports organisations fan engagement is crucial and the key performance indicator is attendance. As a result, most sports organisations are particularly effective at engaging with their supporters. Organisations in different sectors, such as healthcare or VCSE, could learn a lot about stakeholder engagement from them – including when they get it wrong.

Questions for your board

- Do you know who your key stakeholders are?
- Do you know what their perception of your organisation is?
- Do you know what matters most to them?
- Do you have guiding principles for your stakeholder engagement?
- Are they principles which should apply consistently to all our engagement activities – staff, patient, partner and community?
- What would be good indicators for successful engagement in your organisation?

The solution

It started with a slogan: 'Time to believe'. Unveiled at the outset of Wales' campaign to qualify for the 2014 World Cup, the slogan was the first real attempt to galvanise the Welsh fans and reconnect them to the Welsh team and its aspirations for success.

The motto of the FAW 'Gorau Cwarae Cyd Chwarae' or 'best play is team play' inspired the new Welsh slogan 'Together stronger'. They quickly realised that the best way to unite fans was to give them a slogan they could all believe in.

"Good communication is the bridge between confusion and clarity."

Nat Turner.

To further foster unity among the supporters, they built a red wall of supporters all wearing the same shirts. This was just the beginning, the hard work started when implementing a continual dialogue between supporter groups and the FAW, taking ideas and learning about culture from them and then giving their support to it.

When Wales turned up in France for Euro 2016, it was their first appearance at a major international tournament since 1958. No one outside Wales really knew what to expect from them. Wales would go on, extraordinarily, to make it to the semi-finals. But just as surprising and astounding was the performance of the so-called Red Wall – the mass of Welsh fans decked out in replicas of the nation's red shirts, as numerous and as loud as those of any other nation in the tournament. Such was the support of the Welsh fans during Euro 2016, they won a special award from UEFA.

Your typical Welsh football fan

The matchday experience starts before the whistle blows. Providing detailed information about travel options through its website and through Transport for Wales, the FAW started supporter engagement from the get-go. To build atmosphere, entertainment was provided on the concourses outside each stand, playing popular hits from Welsh bands such as the Manic Street Preachers and Stereophonics. Introducing the Welsh language and aspects of Welsh culture has been pivotal to this and to the music selection on matchdays.

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Then the FAW set about addressing the issue of the Welsh national anthem. It took several years for them to get this right, experimenting with different singers, different set ups, volumes, putting the words up on big screens. All without much success until they made another crucial decision – they would start the anthem off with the first three bars to start the fans off and then they would stop the music and let the Red Wall take over. It's been a hit!

Alongside this the FAW created a network of Fan Ambassadors to drive further improvements to supporter culture and experience. And fans have been inspired and empowered to create their own new organisations like Club Wales which further transformed Welsh support.

A fan newsletter, new fan memberships, a new website with an interactive fan zone, all supported with excellent social media built a sense of closeness between fans and the squad.

Results

From slow progress at first, attendances of Welsh national football team home and away matches have been on the rise for years. So much so that talks have recently resumed about the team potentially returning to the Principality Stadium.

Improving your stakeholder engagement

The Good Governance Institute has developed a new stakeholder engagement maturity matrix as an aid for organisations to benchmark themselves against and use as a framework for improvement.

The stakeholder engagement maturity matrix outlines nine key elements of communicating, engaging and building relationships with core organisations and individuals. It can be used both for the whole organisation or for specific programmes of work and aligns with public, third and private sector organisations. It provides clear steps on how to progress and improve in each of these areas.

This practical tool enables boards and communications teams of organisations to identify their current level of progress in developing against each key competency, to determine where they want to get in 12 months in each area and how to get there.

The matrix outlines the following core elements for assessment:

- Stakeholder identification and awareness
- Relationship development
- Strategic management
- Systems, processes and procedures
- Culture
- Influence
- Perception/reputation
- Skills and capacity
- Feedback and improvement

GGI provides specialist engagement support. If you're interested in how we can help improve your organisation's engagement, start a conversation with us. advice@good-governance.org.uk

