On the journey leading a football club to success or decline, it is tempting to attribute highs and lows solely to the talent of players or coaches. However, as John H. Holland observed, “in a complex system, the interaction of small parts can create a whole in ways that no one could have predicted.” This idea resonates with how football clubs operate as dynamic, complex organisational systems. As a former professional footballer turned academic, I argue that understanding the game’s nuances is essential in contemporary football but no longer sufficient.

The recent decline of Sporting Clube de Portugal, following the departure of coach Ruben Amorim to Manchester United, illustrates how seemingly isolated changes can trigger systemic transformations in complex organisations. A dominant leader in the Portuguese league and on course for back-to-back championships, Sporting suffered a string of poor results after Amorim’s departure. Meanwhile, Manchester United, which had been stagnating under Erik ten Hag, now appears poised for resurgence under the new coach. This transition at Sporting mirrors what Manchester United endured after Alex Ferguson’s departure in 2013. For years, the club struggled with instability, frequent managerial changes, and the inability to reclaim the collective synergy that defined Ferguson’s era. Just as Ferguson had a profound understanding of the club’s organisational complexities, Ruben Amorim played a similar role at Sporting. Now at Manchester United, the same coach seems to be orchestrating a positive reconfiguration: small internal leadership adjustments and tactical tweaks are driving deep transformations, exemplifying the phenomenon of emergence, where marginal changes produce significantly transformative outcomes.

Emergence, a central concept in complex systems, describes how a whole exhibits properties and behaviours that cannot be explained by the individual characteristics of its parts. At Sporting, Ruben Amorim was not merely a coach; he was a catalyst synchronising individual talents into a collective performance that transcended the sum of its parts. With his departure, the dynamics that sustained harmony and resilience collapsed, revealing the fragility of a system overly dependent on critical interactions. Furthermore, complex systems operate non-linearly, where effects are disproportionate to causes. In football, seemingly trivial decisions—such as formation changes or introducing new training methods—can have outsized impacts. Sporting exemplifies how disruptions, like Amorim’s departure, amplify latent imbalances, exposing interdependencies among its parts. Conversely, Manchester United demonstrates the reverse potential: under Amorim’s leadership, each strategic

decision reverberates, fostering unexpected alignments and synergies that gradually revitalise the club. This non-linear behaviour, illustrated by Lorenz's "butterfly effect," highlights how initial decisions can trigger cascades of transformation.

Managing a football club in the 21st century requires more than technical knowledge. It necessitates understanding the club as an adaptive ecosystem, where interactions among politics, economics, and culture shape decisions and outcomes. The adaptive leadership theories of Uhl-Bien and Arena, which emphasise creating "adaptive spaces" to foster innovation and resilience, are particularly relevant. Ruben Amorim does not act merely as a coach but as a systems architect, shaping narratives, aligning players with shared objectives, and nurturing an environment conducive to the emergence of adaptive behaviours. In contrast, Sporting, without leadership capable of restoring lost synchronicity, faces the challenge of reconfiguring its organisational system. For instance, the inability to promptly fill the leadership vacuum following Amorim's departure highlights a structural issue requiring not just replacement but a systemic understanding of how to reintegrate the club around new dynamics.

The lessons extrapolated extend far beyond football, offering profound insights for managers across industries. Startups, for example, often operate as dynamic systems where small decisions—such as choosing a technology or defining a marketing strategy—can radically alter their trajectory. Similarly, multinational corporations face comparable challenges in aligning global teams around common objectives, often under the pressure of volatile markets. Recognising that organisations are living systems resistant to predictability is fundamental. Strategic decisions must be made with sensitivity to the system's internal and external connections. For leaders in any domain, the lesson is clear: creating "adaptive spaces"—environments where ideas and interactions flow freely—is essential to fostering innovation and resilience. Adopting a leadership approach that integrates uncertainty, relational dynamics, and a long-term vision enables crises to be transformed into opportunities.

Looking to the future, one can foresee Manchester United reaping the rewards of Amorim's leadership, while Sporting continues to face challenges until it identifies a new catalytic force. This contrast reinforces a fundamental principle: something in motion does not guarantee its continuity without leadership and adaptability; conversely, something in inertia demands an external force to propel it—and Ruben Amorim epitomises that force. More than that,

sustainable success demands a vision transcending immediate victories, embedding resilience and innovation as pillars of organisational strategy. Major football clubs, if they aim to achieve long-term success, must align their internal and external operations, investing in both visionary leadership and continuous adaptability. This cycle of energy and transformation encapsulates the essence of modern organisational systems: equilibrium is fleeting, and the true challenge lies in orchestrating change and anticipating emergences.

As a former player and academic, I see football as a powerful laboratory for understanding organisational dynamics. Thriving requires more than technical knowledge; it demands visionary leadership that integrates tenacity, adaptability, and innovation. Under Ruben Amorim's transformative leadership, Manchester United appears set on a path of sustained resurgence. Sporting, meanwhile, stands at a crossroads: without leadership capable of reorganising its organisational energy, it will remain mired in uncertainty. The president's role, though less visible, is crucial in this process, serving as a catalyst for a new strategic direction. These narratives transcend sport, offering universal lessons on how to lead in complexity and transform crises into opportunities, positioning visionary leadership as the key differentiator in uncertain times.

Eduardo Leite, PhD
Former professional football player
Professor, University of Madeira
Honorary Professor, School of Law, University of Aberdeen
Madeira, 15 January 2025