INSIGHTS · CASE STUDY

The Promotion Paradox

Getting to the top tier is hard. Staying there is a different game.

The English Premier League offers one of the most vivid illustrations of what happens when an organization enters a more demanding environment without changing how it operates. Scale-ups face the same dynamic. Often with the same outcome.

Coriolis Marketing Partners
coriolismarketing.com

THE RESULTS

A Cycle That Repeats With Remarkable Consistency

In the modern 20-team Premier League era, almost half of all promoted clubs are immediately relegated. In each of the last two seasons, all three promoted clubs went straight back down. The financial gap between staying up and going down is enormous, and yet the pattern repeats with striking consistency.

~44%	3/3	5–10×
Immediate relegation rate for promoted clubs	**Promoted clubs immediately relegated, two seasons running**	**Net spend needed to meaningfully improve survival odds**
Opta Analyst — 89 promoted clubs since 20-team era	*Sky Sports / Premier League data, 2023-24 & 2024-25*	*Sky Sports analysis, 2025-26 season preview*

These are not statistics about football. They are statistics about what happens when an organization enters a more demanding environment without redesigning its operating model. Scale-ups face the same dynamic. Often with the same outcome.

For our American readers

Unlike US sports, English football has no drafts, no salary caps, and no protected franchises. The Premier League is England's top-flight football (soccer) division, the most watched sports league in the world. Below it sits the Championship, a fiercely competitive second tier. Every season, the three lowest-ranked Premier League clubs are automatically relegated (demoted to the Championship), and the top Championship clubs earn promotion. No exceptions. No wild cards. The financial and reputational gap between the two divisions is enormous.

The Situation

A club earns promotion after a season of sustained, determined effort. The owners are elated. The manager keeps his job. A few players are signed. The squad is largely unchanged.

The core belief: this approach worked, so why change it?

What follows has become almost predictable. Early defeats are attributed to adjustment — the pace is faster here, opponents are stronger, these things take time. Then comes a famous scalp, a win against an established club, and the mood lifts dramatically. The press talks of a corner being turned. But that win is an outlier, not the start of a pattern, and it delays the harder conversation about what structural change is actually required.

The Arc

The pattern unfolds in three predictable phases. Each one feels reasonable at the time.

OPTIMISM

Pre-season

Confidence And Continuity

Promotion celebrated. Manager retained. Squad largely unchanged. The belief: what won the Championship will work in the Premier League. No fundamental operating model review is undertaken.

DENIAL

Early Season

The False Corner

Defeats mount but are explained away as growing pains. Then a big win, a genuine upset, lifts the mood and briefly silences the doubters. The team is elated; the board exhales. But the win doesn't repeat. It was a moment, not a signal.

CRISIS

Mid-Late Season

The Manager Gets Fired

As pressure becomes undeniable, the board fires the manager — a visible act that shifts blame downward. But the manager is rarely the root cause. The decision that produced the failure was made earlier, in the boardroom.

The Accountability Gap

In sport and in business, the failure is rarely where it appears to be.

On The Pitch

The manager is fired for results that were always going to be poor, given the board never invested in the structural prerequisites for Premier League performance: specialist coaching staff,

In The Boardroom

The sales team is blamed for missing targets. But if leadership has not built the right infrastructure (a repeatable pipeline, proper enablement, the right talent at every level), then missing targets was the modern facilities, and the caliber of player the top flight demands. The decision that caused the failure was made in the boardroom months earlier, not on the touchline.

inevitable result of a structural decision made well before the quarter closed. It is not a sales execution problem. It is an investment timing problem.

Timing Of Adjustment

When a club adapts matters as much as whether it adapts.

Clubs that enter the Premier League with a pre-planned operating model transition (restructured coaching teams, upgraded facilities, deliberate recruitment at the right level) consistently outperform those that make the same investments reactively once the season is already in difficulty. The investment is similar. The outcome is not.

Timing Of Structural Adjustment	Indicative Survival Outcome	Direction
Pre-season: operating model rebuilt before a ball is kicked	Club enters with infrastructure matched to the new environment; survival odds materially higher.	**Higher**
Early season: adjustments triggered by first warning signs	Enough runway remains but momentum already lost; moderate survival chance.	**Moderate**
Mid- to late-season: change forced by crisis	Structural changes under pressure with minimal runway rarely prevent relegation.	**Lower**

Note: Directional framework based on observed patterns in newly promoted clubs. Not a single published statistical study. Intended to illustrate the relationship between timing of adaptation and survival outcomes.

The clubs that survive are rarely the ones with the best Championship squad. They are the ones that most quickly build the operational capacity to compete at the new level.

The Business Parallel

Scale-ups follow the same three-phase pattern.

The dynamics at work in a newly promoted club are not unique to sport. Technology Scale-Ups navigating the transition from early-stage to growth-stage face the same structural challenge, and make the same mistakes, in the same sequence.

Newly Promoted Club	Scale-Up Entering New Growth Phase
OPTIMISM · Championship-winning formula kept intact: same manager, same squad, same methods. "We earned the right to be here."	**OPTIMISM ·** Start-up model retained: founder-led decisions, informal execution, referral-driven pipeline. "This is what got us here."
DENIAL · A big upset win electrifies the dressing room and buys time. Everyone believes it signals a turning point. It doesn't repeat. It was always an outlier in a structurally difficult season.	**DENIAL ·** A landmark contract win electrifies the sales team and leadership. It feels like the start of a pattern. Pressure to examine the operating model fades, until the pipeline fails to produce anything similar for the next two quarters.
CRISIS · The manager is fired. But the board, who chose not to invest earlier in coaching depth, facilities, and player quality, made the decision that produced the outcome.	**CRISIS ·** The sales team is blamed for missing targets. But if leadership hasn't built the pipeline, the enablement, and the right operational infrastructure, the outcome was never in the sales team's hands.

The Core Insight

Past success is evidence of what worked before. Not a template for what comes next.

The Premier League does not relegate clubs because their Championship approach was wrong. It does so because that approach was built for a different competitive environment. The occasional big result, like the occasional landmark deal, is real, and worth celebrating. But it is not proof that the underlying model is working. It is a moment in a season that is otherwise telling a different story.

The work of getting through is the work of building the operating model the next stage actually demands. Pipeline. Enablement. Leadership depth. Process maturity. Investment in the structural prerequisites of performance at the new level, made early enough to matter.

Lessons For A Scale-Up

Four transferable lessons from the Premier League pattern that apply directly to scale-up businesses facing their own promotion moment.

LESSONS FOR A SCALE-UP

01. Getting there and being ready for it are two different things.

Promotion, or scale-up, is an achievement. It is not evidence of readiness for what comes next. The two must be built separately and deliberately. The skills that won you the Championship are not the skills that keep you in the Premier League. The traction that earned you investment is not the traction that builds a $30M business.

02. A big win is a moment. Not a signal.

One famous result, like one landmark contract, can mask structural problems and delay necessary adaptation. Celebrate it. Then keep asking whether the underlying model is actually working. The pattern, not the peak, is the signal.

03. Blame flows downhill. Accountability should go upstream.

Firing the manager, or blaming the sales team, addresses a symptom. The decision that produced the outcome was made earlier, at the leadership level, when the structural investment wasn't made. Look for the missing investment, not the missing performance.

04. Proactive adaptation consistently outperforms reactive restructuring.

The same structural investment made before the pressure arrives produces better outcomes than the same investment made in crisis. Earlier is almost always cheaper. It is also more effective. The work of operating model evolution is not optional. It is only a question of whether it is done by design or by crisis.

About Coriolis

Coriolis is a marketing partner built for Technology Scale-Ups in the growth-stall zone.

We work alongside scale-up leadership teams to relieve immediate pressure, build the marketing system the next stage of growth needs, and transfer full ownership to internal teams. Not retainers. Not lock-in. Not a long-term agency relationship.

Our role is not to replace the leadership teams that built these organizations. It is to help them build the infrastructure, systems, and operating model that give their people the best possible chance of performing at the next level — before the pressure arrives, not in response to it.

Want to talk through how this applies to your business?

Start a conversation at coriolismarketing.com/contact

Data Sources

Survival rate statistics: Opta Analyst (89 promoted clubs, 20-team Premier League era); Sky Sports (2025-26 season preview and historical records); Premier League data (1995-present). The timing-of-adjustment framework is illustrative — it reflects directional patterns across promoted clubs, not a single published dataset.