

Leadership Lessons from the 2018 World Cup

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From the outset, this year's World Cup was dominated by surprise victories, as upstart teams challenged the sport's dominant powers – and sent them home early. One of the primary lessons from this year's competition is that success doesn't depend on stellar football technique alone. For this year's winners, the key was leadership.

That means the World Cup offers a range of lessons in leadership for the corporate world. On-field heroes have a lot to teach executives about inspiring their teammates, while managers like England's Gareth Southgate provide examples of caring for subordinates' psychological needs. Germany offers a cautionary tale of how team leadership can go wrong, while Croatian

President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic delivers perhaps the most important lesson: how to respond to defeat and disappointment gracefully.

The first lesson on how to effectively motivate a team came from Romelu Lukaku, the Manchester United player from Belgium, who emerged as one of the stars of the tournament. He encouraged his teammates to perform better, inspiring them with the determination to improve. Lukaku's lack of complacency strengthened Belgium on the field, yielding a fantastic collaboration with Eden Hazard and Kevin De Bruyne that delivered four goals for Lukaku.

Similarly, France would probably not be as successful as it had if it weren't for Paul Pogba's fantastic leadership. The midfielder's famous locker room speeches were packed with inspiring turns of phrase such as "we have to beat the best to be the best" and "I will die on the pitch, or we will kill them". While it's easy to dismiss his words as tacky motivational slogans, his teammates say they proved to be crucial to victory, helping them move beyond their defeat at the hands of Portugal in the Euro 2016 final. Similarly, corporate managers can contribute to their teams' progress by keeping in mind the power of encouraging words, and actively showing faith in their teams' success.

Any executive still doubting the importance of psychology should take a closer look at England's performance during this year's World Cup. Although the Three Lions arrived in Russia with lowered expectations, they soon managed to convince the public that football might indeed be "coming home". One of the most convincing explanations for the team's dramatic improvement is the players' positive attitude, driven by the manager, Gareth Southgate. Strengthened by his previous failures, Southgate made his team believe that "whatever goes wrong we can deal with, as I have lived through it".

Further demonstrating his belief in the power of the mind, Southgate also hired Pippa Grange, a psychologist, who encouraged the team to regularly sit down together and talk about their experiences and anxieties. Grange taught footballers simple tricks on how to manage stress and relieve the pressure. As a result, England entered the World Cup more relaxed, focused and united than ever. When journalists asked midfielder Dele Alli before a game whether he was nervous, he replied: "excited, not nervous". His answer reflects how England players learned to trust themselves and productively manage their emotions. Executives seeking to lead employees who become paralysed by the fear of failure should take note of Southgate's methods. Rebukes and pressure rarely push subordinates to perform better; managers who want a long-term improvement need to build emotional trust with their teams.

And bosses who underestimate the power that fear of failure holds should take a closer look at Germany's crushing defeat. Entering the tournament as the reigning champions, Die Mannschaft lost largely because its manager, Joachim Löw, got trapped by the "innovators dilemma", a term that explains why organisations tend to struggle with change. Just like Germany's coach, executives often realise that the stakes are high, and prefer to stick to "proven" methods from the past, failing to realise that this isn't enough to deliver success. Leaders who want to push established organisations towards further successes should avoid Löw's fear of failure, recognising the need to continuously reassess old approaches and adjust to changing environments.

No matter how much energy and support a leader invests in the team's progress, success is never guaranteed. But when failures happen, managers should look to Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic as a model of how to respond. The leader showed unflinching support for her national team from the very beginning of the World Cup, attending every match she could and insisted on sitting in stands among the Croatian fans. And Grabar-Kitarovic became the strong leader she needed to be when Croatia had to face defeat in the final match. She embraced Luka Modric, the team's captain, and shook hands with each of the Croatian and French footballers on the field. By providing unwavering support, the president helped maintain unity and pride. Undoubtedly, her positive leadership will help Croatians move past the failure and aim for victory four years from now.