Leadership lessons from the 2014 World Cup

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“If there is a difference between management and leadership it is that managers make money and leaders leave a legacy. Executives who thrive, those whose memory survives - deliver both.”

Brazil 2014. The World Cup. Some say it was the best ever. Stadiums were full; there were a record number of goals; and the carnival atmosphere, unrelenting. And in between the games ... the golden beaches of Ipanema and Copacabana. The players came to perform. The fans came to play.

Global sporting events invariably embrace the good, the bad and the ugly. Brazil was no exception. The good: Brazilian hospitality. The bad: inconsistent refereeing. The ugly: a bite that was met with shock around the world.

It would be naïve to think that the World Cup is just another sporting competition. The scope, the scale, the money, the politics, the international reach and the national pride involved, make it a unique leadership challenge. For the observer it is also a one-of-a-kind learning opportunity.

As a life-time soccer fan I always look forward to the World Cup. As an England supporter, once they begin, I am quickly disappointed, regularly disillusioned and occasionally disgusted. One small plus: if your team leaves early, it (hopefully) allows for a more dispassionate view of the unfolding events. With this thought in mind, please find the leadership lessons I took away from the 2014 World Cup:

1. Coaching is about inspiring people

When Joachim Löw, the German coach, sent on 22-year-old Mario Götze as a substitute in the World Cup final, he could have given him tactical advice.
Considering what was at risk for Germany, and for him personally, he could have cautioned Götze about what not to do. He didn’t. What he said was, “show the world that you are better than Messi.” In the 113th minute of extra time, Götze scored not only the winning goal, but one of the best goals of the World Cup.

Question: when you next face a must-win scenario how will you inspire people?

2. If everything is going well you can succeed with brilliant individuals, but when things go off track it’s all about the team

In Estádio Mineirão in Belo Horizonte, in the largest defeat ever in a World Cup semi-final, Germany beat Brazil 7-1. It brought to an end Brazil’s 62-match home unbeaten streak in competitive matches going back to 1975.

Although without two of its stars (Thiago Silva and Neymar), the national humiliation wasn’t brought about because Brazil lacked talent. Immediately before the World Cup, David Luis - who was destined to replace Silva as Brazil’s Captain - was transferred from Chelsea to Paris Saint-Germain for a reputed $83M. Earlier in the season Willian moved to Chelsea for $50M. Hulk, although still with Russian club Zenit St Petersburg, was regularly quoted as being courted by top European clubs for a fee in excess of $50M. Dani Alves was ever-present with record breaking Barcelona. Marcelo was a regular choice with the 2014 European Champions Cup winners Real Madrid.

On the surface, Brazil had the appearance of being a great team. Undefeated up until the semi-final, Brazil had also been victorious in the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup. And yet! The test of “teamwork” isn’t when things are going well but when the team faces adversity. The first goal against Brazil came after 11 minutes; and that was when the wheels came off. Another four goals were added between the 23rd and 29th minutes.

The pundits came up with plenty of reasons: Luis was played out of position, the wrong team set up, pressure from the crowd, and so on. Why would a team made

1 Teams playing in the 2013 Confederations Cup included international heavyweights: Spain, Uruguay, Mexico and Italy.
up of players from some of the most successful clubs on the planet suddenly implode? And herein lies the rub. Without a buoyant league of its own, the Brazilian team was drawn from clubs in Brazil (three players only), France, Germany, Spain, England, Italy, and Canada. The dilemma: the approach and style of soccer is very different in each of these leagues. Although diversity adds a good deal of variety, texture and opportunity for invention, blending people together from different backgrounds doesn’t happen of its own accord. And it doesn’t happen overnight. The Brazilian team had no choice but to rely on individual brilliance.

Meanwhile, Germany, whose players had been working together for over a decade, had sixteen members of the squad who played soccer in the highly acclaimed German league.\(^2\) Moreover, the four members of the squad who played in England had moved to the Premier League well into their career. Drawing upon a natural and deep-rooted cohesiveness, the Germans were able to truly play as a team.

Paradoxically, if the German team had a shortfall, it was that the trade-off for a unified way to play was predictability. One well-known sports writer - with a good deal of admiration it must be said - called the German team “machine-like.” Against teams that played with a very defensive formation they had little by way of a plan B. In the game with Algeria, (ranked 22\(^{nd}\) in the world by FIFA), Germany won by a single goal (2-1). Ghana (ranked 37\(^{th}\) in the world) took them to extra time (2-2). And in the 86th minute of Germany’s win over Algeria, a brief moment of innovation ended up with Thomas Muller totally missing the ball. That said, they were clearly the best team in the competition and deserved winners.

Question(s): if you manage a team (or teams) drawn from different countries/organizations/backgrounds, what specifically do you do to understand the background, leadership style, culture and mindset (as it relates to working in a

\(^2\) Six of the starting eleven on the German team came for one club: Bayern Munich. Mario Götze, who came on as a substitute, also came from Bayern Munich.
group), of each team member?  How do to take advantage of diversity within the team while, at the same time, build cohesiveness?

3. The constant in successful change is dissatisfaction with the status quo

In the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, England mid-field player, Frank Lampard, had a perfectly good goal disallowed. The ball was at least a meter over the German goal line, but because both the referee and the linesman missed it, the potential outcome of the game was unfairly changed.

Although the problem was cast as a refereeing error, the root-cause of the mistake was the conservative attitude towards technology within FIFA. Available in virtually every other major sport, soccer’s governing body was of the opinion that the game wasn’t ready for (instant and inexpensive) goal-line technology.

FIFA wasn’t ready, but hundreds of millions of fans around the world were. Dragged into the twenty-first century by the weight of public opinion, goal line technology was introduced at the 2014 World Cup. Making an especially difficult call in France’s 3-0 victory over Honduras both easy and transparent, the Cue Goal Control 4D system more than lived up to its billing.

FIFA President, Joseph S. Blatter, in the FIFA report on GLT (2012) stated, “The IFAB\(^3\) unanimously agreed that any technology should be for the goal line only and that it did not support any technology in the game beyond GLT.”

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With the level of dissatisfaction from television companies, corporate sponsors and the paying public with play acting, diving in the penalty box and “simulation” generally, don’t bet against video replay featuring at a future World Cup.

Question(s): if you were to ask those who fall under your sphere of influence what they were most dissatisfied with, what would they say?  Assuming that you are right - and you probably are - what prevents you working on that issue right now?

\(^3\) International Football Association Board
4. Leadership is ultimately about the legacy you leave

Hosting an event like the World Cup is a staggering achievement. For a nation that has soccer woven into its very identity it’s a political, economic, and social challenge that touches every aspect of what it means to be “Brazilian.”

*Political*: in promising the “Copa das Copas” - the Cup of Cups, President Dilma Rousseff linked her re-election ambitions to the World Cup’s success.

*Economic*: although the World Cup was seven years in the planning and the budget $13.5b, venues were completed only at the last minute and planned road and infrastructure projects left unfinished. Only eight stadiums were needed. To placate local politicians, Brazil built or refurbished twelve. New stadiums were even built in remote locations such as Manaus in the Amazonian jungle and in the northern coastal city of Natal. Sustainable use of either is highly unlikely. The team that now calls the 40,000 seat stadium in Natal home, draws only 3,000 spectators. If you don’t learn from history you are destined to repeat it. The stadium built in Cape Town, at a cost of $600M, for the South African World Cup, has seen only seven soccer games in the past four years.

*Social*: relatively few, 50%, of the Brazilian population who describe themselves as black or mixed race were sitting in the stands.

Leadership hasn’t changed that much over the years. Clearly the means to execute have changed, but what it means to be a leader, not so much. It’s about strategic thinking (the vision); strategic planning (priorities and options); and strategic doing (making it happen). Leadership is also about growing people because if the organization’s (country’s) human assets don’t grow, any other aspect of growth is a pipe dream. And leadership must always be about how the leader personally turns up: inspiring, authentic, caring. If the latter is missing, in a world where the choices are many, few will choose to follow.
In a climate where quarterly results are the norm and the day-today price of the stock is an arbitrary measure of success, what is often pushed to one side is that leadership is also about what happens ten years from now. If there is a difference between management and leadership, it is that managers make money and leaders leave a legacy. Executives who thrive, those whose memory survives - deliver both.

Now that the FIFA circus has left town, and the excitement of an exceptional event has passed ... what Brazil is left with is the legacy of the World Cup. Let’s hope those who planned and organized the World Cup in Brazil can hold their heads high as they look back and say, “I am proud to have made a difference.”

**Question: specifically, what will your legacy be?**

### 5. Fairness and consistency matter

After biting Italy defender Giorgio Chiellini\(^4\) in the Uruguay-Italy game Luis Suarez was suspended for four months. The suspension ruled him out of the rest of the World Cup. He was also fined 100,000 Swiss francs. For that amount, Suarez could have dined out every day at MacDonald’s for the next 27 years.

The “bite” that reverberated around the world was not Suarez’s first. In 2013 his impressive incisors impaled Chelsea’s Branislav Ivanovic. For that breach of fair play, the then Liverpool player was suspended for ten games. Following an incident in 2010, while playing for Ajax, he was suspended for seven games for chomping down on PSV Eindhoven’s Otman Bakkal.

Suarez’s history of biting his opponents proves three things. One: if you want to predict future behaviour, examine an individual’s past practice. Two: faced with a mistake, it’s better to tell the truth than to come up with a lame excuse. Suarez tried to downplay the incident, telling Uruguayan television: “These are just things that happen out on the pitch. It was just the two of us inside the area and he bumped into

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\(^4\) Shortly after returning to Italy from the World Cup, Giorgio Chiellini married his partner Carolina Bonistalli. It appears Luis Suarez was not invited.
me with his shoulder.” Three: judging by the names of his victims, Anglo Saxon beef is off the menu.

What’s sad about Suarez’s dental dilemmas is that he is one of the best players in the world. Indeed, he has everything: technical skill, quickness, tenacity, flair, consistency, an unbelievable drive to win, and an ability to score that sits him at the same table as Messi and Ronaldo.

What’s unfair about his suspension is that it was out of step with everything else that happened in Brazil. Throwing yourself to the ground to win a penalty, taking turns to kick an especially talented player on the other team, time wasting, grabbing an opponent’s shirt, deliberately going over the ball in a tackle, feigning injury, and any number of creative ways to cheat all went unpunished. Arjen Robben, the Netherlands international, even admitted that he cheated. This is not to suggest that the four month’s suspension for Suarez doesn’t fit the crime. But let’s be consistent. Let’s be fair.

The quickest way to lose credibility as a leader is to treat people on your team differently. If your values don’t apply to everyone, you don’t have values. And watching something unfold that you know is wrong is to be complicit in the crime.

Question: what do you need to do - that you are not already doing - to make consistency and fairness central to your approach to leadership?

6. Make sure those on the sidelines are ready

Thiago Emiliano da Silva is a central defender with Paris Saint-Germain. He is captain of both PSG and Brazil. Showing promise, when he was 20, he was transferred from a small Brazilian club to Porto in the Portuguese League. He didn’t get beyond the reserve team and a year after joining Porto was transferred to Dynamo Moscow - where he was promptly diagnosed with Tuberculosis. He was hospitalised for six months and came close to death.

His mother persuaded him to return to soccer and he joined Flulminese, at the time, a struggling Brazilian team. Fully fit, his career went from strength to strength.
press in Brazil started to nickname him “the Monster.” In 2009 he was transferred to AC Milan. So powerful were his performances for Milan that in 2012 he moved to PSG for $60M.

Silva is no ordinary player. He might have film star looks and a winning smile, but there is steel in his approach and character in his disposition. Not an easy player to replace, but Silva’s two yellow cards in earlier games meant, for the game against Germany, that is exactly what the Brazil coach, Scolari, had to do.

The suspended captain was replaced at centre back by Dante - even though the Bayern Munich player has barely played for either club, or country, in the previous three months. “Confusion,” “ball watching,” “school-yard tactics,” were all used by the media to describe Brazil’s reshuffled defense.

Succession is developing talent today in order that the individual in question is ready to move into a key role at some point in the future - three to five years being a typical time-span. Replacement is what happens if your captain, and backbone of the team, can’t play in the next match.

So superior were Germany that, even with Thiago Silver, Brazil would probably not have won. Without a fully ready replacement, however, there is no way Brazil could have won. Small or large, every organization/outstanding team has someone like Thiago Silver. Often it’s someone we have come to rely on, whose outstanding performance is so unwavering that, all too easily, we take him/her for granted.

Succession and replacement aren’t “nice to do” attributes of what it means to be a leader. They are a fiduciary responsibility. Poor replacement planning cost Scolari his job. If you haven’t fully prepared and tested (stretched, challenged and expanded their responsibility) those you have on the sidelines – that negligence may cost you yours. Keep in mind: it’s tough to blame an own goal on someone else!

Question(s): as you look across to the sidelines are you confident you have (1) a successor in place and; (2) a fully ready replacement? Is your successor being

"Replacement is what happens if your captain, and backbone of the team, can’t play in the next match."
developed for the role - not as it is, but as it will be? How will you know he/she is ready? In the case of your replacement, specifically, what can you do that you are not doing now to “test” his/her capability?

7. Governance is an act of service

Prior to the Cup Final in Rio de Janeiro, in a symbolic handover ceremony hosted by Sep Blatter, President Dilma Rousseff, passed custody of the 2018 World Cup to Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation. The world’s largest country will be next to host the world’s most privileged not-for-profit organization. In what might be the irony of all ironies, “blat” just happens to be an everyday expression in Russia. It describes a form of informal barter where people do favours for each other outside of the system. The English equivalent: “an under the table deal.” Ouch!

Qatar, a country with two million inhabitants, no soccer league, no soccer teams and no professional players will be responsible for the competition in 2022. With a summer average daily temperature of 50C (120F), an Arab state few people have ever heard of will host, what is arguably, the world’s largest sporting event. An apt comparison might well be holding the Cricket World Cup in Greenland in mid-winter. Incidentally, 50C is also the average summer temperature of Death Valley. Literally, the hottest place on the planet, there is a reason why Death Valley came by its name.

That Qatar does not recognize the State of Israel (a member of FIFA); alcohol will be available only in special areas (if you show your passport); women will need to dress in “proper clothing;” and homosexuality is illegal - seems not to have slowed down the FIFA gravy train. A Dutch member of parliament has proposed that the Netherlands play in pink. One can only hope that Scottish soccer picks up in the next decade. The image of hordes of kilt-wearing Scottish fans - men wearing skirts?

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5 In a typical international game, soccer players run the best part of a half-marathon. For winning teams, the World Cup means playing seven games in two weeks. The combination of high physical exertion and extreme ambient temperature often results in heat stroke. It can be also be lethal. In that they are open to the elements, Qatar’s initial plan to air condition all 12 stadiums would appear to have been somewhat impractical.
descending on Qatar defies imagination. And while on the topic of appropriate attire, “Will my girlfriend be allowed to wear an England shirt over her burka?”

As if the summer temperature in Qatar came as a complete surprise, FIFA’s latest adventure is to now suggest that the 2022 World Cup should be held in winter. It’s a decision that rides roughshod over the English Premier League - where there is no winter break. That the English Premier League contributes significantly more players to the World Cup than any other domestic league seems have been either forgotten or ignored.

It should surprise no one that Britain’s Sunday Times claims to have irrefutable proof that Qatar used a $5.4 million slush fund to secure the support of key members of the 24-man FIFA ruling committee. Qatar officials say corruption claims are baseless and riddled with innuendo designed to tarnish the reputation of Qatar’s 2022 Bid Committee. Herr Blatter puts all the fuss down to racism.

Meanwhile, if you are about to book your trip to Qatar ensure that the airline portion is refundable. The agreement between the major soccer clubs and FIFA to release players for international fixtures is coming to an end. Without that agreement FIFA has no players, no tournaments and, by implication, no reason to exist. In 2011 Bayern Munich’s president, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, said: ‘I don’t accept any longer that we [should be] guided by people who are not serious and clean. Now is the moment to intervene. Because knowing something is wrong is an obligation to change.”

FIFA might have grabbed $4billion in television rights for the World Cup and be the only not-for-profit organization in the world with a billion dollars in the bank (an emergency fund!), but they are not a business. They are a governing body! Decisions should be based on what’s good for its members - not on maximising profits. Better boots for young kids in Africa; not a bigger bank balance for a bunch of old men in Zurich.

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6 1st June 2014
7 Daily Mail. 12th July 2014.
Governance should be about consistency in the rules of the game, sustaining and expanding the sport and ensuring that regulations are applied equally to all. Leadership certainly ... but leadership in support of the national associations, clubs, fans, players, sponsors and the media who are the game. Leadership, no matter what form it takes, is an act of service - a privilege that has to be earned every single day!

Governance is part of every leader’s responsibility; be it managing the budget, protecting the brand, saving costs and/or ensuring that the team lives the organization’s values. Trust building, transparency, and timing, is how governance is judged. Candour, conflict resolution and consistency is how it is maintained.

Question: if you were judged solely on how others perceive your governance would you get a passing grade? What can you do, starting tomorrow, to take that perception to the next level?

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“For the World Cup Final between Argentina and Germany the global television audience was estimated to be between 700 million and a billion people. No fewer than 174 countries tuned in. Only The Olympic Games and the World Cup of Cricket came close to those numbers.

For World Cup pessimists the need to win dominated any sense of fair play. They would also argue that the bureaucracy that supports soccer is either corrupt or totally inept. Possibly both! The optimist saw a world ever-more separated by tribal enmity and religious prejudice - for a brief moment in time - put differences aside and, as a human community, celebrate the sheer joy of competition. A pragmatist might simply point out that, “What we witnessed was the best and the worst of our kind.”

Without reflection there is no learning. As we start to look back, what did we learn from the World Cup? Whether you were in Toronto or Turin; Sydney or Singapore; in a pub, club, or city square; the warmth, hospitality and generosity of the Brazilian people shone through. No one puts on a party like Brazil! With all the depressing news around, it’s also encouraging to know that a sense of fun is still alive and well in
the world. Be it fancy dress, plumed headdresses, bizarre masks, face painting and/or elaborate costumes – win or lose - the fans in the stadium went out of their way to make the World Cup a truly festive occasion. At a deeper level there was also an opportunity to learn something about leadership.

And four years from now we all get to do it again. See you on the Volga comrade.