

What has the World Cup got to do with Leadership? - Round One

This has been the most unpredictable World Cup thus far. There were many surprises. Who would have imagined that the two favorites to capture the World Cup, France and Argentina, would be out in the first round? To add insult to injury, France, which boasts of having three top goal-scorers in Europe, did not even score a single goal!

So, what can we learn about leadership from this World Cup experience?

1. Fundamentals matter

There is no magic formula for success. One of the more successful teams in the World Cup is Denmark. Although coming from a strong tradition of football achievements in the past, the present Danish team was not given much chance. But it topped its group and ousted previous champion France in the process.

According to Jan Poulsen, who was the Denmark's Coach for their Under-21 team and has coached 10 of the 11 players in this World Cup team, it was sound fundamentals such as discipline, good organization and tactical awareness that have seen them through to the second round.

"By sticking to its game plan playing a simple game, and working hard, Denmark won. These are the fundamentals."

As leaders, we have our own fundamentals. Among these include self-leadership, strategic orientation, team leadership, and customer-focus. The key is in executing these consistently, whether we are playing against the big fishes or minnows.

2. Teamwork counts

Some of the teams that have surprised us in this World Cup are Korea, Japan, Denmark, and Senegal. All these teams have no great star players. No prima donnas. Have you heard of Klosse (Germany), Tomasson (Denmark), Inamoto (Japan), Diob (Senegal)? Probably not. Neither have I.

Once again, Poulsen has this to say of the Danish team, "They have fantastic team spirit. During a game, nobody slacks off. And because they play with other top stars every week, they are not overawed when they meet teams like France, which is full of big names."

Prima donnas like Roy Keane were dispatched shamefully home without playing any game. Michael Jordan, one of the world's greatest basketball players and member of the Chicago Bulls, and a six-time NBA Champion, gives this advice to CEOs on how to manage talented individuals, "Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships. On the Bulls, we had two guys with distinct abilities in Bill Cartwright and John Paxson. And we found a way to use those talents within the framework of our team. Managers, just like basketball coaches, have to find a way to utilize those individual talents in the best interests of the company....When we started winning championships, there was an understanding among all twelve players about what our roles were. We knew our responsibilities and we knew our capabilities."

Michael Jordan emphasizes what it takes to win championships, "There are plenty of

teams in every sport that have great players and never win championships. Most of the time, those players aren't willing to sacrifice for the greatest good of the team. The funny thing is, in the end, their unwillingness to sacrifice only makes individual goals more difficult to achieve...I'd rather have five guys with less talent who are willing to come together as a team than five guys who consider themselves stars and aren't willing to sacrifice."

How true! Especially in this world cup!

3. Past success doesn't guarantee present victory

France came into the tournament with a huge reputation. Touted to be the favorite, France bowed out in the first round - a national tragedy. Being World Champion and European Champion doesn't guarantee success for them.

Every match is different. As they say, "The ball is round. Anything can happen." And anything did happen! Ask any chief executive and they will tell you that past victories only give you the edge of experience but is no guarantee of future success. Every ball game is different. Every new product needs careful strategy execution. We can't rest on our past laurels.

Defender Rio Ferdinand, one of England's most reliable players, in preparing for the game with Nigeria, could not have put it more succinctly, "Just because we beat Argentina does not mean that everything is going to be rosy. We can be brought back down to earth with a bump if we get complacent." Fortunately, England managed a draw with Nigeria and went through to round two.

4. Preserve integrity

The uproar over Rivaldo's simulation is a clear indication of the world's revulsion with people who fake or cheat to win. No star can be exempt from behaving with integrity. It will be a travesty if FIFA did not take any action on such acts of falsehood. Whether the fine commensurate with the act is a point of debate. But FIFA did take action. The world applauded, although somewhat mutely.

Winning at any cost is not a dictum that chief executives should abide by. Winning with integrity is far better. The Enron incident is a mega warning to all of us in this respect.

5. Live and play passionately

Talent is not enough. Talent without passion leads to complacency and pride. But passion without talent may lead to success. Senegal, Korea, Japan, Ireland and traditional minnow USA - all of these teams played with passion. The Irish team is a good case in point. Without their disgraced team captain Roy Keane, nobody expected them to survive the first round. But the Irish spirit of "never-say-die" proved the pundits wrong and gave them a well-deserved draw with Germany. Their passion saw them through to the next round. Who would have thought that the US could beat Portugal? But they did, and with passion.

6. We need cheer team

All of us are aware of the advantage of home turf. The home crowd support for Japan and Korea was simply electric. At the stadiums where the home teams played, the decibels of support were earth shattering. Every move and distribution by the home players was cheered. Every goal was celebrated as though it has won the World Cup. Why all these frenzy? The fans feel for their country. Ownership produces celebration.

Today's leaders need to build ownership. That means making employees feel that they are part of the company and making them feel respected and important so that when the company wins, they cheer rather than jeer. Celebration is only possible when there

is ownership. Celebration is sharing success. Companies need to celebrate success constantly. Cheer team motivates executives to perform.

Let's watch for the next round of the World Cup and see what other leadership lessons we can learn.

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