

Why Germany won the World Cup

Three lessons leaders in business and sports can take away from the success story of the German soccer team

By THOMAS MENKHOFF

"WE will win 2-0 and become world champions!" proclaimed Germany's *Fussball Kaiser* (Football emperor) Franz Beckenbauer in the German tabloid *Bild* one day before the final game between his country and Argentina on July 13, 2014. While his prediction was not fully spot-on (Germany beat Argentina 1-0), Beckenbauer was full of praise for German national head coach Joachim ("Jogi") Loew shortly before the victory: "Until now Jogi Loew has done everything right."

In the aftermath of that stunning victory at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, numerous analysts have argued that Germany's high-performance futsal squad excelled because of effective management, an amazingly strong team spirit and great team leadership. Leaders in business and sports can learn three lessons from Germany's soccer success story:

- ◆ Plan well!
- ◆ Build a strong team!
- ◆ Lead well!

Plan well!

Like the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (1872-1928) who lived to tell the tale of how he reached the South Pole in December 1911 (just a few weeks before British naval officer Robert Scott and his team, most of whom died of starvation on the way back), which has been attributed to numerous factors such as better depot laying and route marking, the German planners envisioned the importance of a superb base camp in Brazil.

With the very best accommodation, a world-class football ground, excellent food prepared by star chef Holger Stromberg (and his 40 employees), billiards and table-tennis tables, psychologists, medical professionals, officials etc, Campo Bahia (purpose-built by the German soccer federation at a price tag of US\$42 million) provided the star team with a conducive environment and perfect training conditions to be highly motivated in order to excel on the pitch.

As a result of strategic talent development in Germany's polycentric soccer landscape, Loew's World Cup squad featured not only the very best



Inspiring his followers: German national soccer coach Joachim Loew at the beach in front of the team's base camp in Brazil, Campo Bahia. Loew managed to transform a team of star players into a true star team where egomania had no place. PHOTO: REUTERS

of the country's soccer players, such as Thomas Mueller, but also one of the youngest teams with an average age of 26 years.

Strategic planning tools were utilised to anticipate and tactically think through different game situations in order to increase the chances of outperforming opponents whatever their background or tactical visions.

Build a strong team!

Management textbooks refer to teams as units of two or more people with complementary skills, committed to a common purpose and set of perform-

ance goals and to common expectations, for which they hold themselves accountable.

Whether one reviews the story of Walt Disney's "Nine Old Men" (the team of core creators behind the success of Disney's animated cartoons such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) or Google's top management team comprising Sergey Brin, Larry Page and CEO Eric Schmidt, team success is fuelled by factors such as shared team norms and values, team cohesion and strong team leadership.

Jogi Loew managed to transform a team of stars (comprising some of the

best-paid soccer players such as Mesut Ozil, who made a total of US\$18 million in 2013, according to *Forbes*) into a true star team. Egomaniac behaviour was nipped in the bud. Bad apples had no chance to make it to the team.

Campo Bahia featured attractive spaces for the players and their support crews to rest, intermingle and strategise. It became a truly great team-building camp where lead players, newcomers and substitute players were put into several flat-sharing communities, co-located in tastefully decorated villas to leverage diversity.

The camp environment, conducive to inclusiveness and interaction (and good nutrition), further encouraged the formation of norms and values that positively affected the team's goals, interdependence and cohesiveness.

Research has shown that the extent to which team members band together and remain committed to achieving team goals is crucial for team success. Highly cohesive teams such as the German soccer "Mannschaft" are characterised by high group potency, i.e. the belief that they can be effective collectively.

If team members appreciate that they depend on each other for information, resources, etc, to complete their tasks and mission, team effectiveness is increased as a result of the high level of interdependence. Family members, girlfriends, journalists, etc, were regarded as important stakeholders.

Lead well!

Flat hierarchies, shared responsibilities and resolute action are some of the hallmarks of Coach Loew. Under his able leadership, Germany clinched the world championship title for the fourth time and managed to become No 1 in the Fifa world ranking list after 17 years.

Loew embodies strong leadership skills. The German news magazine *Focus* characterised him as a "soft tyrant" who has morphed from a "stubborn soccer teacher" (since the days of the 2-1 semi-final defeat to Italy in 2012) to a flexible manager who knows when it's time to listen to his assistant, experts and players and to change even the most meticulously planned strategy if it does not work.

Authentic leaders like Loew do inspire their followers. They are competent, confident, trustworthy, emotionally intelligent and communicate well. While we do not know what the national squad thought about Loew during the various stages of the world championships, management research suggests that team members have high expectations when it comes to their team leader(s): commitment to members and team tasks; strong desire to support and serve the team as well as to lead from the front; distinct qualities such as enthusiasm, energy, inspiration, expertise as well as courage and the willingness to shoulder responsibility rather than pass the buck.

For Loew, failure in Brazil was not an option. He enabled the German soccer team to come together in order to achieve "Vision 2014", and the rest is *fussball* history.

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