



## Seven Leadership Lessons from the World Cup:

### What executives can learn from football's biggest stage.

8 minute read

When established giants fall and underdogs outperform expectations at the highest level of competition, it is rarely through chance. Whether seeking an executive transition or leadership through transformation, leaders can learn as much from the gutsy and spirited fight of the minnows as they can from the slick performances of the favourites.

The FIFA World Cup is more than football's biggest tournament. It is one of the world's clearest demonstrations of leadership under pressure, where strategy, resilience and decision-making are tested in full public view. Every match mirrors challenges executives face every day: responding to unexpected setbacks, adapting plans in real time, making high-stakes decisions and leading teams through uncertainty.

England's win over Mexico showed the value of composure under pressure. Diehard fans stayed up until 4am to watch Thomas Tuchel's side reach the quarter-finals, holding out for over half an hour with ten men in the cauldron of the Azteca Stadium after a red card threatened to derail their campaign. The final score, 3-2, barely captures how costly one moment of adversity could have been without the discipline to manage it and resilience to reshape a plan to a changed situation that wasn't prepared for - a habit of mind executives will need far more of as AI reshapes markets fixture by fixture.

Cape Verde's story shows what a smaller nation can achieve through preparation and self-belief. A nation of around 525,000 people, and the smallest ever to reach the knockout stage, they pushed reigning champions Argentina to extra time, levelling twice before a deflected goal finally settled the tie 3-2 in the 111th minute.

Meanwhile, some of the tournament's traditional powerhouses struggled to adapt when things didn't go their way. Germany were beaten on penalties by Paraguay, the Netherlands lost on penalties to Morocco and five-time champions Brazil were knocked out by Erling Haaland's Norway.

These results weren't simply footballing upsets. They were the product of preparation, adaptability, disciplined execution, intelligent leadership and exceptional teamwork, the same qualities now separating organisations that keep growing and stay relevant from those coasting on past success, as AI and constant disruption reset the competitive landscape.

Whether you're leading a multinational organisation, a growing business or a leadership team navigating rapid change, the lessons are remarkably similar. Here, we look at what the tournament's smaller nations, its hosts and its sharpest tactical minds are getting right, and what executives can learn from them about leadership, strategy and striving for success - whether as the plucky underdog or the pressured top seed. Seven leadership lessons from the FIFA 2026 World Cup so far.

## 1. PREPARE FOR EVERY CHALLENGE WITH FOCUSED INTENTIONALITY

England's manager Thomas Tuchel built his reputation on adapting his approach fixture by fixture rather than applying a fixed system regardless of opponent. There was intention and method behind every decision, communicated effectively to his team, and it paid off. He led England to beat Mexico with ten men by ripping up his plan, switching to a back five and asking his players to protect a one-goal lead for half an hour as the crosses hammered in and energy levels were drained by the reduced oxygen levels. It held because the response was built for the situation in front of him, not the one he had prepared for.

The United States offer the counterpoint. Their tournament had genuinely progressed with the US top of Group D, their first knockout-stage win since 2002, their best goal return at a World Cup but that progress had come against opposition that never tested their weaknesses. Belgium, unbeaten in 18 matches and by some distance the USA's toughest opponent of the tournament, exposed them inside minutes and finished the job with two individual errors either side of half-time, none of it helped by the off-the-pitch furore of President Trump's interference to get a red card overturned. They were unable to change their gameplan to suit the tougher opposition and step up to the next level when required.

A fixed playbook applied regardless of context is a liability in a fast-moving, AI-driven market and so is a team, or an organisation, that mistakes progress against easy competition for readiness against serious competition. The leaders who win reassess fixture by fixture, change shape the moment conditions do, and stress-test themselves against the highest level of competition, not just near rivals. Building that instinct rarely happens alone: it's the same reason elite squads travel with a coaching staff rather than a manager working solo, and why the sharpest executives invest in the same thing, a coach who can pressure-test their thinking before the market does it for them.

## 2. DON'T MISTAKE REPUTATION FOR CURRENT FORM

Brazil are out, beaten by Norway. Germany and the Netherlands went out on penalties to Paraguay and Morocco, and reigning European champions Spain were held by debutants Cape Verde. None of these giants suddenly lost their quality. They lost because reputation is not readiness, and smaller sides prepared precisely for them while they assumed the result was settled.

Market leaders slip the same way. It is rarely that a rival outspends them. More often they stop treating each contest as one to be won on its own terms, and fail to realise that AI is now levelling the field fast. Rank, history and brand earn a place in the competition but they don't guarantee winning the next fixture. Even the most established companies can lose their market position through complacency. Leadership should take time out for self-reflection, seeking trusted mentors or coaches to ensure they remain relevant and valuable in the rapidly changing market.

### 3. RECRUIT BEYOND YOUR IMMEDIATE POOL AND HOLD ON TO YOUR TALENT

Cape Verde and Curaçao could never have fielded competitive sides from their tiny domestic games, so they built squads from the diaspora, treating talent as global rather than local. Cape Verde's Roberto Lopes was first approached through a LinkedIn message he dismissed as spam. Their 40-year-old goalkeeper Vozinha, a journeyman for two decades, shut out Spain with seven saves and then took Argentina to extra time, saving even from Messi, before a deflection ended the run.

The strongest candidate is not always the one already inside the building, particularly in start-ups and smaller organisations competing in crowded markets. Finding people beyond your borders is only half the job., though. Keeping them, through culture, loyalty and moments they would never trade, is the half a wealthier rival cannot simply buy.

### 4. THERE IS REAL STRENGTH IN DEFENCE

Football fixates on goals and strikers, just as business fixates on the bottom line and star performers. This tournament has equally rewarded defence: England holding a lead with ten men, Cape Verde stifling Spain, Morocco grinding out knockout wins. The unglamorous work kept them all alive.

None of these performances made a highlight reel the way a goal would. A last-ditch tackle, a well-organised backline, a goalkeeper's save - they're remembered, if at all, as the absence of a disaster rather than an achievement in their own right. But ask any of these teams what got them through the knockout stages, and it wasn't just the moments of individual brilliance up front. It was the discipline to hold a structure together when they were under sustained pressure, tired, and down to fewer resources than the team attacking them.

In business, the equivalents are easy to underfund: governance, data security, compliance, risk controls. They never make the highlight reel, yet they are repeatedly what keeps an organisation in the game when the attack misfires. (See our previous insight on speed vs governance in AI transformation.) The same logic applies to leadership capability. Coaching and development are too often treated the same way, a discretionary spend, easy to cut when budgets tighten, when in practice they're what holds an organisation together under the pressure a strategy alone can't withstand. The businesses that invest in their people's resilience and judgement before a crisis, not during one, are the ones still standing when it arrives.

## 5. BUILD FOR WHAT OUTLASTS THE IMMEDIATE CAMPAIGN

Hosting a World Cup buys six weeks of attention. The question hosts routinely fluff is what happens in week seven. The US's answer is Soccer Forward, a legacy programme launched in 2024 to convert the tournament into lasting participation, with the sport's US fanbase projected to grow by close to half and participation to reach 34 million by 2031. Major League Soccer has been planning around this since 2018, adding teams, stadiums and academies.

Plenty of organisations can mobilise around a headline moment or eye-catching campaign. (Though as the US found, even all the preparation and resources in the world can be undone by a unforced error – Trump's red card interference contributing to an embarrassing exit.) Far fewer do the quiet work in advance to make sure the attention leaves something behind. The same is true of leadership capability. A single training day rarely outlasts the enthusiasm it generates; it's the sustained, long-term investment in coaching and development that turns a moment of momentum into a lasting capability.

## 6. MAKE AI ACCESSIBLE TO LIFT THE WHOLE ORGANISATION

FIFA and Lenovo's Football AI Pro was designed to level the playing field by giving all participating countries access to 2,000 performance metrics and millions of data points driven by hybrid and generative AI, regardless of their budgets. It showed in the way the smaller teams took on the big players, anticipating their game, man marking their stars with many progressing to the later stages for the first time in history.

There is a catch, though. Equal access to a tool is not equal capacity to use it, and the teams that gain most are the ones clear about what to ask it. For executives, the constraint has shifted from access to strategic clarity, a theme we explored in [The Rise of the AI Strategist](#), along with the governance and workflows that turn a shared tool into durable advantage. Just as importantly, that clarity has to be coached into an organisation; the businesses getting the most from AI are pairing the technology with genuine leadership development, not rolling out a tool and hoping capability follows.

## 7: STAKEHOLDER TRUST IN YOUR PERSONAL OR ORGANISATIONAL BRAND IS EVERYTHING.

The US's tournament co-organisers and team worked so hard to build the reputation of US soccer – but their organisation and performance on the pitch disintegrated in their last 4-1 loss to Belgium with many suggesting the overturned red card furore played its part. It also brought FIFA and its embattled President Gianni Infantino into disrepute.

Similarly, executives cannot afford to bend or sacrifice compliance for short-term wins. Good governance and ethical leadership are more important than ever in today's high visibility landscape where trust is one of the most hard won, and easily lost, commodities.

## WHAT CONNECTS ALL SEVEN? THE GAME IS FOOTBALL. THE LESSONS ARE LEADERSHIP.

Success belongs to the organisations that prepare with intention, adapt faster than their competitors and build capabilities that outlast the immediate challenge.

They widen the talent pool, embrace shared tools, defend as seriously as they attack and invest for the long term. Reputation guarantees nothing on its own and resourcefulness, deployed with intention, can close a gap that budget alone cannot.

The teams still standing at the quarter-final stage at time of writing are the ones that took these lessons seriously from the first whistle. Cape Verde are out, but they proved so much more than the sum of their parts; England stepped up when they needed to and adapted to the multiple, evolving challenges they faced; France dazzled with their star quality but also their commitment, tactics and teamwork. While they may be clear favourites, nothing is guaranteed in any competition. Adaptability, strength in defence, communication, technology, intentionality and strategy can make champions out of the least favourable conditions, and can just as easily be the difference between a leader who stays ahead and one who is overtaken.

These are all skills that executives must work on continuously to remain match-fit, relevant and demonstrably valuable in this frenetic landscape where boards are seeking talent to match the fast-evolving conditions, emerging opportunities, challenges and challengers who no longer wait for an invitation to compete.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### What can business leaders learn from a sporting tournament?

Tournaments compress the executive's high-pressure world into a few weeks: unequal resources, public scrutiny and instantly visible results. The sides that outperform their budget share habits – intelligent recruitment, disciplined use of shared tools and preparation built for the specific challenge - that map straight onto leadership.

### How are smaller nations competing with wealthier ones?

Through expanded recruitment, often via diaspora communities, and shared access to elite tools such as Football AI Pro, open to all 48 nations regardless of budget. It may well have been a factor in Cape Verde coming within a deflection of potentially knocking out Argentina on their debut.

### Why do reputationally strong teams sometimes underperform?

Reputation can breed a false sense of security, in the team and in how hard it prepares. Brazil, Germany and the Netherlands are all out, each having underestimated the competition.

### Is the AI story relevant to business?

Directly. Putting the same analytics in every team's hands shows AI levelling a field that budget used to tilt. The differentiator is having the clarity, governance and skills to use it well.

## MORE INSIGHTS



The Rise of the AI Strategist



From High Performer to Executive Leader



Rialto specialises in unique change management and business transformation solutions which deliver exceptional results.

#### OUR SERVICES INCLUDE



Executive Transition, Career Coaching & Personal Branding



Leadership Development for individuals and teams



Culture, Digital and Business Transformation

# rialto

ACCELERATED IMPACT

The Rialto Consultancy Ltd  
25 Southampton Buildings  
Chancery Lane  
London WC2A 1AL

T: +44 (0)20 3746 2960

E: [info@rialtoconsultancy.com](mailto:info@rialtoconsultancy.com)

[www.rialtoconsultancy.com](http://www.rialtoconsultancy.com)