

# HOW GERMANY GOT INTO THE GROOVE

What gave Germany the edge in the world cup semi-final against Brazil, and why top executives should revisit that match

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The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (Fifa) World Cup may have come to a close on 13 July with Germany taking home the trophy, but conversations and analyses around the matches, team strategies and players are far from over. While several matches produced memorable moments, there's one game that will likely be recalled for years.

The semi-final between Germany and Brazil on 8 July could have been a chap-

ter straight out of a magic realism novel, the kind popularized by Latin American writer Gabriel García Márquez.

Because the 1-7 defeat of the Brazilian side was so complete, and the discipline and superior play of the Germans so obvious, the game is also a great demonstration of ideas like team play, consistency, discipline, depth of talent, strategy and efficiency that are often vocalized in fora outside sport as well.

An avid fan of the game, software maker Ramco Systems' chief executive officer Virender Aggarwal says a lot of things that gave Germany the edge in that historic match, like multi-skilling, accounta-

bility, stamina and the mindset to stay in the game for the long haul, also apply at the workplace.

"Thomas Müller, for example, wasn't just confined to being an attacker, he played multiple roles and never gave his game away to opponents," says Singapore-based Aggarwal.

We spoke to managing directors and top executives across sectors like healthcare, technology and manufacturing on the lessons the football world cup held for them, and why a return to business as usual shouldn't mean forgetting that fateful semi-final between Brazil and Germany.

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### Pass the ball

Sometimes it's not just about shining as an individual athlete but playing for the team. German midfielder Toni Kroos set the pace when he assisted the first two goals in the match, the second of which made teammate Miroslav Klose the highest scorer in world cup history with 16 goals to his credit.

It's a similar challenge between personal glory and team victory in the corporate world too, says Mumbai-based Utkarsh Palnitkar, head of advisory and life sciences at consultancy KPMG in India. From the time a lead is uncovered to the final pitch to a client, a proposal goes through many hands. If any one person or team tries to hog the presentation, he explains, it runs the chance of losing its cohesiveness—that could well defeat the whole purpose.

"You have to rehearse working in synchronicity, get to know each other, leave enough room for other speakers and agree in advance who will present the final point and why. It's like passing the ball rather than always scoring the goal yourself," says Palnitkar. Any dissonance there, and "clients are quick to perceive it".



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### Communication channels

Troy Malone, general manager, Asia-Pacific region, at Evernote Corp., the maker of the eponymous app for note-making and archiving, agrees that this synchronicity is extremely important in business and needs to be carefully cultivated and supported through processes. "A lot needs to happen for things to come together within the deadlines."

"I manage a team that is locationally challenged. I do a weekly call with people from India, Korea, Taiwan, and different locations within the US. With the time differences, if something remains unsaid, I have to wait a whole day to say it again," says the US-based Malone. "It's like with the players on the field. There's a lot of non-verbal communication and practice that goes into telling them what they can expect of their teammates."

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### Dependability

Germany were already two goals up when captain Philipp Lahm passed the ball back—he was a few feet from the Brazilian post, but didn't have a clear shot. Neither Müller nor Kroos was in line to take control of the ball just then, but Lahm seemed to know he could depend on his teammates to get there in time. In a matter of seconds, they were both in position, and Kroos sent the ball flying in a nearly straight line to score Germany's third goal in the game. This sense of confidence in one's teammates also works well in high-stakes businesses.

In Sukumar Rajah's line of work, the ticket size of one investment can go up to \$50 million (around ₹300 crore). The managing director and chief investment officer, Asian equity, for Franklin Templeton's Local Asset Management, says investment decisions are based on an entire machinery of recommendations and scrutiny.

There's substantial reliance on research analysts and senior associates, and this calls for great dependability and trust across teams to stand by a decision, says Singapore-based Rajah.

Fortis Healthcare chief people officer Rajiv Kapoor says building a solid foundation for teamwork can take on life-and-death proportions in a hospital. "A doctor is like the centre forward, if you like. The ambulance driver, nurse, emergency room staff are all working to support him in their one common objective—to save the patient," adds Kapoor, who is based in Gurgaon, Haryana. Everyone needs to do their part in a seamless chain to even bring the patient to the doctor. Without that, there's little that even the most qualified surgeon can accomplish. He gives a recent example where the Tamil Nadu government, hospital staff, and the families of an organ donor and recipient worked in tandem to transport a heart for transplant from one hospital to another in 13 minutes flat. "That route is easily 45 minutes on any other day."

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### Equal opportunity

To put all your eggs in one basket is as imprudent in business as in football. Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India's vice-president of sales and marketing, Yadinder S. Guleria, says, "Brazil were one of the favourites to win. But once the captain (Thiago Silva) got out with two yellow cards and Neymar couldn't play (in the semi-final) after an injury, they had no Plan B. They were suddenly looking naive."

He says it was this sort of over-dependence on one or two key players that he wanted to avoid when the company decided to take 900 business partners, including dealers, to Japan in May. Guleria says that the idea was to "build trust in the brand and introduce everyone to Japanese culture", and not just give added advantage to key performers by only allowing them to interact with the Japanese officials. Instead of investing in one or two key players, Guleria says, work to build talent across the business by giving everyone the same opportunities.





**9 Outclassed and outplayed**

The Brazilians were simply the poorer team (in the semi-final), says Ajit Chaturvedi, mobility business head, New Delhi and Rajasthan, Tata Teleservices Ltd.

The German line-up comprised players like Manuel Neuer, Jérôme Boateng, Bastian Schweinsteiger, Lahm, Müller, Kroos and Götze, who had steeled themselves in the premier Bayern Munich German football club. And German midfielder Mesut Özil and defender Per Mertesacker play for the English Premier League club Arsenal.

All 11 had exposure to international, competitive football, playing for the best clubs in the world. In contrast, seven of the Brazilians play for elite clubs, but not all are regulars in the starting line-up. This is something Brazil perhaps should have kept in mind while deciding their game plan.

"There's no point in opening war on all fronts; know your strengths," says Aggarwal. "If you are the poorer team, focus on your defence."

It's a lesson Aggarwal applies in business too—his company is taking its time to launch products in the US market, putting the launch of some enterprise resource planning products on hold to first introduce its aviation suite there, he says.

**8 Cliff face**

Once the Brazilians gave away the first goal in the 11th minute of the semi-final, they seemed in a hurry to get even, says Aggarwal. "Know that you're playing a 90-minute match, not a 3-minute one. Bide your time, wait for an opportune moment, and don't lose your cool," he says.

It's something you see in consultancy all the time, says Palnitkar. If someone has lost a couple of projects, he says, a sense of despondency can sometimes set in. The person may then give in to what Palnitkar describes as the "pendulum effect"—they might quote a high price to make up for those lost projects or benchmark too low just to get the project. In both cases, the bid is shortsighted and unlikely to be sustainable.

**7 Surprise element**

"On the football field, there are 21 players beside you. Eleven of them are trying to thwart your every move, and the other 10 on your team can have very different personalities and styles," says New Delhi-based Abhijit Ganguly, brand director, Grasm Bhiwani Textiles Ltd. To keep your cards close to your chest and keep the opponents guessing, he says, players—both on the 100-yard football field and in the corporate sphere—must mix it up.

Ganguly says what made it easy for the Europeans to tackle Latin American teams like Brazil or even Argentina was that the latter teams kept waiting for a Neymar or a Lionel Messi to do something spectacular. It becomes easy to mark these players and cover them if you know everyone else will largely play a supportive role rather than an unpredictable game to keep opponents on their toes. Rather like his strategy of initially concentrating Grasm's retail business in the north and south Indian markets at the cost of developing the western and central Indian zones. Soon, the competition started to poach distributors in these centres to choke the business.

A mid-course correction saved Grasm's retail arm, says Ganguly, but perhaps Brazil could not recover its breath enough in that semi-final to put up much of a fight.

**6 Multi-skilling**

If you are a one-trick pony, it makes it that much easier for the opposition to crush you. What helped Germany gain an edge, says Aggarwal, was that each of its players was able to do more than one thing. "That makes it harder for the opponents to read a player, they can't predict what he's going to do next," he says.

Aggarwal has been trying for similar multi-skilling in his company—merging the pre-sales and sales roles at Ramco Systems, for instance. The person who makes the sale is competent to give the demonstration and take on the spot customer queries. And regional heads are now expected to understand numbers—revenue, targets—and are typically people who have hands-on experience in developing the product, he says. "It's like being able to play with both feet."

**5 Depth of talent**

You could see this especially at play in the World Cup final, where the player who scored the winning goal against Argentina in extra time, Mario Götze, had come in as a substitute late in the game, says Sminu Jindal, managing director of Jindal SAW Ltd, whose businesses range from pipes to infrastructure. Jindal stayed up into the wee hours to watch most of the football matches over the past month with her two pre-teen boys. She says she learnt first-hand not to dis-

count the importance of developing skills in the second rung of employees a few years ago. "Just before an important presentation, the project lead fell sick," she says. The project was worth \$200 million, she says, adding that company policy and rules prevent her from divulging details about it. The star presenter's second-in-command could step in only because he had been kept in the loop throughout, and was confident he could make the presentation unaided—he put them back in the game.