

# Lessons from a World-Class Sprinter

In the game of business today, speed is important, but agility is indispensable. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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On August 31, Usain Bolt—eight-time Olympic Gold medalist and the world's fastest man in both the 100 and 200 meters—stepped onto the pitch to make his professional soccer debut for the Central Coast Mariners, an A-League team in Gosford, Australia.

The world's fastest soccer player, Gareth Bale of Real Madrid, has been clocked running at a speed of 22.9 miles per hour, but Bolt can run as fast as 25 miles per hour. The Mariners hoped to convert that sizable speed advantage into goals and wins for the team.

The crowd at the match that Friday evening was four times bigger than average, and fans from more than 60 countries around the world tuned in to see if the greatest sprinter in history could leverage his speed advantage to score on the field.

With the Mariners already holding a commanding lead in the game, Bolt entered the fray as a substitute in the 72nd minute. But the resulting crowd frenzy quickly subsided as Bolt couldn't control the ball and often was caught out of position and out of sync with the ever-shifting run of play.

During stoppage time, however, an opportunity for the crowd to erupt again resurfaced as a low cross from the right zipped across the goalmouth. Bolt left everyone in the dust as he sprinted toward the ball in front of the open goal, but he failed to make contact with it as his finishing footwork let him down.

The game ended with a 6-1 win for the Mariners, leaving fans happy with the result but underwhelmed by Bolt's performance. While speed certainly has a role to play in soccer, so, too, does the ability to sense shifts in the run of play and switch direction to be better positioned to strike.

### MAINTAINING SYNCHRONY

The experience the world's fastest man had on the soccer pitch mirrors the experience many organizations are having today as they struggle to learn how to play an ever-evolving game of business on an increasingly accelerating and shifting playing field where speed alone is insufficient to ensure success.

Almost two decades ago, in GE's 2000 Annual Report, then-CEO Jack Welch wrote, "We've long

believed that when the rate of change on the inside becomes slower than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight."

Over the last 18 years, organizations that have been unable to keep pace with the ever-accelerating rate of change of the global business environment have paid the ultimate price: Just over half of the company names on the Fortune 500 have disappeared since 2000.

The exponentially increasing rate at which goods, information, and capital flow around the world creates unprecedented levels of opportunity and threat for organizations. Maintaining synchrony with the ever-increasing clock speed of today's global business environment is a prerequisite to playing the game.

### CONNECTIVITY AND COMPLEXITY

Today's global business environment is powered by an ever-expanding digital network that is continuously reconfiguring how organizations coordinate, connect, communicate, collaborate, and take collective action. This increased connectivity brings a higher level of interdependency and a compounding degree of complexity in how the overall global game of business is being played.

Together, these two drivers frame the boundaries that define a dynamic and ever-evolving globally distributed, digitally mediated, complex-adaptive business playing field where the rate of change and degree of complexity continue to intensify.

The key to success on the playing field requires that players see and seize upon moments of synchrony around shifts in the rate of change and degree of complexity within and across the three interdependent and evolving systems: The Market System, the Organization System, and the Leadership System. Cultivating the capacity for agility in moving within and across these three systems is the key to winning the increasingly dynamic and unpredictable game of business.

Usain Bolt had the speed to dominate in track and field, but he lacked the agility to win on the soccer field. Business leaders should learn from Bolt's lesson and recognize that in the game of business, speed is important, but agility is indispensable. ■