

Giel Bekker & Inga Minelgaitė

# **“Zero to Hero”**

**15 Project leadership lessons from  
South Africa’s pursuit towards the  
Rugby World Cup 2019**

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Publisher and owner of the IPMA Case Study: *“Zero to Hero”: 15 Project leadership lessons from South Africa’s pursuit towards the Rugby World Cup 2019*

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Sport is universal, however, different sport codes allow nations to compete in team and individual formats. Major events, such as World Cups and Olympic Games, require focused approaches with the end goal of being victorious clearly defined. The initiation, planning, preparation, and participation in major tournaments contains all the elements of project management and provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the practicing of this management discipline in an entertainment field. The rise of the South African Rugby Team from despair to victory is a classic example of how project leadership, through a coach, can be instrumental in motivating people to achieve excellence.



**The Webb Ellis Cup, only 38 cm tall, 4.5 kg of sterling silver and 24 carat gold plating, is the most sought-after trophy in the world of rugby.**

In October 2016, just 36 months before the 2019 World Cup and the South African rugby team, also known as the Springboks, lost 57-15 to the All Blacks. September 2017 saw them losing by a record 57-0 score to the same team. During November 2016, they lost, for the first time in history, to low-ranking Italy and after a 38-3 loss to Ireland, they



Photo: @Springboks via Twitter

dropped to an all-time low world ranking of 7th. The main sponsor withdrew. The South African rugby fraternity wanted action. The Rugby Board decided to get the talented coach onboard as soon as possible. The call went to local boy and ex-Springbok player, Johan (Rassie) Erasmus. At the time, Rassie and his family lived in Ireland, where he plied his coaching trade as Director of Rugby after becoming disillusioned by the way South African rugby was administered and coached. After receiving the call, Rassie consulted with his long-time friend and assistant coach, Jacques Nienaber, his family, and friends about the call to move back to South Africa and take-up the daunting task of coaching the Springboks under a cloud of supporter and political animosity. The loss to Ireland, which he and his family attended as spectators in their Springbok sup-

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP**

**lesson 1:**

Choose the most competent project manager, especially when the project is in trouble.

player, Johan (Rassie) Erasmus. At the time, Rassie and his family lived in Ireland, where he plied his coaching trade as Director of Rugby after becoming disillusioned

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP**

**lesson 2:**

The project manager must consult with, and obtain buy-in from, all the key stakeholders and communicate the project goal clearly.

porter gear, and experiencing the collective disappointment with fellow South Africans, was the final straw. He made it clear that he knew what had to be done to win the World Cup but had to be sure he had all the necessary support.



Walking into a broken and cash strapped rugby system, Rassie appealed to the South African Rugby Board to obtain funds for the World Cup campaign. The Board approached old sponsors who graciously provided the funds based only on their belief in Rassie and his plan to win the World Cup.

#### PROJECT LEADERSHIP

### Lesson 3:

The project sponsor must have confidence in the team, be willing to take risks, provide the means, and support the project manager under extreme adversity.

The strategic goals were clear: (1) winning, (2) transformation, (3) depth of the squad, and (4) experience. Full transparency, honesty and belief were the paramount values in Rassie's approach. The most important goal was winning – and that was needed urgently.

The first big hurdle was the June 2018 test against the upcoming England team under the brilliant coach Eddie Jones. Rassie selected a new captain Siya Kolisi, the first black Springbok captain. Transformation box ticked.

With high expectations, England arrived in South Africa to an even more highly expecting rugby crowd. Siya led the team out in front of

a fully packed stadium and at half-time England were leading 24-3. A clearly panicking Siya called the most senior players together and asked for their help and guidance. The experience and squad depth goals were put to the test and the Springboks dominated the second half to secure a 42-39 win over England. The losing streak was broken, and goal number one (partially) achieved.

Entering the four-nation 2018 Southern Hemisphere Rugby Championship, Rassie and the team experimented with a few players, which resulted in close losses to Argentina and Australia. The team's alignment was improving but then came the big test – playing the world number one team, the All Blacks in New Zealand. This game was pivotal in Rassie's plan. Winning would be a watershed moment and an indication of whether the Springboks could be World Cup contenders.

The coaching team studied the All Black playing pattern in depth. They listed the strengths and weaknesses, worked out strategies, and reminded the players of the previous big losses and how much that hurt. Shortly after the game started, the All Blacks were leading 12-

0. Somehow the Springboks found new energy and secured a 36-34 win, with an easy kick missed by the All Blacks in the last few minutes.

The tide was turned, the team believed, but hard work lay ahead.

The next big milestone was the northern hemisphere tour at the end of 2018. Wales were in good form and proved to be another must

#### PROJECT LEADERSHIP

### Lesson 5:

During a project, the project manager and team are faced with moments or decisions that could impact the outcome of a project. The outcomes are dependent on the capability, competency, and commitment of each team member – and sometimes a little bit of luck.

#### PROJECT LEADERSHIP

### Lesson 4:

When a project is in trouble, the project manager must inspire the team to get a quick win as soon as possible to boost the morale.

win test. Unfortunately, with only 10 months left to the World Cup in Tokyo, the Springboks were beaten convincingly by 20-11 at Cardiff Arms Park. The winning

South Africa, competing. With time running out and many playing positions to be secured, Rassie and his team decided to approach the upcoming, shortened Rugby Championship with a split squad. One team would stay in South Africa to play the home games while the other team would travel abroad earlier to make sure the jetlag is shrugged off before playing the important All Black game. The strategy worked with victories over Australia, Argentina, and a draw against New Zealand, which secured the Springboks the all-important trophy. A huge psychological step for the team. The World Cup tournament in Japan was next.

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP** **Lesson 6:**

**Celebrate small victories but never become complacent or distracted by external pressure. Keep the focus on the project objective.**

percentage was at a mere 50% and although tempted to improve on that, Rassie decided to rather work on the squad depth, even if it did mean losing some matches before the World Cup. Adding to the complexity, the captain Siya Kolisi got injured and was struggling to re-

September 2023 and the Springbok team arrived in Tokyo, 20 days before the first kick-off. The plan was to be the first team arriving and last team departing Japan.

The team was faced with two daunting prospects. Firstly, being in the sample pool as the tournament favorites, the All Blacks, and playing in a warm-up game against underdogs Japan, the team they lost to in the 2015 World Cup at the Brighton stadium, causing the biggest upset

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP**

**Lesson 7:**

**Team buy-in and trust in the project leadership, especially when plans are unorthodox, is key to success.**

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP**

**Lesson 8:**

**A project team is always under pressure and must work through challenges on a continuous basis.**



cover. The 2019 Rugby Championship was an important precursor to the World Cup with four of the strongest teams, namely Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, and

in world rugby at that stage. Many of the current players still carried those scars.

PROJECT LEADERSHIP

## Lesson 9:

Conditions and circumstances can change during a project and then the team need to adjust and adapt.

Upon arrival, Japan opened their hearts to the Springboks and made them feel very welcome but kept reminding them of the humiliation in Brighton. Even at the hotel

the Wi-Fi had three networks, Brighton1, Brighton2 and Brighton3. The first training session was attended by more than 10,000 Japanese spectators. The heat and humidity were some things the players were not used to, and they really suffered.

The Springboks ran onto the field for their warmup match against Japan under a cloud of protests in South Africa against women and children abuse. People lost their lives during the protests, with property and vehicles set alight. The team realized that their role was now also to inspire, but they could only do that if they play well and win the World Cup, like in 1995 and 2007. They won the game 41-7, with left winger Makazole Mapimpi, whose sister was a victim of abuse, scoring a hat-trick of tries.

After facing the All Black Haka, the game started with high intensity and the Springboks dominating all aspects of the game. The All Blacks held their nerve, preventing the Springboks from scoring any points. Late in the first half, a lapse of concentration saw the All Blacks breaking the Springbok defense, scoring two



quick converted tries in succession. At 14-0 down, the second half saw the Springboks playing with new energy, scoring early points. However, despite their best efforts, the All Blacks won 23-13, cementing their reputation as the toughest team to

beat in the world. No team had ever won the World Cup after losing their first pool game and the players were devastated. With their backs against the wall, they had to pick themselves up quickly. They had to win every remaining game and would rely on the smallest of details that go into the planning and preparation of the past 3 years.



PROJECT LEADERSHIP

## Lesson 10:

Among adversity, always focus on the end goal.

South Africa and New Zealand are small countries, but somehow rugby is big. It is the dream of many a young boy to one day play for the Springboks or All Blacks. Both countries have rich rugby histories and a battle between these two sides, in this hard, physical game, hardly ever disappoints. The two teams were drawn in the same pool.

The All Blacks were reeling after their recent defeat and draw against the Springboks, and were ready as outright favorites for the World Cup 2019. The pool game promised to be a hard-fought battle.

PROJECT LEADERSHIP

## Lesson 11:

During any high-stake project, at times, your best efforts might not seem enough. The key is to stick to the well thought through plan and keep the team focused. This requires extraordinary project leadership.

**To ensure each team member could perform at maximum levels, the planning included:**

- ▶ Nutrition and conditioning plans for each individual player.
- ▶ Expectations and levels of performance quantified as per playing position.
- ▶ Travel plan that allowed the least amount of travel during the tournament.
- ▶ Early arrival and acclimatization.
- ▶ Comfortable hotels and easy access to training facilities.
- ▶ Communication advisors and social media assistance.
- ▶ Arrangements for families and their travel needs.
- ▶ Full and open communication with clear selection policies.

After comfortably beating Namibia in the 2nd pool game, the team retreated to a remote and quite place called Omaezaki. The training venue was 3 minutes away from the resort where the players were staying. Apart from that, the nearest form of civilization was 30 minutes' drive away. The team could isolate themselves, reset their minds and prepare for a few tough games ahead.

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP lesson 13:**

**Before every project milestone, make sure all stakeholders are aligned and expectations regarding deliverables are well understood.**

Italy were a surprise package, and this worried coach Rassie. The strategy was simple. Play to the strength of the South African tradition, which was brutal, overpowering, intimidation, and in-your-face aggression. No finesse or running, spectator rugby. Just physically out-muscle the opposition. Training sessions became so physically intense that tempers often flared, and

players looked forward to the actual game to take things 'easier'. The game started with unknown physicality.

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP**

**lesson 12:**

**In times of crisis, the project team will rely heavily on the project's upfront planning, preparation, infrastructure, systems, processes, and trust.**

After 15 minutes, Italy lost three front row players and bandaged three others with blood injuries. Beating Italy 49-3 in such fashion created a new dimension of self-belief that they could go all the way.

**Quarter finals next.**

Playing the hosts in the quarter finals and potentially knocking them out of the tournament is what no team wants to do. This is especially true given that Japan were suddenly playing excellent rugby, beating top teams such as Scotland and Ireland. The Japanese public adored the physically massive Springboks, and their hospitality had no end – but for one week, they had to be the enemy.

Two teams with two completely different playing styles. The Japanese – light, fast, agile against heavy, brutal, bullies. As one commentator observed: *"Japan takes you to the dance floor, the Springboks pull you into the gutters"*. The 1st half saw a highly motivated home team pulling out all the stops with spectacular running rugby, but the Springbok power kept them from scoring. Returning to the field at 5-3 in front, the Springboks intensified their battering ram approach and overpowered the Japanese by 26-3. An emotional crowd respectfully applauded their beloved team out of the tournament, but somehow fell in love with the Springboks.

The green machine was now their team to take the glory.



The quarter final victory game at a cost. Star winger, Cheslin Kolbe, hurt his ankle badly. The team policy is that if you cannot train on the Monday before a Saturday game, you will not be considered for selection. Cheslin's ankle assessment was not good. This was a major setback since the Springboks' opponent in the semi-final was Wales, a team they lost to during their four previous encounters.

Wales played a similar style of rugby to the Springboks, and this game promised to be a showdown of brutal force. Similar strategies against each other, with the team executing theirs the best would likely be victorious. As replacement winger, Sbu Nkosi, remarked: *"the game will be system against system, no X-factor"*. South Africa did not have a plan B, plan A had to be perfect. The effective, smothering defense of the Welsh was intimidating and daunting to play against.

The Thursday before the game, Cheslin Kolbe had miraculously recovered from his injury. The star player was ready but did not train the previous Monday. This caused a major predicament for Rassie because they really needed all the best players for the semi-final. Rassie had to make a tough decision, one that could break the team's trust in him if he violated protocol. He walked up to Cheslin and asked how his ankle was feeling? Cheslin looked at him in amazement and said

#### PROJECT LEADERSHIP

### Lesson 14:

In any project the project leader will be faced with tough decisions, often ones that can impact team trust for the sake of the project. Always maintain integrity.

he is "fine", but in such a manner that it did not matter because he knew that he would not be playing. Rassie honored the team's protocol and selected the reserve winger, Sbu Nkosi, for the crucial game against a tough opponent. Trust was intact, and now it just came down to 80 minutes of nail-biting, World Cup semi-final rugby.

The game was like a chess match and after three-quarters of the game, the score was dead level at 9-9. The Springboks kept hammering down the opposition and finally scored a try. With the score at 16-9, the crowd thought it was game over, but Wales did not give-up and scored their own try shortly afterwards. 16-16. However, the Springboks prevailed, and fly-half Handre Pollard kicked a last-minute penalty to secure a 19-16 win.

**The Springboks were in the World Cup FINAL!  
The biggest game in rugby.**

In the second semi-final, England caused a major upset by beating the tournament favorites, the All Blacks, convincingly by 19–7. England showed dominance in all their pool games and were clearly destined for greatness. With the Springboks scraping thorough against Wales and having lost to the All Blacks, England were now outright favorites to win the World Cup. The English media lauded their team and as far as they were concerned, the result was already decided in favor of the white shirts.

02 November 2019. Match-day of the Rugby World Cup Final 2019 at the International Stadium Yokohama. The President of South Africa met with the team and wished them well. The stadium was packed, with the vast majority dressed in white, England supporters' attire. But a silent confidence was brewing in the South African side. They were the underdogs, and they liked it. During the warm-up on the field, the English assistant coach, John Mitchell, looked at the Springbok forward pack players going through their pre-match routine and was struck by their calmness. He turned back and walked up to the English head coach, Eddie Jones, and said, "I think we're in trouble".

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP  
Lesson 15:**

Towards the end of a project, the team members will get tired and demotivated. Some will already start work on a new, exciting project. There will be many distracting things that could lead to the project not being handed over or closed properly. To make sure the team remain focused will require exceptional project leadership.

In Rassie's words, the first training session after the Wales game was "terrible". The players were flat-footed, slow, dropping balls – just a bit lackluster. He suddenly realized they cannot train themselves to be any better in one week. They will need to focus on their minds, thoughts, and motivation. It suddenly dawned on Rassie that what they were busy with was more than just a rugby game. It was about South Africa's best players representing their country, the very same country that

is going through immense political and social turmoil. Poverty, violence, hardship. A country that needed hope and inspiration. The Springboks were not playing for themselves anymore, they were playing for all of South Africa – and that is a privilege, not a burden.

Rassie got the players together and reminded them why they were there and how they should view this wonderful opportunity bestowed upon them. The hard work was done. No more hard sessions, just a few surprising tactical moves to practice. Only 80 minutes on a grass pitch in Tokyo between them and life-long glory.

The match kicked-off under the loud singing of Swing Low Sweet Chariot, and from the outset the battle was physical. The Springboks' defense was relentless and at half time they led 12 – 6. The crowd and commentators were shocked. The second half saw more pressure being put on the English and they started making mistakes – the Springboks capitalized. Towards the end, the England players were tired and after two quick tries, one a spectacular finish by the smallest man on the field, Cheslin Kolbe, saw the Springboks victorious by 32–12.



**The World Cup 2019 project was closed successfully.**



*Bibliography: Chasing the Sun, Showmax*

# Zero to Hero

Springbok pursuit to the World Cup 2019



# Authors

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Giel is Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Technology Management at the University of Pretoria where he is heading the Project Management Programme. He is a recipient of an Erasmus Mundus Scholarship taught on the Masters in Strategic Project Management Programme at Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland and Umea University in Sweden. He was also a visiting scholar at the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania.

He started his career as a mechanical design engineer in the petrochemical industry. His career quickly progressed into project management and eventually managed a project office of 20 project managers with a total project portfolio budget of USD 2 billion. In 2000 joined the University of Pretoria. On a consulting basis he has been involved in more than 200 projects, mostly in the heavy industry, building and mining sectors.

## INGA MINELGAITE, PH.D.



Inga Minelgaite, Ph.D., is a Professor at School of Business at the University of Iceland and affiliated professor at University of Johannesburg, South Africa. She is a visiting professor at few universities in Europe and serves as board member or chairwoman of the council. She has also worked with triple crown universities. Inga is co-author of the first book on organizational leadership in Iceland *Demystifying Leadership in Iceland: An Inquiry Into Cultural, Societal, and Entrepreneurial Uniqueness* (Springer), which was nominated for EURAM Book of the year award. Inga is global manager for FEELS project and country collaborator for GLOBE research, the biggest organizational leadership research. Inga has more than fifteen-year managerial experience holding various positions, including head of department, CEO, and board member. She has consulted companies, global leaders in their respective sector. Inga's research focuses on cross-cultural leadership, temporary project teams, and followership among other topics. Her research has appeared in academic journals such as the *Production Planning & Control*, *Project Management Journal*, and *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*.

# IPMA World Map



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