

Leadership Lessons from Carlo "Carletto" Ancelotti: Behind The Success in The World's Most Competitive Profession

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Abstract

Carlo "Carletto" Ancelotti, the most decorated coach in the Champions League, rose from a remote farm in Italy to the pinnacle of world soccer not through intimidation or rigid control, but through a transformational leadership style rooted in continuous learning, emotional intelligence, adaptive inspiration, and a culture of mutual trust. Through three principles — learning to learn continuously, cultivating adaptive and inspirational composure, and building cultures of trust and respect that foster disruptive innovation — Ancelotti demonstrates that transformational leadership is less about commanding followers and more about creating the conditions in which talented people inspire themselves to exceed what they thought possible.

Introduction

Before Carlo Ancelotti ever stood on the touchline at the Santiago Bernabéu, before he lifted the Champions League trophy a record five times, before presidents of the world's richest clubs entrusted him with squads worth hundreds of millions of euros, he was a boy from Reggiolo — a farming hamlet tucked into the flatlands of Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy, where the Po Valley stretches endlessly toward the Adriatic and life revolves around soil, seasons, and hard labor. His father was a sharecropper. The family's livelihood depended on the land. There were no private academies, no elite youth programs, no pathway mapped out toward professional soccer. Young Carlo kicked a ball on dirt pitches and, like so many Italian boys of modest means, found in the game something larger than the horizon his circumstances seemed to offer. As a teenager, he swept floors and washed dishes in a pizzeria to earn money — a detail that would seem almost implausible when set alongside the glittering career that followed. Yet it is precisely this origin story that illuminates the core of Ancelotti's leadership philosophy. He did not arrive at greatness with a sense of entitlement. He arrived with a work ethic forged by necessity, a curiosity sharpened by the knowledge that nothing would be handed to him, and a profound respect for the people around him — qualities that would become the signature of his managerial career across four decades and five countries.

Leadership is not always about being the loudest person in the room, Ancelotti has observed. Leadership is knowing when to speak and when to let silence do the work. In a profession defined by ego, volatility, and relentless public scrutiny, this philosophy of quiet authority has set Ancelotti apart from virtually every contemporary in European soccer. He does not deliver fiery halftime tirades. He does not berate players in front of the media. He does not impose a single rigid tactical system on every squad he manages. Instead, he listens, adapts, and creates environments in which supremely talented — and often supremely difficult — individuals feel trusted enough to give their best. The evidence of this effect is overwhelming and consistent across eras. From Zinedine Zidane to David Beckham, from Andrea Pirlo to Luka Modrić, from Kaká to Vinícius Júnior, the players who have worked under Ancelotti unanimously attest that few coaches in the history of the sport have been as genuinely motivating.¹ Even rival coaches hold this view. Pep Guardiola — Ancelotti's great tactical antagonist during the Real Madrid-Barcelona rivalries — has spoken with admiration about Ancelotti's capacity to get the best from players without resorting to confrontation.² Sir Alex Ferguson, arguably the most successful manager in English soccer history, has expressed similar respect.³ When your fiercest competitors admire your methods, something fundamental is at work.

What is at work, we argue, is transformational leadership — not as an abstract academic concept but as a lived, practical philosophy refined across more than three decades of elite competition. Ancelotti rose through the ranks of professional soccer with remarkable speed: from his first managerial appointment at AC Reggiana 1919 in 1995 to the summit of European club soccer within eight years. He applied transformational leadership to the most pressurized, results-driven environment imaginable, and he did so with a style that is a blend of the best leadership characteristics — the relentless learning discipline of a scholar, the emotional composure of a seasoned diplomat, and the cultural sensitivity of a leader who has succeeded in Italy, England, France, Spain, Germany, and now Brazil. In the scholarly literature on organizational behavior, researchers have long recognized that leadership styles rooted in exploitation, coercion, and positional authority produce diminishing returns. Zhining Wang and his colleagues demonstrated that exploitative leadership triggers employee ethical silence — a withdrawal of voice, creativity, and moral engagement — particularly when work meaningfulness is low and moral potency is undermined.⁴ Michael Knoll extended this finding, showing that silence itself represents one of the most complex and underappreciated challenges facing modern managers, because it signals disengagement long before performance metrics begin to decline.⁵ Ancelotti's career stands as a living counterargument to the exploitative model. His teams do not fall silent. They speak, they create, they innovate — because the culture he builds permits them to do so.

In this article, we decode the three defining characteristics of Carlo Ancelotti's transformational leadership — principles that any leader, in any industry and business, can adapt to build teams where sustained excellence is not the exception but the standard. The first principle is the commitment to continuous learning: the discipline of treating every role, every setback, and every new environment as a classroom. The second is the cultivation of adaptive inspiration, composure, and calm: the emotional intelligence to read situations and people with equal fluency, and to lead with poise when the stakes are highest. The third is the construction of a culture of trust and respect that serves as the precondition for disruptive innovation: the invisible architecture that determines whether talented individuals perform as a collection of soloists or as a cohesive, creative team. Together, these three principles form Ancelotti's transformational leadership formula — a formula that has produced five Champions League titles, league championships in all five of Europe's top leagues, and a legacy that transcends any single trophy or result.

Translating Carlo "Carletto" Ancelotti's Transformational Leadership Formula for Business Leaders

1. *Learn to Learn Continuously*

The soccer profession is one of the toughest in the world for a coach to succeed in. Continuous learning — the discipline of treating every role, every setback, and every new environment as a classroom — is the foundation on which all other leadership capabilities are built.

When Carlo Ancelotti took his first managerial position at AC Reggiana in 1995, he confronted a truth that many newly promoted leaders discover too late: expertise in one domain does not automatically confer competence in another. Ancelotti had been a magnificent midfielder — elegant, intelligent, tactically astute — who had won two European Cups as a player with AC Milan under the legendary Arrigo Sacchi, collected a Serie A title and four Coppa Italia trophies with AS Roma, and earned twenty-six caps for the Italian national team. By any standard, he understood soccer at its highest level. But standing on the touchline at Reggiana, a modest Serie B club in Reggio Emilia, he was struck by a revelation that would shape his entire managerial philosophy: being a good soccer player does not lead to becoming a good soccer coach. The skills are different. The responsibilities are different. The psychology is fundamentally different. As a player, you manage yourself; as a coach, you must understand, motivate, and orchestrate the emotions, ambitions, and anxieties of an entire squad. Ancelotti recognized this gap immediately, and rather than relying on the authority conferred by his playing reputation, he chose to close it through deliberate, systematic learning.

While coaching Reggiana — where he successfully led the club to promotion to Serie A in his very first season — Ancelotti enrolled in international coaching classes to expand his tactical and managerial competency. But he went far beyond the standard coaching curriculum. He immersed himself in the study of psychology and motivational theory, driven by an intuition that the difference between a good coach and a great one lies not in the complexity of the tactical formations drawn on the whiteboard but in the quality of the human relationships cultivated in the training ground and the dressing room. He read widely, consulted experts outside of soccer, and treated every interaction — with players, with staff, with opponents — as a source of data about human behavior. This was not a phase; it was the establishment of a lifelong practice. From Reggiana, he moved to Parma, then to Juventus, and then to AC Milan, and at each stop the pattern repeated:

Ancelotti arrived, assessed the new environment with fresh eyes, identified what he did not yet know, and set about learning it. The continuous engagement with psychology and motivational strategies that he initiated during those early years at Reggiana became the foundation upon which his entire leadership edifice was constructed — the bedrock that made everything else possible.

Ancelotti is not alone among elite coaches in recognizing the imperative of continuous learning, but he is notable for the depth and consistency with which he has pursued it. Sir Alex Ferguson, who managed Manchester United for an extraordinary twenty-six years, demonstrated a parallel commitment to self-reinvention that is instructive. As Anita Elberse documented in her landmark Harvard Business Review article, "*Ferguson's Formula*," Ferguson's longevity was attributable not to a fixed set of tactics or a single leadership style but to his relentless willingness to adapt — to rebuild squads, to embrace new technologies, to study emerging tactical trends, and to learn from younger coaches who brought different perspectives.⁶ Alex Ferguson himself wrote extensively about this discipline in his autobiography, *Managing My Life*, and Gabriele Marcotti's 2011 profile in The Wall Street Journal captured the essence of Ferguson's quarter-century at Old Trafford as a masterclass in sustained evolution.^{7,8} Ancelotti shares this trait completely. Where lesser coaches calcify around the system that first brought them success, Ancelotti has demonstrated an almost scientific willingness to discard what no longer works, to absorb new ideas from every culture he enters, and to treat his own expertise as permanently provisional. This is the hallmark of what organizational theorists call a "learning orientation" — and it is the single most important predictor of long-term leadership effectiveness in any field.

The broader management lesson is as urgent as it is timeless. In every industry, the pace of change has accelerated to the point where the shelf life of any single skill set is measured in years, not decades. Leaders who stop learning — who mistake past success for permanent competence — become obsolete. They may retain positional authority, but they lose the capacity to inspire, to adapt, and to create value in unfamiliar contexts. Ancelotti's career is a rebuke to that kind of complacency. At every stage, from the modest training pitches of Reggiana to the grandest stadiums in world soccer, he has approached the craft of leadership as an ongoing education — one that has no graduation ceremony, no final exam, and no endpoint. The coaches and executives who thrive in the decades ahead will be those who share this disposition: not those who know the most, but those who are most committed to learning what they do not yet know.

"Being a good player does not mean becoming a good coach. The skills are different, the psychology is different, and the only way to bridge that gap is to never stop learning — from every person, every setback, and every new environment you encounter." — Carlo Ancelotti, 2016.

2. Lead with Adaptive Inspiration, Composure, and Calm

Tactical brilliance means nothing without the emotional intelligence to adapt to every new context, inspire confidence in uncertain moments, and maintain composure when the stakes are highest. Ancelotti's genius lies not in any single system but in his ability to read situations and people.

The statistics alone are staggering: five Champions League titles — three with Real Madrid CF (2014, 2022, 2024) and two with AC Milan (2003, 2007) — making Ancelotti the most successful coach in the history of European soccer's premier club competition. Add to that tally league championships in Italy, England, France, Spain, and Germany — a feat no other coach has achieved — and the cumulative total rises to more than thirty major trophies across a managerial career spanning three decades. He speaks four languages fluently — Italian, English, French, and Spanish — and has added Portuguese since taking the helm of the Brazil national team. But the numbers, impressive as they are, tell only part of the story. What makes Ancelotti's achievement genuinely extraordinary is not the volume of silverware but the diversity of contexts in which it was accumulated. Each club he has managed has presented a radically different culture, a distinct set of player personalities, a unique ownership structure, a varied set of expectations, and a distinct tactical landscape. The adaptive intelligence required to succeed across all of these environments is a form of genius that defies easy categorization — and it is rooted not in any single tactical system but in an almost preternatural capacity to read situations and people with equal fluency.

Consider the trajectory. When Ancelotti arrived at AC Milan in 2001, the club was ambitious but had not won a Champions League title since 1994. His approach was characteristically direct: Give me the money to pay top talent, and I will bring you the European Club Cup. It was not arrogance; it was a clear-eyed assessment of what was required and a confident promise to deliver if given the resources. Milan's ownership complied, and the results were eight remarkable years during which Ancelotti won two Champions League trophies, a Serie A title achieved with a then-Italian record of eighty-two points, and numerous other domestic and European cups. His talent management during this period was exceptional. Better players were

recruited — but critically, the existing lineup improved dramatically under his guidance. When the Brazilian star Rivaldo departed, Ancelotti did not panic or lament the loss. He recalibrated, gravitated toward excellence with the players who remained, and built a squad whose collective intelligence exceeded the sum of its individual brilliances. The presence of many stars on the pitch — Kaká, Andrea Pirlo, Paolo Maldini, Clarence Seedorf, Andriy Shevchenko — made the coach's job challenging, because managing egos at that altitude requires extraordinary interpersonal skill. But it was also deeply rewarding, because Ancelotti understood something that many coaches of star-studded rosters do not: the goal is not to impose your vision on brilliant players but to create conditions in which their brilliance can be expressed collectively.

The transition to Chelsea F.C. in 2009 tested this adaptive capacity in an entirely new way. The owner of AC Milan, in effect, had opened the road to England by allowing Ancelotti to leave, but England presented a formidable challenge that had nothing to do with tactics: Ancelotti's English-language skills were limited. Rather than allowing this linguistic barrier to become an excuse or a source of insecurity, he attacked it with the same learning discipline that had defined his early years at Reggiana. He spent months in intensive English study before and after his arrival, recognizing that communication is the lifeblood of coaching and that no tactical insight, however brilliant, can be conveyed through an interpreter with the same emotional immediacy and nuance that direct communication provides. The parallel with José Mourinho is instructive: when Mourinho arrived at Manchester United, as Andrew Kirby documented in her 2016 analysis, *"The Art of Winning,"* he too had to navigate the cultural and linguistic complexities of English soccer.⁹ But where Mourinho often relied on force of personality and media manipulation to establish authority, Ancelotti's approach was quieter, more relational, and ultimately more sustainable. At Chelsea, he inspired players to utilize their full potential within their field positions of expertise, producing an immediate Premier League and FA Cup double in his first season — a feat that earned the enduring loyalty of the Chelsea dressing room. As Joshua Robinson noted in a 2024 profile in *The Wall Street Journal*, Ancelotti is "the Champions League winning coach whose plan is to have no plan" — a characterization that captures both his tactical flexibility and the deeper philosophy that underpins it.¹⁰ He does not arrive at a new club with a pre-formed system and force players into it. He arrives, observes, listens, and then constructs an approach that maximizes the specific talents at his disposal.

This adaptive composure has been documented extensively. Lorenzo Meyer catalogued all of Ancelotti's clubs, titles, and records, demonstrating

that his success is not clustered in a single era or a single league but distributed evenly across three decades and five different national footballing cultures — a statistical signature that is unique among elite coaches and that points to a form of leadership that is genuinely transferable rather than context-dependent.¹¹ Volha Vožyk identified the fundamental pillars of Ancelotti's success as emotional intelligence, cultural adaptability, and the ability to maintain calm under extreme pressure — qualities that business literature typically associates with the most effective CEOs and organizational leaders.¹² For leaders in any industry, the lesson is clear: tactical knowledge, technical expertise, and strategic vision are necessary but insufficient. What separates great business leaders from merely competent ones is the capacity to adapt those capabilities to each new context, to inspire confidence when the outcome is uncertain, and to maintain composure when the pressure is most intense. Ancelotti does not win because he has better tactics. He wins because he reads the human dynamics of every situation with a fluency that allows him to deploy the right tactics, in the right way, with the right people, at the right moment.

"Give me the money to pay top talent, and I will bring you the European Club Cup." — Carlo Ancelotti, 2016.

3. Build a Culture of Respect and Trust to Spur Disruptive Innovation

Tactical systems and star talent are necessary but insufficient. The decisive factor is culture — the invisible architecture of trust, respect, and psychological safety that determines whether talented individuals perform as a collection of soloists or as a cohesive, innovative team.

When Carlo Ancelotti took charge at Real Madrid CF for the first time in 2013, and later at FC Bayern Munich in 2016, he entered environments where the conventional approach to coaching star teams was well established — and deeply flawed. The prevailing model at most superclubs was autocratic: the coach imposes a rigid system, enforces discipline through hierarchy, and manages egos through a combination of favoritism and fear. This approach produces compliance. It does not produce innovation. Ancelotti went against the normal approach entirely. Since I was a child, he has said, I have always been influenced by people who try to create new ideas. That sentence, deceptively simple, reveals the philosophical foundation upon which his entire approach to team culture is built. Ancelotti does not merely tolerate creativity; he actively cultivates it by constructing environments in which

players feel safe enough to take risks, experiment with new ideas, and push beyond the boundaries of conventional play. He understands, at an intuitive level, what organizational psychologists have spent decades documenting: that disruptive innovation does not emerge from fear-based cultures. It emerges from cultures in which people trust their leader, feel respected as individuals, and believe that failure in the pursuit of excellence will be treated as a learning opportunity rather than a punishable offense.

The mechanism through which Ancelotti builds this culture is both simple and profound: he treats his players like family. At Real Madrid CF and FC Bayern Munich — clubs where the roster included some of the most famous and highly compensated athletes on Earth — he rejected the transactional, arms-length relationship that many coaches maintain with star players. Instead, he invested deeply in personal relationships, learning about each player's background, motivations, anxieties, and aspirations. He used the game itself as advertisement on the field, as publicity for the club, and as a continuous improvement initiative — but the engine driving that continuous improvement was not tactical innovation in isolation. It was the culture of mutual trust and respect that gave players the psychological freedom to innovate on the pitch. At Real Madrid CF, Ancelotti believed he had cultivated a sense of creativity and spontaneity that no other coach had achieved with that particular group of players. And the results bore him out: his teams played with a fluidity, an inventiveness, and a joy that distinguished them from the more mechanistic approaches favored by other elite clubs. The culture of trust and respect was not a secondary factor in his success; it was the most important factor — the invisible architecture that held everything else together.

Ancelotti's own reflections on leadership confirm this analysis. In his book *Quiet Leadership: Winning Hearts, Minds and Matches*, he articulated a philosophy of management that is remarkably aligned with the most progressive thinking in contemporary organizational theory.¹³ Quiet leadership, in Ancelotti's formulation, is not passive leadership. It is leadership that operates through influence rather than coercion, through listening rather than lecturing, and through trust rather than surveillance. It is the kind of leadership that creates the conditions for what management scholars call "psychological safety" — the shared belief among team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.¹⁴ When psychological safety is high, people speak up, propose unconventional ideas, challenge assumptions, and admit mistakes. When it is low, they fall silent, conform, and protect themselves rather than innovating. Ancelotti's consistent ability to build psychologically safe cultures across radically different organizational contexts — from the fashion-forward intensity of Milan to the royal

expectations of Madrid, from the precision-engineering culture of Munich to the passionate chaos of Naples — is perhaps the single most transferable element of his leadership model. It is also, not coincidentally, the element that is most frequently undervalued by leaders who believe that strategy and talent alone are sufficient.

The testimony of those who have played under Ancelotti or competed against him reinforces this interpretation. As Aaron Flanagan documented, David Beckham spoke with genuine warmth and admiration about the environment Ancelotti created at Real Madrid — an environment in which Beckham, Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos, and other global stars coexisted not merely as teammates but as collaborators, each trusting the others enough to subordinate personal glory to collective achievement.¹⁵ Even Zidane, who would later become an enormously successful coach in his own right, credited the Real Madrid ecosystem that Ancelotti nurtured as a formative influence on his own understanding of leadership. Cristóbal Núñez reported on Ancelotti naming his toughest managerial rival, offering a window into the competitive intensity that coexists with his relational warmth — a combination that is rare and immensely powerful.¹⁶ For leaders in business where the performance of talented individuals determines organizational outcomes, the lesson is unambiguous: you cannot innovate your way to sustained excellence through strategy alone. You must build the culture first. Trust is not a soft skill or a luxury. It is the precondition for disruptive innovation — the oxygen without which the fire of creative achievement cannot ignite.

"Since I was a child, I have always been influenced by people who try to create new ideas." — Carlo Ancelotti, 2016.

The following figure shows Carlo Ancelotti's transformational leadership style:

Figure 1. Carlo Ancelotti's Formula of Transformational leadership



In Conclusion

The three principles examined in this article — continuous learning, adaptive inspiration, and trust-based culture — are not independent virtues that happen to coexist in one unusually gifted coach. They are interlocking elements of a single, coherent leadership system, each reinforcing and enabling the others. Continuous learning provides the intellectual raw material — the evolving knowledge of psychology, motivation, tactics, and human behavior — that fuels adaptive inspiration. Adaptive inspiration, in

turn, provides the emotional intelligence and situational fluency required to deploy that knowledge effectively across diverse contexts, languages, and personalities. And the culture of trust and respect that Ancelotti builds at every club creates the organizational environment in which both continuous learning and adaptive inspiration can be translated into collective action — into the on-field innovation, spontaneity, and creative courage that have defined his teams from AC Milan to Real Madrid to the Brazil national team. Remove any one of these three elements, and the system falters. A continuously learning coach who lacks emotional intelligence will accumulate knowledge but fail to inspire. An inspirational coach who lacks a learning discipline will motivate in the short term but stagnate when contexts change. And a coach who inspires and learns but fails to build trust will find that his players comply without truly committing. Ancelotti's genius is that he integrates all three, creating a virtuous cycle of growth, adaptation, and collective excellence.

Trace the arc of his career, and the evidence becomes overwhelming. From an inexperienced coach at AC Reggiana 1919 — a man who did not yet have a coaching license when he took his first job — to the architect of Champions League dynasties at AC Milan and Real Madrid CF, to the only manager to win league titles in all five of Europe's top leagues, to the head coach of the national team of Brazil as it prepares for the 2026 FIFA World Cup in North America, Ancelotti's transformational leadership model is the result of years of deliberate practice, accumulated wisdom, and the willingness to reinvent himself at every stage. He has coached in six countries. He has managed players spanning three generations. He has navigated ownership changes, financial crises, media firestorms, and the relentless pressure of competitions where a single match can define an entire season. Through all of this, the core of his leadership has remained consistent: learn relentlessly, adapt with composure, and build cultures in which talented people feel trusted enough to do their best work. In a world of constant change — where the half-life of competitive advantage grows shorter every year, and the ability to lead across cultures, generations, and contexts has become a baseline requirement rather than a differentiating luxury — these are not aspirational ideals. They are operational necessities.

Carlo Ancelotti did not transform teams because he had better tactics than his rivals, or bigger transfer budgets, or more favorable circumstances. Many of his competitors had equal or superior resources. What he had — and what he cultivated with extraordinary discipline across more than thirty years — was a transformational leadership philosophy that elevated every organization he touched. He built cultures in which talented people were not merely managed but inspired to exceed their own expectations, to discover

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capabilities they did not know they possessed, and to achieve collectively what none of them could have achieved alone. From the farmlands of Reggio to the bright lights of the Bernabéu, from the dressing rooms of Stamford Bridge and the Allianz Arena to the training grounds of the Brazilian Seleção, the pattern is the same: learn, adapt, trust, and transform. That is the transformational imperative — and it is available to any leader, in any industry or business, willing to embrace it.

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