



Causa Thomas Müller

A Leadership Lesson on Power, Culture, and Credibility

By Christian Rook

Disbelief. Frustration. Cringe.

That's the emotional cocktail many viewers felt watching German football executive Max Eberl appear on the national TV show *Doppelpass* on 7. April 2025. As the newly appointed sporting director of FC Bayern Munich – one of the most successful and powerful football clubs in the world – Eberl was expected to clarify why **Thomas Müller**, Bayern legend and long-time team leader, will not be offered a new contract.

He sounded honest. Reflective. Even apologetic. But the more he talked, the more it became obvious: **What was being said didn't match what had actually happened.**

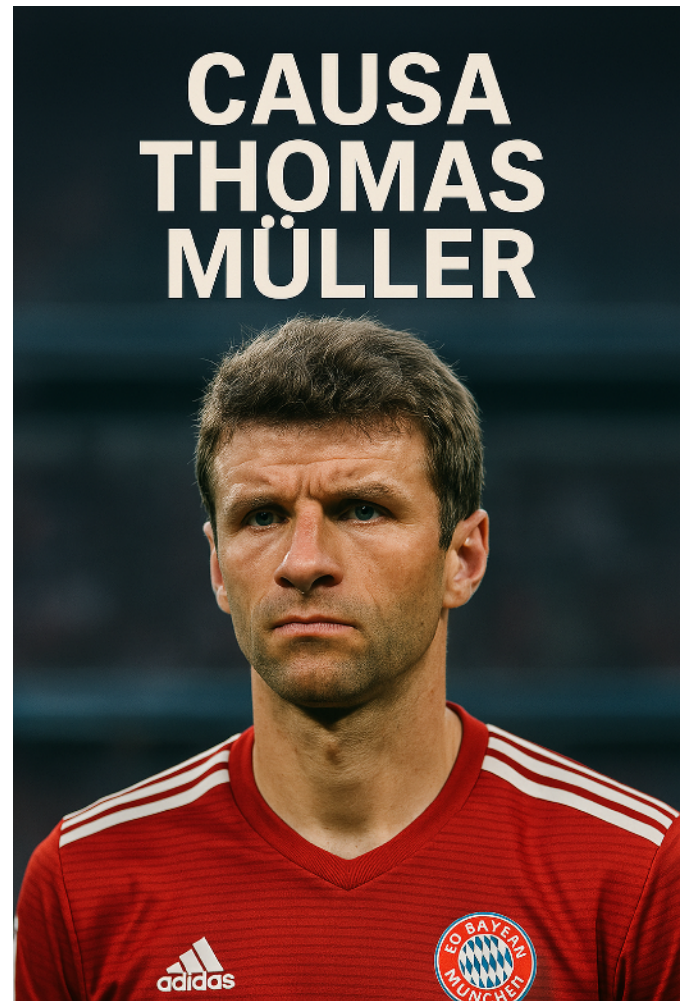
Thomas Müller – World Cup winner, fan favorite, club icon – is being let go. The official reason? "Too few minutes played." A curious claim, considering it was the club itself that kept him on the bench. Days later, Müller came off the bench in a Champions League quarterfinal match and immediately scored the equalizer – a moment that made the club's narrative fall apart in real time.

This situation is more than a football story. It's a powerful case study in **leadership, communication, and organizational trust** – and a mirror for any leader managing transformation, culture, or high-profile people.

1. The on-field moment – and the bitter irony

In the Champions League quarterfinal against Inter Milan, Müller was on Tuesday, April 8, subbed in during the 85th minute. On the field, he immediately scored the 1–1 equalizer. The very player said to be "no longer relevant" saved the team – for a moment.

Bayern ultimately lost 2–1, but Müller's goal highlighted the absurdity of the argument:



It's hard to claim someone has "too little impact" when they make a difference the moment they're trusted.

2. Müller's open letter: dignity, clarity, subtle criticism

Soon after the hobble announcement meeting with Max Eberl, Müller himself published an open letter to fans – gracious, composed, but with unmistakable subtext. He made it clear:

He wanted to stay. The club didn't.

The decision had been made by the **board of directors and supervisory board**, not by mutual agreement.

And the public back-and-forth in recent weeks? “It didn’t sit well with me,” he wrote.

Müller delivered a **masterclass in dignity** – from someone who had every reason to speak out, but chose to stay constructive. Instead of lashing out, he reclaimed control of his narrative.

3. The strategic suspicion: clearing space for a star

Behind the scenes, speculation is growing: Müller’s departure may not be about minutes on the field, but about **creating room for Florian Wirtz** – a 21-year-old attacking midfielder currently playing for Bayer Leverkusen and considered one of the brightest talents in Europe.

Wirtz has not yet extended his contract in Leverkusen. A move to Bayern is seen as likely.

But Wirtz reportedly demands a salary of **€25 million per year** – and Müller’s current **€17 million** could be „in the way“ from a budgetary perspective, especially because the contracts with

Jamal Musiala (increase for €9 million to €25 million),

Joshua Kimmich (salary stable at €20 million), and

Alphonso Davies (increase from €11 million to €15 million plus €5 million bonus) have already been extended and

Leroy Sané and

Dayot Upamecano are still in the waiting for their extensions.

Accommodating all of these signings requires freeing up budget and position.

Eberl hinted at undisclosed plans during his TV appearance:

“There are things I can’t talk about yet.”

That sentence now reads like the puzzle piece that completes the picture.

What organizations must learn from this

The Thomas Müller case is a textbook example of how credibility erodes when leadership is fragmented, unclear, or inauthentic.

1. Authenticity beats spin

Max Eberl initially acted **as if he was in charge**. In January, he had publicly suggested that the decision about Thomas Müller’s contract extension was essentially up to Müller himself. His exact sentiment was as such:

“If Thomas wants to continue, the conversation will be short.”

But his public walk-back exposed him as what German media now call a “toothless tiger”: someone with a title, but without real decision-making power. A messenger, not a leader.

In transformation, this is dangerous. A leader who can’t lead becomes a bottleneck:

- They delay decisions.
- They dilute accountability.
- They represent authority, but possess none.

Real change demands more than charm and good intentions. It requires teeth.

2. Power without clarity destroys culture

At FC Bayern, the real power seems to lie not with the executive leadership (Eberl, CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen, and sporting director Christoph Freund), but with the **supervisory board** – especially honorary president **Uli Hoeneß** and former CEO **Karl-Heinz Rummenigge**, who pulled strings from behind the scenes even after stepping down.

In such a setup, the risk is huge:

Decisions are made by one group and explained by another.

Responsibility is blurred.

Trust, internally and externally, erodes.

3. Respect is tested when people leave

If someone like Thomas Müller – who has served the club for over 20 years – is shown the door with vague reasoning and zero alignment, employees take notice. They wonder: *“If that’s how they treat him, what chance do I have?”*

Respect is easy to preach.

But it’s in the *exit* – not the *entry* – where a company’s true culture is revealed.

4. Transformation requires leaders who can act – and stand firm

Organizational transformation can’t be managed by those who aren’t allowed to make real decisions. It needs leaders with:

- Clear mandates,
- The authority to execute them,
- And the courage to communicate hard truths with humanity.

When “leadership” becomes a front for others pulling the strings, the entire structure weakens.

Conclusion: Leadership is proven in departure, not arrival

FC Bayern had the chance to handle this with grace and clarity.

Letting Müller go might have been a legitimate choice – but the way it was done was anything but. There was no shared narrative. No mutual respect on display. Only spin, confusion, and visible friction.

Müller scored when it mattered. He communicated with maturity.

The club leadership, meanwhile, was absent, disjointed, and reactive.

This case reminds us: leadership is not tested when welcoming new stars.

It's tested when saying goodbye to old ones.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Christian Rook".

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