

# Thoughts on leadership

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**W**ith more than two decades working in sport and business, I have experienced many different styles and forms of leadership. I have had the great privilege of spending time with many great coaches and business minds.

I have also seen the other side of leadership, where groups were frustrated, stressed and unhappy, mainly because of ineffective leadership. I have seen a thriving organization with a cohesive staff torn apart within two years because of hiring an ineffective leader.

I thought I would take the time to write out a few experiences that I still think of today. Sometimes it is not the big things in life that leave the most impression on us but the little events. In business the foundation is leadership. If there is a lack of it the business usually fizzles out and goes nowhere. In sport I feel it is the same. Most of you reading this already have leadership qualities, I simply encourage you to always reflect on those qualities and strive to improve them. Keep these qualities at the forefront of your mind and consider that you are leading people into "battle". You are providing inspiration when they are doubting. This does not just go for the athletes, also for parents, fellow coaches and IST

## When was the last time you wrote a handwritten note to an athlete or employee on how great they are doing?

Although I feel I could fill half a book on the topic, let me give what may appear as a simple, small explanation of great leadership. Over 10 years ago, I did a camp for Women's National Hockey. I believe it was the first time I met Coach "Mel" Davidson. I was taken by her presence. It is hard to put a finger on it but a good chunk of this article is based on what I saw at that camp. To get to my story, let me jump to the end of the camp, on our drive back to the airport. With Mel at the wheel, we had one of those conversations that you would have to

pay a "business coach" a lot of money for. We



went back and forth on what leadership was, how to get peak performance and so many great topics. Mel went on to tell me this great story..." Hockey Canada kept trying to get me to do these corporate talks and I kept telling them I have nothing to offer them. The 4<sup>th</sup> time the president came to me, I said, 'okay, if you think it would be good for the program.' I did the talk describing how we operate, how we motivate our athletes and the expectations we have of them. Darren, I got a standing ovation and the CEO would not stop shaking my hand and saying, 'I never thought of it that way.... that was amazing!! We need you working with our executive team.' Darren, I was dumbfounded. It was such

common sense, we do this every day in sport, and it is just common practice." I turned to Mel in the car and said, "sport imitates life." Maybe this why 80% of blue chip CEO's played NCAA sport.

Here is where the great leadership story continues. When we first got to the camp they handed out the staff Hockey Canada gear. For people who have been involved with a national team, you'll know that the gear is a big deal. We almost don't care if we get paid, as long as we get the track suit. They didn't have my size. Mel apologized profusely and I explained it was no big deal. I had lots of gear from previous camps. I flew home after the great drive to the airport with Mel and two days later an express post package showed up. It was an XL Hockey Canada track suit with a card inside. I opened the Hockey Canada card and inside a hand-written note said, "you're a "keeper" Mel."

*I think leadership drives well-being in an organization, team, and life.*

So, what are the 5 big mistakes made in leadership roles in my view?

#### **Sucking the O<sub>2</sub> out of the room.**

Donald Trump effect. If you speak for more than 50% of a conversation or meeting you might want to reflect on whether you are really listening. Are your troops feeling part of the process? Are they feeling valued? It has been my experience that allowing your staff or athletes to speak and play an

important role in a conversation or meeting is key. Being a great listener is such an important skill for leaders. Stop and think. Are you a good listener? Here is a great quote from my wife, a school teacher of grade four students. She will stop mid-sentence and ask her student, "Are you listening to me or thinking about what you are going to say next."

#### **Power verses empower.**



For the last 20 years, empower has been a much-overused

term, but it is an important concept. Even in my work life I have experienced this. My first job in 1994 was with the YMCA. I still call upon Terry (the CEO) today for advice. I remember being excited because I came up with a new program idea and pitched it to Terry. Here was his response, "I trust you. Give me a business case and a plan of how you see it working. Then give me the best-case scenario and worst case. If it is the worst case, which I doubt will happen, tell me how you will rectify it. I know you can do it, so let me know how I can help." I really respected the fact that Terry trusted me as the resident expert and that I would not pitch an idea I hadn't thought out.

#### **No debrief.**

We learn from failure. **First Attempt in Learning.** We also learn from winning. Doing an excellent

debrief at the end of project, competition or just annually with your athlete can be very meaningful. The definition of insanity is doing the same process and expecting different results. I have sat through outstanding debriefs where we ended up changing practice globally within the organization and sometimes just within the group. I have also been involved in projects that have failed and no one was willing to sit and discuss the failure and face the brutal facts! The stuff we could have learned from that would have been amazing to help for the future.

A good example was when a funder hosted a large event with many sport science team members from different sports, a colleague presented on a project that failed to capture a podium performance but truly helped the athlete in life. Many people in the room started to console the presenter and disregarded the fact the athlete did not reach the podium. The head of agency, stopped the session, stood up and said, "Let me explain something...it is nice that the athlete is going to have a better life because of what we did BUT our goal was to podium, period. This particular initiative failed, and we will get to the bottom of this and learn from it. A lot of money and good people's time went into this." Then he sat back down.

### **I change by not changing at all.**

Pick up any leadership book and you will see something related to embracing change. There is a whole section at the book store.

There isn't a more classic case of this than what is going on in high performance sport. The growth of scientists in sport has been welcomed by some sports and coaches and pandered by others. Funding organizations want periodic reports to ensure that programs are on track and that key performance indicators are improving. No longer is "I think we are on track" accepted. Picture this scenario. You retire after investing the last 30 years with one financial planner who said everything is going well and pulled out a blank piece of paper and explained it to you with a pen. The day you go to retire you find out all your investments tanked, and your advisor looks at you and says, "I am not sure what went wrong, it was looking good."

Let me highlight an example of this. I worked with a coach with over 25 years experience and could have easily said I have a system that has worked, and I have had success, so I am sticking with it. But he didn't. He accepted the support of scientists as well as other coaches and used it to his, and his athletes, advantage. He has created a world class process on how he analyses his program and has sustained predictable performance from his athletes.

With high functioning leaders, you get sustained high performance. It may not be a podium performance for everyone, but you get the best out of everyone, whatever their best is.

One thing I pride myself on is being able to self-reflect and be introspective. I feel at times I have been a good leader but there have been times I have shown poor leadership skills. Sometimes I do not

practice what I preach. It is a work in progress.

“Ultimately, leadership is not about glorious crowning acts. It's about keeping your team focused on a goal and motivated to do their best to achieve it, especially when the stakes are high and the consequences really matter. It is about laying the groundwork for others' success, and then standing back and letting them shine.” Chris Hatfield

