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What Leaders Can Learn From Athletics: Inconsistencies Between Leadership in Sports and Leadership in Corporations

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As someone who has taught, written, and spoken about leadership at both the undergraduate and graduate levels I find amazing the correlation between leadership and athletics and there have been so little written about it. There are numerous books on coaching team sports. There have also been numerous articles written about the personalities of various coaches, in particular Bobby Knight, Head Men's Basketball Coach at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, Pat Summit, Head Women's Basketball Coach at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee and Mike Krzyzewski, Head Men's Basketball Coach at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Although these articles and books have focused specifically on coaching methodology there is a great deal an individual can learn from the culture of athletics.

What I find particularly interesting is that every participant on any given team, regardless of the sport and regardless of the ability of the participant, knows exactly what is expected of them. There is absolutely no confusion as to organizational mission put forth by the owner and the coach (leader/manager) which is simply to win. There is no confusion as to what the vision for the team (business) may be which is to become the best team in that particular sport. There is no misunderstanding as to their particular role in achieving the mission (the ability to play their position on the team). Most importantly, there is a clear understanding as to how their individual performance on the field, etc. affects the performance of the rest of the members of the team.

One way of looking at this would be from the perspective of a baseball player although it would be the same in football, basketball, or any other team sport where the actions of one affect the actions of the other members.

First, each player is completely familiar with the rules; how the game is played. There is no question on anyone's part as to what is allowed and what is not allowed; the rules. Is this true in business when every company, division, or even department may be working in a different cultural environment? Second, each player knows exactly what to do when it come to playing their position. There is absolutely no confusion as to what they need to know and their ability to do the job they have been hired to perform. This is somewhat the same in business however it is not always the case. Until the person is actually on the job no one knows for sure just how well they will do. Third, each person on the team is fully aware of the impact their performance will have on the other members of the team. They fully understand the impact of their actions. This is not always the case in business when departments and divisions may in fact work independently of other departments and divisions. What is interesting is the role that the coach/manager has in this process. For the most part they can be found on the sidelines or

in the dugout, as in the case with baseball, monitoring what is happening on the playing field. Since the players know what to do there is little for the manager to do other than to monitor the players as they play their positions and make changes when the situation warrants. So, the question remains, what can companies learn from athletics when it comes to leadership? Perhaps less is best. There are a number of variables to be considered. One is assuming that the organization is willing to pay for the best the market has to offer which in most instances means paying significantly more than other businesses are willing to pay for a similar position. For the most part, professional sports teams try to identify the best players they can based on the size of their market and what they can afford to pay. In most cases, the more they pay the better player they can attract. This seems to only happen at the executive levels in business, it most certainly does not happen at the entry level or most middle management positions. There are, of course, exceptions. The financial markets for instance, especially in fields such as financial analysis and hedge funds tend towards higher salaries.

In summary, businesses leaders should:

1. Hire individuals who are already familiar with their organizations and its culture or be willing to spend the time needed to acquaint them with the culture of the organization. This is unnecessary in athletics because everyone on the team already knows the rules. They may not know the personalities of the manager, coaches and other players but they do know how the game is to be played.
2. Lead on a daily basis. Athletes clearly understand what they are to do; WIN. They are paid to win and they are monitored daily by their manager and coaches regarding their performance, in other words there is no waiting for an “annual review” to discuss their performance.
3. Make their employees aware of the impact their job has on other segments of the organization. In athletics every player is fundamentally aware of the impact that a mistake can have on the performance of the rest of the team. They are aware of the role of the other players as well as their own. In business there are too many little kingdoms existing within the organization but in too many instances apart from it.

Ask anyone who has played a team sport regardless of ability. Everyone comes to the game knowing how the game is played; if only business worked the same way.

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