



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE COACH-LEADERSHIP MOMENT

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Everyone talks about being a coach rather than a director. Business cards sprout, like crocuses in the spring, with the job title “Head Coach” emblazoned on them. But what does a coach-leader do? Read on for some insight.

Welcome to the Tennis Match

They’d been hard at it for several hours, so involved that the scheduled break time came and went with hardly a movement of the chairs. The walls were plastered with butcher paper on which were scrawled “Opportunities,” “Threats,” and “Possibilities,” the product of all those hours of brainstorming and heated discussion. Now stillness filled the room. Seven pairs of eyes turned toward the slight Chinese man who sat at one corner of the note-and-cup-strewn walnut table. The question hung like putrid cigarette smoke in a bar, “All right, George, what do we do?”

Well, there it is; the fuzzy little ball so deftly tapped into George’s court. He sees it bounce toward him in slow motion. Now what? Welcome to *the coach-leader moment*.

I was midwife for the unfolding drama. George's electronic components business rang up \$7 million in sales last year, up from \$2 million three years ago. He saw lots of opportunity to grow to \$12 million in the coming year and to \$50 million within five years. George saw what he had to do. He hired several new managers, expanded his facilities, and set a vision for aggressive growth.

By lunchtime the table groaned under the weight of all the opportunities they'd uncovered. The "To Do" agenda couldn't have been accomplished in a billion-dollar organization. There was clearly too much on this small company's plate. Having surfaced the opportunities and threats, the seven members of the management team turned to George to decide which opportunities they would pursue. George knew the match would be a series of classic *coach-leader moments*, each preceded by the question, "Now what do we do, boss?"

The Bobby Riggs Response

Engaging the Racquet and the Heart

We anticipated this moment. It happens many times a day in the life of most leaders. The ball ends up in your court. Everyone watches carefully to see whether you make the decision or engage others in making the decision. It's the classic play that reveals your view of your role in this very serious team sport. It's a test. It's the *coach-leader moment*.

I've learned to use the Bobby Riggs lob approach in these coach-leader moments. Bobby Riggs built a very successful tennis career by mastering the art of the lob. Rather than trying to overpower his opponent with the speed of his serve or the power of his backhand (both of which were very ordinary), Riggs lobbed the ball back to his opponent and let him make the unforced error. He won lots of games with this strategy.

George knew about the Bobby Riggs approach. He was ready for the question. He paused, allowing the silence to clear the air and set the stage. Turning to his controller, the most junior member of the staff, he asked, "Melly, what do you think are the most important items for us to pursue?"

The awkward stillness was broken only by the shuffling of feet and the shifting of chairs. After what seemed like an eternity—but likely was only 45 seconds—Melinora artfully passed the ball back to George, “I don’t know, George. You know this business better than any of us. What do you think we ought to do?”

Bap! The racket made contact. George was steadfast. “Anybody want to help Melly decide? How about you, Jack?” George asked, turning to his executive vice president. Not being the shy and retiring type, Jack rushed the net. Bap! The room sprang alive with conversation. Lunchtime came and went unnoticed. The “To Do” list shrank to a more manageable size.

Using Questions to Engage People in the Business of the Business

The lesson: *coach-leaders engage people in weighing alternatives and making tough decisions.* Opportunities always outnumber resources. There’s always more to do than there is time to do it. Coaching leaders engage others in making tough choices. Coach-leadership—engaging people—can come from anywhere in the organization. You don’t have to be the CEO. Sure, the CEO engages from the top, but every individual from the shop floor to the back office can engage people in the business of the business. Being a coach-leader is a matter of spirit, not spotlight; a function of purpose, not position.

More than Just Questions

Make no mistake, coach-leaders don’t *just* ask questions. Coach leadership is not a passive activity. George knew his marketplace. He saw what he thought were the best opportunities, but he wanted more knowledge on the table to make the best decision. George knew that a team decision would be more enthusiastically executed than a solo decision. He’d read the book. He knew the drill. Engage the people or suffer the consequences of poor implementation.

What else do coach-leaders do, besides ask engaging questions? There are several other critical activities:

Avoiding the Moses Mind-Set

It's About Us—As a People

Coach-leaders are not like Moses going up the mountain, hearing God talk, and getting a vision to tell everyone else. No, coach leadership is *about us, as a people*. Fall in the Moses trap, believing that it's all up to you, and you guarantee failure, coach leadership is about “of, by, and for the people.”

Saying Farewell to Superstar, Hello to Dream Team

If you believe you're going to play the superstar and run the whole show, doling out pieces to others, then don't even start. You'll fail. It doesn't matter how bright you are or how energetic you are. It doesn't even matter how much money you're making. You'll fail, because no one can do it alone. Even Moses came to realize that he couldn't do it all himself. The Israeli camp would have shut down had his sagacious father-in-law, Jethro, not helped Moses see the reality of his own limitations.

Moses saw Jethro's wisdom and divided up the work of leadership among key people. In reality and in the future, dream teams will produce the wins. That's the way to the Promised Land.

Getting Out of Your Own Way

A high-profile CEO asked me to stop by for a “chat.” The daily business press had chronicled his difficulties and disappointments in gory detail. “It's a much tougher slog than I thought. This group of folks just doesn't move fast. They discuss and discuss and discuss some more. Our market position continues to deteriorate faster than I can react. We've got lots of cash for the short term, but. . .” and his voice trailed off as he stood looking out at the foggy morning.

“Any stars on whom you can depend?” I asked.

“Stars?” he exploded. “Never seen anything like these people—they're like store manikins. I've got to do everything. If I don't do it, it doesn't get done. Strategy is a foreign word around here. Responsibility is unknown.

People talk, but don't execute—and no one cares. I'm no introvert, as you know, but even my temper tantrums don't move them. I'm at my wits' end for what to do. Any suggestions?"

"Polish up your résumé?" I said, smiling.

"Right," he grimaced, "and who'd take me after I've presided over the demise of one of the premier names in our business? Nope, I've got to make this one go. Let me try again. Any suggestions?"

I spent the next two hours scoping out several ways he might engage the several thousand people still in the business. My parting words to him summarized our theme, "At the end of the day, all of these activities will only work if you stop trying to do everything yourself. You need to *get out of your own way*. As long as everyone looks to you—and you believe that you've got to do it by yourself—you're creating the best short-selling opportunity in the market today, and you can't even capitalize on it." Can the leopard change his spots? As they used to say at the Saturday afternoon serials I watched as a kid, "Come back next week and find out."

Unlearn, to Learn Anew

Mort Meyerson thought he knew all there was to know about leadership. After all, he'd had one of the best teachers, Ross Perot, and a very successful track record building EDS into the power it is today. He had his priorities straight. Work came first, second, and third; family, community, and other obligations came after that, if there was time and energy. His leadership system worked. EDS grew at a phenomenal rate and created thousands of employee millionaires. He'd found the mother lode. What could be better?

There were a few bumps along the way. Employees often dropped like flies from working seventy to eighty hours a week. Customers often were shortchanged. The hyper-focus on short-term results often hurt the organization in the long term. But the dollars kept rolling in and the stock price kept going up, so it was easy to ignore these minor issues.

When Meyerson became CEO at Perot Systems, he saw the corrosive impact of the emphasis on profit-and-loss to the exclusion of other values. In the April/May, 1996, issue of *Fast Company*, he wrote that everything he

thought he knew about leadership was wrong, so he embarked on a new coach-leader strategy. He engaged the people in an extensive information gathering process as a coach, not an executive. Rather than telling them what to do, he'd encourage them to look in the mirror at themselves and each other, rather than at him as the leader. Only by not stepping in all the time, as he had done previously, could he create a collaborative environment in which people could succeed through teamwork.

He also learned that he needed to be accessible. Meyerson replied to thousands of e-mail messages a month. He found that the single most important tool he had to break through the old organization and the old mind-set was e-mail. Through e-mail he could be an instant participant in any part of the organization.

Meyerson learned a new coaching approach to leadership: engaging people by giving up the flowing robes and long white beard of a Moses.

The Agile, Amphibious Coach-Leader Works Above and Below the Water Line

Don't let me mislead you. Coaching leadership does not require a vow of silence. Far from it. Be engaged. But the key word is "engage," not "control." In a crisis, a team of paramedics is more valuable than the solo virtuosity of the world's greatest surgeon.

But when do you control, and when do you contribute? When do you decide, and when do you question? The "high visibility" water line is the dividing line between these two approaches. Participate in topics and issues that are above the water line. Mistakes here cause embarrassment, but are not fatal to the organization. Decisions below the water line, however, are cats of a different color. You still want others to make the below-the-water-line decisions, but you can't afford to allow a bad decision. People might drown.

On decisions above the water line, learn to question, question, question; get out the spotlights and spades and work to make the decision as fact-based as possible. But at the end of the day, like George, move aside on any above-the-water-line decisions. Use the same questioning and searching

activities as you did for decisions below the water line. Only redouble your surfacing efforts, because if the group comes up with what you believe to be a wrong decision, you will have to intervene.

It's not an easy call. When do you play the trump card? It'll take the trick, but it often doesn't win the game. I've learned that I lose every time I have to trump someone else's decision. Yet, I can also lose when I take over on a decision below the water line. It takes lots of patience and education to bring out the leadership talents of others, and during the learning process, the casualties can be high.

For instance, in one business I worked hard to narrow the product focus from twenty industries to something smaller. I believed that three was the magic number. Try as I might, I could not get the group to agree to any fewer than six. I bought off on six, hoping that I could come back the next year and narrow it again. Only this time, there was no next year. Heavy losses forced them to abandon major portions of the company's activities. The new leaders of the next corporate reinvention narrowed their focus to three products. My "right" answer came too late for me. There are risks in this engagement game.

In another situation, I moved too quickly. In my specialty chemical venture, the management group wanted to invest heavily in a new product venture. I wasn't convinced that there was a market for the new products, so I vetoed the proposal after long and heated discussions. A competitor launched exactly the same product and swept the market, costing us multiple points of market share. The unspoken "We told you so's" hung around like bad pennies for a long time. It's a judgment call. You win most and lose some.

"Mea Culpas" Clear the Air and Reinforce the Heart Connection

When you do lose—and we all do—call the folks together and declare your fallibility. Apologize for the error, figure out how you can do better next time, and move on. I did that with the specialty chemical management team. They accepted my apology, and we figured out how to counter the

competitor's new product with some innovative ideas of our own. Everyone knows that no one, not even the leader, is perfect. It helps to reinforce the heart connection when you remind people of your own fallibility.

Coach-leaders at all levels can stand up and admit a mistake. In their Sept. 7, 1992, issue, *Sports Illustrated* reported the turning point for the Washington Redskins in the early 1990s. It occurred when pass receiver Art Monk, a usually quiet member of the team, stood up and called a mandatory team meeting. The team was in a slump and struggling. Addressing them in dead earnest, Monk told them that everyone, including himself, could play a lot better, and that he was rededicating himself to doing better right now. That simple but powerful admission coming from a star receiver made all the difference. The Redskins beat the Dolphins 42 to 20 the next day, and won all but one game on the way to the play-offs.

It's not only undesirable, but suicidal, to pretend you are infallible in any role you play. You can't romanticize your record—you've made mistakes and witnesses were present. You may as well admit it, or hear about it at an awkward moment from an unexpected source!

Words Are Prophetic: Paint the "Us" Picture

Words paint a picture. Coach-leaders carefully choose their words to paint a Rembrandt that celebrates and honors "us" rather than "I."

For instance, there's a big, big difference between the words "girl" and "woman." One describes an immature, dependent female. The other describes an independent, mature female. Which word picture would you prefer if you were a thirty-seven-year-old CFO of a Fortune 20 company? A woman we know told us of the following personal experience.

She's earned an M.D. and a Ph.D. and is the president of a start-up company looking for venture capital funding. The venture capitalists are due at 2 P.M. She's pacing the entry hall anxiously awaiting their arrival. At 2:05 the three male venture capitalists hurry through the door, led by the senior partner. He takes off his coat, gives it to her and says, "Here,

girl, please tell Dr. Smyth that we're here. And I'd like some coffee, black with one sugar."

She hangs up the coat, gets him the coffee, and offers it to him with the words, "Here you are, boy. Dr. Smyth at your service."

"Maybe it was his guilt, but it was the easiest \$7 million we ever raised," Dr. Smyth told us.

Words paint a picture. Be certain they paint the picture you want.

So, there you have it: ask engaging "What do you think?" questions; drop the Moses mind-set; radar out the water line in your activity and adjust your activities accordingly; prepare for the inevitable mea culpas; and watch your language. It's easy to write about, and hopefully easy to read. It's just very hard to do. But it must be done, so let's get on with it.

About the Contributor

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Jim is a dynamic speaker on topics of strategy, leadership, change, empowerment, and customer service, and a successful entrepreneur and coach-leader in specialty chemicals and computer software companies. He is the author of nine books, including the bestseller *Teaching the Elephant to Dance: Empowering Change in Your Organization*. His newest book is entitled *Soaring with the Phoenix: Renewing the Vision, Reviving the Spirit, Recreating the Success of Your Organization*.

