

The corporate athlete: It takes training and conditioning to achieve and sustain leadership

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Models of leadership behavior have evolved as research has demonstrated that we actually can describe requisite sets of behaviors for successful leadership.

These models can vary with the personal and organizational context or situation. An example is the old axiom, there are “horses for courses,” taken from the horse racing world, where it was widely assumed some horses ran better on certain courses than others because of track conditions (e.g., some horses run better on dry tracks than wet tracks, and vice versa).

So it is with leaders. Some leaders “run” better in certain situations and conditions than others. In today’s chaotic world, situations, just like track conditions, change rapidly. One fundamental truth remains clear: whatever the situations are, or the leadership models that are applied, it is axiomatic that success and well-being cannot both be sustained unless we also pay attention to the well-being of our mind, body and spirit, and those of our employees.

The rationales for exercise are logical enough. Exercise is thought to refine body image and behaviors and build spirit, which is ultimately one’s sense of how one’s body is positioned. Improved well-being should, in theory, improve the efficiency of movement and reduce disease, injuries and illnesses. Shouldn’t we also then be thinking of what it does for us as we lead our day, our teams or our companies? And shouldn’t this be added to the definition of a great leader?

Understanding this rationale is aided by understanding what it means to be a corporate athlete. This term can be explained by examining models for sustaining high-performing athletes. Using a model related to high-performing athletes could fit today’s leaders, who are often expected to act as highly performing corporate athletes. Daily, they are facing a multitude of challenges to their body, mind and spirit

1. Athletes condition and train; they focus on concepts of periodicity and oscillation, with rest and recovery followed by disciplined rounds of intense workout.
2. Athletes practice their skills; whatever the sport, they repeat the task and mentally envision success.
3. Athletes evaluate their performance; typically with objec

tivity, and adjust how they train and prepare based on the evaluation.

4. Athletes pay attention to their mental focus, emotional mindset, sense of well-being and commitment to their sport.
5. Athletes repeat the above sequence, as frequently as possible, in daily conditioning as well as in rest and recovery.

This model suggests the need for self-awareness and recognition by leaders; that they are actually expected to function as corporate athletes. Ultimately, the success of any organization requires this level of personal commitment in response to the challenge of leadership.

Ask yourself, how do you lead? How do you practice or condition yourself to lead? Leadership takes enormous time, which requires your entire life to have meaning, motivation and movement. You must run tough. You must shut down noise and clutter. You must move with meaning and motivation.

To achieve and sustain leadership takes training and conditioning, similar to what one would do as an athlete involved in one’s own conditioning for competitive events. Each role, the athlete and the corporate athlete, requires planning, execution and evaluation. All must be done with focus, patience and humility. And each role must start with you.

For corporate leaders to acknowledge that they will need to lead this effort and model the behavior of a corporate athlete is a huge task. Whether you are investing in the health of your employees, or in yourself, very rarely do the results happen overnight. Achieving success in health or business is like turning around a large plane: it takes a vision of where you want to go, and sustained effort and fearless commitment to get there. Gradually, you achieve your goal and you navigate through all the cataclysmic chaos, intently focused on results even though the landscape in front of you seems to be ever-changing.

This task was actually best framed by the famous Green Bay Packers coach, Vince Lombardi:

“Leaders aren’t born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that’s the price we’ll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal.” ♦