
Winning mentality

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Randall S Peterson

Randall S. Peterson discusses the common traits needed to be an effective leader in the boardroom or on the sports field.

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Professor Peterson speaking on a panel session at the 2015 Sports Performance Summit in London.

Star performers are not typically natural leaders

In sport, the best player is rarely the best captain. For the star, everything comes naturally and it's very difficult for them to understand why the bulk of the team struggles with the same things. Getting the star player to co-operate is often the hardest thing for coaches, because that player knows they are the best. It's a big challenge in business and in any area of leadership.

The toughest conversation I've ever had as a leader and manager is to say to someone, 'You're my best technical expert but I'm not going to promote you because you don't have the character and those interpersonal skills I need for you to take on a leadership role at this time'. That's always a difficult conversation to have.

The qualities of a great leader

There are four or five things to look for when identifying leadership talent in business and sport: a good track record, commitment to the organisation and its ideals and values, the interpersonal skills to get along with a broad variety of people and an ambition to be in charge. Not everyone wants it – some people want to be the star, but not in that leadership role. You also get people who want to be leaders, but only for the status and dominance over others it provides rather than the role itself and achieving anything in particular.

Silence can be golden

Many people who make it successfully in business are introverted when it comes to communication. They listen a lot more than they talk, but they are extroverted in terms of drive and putting themselves out there; they like to be in a position of responsibility and power. That combination allows them to find ways of asserting control non-verbally. A number of well-known chief executives fit this exact mould; they walk into a room and don't say a thing, but everybody pays attention.

Why 'yes-men' are a hindrance

On average leaders have a six to seven-year shelf life, where they start off needing to grow their confidence, to push themselves and to make the big decisions. Then they get on top of things, begin to peak and start believing they are better than everybody else.

Typically, the more power and status individuals have, the more they can have a tendency to devalue the people around them. When that happens, they can stop listening. You have to find ways to see what's really going on and surround yourself with people who can tell you the truth. Every great leader has one or two people who tell them like it really is and don't sugar coat anything.

Why leaders fail

In the world of business, an increasing number of companies are picking more extreme leaders who stand out in terms of their personality and general style. They are different and unique, and we think of leadership as the need for someone who both fits within the group and makes a unique contribution. The problem with that is you can sometimes pick someone who is good for today but not for tomorrow. You may have needed a technical expert, but now you need someone who can motivate, energise and get people excited.

Leaders are sometimes right for a particular period, but then the wrong person to have in charge when that time has passed. The most important thing any senior executive or sports coach can do is to identify the right person for the situation and think about developing a pipeline of leaders who can step in further down the line as the situation develops.