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Playing Above the Breaks...

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When an organization experiences failure, perhaps the quickest and most revealing way of determining whether the person in charge is just a boss or a real leader is what happens next.

As a high school and college athlete, few things were more distasteful to me than losing. I was fortunate in having an accomplished, caring coach along the way who took me aside one afternoon in the middle of practice, sat me down on a bench, and in language I could easily grasp, said sternly: “Before you experience more success, you will have to conquer yourself.”

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That encounter is one of the major reasons I have since read everything I could lay my fingers on about Jackie Robinson, my childhood hero. If you've seen the recent movie “42,” you will recount how Jackie had to learn patience and self-restraint. And once he did, his innumerable achievements, on and off the field, followed. Few of us are as supremely gifted as he was, but we can all learn from his incredible courage, discipline, and strength of character.

When I periodically teach college courses, I often ask students this question: When the one in charge fails to achieve a highly-sought after goal, why does he or she resort to blaming others for the unsuccessful attempt, while a real leader perceives the set-back as temporary, assembles the team, seeks their input, admits his or her failure, resolves to learn from the mistakes made, and moves forward with renewed vigor? During the past 25 years, I've generated a set of what I thought were sound answers to this question. But I recently decided I needed a fresh perspective so I assembled a panel of bright, successful, and thoughtful leaders from the C-suite, academe, law enforcement, journalism, foreign affairs, and athletics and posed the same question to them.

Dave Brandon, the former *Domino's Pizza* Chairman and CEO, and current *Donald R. Shepherd Director of Athletics* at the University of Michigan, told me: “Just because someone is in a leadership position doesn't mean they are a true leader. By definition, a

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true leader won't put his or her personal goals ahead of building trust and a strong, positive relationship with members of the team. Finger-pointing and blaming is not what true leaders do...."

Brandon went on to say, "True leaders make themselves vulnerable. This requires them to accept responsibility, admit mistakes, accept criticism and coaching, and not adopt the old 'I am the boss so I always have to be right' attitude. Effective leaders think of themselves as the 'captain of the team' versus allowing themselves to become isolated from the team."¹

Michael D. Bradbury, who served as Ventura County's district attorney for 24 years, offered his perspective: "'Leadership' is one of those somewhat ephemeral qualities that is part learned but also part innate or 'you're born with it.' Although perhaps counterintuitive, there are some aspects of leadership that you simply don't learn. You either have it or you don't. Character is the broad-brush stroke normally used to describe these qualities that must be inherent. But there are many aspects to character. You rarely find an effective leader who doesn't have great character."²

Harold Edwards, President and CEO of *Limoneira*, a leading agri-business and real estate company, believes: "Leaders that blame others really aren't leaders. I view leadership as the act of selfless consensus building and 'leaders' that blame others position themselves as either winners (if all goes as planned) or victims (if they aren't able to accomplish some of their goals). Leaders that blame others in the face of failure really aren't team players and statistically demonstrate a lower probability of accomplishing goals versus team-playing leaders who selflessly commit themselves to executing goals. Leaders who are known winners typically assume complete accountability and responsibility for their important goals. If they come up short they dig deeper and work harder. This behavior tends to motivate and inspire teams, elevate performance and execution."

Edwards proceeded to say: "In my experience the best leaders foster teamwork. The worst leaders act as individuals and blame others for their lack of performance. Leaders who demonstrate these tendencies typically experience shorter careers."³

Professor Stephen A. Stumpf, PhD, the Fred J. Springer Chair in Business Leadership and Professor of Management at Villanova University School of Business, suggested: "Humans are hard wired to defend themselves — a primal instinct. Defensiveness is automatic. The difference between those that blame and those that do not is that those that do not can self-acknowledge their need to blame, and then not do it. Once 'there is no blame,' it is possible to look for new options, alternatives, and actions. Creativity kicks in. Exploring others' perspectives becomes worthy of thought. The future becomes the focus, not reconciling the past with one's ego."

Stumpf also offered this insight: "Those that overcome tough forces do not necessarily become successful — they do survive and get on with their lives. We tend to only notice the ones that become successful. Failing to meet important goals for the 'non-blamers' is a temporary situation in their minds. Goals get redefined, timeframes are altered, and whatever progress was made (or lessons learned) is the inspiration for the next round of effort."⁴

Former *Boston Globe* assistant sports editor and retired *Ventura Star* sports editor Larry Ames told me: “In any business, whether a small company or a corporation, there are hundreds and often thousands of decisions made every day. Not all decisions are the right ones, nor can one expect them to be; therefore, laying blame is never the right approach.” Ames added: “It serves no purpose to analyze, dissect or criticize a wrong. In any situation, the correct approach is to find a solution and move forward rather than rehash what went wrong. Looking back, as opposed to moving forward, can only make matters worse and also create ill will.”⁵

I often remind my students that real leaders aren’t loners; they are builders of strong, diverse teams. They establish a work climate of integrity, intellect, trust, and safety wherein all members of the team are highly respected, their dignity is reinforced, and

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their efforts are recognized and celebrated, as is their selflessness. Real leaders lift your spirits and place a premium on high morale.

As Dr. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., the Black pioneer and highly distinguished leader in four different fields (i.e., foreign economic

development, philanthropy, higher education, and business) said: “The best leader understands the power of unleashing individual talent by offering persons the opportunity to learn, to be enterprising and to make a contribution.”⁶ Dr. Wharton and his very accomplished spouse, Dolores D. Wharton, an esteemed corporate director (she served on some 30 corporate boards of directors) and arts advocate, are great exemplars of leaders who teach, that is, who identify, encourage and mentor new leaders by exposing them to how organizations actually work and by giving them opportunities to use their creativity.

Howard Samuel “Howdy” Holmes, President and CEO of Chelsea Milling Company (“Jiffy Mix”) was a renowned racing car champion, author, and entrepreneur before he rejoined this sole proprietorship, a 112-year-old family business, in 1987. Today, Chelsea Milling owns a 64 percent market share in retail prepared baking mixes. Holmes believes: “You find those that accept responsibility for their own actions and those that blame others for their mistakes in every walk of life.” He told me: “To some extent I think it is in your DNA” and is, in part, a function of how you were raised. He also believes we learn much from observing others and modeling the best of those behaviors we admire.

Holmes added: “In large, hierarchical organizations CEOs are often too removed from their own people” while in flatter organizations, CEOs are more in touch with their associates, more approachable, and more available. He added: “Some business systems make it easier to blame others for our mistakes and CEOs need to ensure their egos don’t get in the way.” Finally, this plain-speaking, down-to-earth, distinguished leader who has successfully blended state-of-the-art management practices with cherished, traditional values said: “One of the most important lessons I’ve learned is the importance of differentiating between what is best for the company versus what is best

for the CEO. If you can't consistently make this distinction, it is impossible to develop trust throughout your organization."⁷

Baseball, like all sports, has had its problems, but it nonetheless offers us many valuable life lessons in leadership. Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg performed magnificently despite frequent anti-Semitic abuse and death threats. Jim Abbott was born without a right hand but made it to "the bigs" and threw a no-hitter against the Yankees. Red Schoendienst severely injured an eye in World War II but taught himself how to switch hit and became a multi-year All-Star. And, of course, there is Jackie Robinson. None of these big leaguers asked for sympathy, complained about their plight, or sought to blame others for their particular circumstances. Instead, they were leaders who played above the breaks. So, too, are Dave Brandon, Mike Bradbury, Harold Edwards, Steve Stumpf, Larry Ames, Clifton and Dolores Wharton, and Howdy Holmes.

Endnotes

- ¹ David Brandon. Interview with author, May 4, 2013.
- ² Michael D. Bradbury. Interview with author, May 17, 2013.
- ³ Harold Edwards. Interview with author, May 2, 2013.
- ⁴ Stephen A. Stumpf, Ph.D. Interview with author, May 6, 2013.
- ⁵ Larry Ames. Interview with author, May 18, 2013.
- ⁶ Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., Ph.D. "Reflections on Leadership, Diversity and Human Capital," American Agricultural Economics Association Annual Meeting, Providence, RI (July 26, 2005). Interview with author, June 18, 2011.
- ⁷ Howard S. "Howdy" Holmes. Interview with author, May 20, 2013.

About the Author

Ritch K. Eich, PhD, is a nationally-recognized leadership, branding, and public relations practitioner and author of *Real Leaders Don't Boss* (Career Press, 2012) with more than 30 years of executive success. Ritch's second book on leadership will be published this fall. His business experience spans hospitals, agriculture, government, food service, higher education, and consulting. Ritch has led marketing, reputation, and communications change processes at Stanford University Medical Center, Blue Shield of California, Indiana University, the University of Michigan, and recently led the branding initiative at California Lutheran University during his six years as its first vice president of marketing.

The author of numerous publications, convention presentations, and a previous leadership column, Ritch's efforts have been recognized by CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education), AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges), Strategic Healthcare Marketing, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, the U.S. Senate, and other professional associations. He and his wife, Joan, of Greenville, Michigan, have two sons, Geoff, a senior director at Amgen, Inc. and Ted, an attorney at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).

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