Chapter 9

Managing & Leading: Parcells to Gibbs and In-Between

Leaders are like eagles...they don't flock. You'll find them one at a time

Knute Rockne, former Notre Dame football coach

Kids don't learn leadership from a class – you learn leadership and organization in games John Madden, former Oakland Raiders coach

Among the coaches and sports executives mentioned in the preceding chapters, some suffered through poor records, some amassed solid results, and a few posted legendary careers. The first eight chapters wove stories about these sports figures around a framework drawn from either well-established principles or ideas closely related to these foundations. In this chapter, the focus is on the personal attributes and characters of the some of the more successful sports managers. By it nature, this kind of examination requires a different approach. Rather than relying on an established framework to provide reference points, the principles about leadership are pieced together by looking at common attributes among the legends of sports. The question at the forefront is, what are some of the leadership intangibles that are mutually shared among great sports leaders?

The study of leadership goes way back. The biographies of great leaders throughout

history have dominated the field. For obvious reasons, many have chosen statesmen or military leaders such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Dwight Eisenhower, or George Patton along with as case studies in the characteristics of successful leaders. In recent years, much of the attention in both the business trade press and the academic literature has steered more and more toward"leadership" in addition to or as opposed to a more narrow emphasis on managerial policies. The professional experiences and viewpoints of business executives and entrepreneurs such as Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch, Bill Gates, Tom Peters, or Warren Buffet have become the subject of interest. Whereas in bygone years, the books about sports figures tended to chronicle their coaching careers from more of a historical or biographical perspective, now many of the books about sports figures fit into the "leadership" niche. As much as anything, the coaches turned consultants and philosophers sell their experience and knowledge about leadership. Whether based on extensive biographies, nuggets of proverbial wisdom, or snappy sound-bites, the beliefs, actions, and viewpoints of successful sports figures have taken on near cultic dimensions. More recently, the study of leadership has emerged as a field of academic study in universities with entire programs devoted to it. Whether this is really a valuable enterprise or

fad-of-the generation is yet to be determined.

The study of leadership contains many inherent difficulties and frequently spirals into little more than nonsense peddled by management consultants who are long on style and short on substance. Because of these difficulties and abuses, this discussion does not even attempt to provide a "how to" manual on effective leadership. No such manual exists as the epigram from John Madden implies, and the sources that claim to offer such sweeping advice are little more than fraudulent vehicles whose main purpose is to enrich their authors. Instead, the intent here is to provide those in leadership position or aspiring to leadership food for thought about what may distinguish poor leaders from average ones, and average ones from great ones. Also, it is intended to provide individuals or groups whose job it is to hire leaders – whether a manager, a corporate board, a university committee, or other – ideas about leadership to ponder.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Whether in business or sports, two key questions are i) what is leadership, and ii) how is it separate from management? The ever-expanding diversity of leadership definitions make answering these questions difficult. There are about as many different ideas and sound bytes about effective leadership as there are opinions about politics or beauty. Among mainstream business consultants and writers, the diversity definitions can be dizzying. One tack taken in defining leadership attempts to boil the explanations down to a simple, resounding maxim. For instance, John Maxwell says, "Leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less," while Peter Drucker observes, "... a leader is someone who has followers."¹

Other writers and observers flesh out leadership principles or responsibilities in more detail or provide more of clinical, textbook-like definitions. Examples include, "leadership is characterized as the ability of an individual or entity to establish a direction and develop a vision of the future by implementing strategies for producing the results needed to achieve the vision."² The two tasks at the heart of the popular notion of leadership are goal setting and motivating."³

Still, in other cases, the thoughts of great thinkers from antiquity are used. An oft-quoted and more thorough definition brought forward from ancient times is offered in *The Art of War*: "Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and sternnessReliance on intelligence alone results in rebelliousness. Exercise of humaneness alone results in weakness. Fixation on trust results in folly. Dependence on the strength of courage results in violence. Excessive sternness in command results in cruelty. When one has all five virtues together, each appropriate to its function, then one can be a military leader."⁴

Sports figures have also chimed in on the problem of defining leadership. Here is a smattering of their efforts: "Leadership is getting someone to do what they don't want to do, to achieve what they want to achieve."⁵ "They have to be salesmen and have to get their players, particularly their leaders [among the players], to believe in what they are trying to accomplish on the basketball floor."⁶

Whatever particular definition is chosen, they all tend to emphasize what basic dictionary definitions emphasize – leading involves interacting with and enabling other people. If this is leadership at a general level, what then separates management and leadership? Dictionaries give overlapping definitions of the two terms so that a broad construction of management makes them more or less synonymous. The dean of management consultants, Peter Drucker, separates leadership from management in a way that has been frequently referenced by other writers and students: "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." This same way of thinking is echoed in the very title to Part I of a book about Jack Welch and his "GE Way" – "Act like a leader – not a manager."⁷

The distinction drawn by Drucker and Welch has become commonplace in business education and consulting. They derive the difference in the terms by narrowing the meaning of management. Broken down, the term "management" is commonly used to define a more restricted set of responsibilities and expectations than the term "leadership." Leadership encompasses the widest scope of tasks including setting or changing the direction for an organization in terms of its goals, culture, and structure as well as providing the parameters within which those following the leader operate and facilitating their work. In contrast, management often is used to refer to accomplishing a predefined set of tasks or supervising preset system to ensure its smooth operation. In this world, the leader defines the policies to be pursued along with general guidelines for pursuing them and the manager fills in the operational details. In this vein, Welch explains leadership in terms of words such as "facilitating change" and "motivating" while managing is about "supervising."

HOW TO STUDY LEADERSHIP

Even if a Drucker-like definition of leadership is accepted, the next question is how does one study it? Good leaders are a lot like good teachers – we may recognize one but be hardpressed to clearly explain what it is that makes them good. This problem has and continues to plague leadership as a field of study.

When looking over the biographical studies and opinions about leadership whether among business or sports figures, it is a considerable challenge to separate the qualities that

326 326 actually make some people successful leaders versus the qualities that they themselves or others perceive make them successful. Just as with company policies and strategies, some individuals may be the proverbial blind squirrel that finds the acorn – they succeed in spite of certain personal characteristics rather than because of them. Yet, because they are successful, their followers and admirers bestow importance on a particular set of characteristics, and then others seek to imitate these qualities. In other cases, the entrepreneur or coach may, indeed, posses leadership characteristics that help bring about the success but observers and disciples identify the wrong set of attributes contributing to their results. Often, the personal attributes that happen to stick out most prominently attract the lion's share of attention, but they are not necessarily responsible for the lion's share of the person's success as a leader.

Coaches such as Vince Lombardi and Bill Parcells illustrate this tendency to elevate the most obvious traits to the status of important. For both, their acerbic tongues have been among their most obvious and frequently documented personality traits. As noted earlier, Parcells' even credits his biting criticisms with being at the very heart of his ability to build successful teams. Yet, both Lombardi and Parcells' leadership tenure may have been just as successful without the extreme verbal assaults. The verbal assaults may have merely been baggage along for the ride. Their records as football coaches owe more to their shared ability to judge talent and commitment among players, their ability to place players in situations where they can excel, or other qualities.

Just as leadership studies may fixate on highly visible but possibly superfluous traits such as a sharp tongue, they can also focus too much on the development of warm fuzzy feelings in a work environment. While an Oprhah-like culture may be appealing to people, it may or may not have much to do with success. As Drucker puts it, "Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked." The general point comes back to the difficulty of determining cause and effect by simple observation discussed in the very first chapter. Separating genuinely important principles from the faux-important not only presents problems for the study of management policies and strategies but also the study of leadership qualities. However, the analysis of policies and strategies by researchers in economics, finance, statistics, and related areas does contain significant scientific qualities. In contrast, the study of "leadership" and "entrepreneurship" often amounts to little more than musings drawn from personal experiences and biographies of leaders.

Did Vince Lombardi produce championship teams in Green Bay because of or in spite of his intimidating style? Were Joe Gibbs' sleep-overs in his office at Redskins headquarters an integral part of his teams winning ways or merely a security blanket to calm his anxieties? Given the lack of hard data that exists in the study of leadership, there may be no definitive way to answer these and similar questions. At the very minimum, though, it is critical to keep these kinds of questions in mind when examining the personal characteristics of leaders in an attempt to organize a list of "how to be a good leader." As with the study of management strategies and policies, it is also critical to keep in mind principles that are definitive in nature as a framework within which to study leadership. If the anecdotal observation of leaders seems to tell us something that is at odds with one of these well-grounded principles, then we should seriously question whether that personal attribute is genuinely important.

Beyond identifying successful leadership qualities, difficulties arise in attempting to transfer these qualities across individuals. Leadership skills are not just policies or tactics that can be studied and imitated. Rather, these qualities, by their very nature, tend to be personal and idiosyncratic. The ability to find the right balance between promoting creativity and setting specific direction cannot be canned and just passed along. Recognizing and installing the right set of helpers in leadership roles requires discretion not easily imitated. No amount of study will demarcate precisely the times when plain-spoken criticism versus gently worded encouragement is required. To the extent that personal "charisma" matters, one does not obtain charisma merely by observing people with it and then aping their actions. If not inborn, these such qualities are acquired through life experiences that are not just unique in some of their specifics but are experienced in a sequence that may be just as important as the experiences themselves. For these reasons and many others, the acquisition of leadership abilities is similar to the painting analogy drawn in Chapter 1. With study and practice, almost any person can improve, but there are also likely innate qualities that lead some people to be better than others for any given level of study and effort.

These stumbling blocks to defining leadership and identifying the traits that make for successful leaders has led some to conclude leadership is defined by results. In the end, results are the proof of the pudding. The leadership-is-in-the-results view is advocated by many leaders and "experts" including Drucker. The only trouble is that such a view identifies success only after the fact. It offers no guidance or direction to those who would like to draw from the experiences of others to improve their own leadership skills. With the preceding caveats and

difficulties in mind, the rest of this chapter attempts to sort out some of the qualities that have made for successful leaders in sports teams.

LEADERSHIP PREREQUISITES

In the literature about leadership and among highly successful sports figures, several common attributes are frequently mentioned. While it would be foolhardy to dispute the importance of these traits, some of these qualify more as prerequisites for effective leadership rather than the factors that discriminate decent leaders from excellent leaders. No doubt, these effective leadership demands these characteristics. Few if any coaches or general managers find any degree of success without possessing them. However, the attributes are also shared by a wide variety of coaches and managers who never experience enormous success. As a result, possessing these qualities is not sufficient for dividing mediocre leaders from great ones. Nonetheless, someone aspiring to be a leader or who is being considered for leadership without these qualities probably needs to redirect their aspirations.

One personal characteristic common to most every sports leader who has found even modest success is an enthusiasm for what they do. Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry could not have been more different personalities in many obvious ways, but they both held a passion for football. In Lombardi's case, this passion exhibited itself in much more obvious ways than it would for someone more introverted like a Tom Landry, but they both shared a near singleminded focus on making their teams better. John Wooden and Bob Knight may represent as wide of a contrast in personality as one might find, yet like Landry and Lombardi, they both pursued excellence in basketball teams with a fire in their bellies.

The importance of enthusiasm and passion for leaders transcends sports. It is certainly as important in business ventures as it is in sports. Investment entrepreneur Charles Schwab noted, "a man can succeed at almost anything for which he has unlimited enthusiasm." In many cases, only those passionate about leading may withstand the storms and overcome the roadblocks to becoming a leader – the nature of the journey demands it. For example, the nature of assistant coaching positions weeds out most individuals without a passion for the game. From the high school level through the college ranks, coaches put in huge chunks of time, especially during the season. An assistant high school football coach may spend 7:30 to 2:30 Monday through Friday in a classroom, participate in football practice or other coaching duties from 2:30 to 8:00 Monday through Thursday, spend all Friday night at a game, and then spend many hours on the weekend preparing plans to face the next opponent. Seventy to eighty hour per week workloads are common during the season. At the professional and college ranks, such time obligations are also common during the season.

Another commonly cited attribute among leaders that best fits into this "prerequisite" category is that they are "doers." John Wooden said, "Everybody has a suggestion. Not everybody has a decision. Perhaps that's why there are so few leaders, or at least good ones." Decisive action is a hallmark of coaches. They develop the ability to think on-the-go and to commit to a course of action. Joe Namath explained the importance of decisiveness for leadership very well when he said, "To be a leader, you have to make people want to follow you, and nobody wants to follow someone who doesn't know where he is going."⁸ In sports as in business, leaders must develop plans and make decisions when time to make decisions is precious – sometimes excruciatingly sparse. A player goes down to injury and a coach must make the appropriate adjustments on the fly during the game or in a day or two leading up to a game. A general manager and coach may have only minutes to make up their mind about the draft selections that will determine their team's course for many years. The examples could go on and on. People that find satisfaction only in the intellectual contemplation of hypothetical choices or those who can never get off the fence when a decision seems 50-50 do not inspire confidence in others. They may bend with anxiety under the ongoing pressures that leaders face. One of John Madden's favorite quips during broadcasts, "It doesn't matter if the horses are blind, just load the wagon," humorously expresses the requirement for decisive doing that is incumbent upon leaders.

Yet, while enthusiasm and active, decisive decision making are common features among successful leaders and almost certainly necessary to be successful, neither one goes very far in discriminating legendary coaches and sports executives from those who fail abysmally. Most coaches exhibit "Type A" personalities just to survive in coaching for any length of time. As noted above, the time commitment alone tends to weed out people who are lazy or who have little enthusiasm for what they do. The development path from assistant to head coach also tends to develop decisiveness as a common trait among coaches whether or not they really make good leaders. For these reasons both qualities are more accurately labeled as prerequisite for leading than as the critical traits that distinguish bad from good from great leaders. It is this

difference between good and great leaders that is of special interest here.⁹

LEADER AS THINKER?

From only a casual acquaintance with the coach and his methods, Vince Lombardi would hardly stand out as an example of the "thinking man's" coach. He did rely on complicated or tricky schemes. Instead, he preached and promoted physical preparation, repetition, precise execution, and effort. He thought coaches that could only draw up plays were "a dime a dozen," insisting that the more important quality of a coach was to motivate players to their highest performance level. His aggressive and even intimidating tactics captured much of the attention of the coaching profession as well as the public during his tenure and immediately thereafter.

Because of his emphasis and personal style, one might think Lombardi hardly illustrates the importance of mental ability and effort to leadership. Nonetheless, Vince Lombardi serves as a prime example of a coach who went far beyond the possession of passion and a loud moth to a coach who combined passion with intellect – a combination of attributes that has separated other great coaches from average and poor ones. Lombardi's loud and forceful personality and lack of innovative schemes drowned out the perception of his intellectual-side that has only been more clearly depicted in anecdotes and biographies well-after his career ended. These paint a clear picture of him as a manager who meticulously mapped out his plans. Whether one agrees with all his methods or not, he pursued clearly thought out methods. This is not to say that all his decisions were driven by cool, detached reflection. He was not an introverted monk. Instead, he was an immensely passionate man according to all close to him. Still, as noted in more detail in an earlier chapter, when he arrived as coach and general manager of the Packers in 1959, he did not just launch into slogans and tirades. Instead, he devoted himself to an orderly, meticulous, and comprehensive evaluation of his players based on past Packer films in order to determine how to best use the players on hand.

Other great coaches who seem to stand out more for their passion, dogged pursuit of perfection, and bluster more than their intellect also fit the model of thinker-coaches when their methods are viewed with greater scrutiny. Bill Parcells himself is another great example as coach whose blaring and sometimes demeaning sound bytes steer attention away from his pensive characteristics. Whether his own perceptions about his success are correct or not, the very fact that he was willing to write an article for the *Harvard Business Review* about building teams suggests an ability at introspection and self-awareness not always appreciated among coaches much less commonly found. Even a coach on the fringe of acceptable behavior, such as Bob Knight, accomplished great achievements with his teams because of his ability to out-think opposing coaches and transfer these thoughts to players rather than because of berating his players. Arguably, Knight's best quality as a coach is his ability to identify the strengths of the opponent and make game to game adjustments to offset these strengths.¹⁰

As in the rest of contemporary culture, sports commentators throw around the label of "genius" haphazardly and cheaply. Set against the discovery of fundamental equations of physics, the development of computer algorithms, or the solving gigantic engineering problems such as tunneling under the English Channel or digging through mountains or jungles in Panama,

decision making by sports coaches and executives hardly qualifies as displays of genius in any respect. Even in everyday business settings, a CEO or Vice President overseeing the operations of 100,000 employees involving hundreds of locations and intricate supply and distribution networks dwarfs the decisions faced by sports managers overseeing thirty or forty players in games where the boundaries are well-defined in advance. Even as far as games go, the sequential strategy options that a Major League Baseball managers goes through pale in comparison with a chess master. In this kind of broad context, managers in sports are not among the great thinkers in society.

Yet, within the confines of their own industry, great coaches and executives in sports are the thinkers at least relative to others in their field. This does not mean that every coach is a master strategist or leading edge innovator. It does imply that whatever aspects of strategy or tactics they leaned more heavily upon, they gave genuine thought to what they were doing. They did not fall back on merely spur-of-the-moment, seat-of-the-pants thinking or imitate-mymentor, follow-the-pack thinking. Rather, they excel at defining some of the key problems to be solved and using considerable mental effort to solve those problems.

John Wooden typified the coach as thinker. On the one hand, Wooden saw basketball as a relatively simple game. He did not try to over-complicate the game for himself, his assistants, or his players. He boiled down his basic strategy as "[we] get in condition, learn fundamentals, and play together."¹¹ Yet the simplicity of his basic strategy masked a great deal of thought that he gave as to how to best train his players and implement his strategy. He purposefully and methodically developed his conditioning drills and practices to develop and perfect his fastbreak strategy with the intent of "outrunning the other team" during the second half.¹² His philosophy concerning turnovers cut against the prevailing wisdom in that he saw turnovers as the natural consequence of playing with initiative and forcing the action. He gave considerable thought to the kinds of players he wanted, "players of spirit just short of temperamental," as well as to how to best deal with individual players needs on and off the court.¹³ He was not just flying by the seat-of-his-pants or trying to step directly in the steps of another coach that he may have held in respect.

This list of great coaches who could be used as examples here goes on and on. Because he devoted much of his mental energies to innovation, Tom Landry stands out as an obvious example. Joe Gibbs and Bill Walsh, two highly successful football coaches from the 1980s brought many of the same qualities of contemplation and thought. Among Major League baseball managers, Earl Weaver and Sparky Anderson were two Hall of Fame managers whose careers overlapped. Although the two men differed in many personality traits, yet both studied their own decisions in detail. Among more recent MLB managers, Joe Torre and Tony LaRussa have experienced as much success as any pair over the last twenty years. Again, their personalties differ and their points of emphasis are not identical, but they both place considerable importance on the mental aspects of the game. In college basketball, Mike Krzyzewski stands out not only because of the winning dynasty he built at Duke, but in many ways he not only typifies the thinking coach, but probably stands at a near extreme as a "philosopher-coach" in much the same way as John Wooden a generation before him.

Another way that the importance of thinking among leaders surfaces is in the emphasis

that coaches place on "preparation." Coaches of widely varying styles but with tremendous records of success sound like clones of each other when it comes to preparation. Joe Paterno, the winningest coach in college football history, said "The will to win is important, but the will to prepare is vital." Many of coaching legends have made similar statements. Most often in sports, the physical side of preparation is emphasized because of the hours spent in on-the-field and on-the-court practicing. Yet, an emphasis on preparation presupposes thinking about how it is you are going to prepare. Bear Bryant's phrasing of the maxim highlights this angle. He held to three main rules for coaching – number three was "Have a plan for everything." Even with regard to the physical drills and exercises, a coach must sort out which of these will really help the team. Great leader-coaches do that – others just fill out a practice schedule based on mimicking ones they have seen before. As a specific example, Eddie Sutton, is noted for specialized instruction to players on to how to guard a bigger player or a quicker player.

The lesson here for mangers in business or leaders of all kinds is critically important. Leaders like Wooden, Landry, Weaver, Krzyzewski, Lombardi, and the others are "intellectuals" in the sense that they use their intellect. No single characteristic may be more common among great coaches than their analytical abilities and efforts. It may be conjecture, but it is based on widespread observation. The ability to think about problems is the main attribute separating the great coaches from the good, average, and poor ones any more than their ability and consistent commitment to using their brain power – not in some ivory-tower, esoteric way, but in concrete, analytical ways. They could think about problems at a very concrete level as well as stepping back from a problem or dilemma a bit to gain a broader perspective. "Vision" may be one of the prerequisites for successful leadership, without thoughtful decisions to make those visions a reality. Plenty of leaders have great "visions" and clearly defined "objectives." Almost any coach alive has the same "vision" – to make their team into a perennial winner of the World Series, the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup, or the like. Tom Landry put it this way, "setting a goal is not the main thing. It is deciding how you will go about achieving it and staying with that plan."

Confusions have arisen about the connection between thinking and leading. For one, studies by behavioralists such as Mintzberg have indicated that most business leaders are not thinkers – instead, they tend to be "doers." This observation, while likely correct, is misleading. In the specific cases of sports coaches and managers, to the person, they are doers – whether their records are among the worst in history or among the best. As noted above, being a "doer" is most likely a prerequisite for being a leader of any value at all or, in most cases, even becoming a leader. People that are "non-doers" rarely aspire to be leaders, and if they do, they are rarely chosen or accepted. The other misleading aspect of the observation is that it does not discriminate between bad leaders and good ones. As just noted, a large percentage of the coaches who are "doers" happen to be coaches with very poor records. In contrast, the legendary sports leaders are also doers but fit into the classification as thinkers.

A second confusion regarding thinking and leading frequently emerges. Developing into an effective leader requires more than just mental effort. It demands an open-minded quality that may not come naturally. John Madden puts it, "Coaches have to watch for what they don't want to see and listen to what they don't want to hear." Whether bouncing ideas off of others or just within the walls of their own mind, they consider ideas. They were and are people given to introspection, at least regarding their teams if not their own personalities. They put valuable people around them and give them genuine opportunities to provide input that is often used as opposed to superficial input that serves no purpose other than to try to make subordinates feel as if they are having input.

Thinking-based leadership also stands out against a mindless fixation on the path chosen by another leader or organization. All of the great coach-leaders carved out their own mold. In part, their paths grew out of their differing and strong personalities, but it emerged from thinking about the issues in front of them in face of the context of those decisions – their team's assets, liabilities, technological limits, rules, and so on. They did not just pick up some book of a successful coach or leader and say, "Here's my guidebook – let me follow it to the letter." On the other hand, they drew from their experiences with other coaches and players and paid attention to the tactics of mentors and peers without trying to become clones of them.

This "intellectual" aspect of leadership stands in out in opposition to the "give-me-justthe-bottom line" mentality that some managers in sports and business seem to think makes for effective leadership. Every problem to be solved or issue to be discussed cannot be boiled down to three bullets a snappy, one-page executive summary, or a two-minute briefing. The rough outline of an issue may be summarized in those ways, but some decisions regarding the operation of a sports team or any organization require deeper understanding and contemplation by decision makers. No doubt, through luck and ignorance of others, many people have risen to the leadership of various organizations by a "thought-free" process relying on well-tailored suits, smooth talks, and few management buzzwords borrowed from the latest management guru. However, these leaders are outstanding only in their own estimation who survive only because limited information and luck permits their weaknesses to be overlooked. The leaders with genuinely long-lasting contributions to an organization possess the ability to bring thoughtful and significant ideas to leadership matters. Not all will attain celebrity status as do many political and sports leaders, but they will make significant contributions.

LEADER AS A LEADER OF LEADERS?

Earlier in this chapter, a quote from Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson noted the importance of getting the players, "particularly their leaders," to believe in the things the coach is trying to accomplish. Embedded in Jackson's statement is the recognition that the coach is not the only leader on the team. He may be the "lead leader," but the views of the leaders among the players themselves matter also. It would be overstating the case to indicate that all legendary sports leaders have recognized the critical importance of leaders below them. In fact, later in the chapter, this is one of the shortcomings noted in Tom Landry. Yet, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Duke's Mike Krzyzewski goes out of his way to note the importance of developing leaders among his players. As he says, "I want players to talk in the huddle because they might notice something that I cannot see from the sidelines." Allowing player-leaders to make adjustments on-the-fly is crucial in his outlook.¹⁴ The NHL's Scotty Bowman, although widely recognized as a coach in firm control of his teams, is also widely

recognized as utilizing the leadership of veteran players on his teams such as the Detroit Red Wings' Steve Yzerman.

In all but the smallest of organizations where one person can or must handle many functions, fostering and developing leadership among subordinates would seem axiomatic. As Krzyzewki's comments make clear, no single person possess all the information relevant for making leadership decisions. Beyond information limitations, no single leader can be at all places at the same time. The proximity of players to each other on the court or the playing field permit them to make adjustments that the coach cannot make. In addition, sometimes players are best suited to take the lead and deal with some kinds of personnel matters better than the coach or general managers. In initiating and implementing change, the buy-in and promotion of ideas by respected players can make the difference between success and failure as Phil Jackson notes.

Not only is this an important quality of many legendary sports leaders, but like the leader as thinker point, it separates great leaders from mediocre ones. Many leaders in sports and business limit their effectiveness because they do not appreciate the importance of subordinate leaders. It becomes a power play. They feel a loss of power and control by granting meaningful decision authority to subordinates, and, therefore, they downplay leadership of others. They may give lip service to empowerment of others or set up supposed leadership posts for subordinates, but at the end of the day, they completely dominate all decisions. They may pick the team captains, but the team captain role may be nothing more than an honorary title for the person who calls the coin flip before the game – and the coach may even tell the player whether to pick heads or tails!

LEADER AS VISIONARY OR TECHNICIAN?

In the literature dealing with leadership in business, it has lately been in vogue to stress the leader's role as that of visionary and deemphasize technical expertise. In fact, a whole generation of leaders in the 1990s was practically reared on books and seminars touting the leader as the vision-setter or goal-setter and demeaning leaders who pursued operational issues very much.

An examination of sports leaders uncovers intriguing cases. For one thing, in sports requiring a lot of coordination among team members such as football, all coach-leaders attained their leadership role first by displaying strong "technical" skills – directing offensive or defensive strategies. In sports such as baseball or basketball, coaches may not have served as coordinators of entire units but oversaw development of particular skills or personnel such as pitchers or hitters, shooting or defensive skills. As assistant coaches turn into head coaches, their duties broaden to include selection of players, interaction with media, and other matters in addition to overseeing the development of strategy, tactics, and use of players. Some coaches choose to maintain their roles as the prime coordinator of certain "operational" aspects. For example, many football coaches choose to be the offensive or defensive coordinator for their teams. In other cases, the coaches appoint assistants over these operational areas and offer supervisory control over the whole operation. On occasion, they switch. During the 2002

season, Jim Fossel, head coach of the New York Giants took direct supervision of offensive strategy after his team had struggled.

One point to be highlighted here is that there have been varying degrees of operational involvement by coaches who achieved high levels of success. Tom Landry, although a defensive specialist as an assistant coach, oversaw the offense while in Dallas. Bill Walsh also was intimately involved in the offensive strategy. Vince Lombardi, coaching before coaches sent plays in during the game, did little in the way of operational moves during games. The bottom line is that there is no hard and fast rule that dictates exactly how much involvement a successful leader should have with operational details. The "right" amount depends on the person's skills, the skills of those on the team around him, and the organizational problems at hand.

Equally important is the fact that coaches have developed operational skills and have the capacity to understand the operational details going on is very important even where the coach may choose to let subordinates make many of these decisions. This technical knowledge and ability inspires respect among followers and tends to help keep the leader in touch with realistic expectations from those doing the work. In almost any organizational setting, nothing undermines leadership much quicker than a lack of respect that grows out of a sense that the leader is out-of-touch or outright ignorant of operational limits and capabilities. A coach who has worked closely with players as an assistant and gained their respect for fairness and for ability to make effective decisions is likely to inspire confidence and respect when given the reins of overall leadership.

In business as in sports, few things eat away at respect between leaders and employees

more than a feeling that the leader has no idea what the employee is doing or has "pie-in-thesky" expectations of what is possible. At SAS Institute, known for its great leader-employee relations, one of the co-founders and executive vice president still knows a lot about and is even involved in writing software code. As one observer put it, "managers who understand the work that they oversee can make sure that details don't slide. At SAS, ...managers understand what their groups do – so unrealistically optimistic promises about time-tables and completion dates are relatively rare."¹⁵ The focus in the 1990s on leader-as-visionary sometimes trivialized and even mocked managers who possessed an intimate knowledge of operational aspects. Sports examples along with those like SAS illustrate that leadership, even effective vision setting, benefits from the buy-in that comes when those charged with fulfilling the leader's visions have a sense that the leader is on the right track, sets obtainable goals, and understands what is going on "in the trenches."

LEADER AS INSPIRING PERSONALITY?

Maybe no element of leadership generates more attention or confusion than the ability of a leader to inspire others. Whatever the precise term one might use for this characteristic, it attracts a lot of attention among leader-wannabes and observers. However, several question surface regarding the ability to inspire. Fundamentally, what really dictates the ability to inspire others?

For many, the ability to inspire others derives mostly from personal "presence." As NFL

Films producer and president, Steve Sabol, once remarked about Vince Lombardi's leadership that, "It was all the voice."¹⁶ Maybe this is an overstatement of the reality – a Lombardi with a Tom Landry voice would have still been Lombardi in most of the important ways. Still, Sabol notes a common perception related to great coaches – their ability to command attention and respect through some aspect of their personal presence, style, or charisma.

Although this kind of observation is common, a broad overview of highly successful coaches would hardly support its importance. People such as Vince Lombardi, Bill Parcells, Bob Knight, and other like them have proven highly successful with their loud and brazen personal styles and gift (or curse) for speaking. In contrast, legendary coaches such as John Wooden and Joe Gibbs projected a much more mild-mannered and even-tempered approach of a mid-western factory manager or strong but soft-spoken preacher. Phil Jackson quotes Oriental philosophers while Parcells and Knight quote George Patton. John Madden threw his arms and hands in every direction, wearing his passion on his sleeve, while Tom Landry, Bill Walsh, and Joe Gibbs often came across more like detached engineers working with a large and complicated piece of machinery. Overall, the great coaches have succeeded with some being out-spoken and some soft-spoken, some short-tempered and some patient, some detached and some overtly passionate, some philosophical and down-to-earth, quick-witted and some humorless. With such diversity, it's hard to determine that the ability to inspire others derives mainly from presence or style.

In viewing presence, the mistake is frequently made of viewing some obvious stylistic feature of a coach and noting the respect that it engenders even when the feature may be maddening such as Parcell's sharp tongue. In most cases, though, the respect is given to the person because of the success achieved and the focus upon and respect for the personality feature only follows along as an effect rather than a cause. Would Woody Hayes have been a highly successful coach at Ohio State had he been in better control of his temper? The answer seems to be certainly, yes. The former players who speak with admiration for him do so in spite of this personality flaw. In some cases, even as extreme as Hayes', players and admirers come to chuckle about personality flaws of admired leaders and may even remember the outbursts in an endearing way much like some fraternity members think back upon hazing.

Saying that personal presence or charisma of a leader is not a generally important quality does not imply that presence and charisma never matter in specific instances. While inspirational pre-game or halftime speeches likely matter little on a week to week basis – even many coaches admit their limits – Knute Rockne's famous "win one for the Gipper" oration may have been a decisive factor on that given day. In sports and business management, leaders can swing to both ends of the spectrum with regard to presence. On the one hand, some may tend to discount it almost completely, viewing style and presence as little more than an extraneous nuisance. To them, they can effectively lead through direct communication to their staff and through impersonal edicts whether transmitted in person or indirectly through memos or staff members. On the other hand, in observing legendary leaders in business or sports who possessed charismatic personal qualities, some managers have placed all of their stock in trying to imitate a certain style in leadership. Rather than leading, they are like an actor playing a part where they are trying to act how a leader should act. Even a leader as noteworthy as General George Patton may have suffered from this "leader as actor" according to some who knew him well or followed

his life closely. In Patton's case, though, he had substantive leadership skills to go with the persona. The problem arises when a leader of lesser ability begins to "play to the camera" as a leader and become far too image conscious.

Rather than some element of personality, the ability to inspire others likely comes from the ability to instill confidence and respect. Two things contribute to this. First, a leader who demonstrates competency in his decision making ability secures buy-in from those being led. Joe Gibbs may not have had a great presence, but his decisions made very clear to his players (after a rough start) that he knew what he was doing. This is likely one reason why coaches who have succeeded in past positions are able to repeat their success in new places. A Bill Parcells who has twice won the Super Bowl with the Giants, took the New England Patriots to the Super Bowl, and elevated the New York Jets to the playoffs steps into his Dallas Cowboys job with immediate buy-in from players.

A second way to inspire players to follow is by showing a genuine interest in them. Because players or employees are unique individuals with their own agendas, most people respond to people who appear to have a genuine interest in them. Coaching legends such as Grambling's Eddie Robinson and UCLA's John Wooden preached this message at length. Even as volatile as a Woody Hayes could be or as bombastic as Vince Lombardi could be, most of their players that were able to withstand the abuse came to see them as coaches who had a passion both for winning and for the players' welfare. In contrast, many coaches imitated Lombardi or Hayes' abusive techniques without ever planting the seed of trust and confidence.

NOBODY'S PERFECT

Sports leaders, just as all leaders, have feet of clay. They all carry flaws. For their staunchest devotees, pointing out the weaknesses legendary figures such as a Bear Bryant or a Woody Hayes amounts to damnable heresy. Considering these less-than-desirable traits may be just as important as evaluating their strengths. Noting and discussing the weaknesses of great leaders is both comforting and educational. It is comforting in that it makes clear that to be a successful leader, even one of legendary proportions, does not demand perfection. Attempts by admirers to turn Bear Bryant or Vince Lombardi or any leader in politics, the military, or business into an icon with no imperfections invites trouble. It not only distorts the truth but sets up an unrealistic standard for those who would try to become great leaders themselves. As the quote from golfer and sports analyst, Andy North, explained in Chapter 8, "I figured out not to try to be too perfect." His point about managing his golf game applies just as easily to leading in general. One can become obsessive and destructive to self and others by pursuing an unachievable standard of faultless leadership. Bryant, Lombardi, Rockne, Wilkinson, Wooden, Krzyzewski, Anderson, Bowman, and others became great leaders while continuing to suffer from the limitations of all mortals.

Beyond the comfort of seeing great leaders as human, examining their frailties also provides educational opportunities. It is easy enough to identify weaknesses of leaders who fail and lessons can be learned from them. However, looking at the shortcomings of great leaders also provides key lessons for those who have a genuine interest in becoming better leaders themselves. Poor leaders garner few disciples; they build no cult-like followings. Great leaders tend to amass sizable followings sometimes with religious zeal. Learning from the missteps these successful leaders may be as important as learning about their strengths. The reasoning is simple. The Vince Lombardis, Woody Hayes, or Scotty Bowmans of the world may be able to overshadow their flaws because of their immense strengths, unique employment environment, past achievements, or just luck. Disciples who blindly attempt to imitate these leaders' styles may end up adopting the weaknesses of the master without enjoying the strengths or circumstances needed that helped the master overcome or mitigate the weaknesses. It is essentially the same problem discussed in Chapter 7 discusses the practice of "benchmarking" – attempting to mimic the practices of some successful organization and how the thoughtless "benchmarking" of some action can spell trouble.

Even among wildly successful coaches and managers, it is not hard to pick out things that had they behaved differently most likely would have improved success. Tom Landry is an excellent starting point. Landry's success, both in terms of the heights it reached along with its longevity, is enviable. Landry brought important leadership strengths such as innovative thinking, meticulous planning, and objective and extensive evaluation of the mental and physical skills of players. In spite of these attributes and his enviable record, Landry's shortcomings as a leader almost certainly cost him championships.

In particular, he failed to fully appreciate the importance of team leaders and the human side of the game he coached. In quarterbacks Don Meredith during the 1960s and Roger Staubach during the 1970s, Landry possessed the kinds of player-leaders that other players rally behind. Both players were talented athletes – Staubach probably more so – and both were endowed with intangible qualities important for the leadership roles that the quarterback position entails. Yet, Landry under-valued these qualities, especially in the case of Meredith. Don Meredith has never fully explained his reasons for leaving the game at such an early age, limiting his remarks to "It wasn't fun anymore." The accounts written by others and hints dropped by Meredith point toward Landry tight-fisted control and view of players, even his quarterbacks, as little more than pieces in a machine. Meredith walked away from the game in his prime disenchanted. His move is more surprising in that Meredith was not a petulant player requiring stroking and coddling from a coach. Instead, what he needed as much as anything from Landry was a recognition and acceptance of Meredith's importance as an on-the-field leader of the team. Landry's unwillingness to see or at least fully appreciate the importance of Meredith's leadership ability and his need for respect and trust drove Meredith away from the game at the time when the team could challenge the Packer's dominance and seemed poised to be able to pass them. Instead, the Cowboys that had pulled equal with the Packers by 1967 took backward steps in the next two seasons. Landry himself mildly admitted his error with Meredith in this regard in his own book.

Landry's experience with Staubach was not as volatile, but even in this case, Landry only slowly came to appreciate the combination of physical skills and the intangible leadership qualities in him. Although Staubach had joined the team in 1969, Landry alternated him with Craig Morton as late as the 1972 season. In spite of the Cowboys' successful run during the 1970s, Landry never seemed to appreciate fully the importance of a player like Staubach.

350 350 Instead, Landry's fixation on strategy dominated his thinking. Even when Staubach might have played another season or two, Landry seemed more than content with the prospect of filling his backup, Danny White, into the role. Again, it seemed as if Landry viewed it as the exchange of one part of a machine for another. The irony in Landry's lack of appreciation of the importance of the intangible, on-the-field leadership abilities of Meredith and Staubach is that Landry had placed such importance on evaluating the mental abilities of players that the Cowboys scouted and not just their physical skills.

These specific shortcomings of even a great coach such as Tom Landry highlight the fact that leaders need to recognize and value leadership of those around them. Usually, in an organization of any size at all, there will be leaders at various levels important for accomplishing various tasks. It is easy for a top leader to overvalue his or her contribution to the success of the organization relative to these subordinate leaders just as Landry undervalued Meredith and, to a lesser extent, Staubach. In fact, Landry's intentional distancing himself from his players so as to make more dispassionate player decisions only raised the importance and value of player-leaders like these two.

Legendary hockey coach, Scotty Bowman, and baseball manager Dick Williams present different examples from Landry of great coaches with clear weaknesses. Although they led teams in different sports, they shared many attributes in common. Both attained the highest levels of success with a variety of teams. Bowman guided the Montreal Canadians and Detroit Red Wings to eight titles and also built very competitive, playoff-caliber clubs in St. Louis and Buffalo. Williams took the Boston Red Sox (1967), Oakland Athletics (1972, 1973) and San Diego Padres (1984) to the World Series and even succeeded in turning the Montreal Expos into a playoff contender.

One persistent question in both of their cases is why did coaches of such obvious talent and success make so many coaching stops? Typically, coaches with their records direct one or two clubs for an entire career. As skillful as they were in decision making, both Bowman and Williams lacked some of the "people skills" that help produce longevity in a particular location. Their defenders might claim that they were "their own men" and refused to cow-tow to owners, general managers, or players, resulting in their abbreviated tenures in places. No doubt, they were fiercely independent thinkers, but the same can be said of other coaches who did not become coaching gypsies. There is a line between independence and insolence – between motivation and destruction. Even talented leaders must work with others – owners, supervisors, peers, subordinates. Like other leaders throughout history and across different fields, sometimes talented leaders begin to view themselves as islands to themselves. In the case of Bowman and Williams, the same hockey or baseball knowledge and the same decisions would have led to the same success without the caustic personalities that created unnecessary friction. As long as the team performed well.

This is a good place to address the question of "character" and its importance to leaders. One can hardly pick up any lengthy discussion of leadership without the topic of "character" or a synonymous term surfacing. Leaders in all kinds of field harp on its importance. For example, General Norman Schwarzkopf said, "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy." Coaches love to preach to their players about the importance of "character" and "discipline" to their players – playing hard no matter what the score, playing unselfishly, devoting onself to improvement, and so on. Still, coaches, even legendary coaches, are frequently not exactly examples of high moral character.

Yet, what does character mean? If it means hard-working, then most coaches are of high character. If it means sticking to are certain set of values, then many would also qualify. However, will any values do as long as you stick by them closely? Members of the Mafia uphold a certain "code of honor" but are hardly standards of virtue. Many coaches have been unwilling to live by standards of unselfishness and integrity that they so often preach. The study of "character" is practically impossible difficult without getting into moral issues and views that go far beyond the scope of this book. In a more narrow consideration of great coaches and problems they have run into because of character flaws, example such as Dick Williams or Bob Knight are instructive. They are obviously skilled but at times lack a key feature of character, that is, self-control or self-discipline, and this character flaw hampered them. Other great coaches have also suffered due to similar weaknesses.

The questionable aspects of Vince Lombardi's methods and personality have also been widely documented and discussed. It is difficult to diminish the accomplishments of a coach whose teams dominated for an entire decade. Still, while his Packer teams enjoyed a tremendous run, his tenure as head coach was relatively brief. The championships won under his leadership coincided with one core group of players. As noted above, while much has been made of his insistence on flawless execution and physical preparation, maybe his most underappreciated tool was his ability to assess talent. Like many coaches, though, his passions for the game ran so strong, and at time with little restraint from good sense, that they had negative consequences. Before being hired as head coach by the Packers, Lombardi had been distraught over his inability to land a head coaching job. Lombardi and others have speculated as to the reasons why, but his temperamental outbursts even as an assistant coach may have cost him an earlier head coaching position.

Maybe the clearest case of lack of control of temperament and its cost is that of Bob Knight. Likely, only his skillful acquisition and utilization of players in winning three national championship's during the 1970s and 1980s permitted him to stay in his position as long as he did. He went through many scrapes due to his lack of self-control that would have sunk almost any coach with a lesser record – an altercation with a Puerto Rican police officer, a trash can on an LSU fan's head, a wrestling match with an athletic director, a chair thrown across the playing floor, a potted-plant thrown and striking an athletic department secretary, accosting (pushing, striking, or other depending on one's perspective) a player in practice, and the like. The national championships and the public accolades they brought insulated him from stricter or swifter discipline, but probably also permitted him to become bolder in thinking his behavior was beyond scrutiny, or at least, control of even his university bosses. A run of less successful teams combined with continued outbursts such as the physical abuse of a player finally brought his employment at Indiana to an end.

Coaches such as Bowman, Williams, Knight, and Lombardi illustrate the point that selfdiscipline is indeed a virtue among leaders. Frequently, leaders are in a position to avoid some of the consequences that might befall people without celebrity status, but this does not mean that lack of self-discipline is beneficial to either one's team or one's self. Bowman and Williams wore out their welcome in several locations. Lombardi probably delayed his rise to a head coaching position. Knight probably lost out on talented players who came to see his antics as too extreme. Ultimately he lost his job. Bowman, Williams, Lombardi or Knight might defend their actions as just being extensions of "who they are," but control of self is a virtue that does not end with childhood. All four of these coaches certainly demanded self-discipline on the part of their players but sometimes exercised a different value system for themselves. No doubt, these coaches excelled as leaders because of offsetting strengths and in spite of this weakness, but the flaws imposed costs in spite of their great skills. People of lesser skill would likely suffer even greater consequences.

TAKEAWAYS

- The most obvious personal characteristics of coaches and managers usually invite imitation. Disciples, observers, and the leaders themselves may frequently overestimate the importance of some skills and underestimate the importance of others.
- 2. Enthusiasm and a decisive, "doer" mentality are nearly universal among successful sports leaders. However, they are also nearly universal among those who fail as sports leaders.
- 3. Legendary sports leaders are thinkers not just "give-me-the-bottom-line" leaders.

Even coaches known for their straight-ahead and simple styles such as Vince Lombardi are usually under-appreciated for mental efforts.

4. Demonstrated competency and interest in those being led inspire people to follow much more so than particular personality styles as the wide divergence between a Bill Parcells and Joe Gibbs illustrates. Notes

1. See John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Neslon, 1998). Drucker quote is from Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, and Richard Beckhard, eds. *The Leader of the Future*, (New York: Jossey Bass, 1996).

2. From John P. Kotter Leading Change, (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

3. From John Gardner, On Leadership (New York: Free Press, 1990).

4. Sun Tzu, The Art of War (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002).

5. From Tom Landry (with Gregg Lewis), Tom Landry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

6. Phil Jackson, Sacred Hoops (New York: Hyperion, 1996).

7. Robert Slater, Jack Welch and the GE Way (New York: Mc-Graw Hill, 1999).

8. Peggy Anderson, *Great Quotes from Great Sports Leaders* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 1994), p. 68.

9. See Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), for another perspective on the differences between good and great leaders.

10. John Feinstein offers a detailed accounting of this skill in John Feinstein, Season on the

Brink (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

11. Jim Savage, *The Encyclopedia of the NCAA Basketball Tournament* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1990), p. 708.

12. Savage, NCAA Basketball Tournament, p. 708.

13. John Wooden (with Jack Tobin), *They Call Me Coach* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1988), p. 113.

14. See Mike Krzyzewski (with Donald T. Phillips), *Leading with the Heart: Coach K's Successful Strategies for Basketball, Business, and Life*, (New York, Warner Books, 2000), p. 73.

15. From Charles Fishman, "Sanity Inc," www.fastcompany.com, 21 (January 1999).

See David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p.
372.