

Leadership Fitness: Are You Exercising Your Leadership Muscles?

In my long career as an executive coach, I have noticed that a large number of my senior executive clients are deemed leaders by virtue of their job title, but their practice of leadership is “rusty” from lack of usage.

These executives have read or at least heard of Michael Watkins book, The First 90 Days. They understand that they must have a strategy and plan to enter a new role or a new organization, including: meeting with key stakeholders; identifying the team’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; redefining the mission; achieving alignment; matching strategy to the organization’s needs, etc.

What these senior leaders sometimes forget is to practice continuous improvement and continuous learning. Leadership is a talent and can be an acquired skill – but like all talents and skills, the leader must engage in the practice of leadership, identify and achieve leadership goals, acquire knowledge, ask for feedback, observe what works and doesn’t work for other leaders, and finally, engage in leadership development activities.

If an athlete does not train regularly, regardless of his or her sport of choice, the athlete will lose strength, agility, focus and general fitness. The athlete will lose the ability to view his or her performance in the larger context of the sport. The athlete will lose the edge.

Leaders like athletes can sometimes lose their edge without their knowledge. I interact daily with executives from a variety of industries. They are the recipients of the best business school educational programs and are placed in a variety of assignments that will season and broaden their leader capabilities. But something can happen during a senior leader’s career. One day, the leader shows up and has not read anything new. One day, the leader shows up and the new initiatives the team needs to pursue to remain competitive are not communicated. One day, the leader shows up and finds his or her skill sets are just a little behind the curve. One day, the leader stops learning and stops the daily exercise of leadership muscle.

Now the leader sees problems versus challenges; now the leader sees risk versus breakthrough opportunities. When this happens – if the leader has a coach or a trusted confidant - he or she may receive feedback that motivates the leader to start a new exercise program. If the leader does not have such a resource, the leadership muscle begins to atrophy. The company may not recognize why an executive does not fit the new culture, the new mission or the new marketplace, so they move the executive to a nonessential role or they terminate the individual.

The best approach for executives to ensure that they stay at the top of their game is to consistently exercise their leadership muscle.

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