

Effective Leadership – In Office as in the NFL

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As a Tampa Bay Buccaneers football fan, I'm excited for the return of play and to see what heights Tom Brady can take us. A few years ago, I was happy to see their former coach, Tony Dungy, named to the NFL Hall of Fame. His career provides an interesting study on Effective Leadership.

Dungy has a well-known approach to leadership – often described as a “servant-leader” style. The reporting on his career emphasizes how he brought the best out of his team. He modeled excellence and high standards and infected his team with the desire to perform at a high level. Why did they perform? To paraphrase Dungy's philosophy, he helped them figure out what their passion was and make it part of who they were and where they were.

Another Tampa Bay coach came along right after Dungy – John Gruden – with a decidedly different style. Gruden's team won the Super Bowl the next year – reflecting both coaches' success. Looking back, common traits between these great coaches are passion, authenticity and creating an expectation of excellence. Gruden's style of coaching was notably more animated, confrontation and vocal. But both coaches were respected by their players and succeeded.

Effective Leadership – Passion, Authenticity and Excellence

There are several lessons from these Bucs coaches that are relevant to business leadership:

First, exude passion about what you are doing. Passion is contagious and will drive employees to strive for excellence from inner desire.

- Second, be authentic. Nobody on the team doubted that Dungy or Gruden were “all-in” and both led in ways (despite very different styles) that were both real and heart-felt. If you want your employees' full buy-in, you must first model it in your own way.
- Third, expect excellence. Let them know that only their best performance is acceptable.

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At this point, one might ask which approach – Dungy’s or Gruden’s – is best. All the CEOs and other managers that I work with have their own leadership styles. But whether your individual personality and values produce servant-leadership or a more “in-your-face” approach, the points above – passion, authenticity and excellence – should be common denominators.

- You may naturally have a deep concern for your employees – both their work and their lives. But if you don’t set high standards and expectations of goal attainment, you are unlikely to bring out the best in your team, which will leave you and them at a disadvantage.
- You may be highly passionate about business goals and readily set high standards and demand achievement. But if you fail to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of your team, and don’t give individuals the training and guidance needed to meet your expectations, expect frustration – for you and your employees.

Effective Leadership – Practical Steps

Some specific suggestions to put these ideas into practice include:

- Set overall goals – then have individual managers establish goals for their areas.
- Don’t just accept goals that from subordinates just because they “fit” the overall business plan. Question the means, methods and math. Demand rigor in planning. Institutionalize accountability.
- Expect passion, authenticity and excellence from your managers (assuming you have modeled these traits!) You are often well-advised to replace managers who fail these tests.
- Break down big goals into small segments. Some are obvious, such as months adding to quarters and years. Some require more planning, such as the process of taking an idea from concept to production and then market prominence. Set milestones and adjust when prudent.
- Celebrate success – early and often. Celebrating achievement of an early milestone should not detract from the focus on continued effort to achieve final success.

In summary...pursue your passion

Share your enthusiasm in an authentic way

Motivate a team that is likewise “all-in”

Together set goals and expectations of excellence

Check your team’s progress early and often

Balance dogged determination and mercurial volatility to decide whether to change course.

May you realize your goals – and passion!