

Chapter 10

The Leader as Coach

The most important thing in leadership is truly caring. The best leaders care about people they lead, and people know when caring is genuine.

—Dean Smith, University of North Carolina Basketball Coach

Henry To'oTo'o is an all-SEC linebacker for the Alabama Crimson Tide football team. But the 6'2", 228-pound California native hasn't always suited up for Alabama. Henry actually began his career at rival Tennessee, where he made an instant impact for the Volunteers as one of the nation's best defensive players in 22 starts at linebacker over his two years in Knoxville.

Following the 2020 season, Henry was one of the biggest names in college football to announce he would enter the transfer portal, college athletics' online interface created to better manage the transfer process. After flirting with a number of the sport's bluebloods, Henry elected to attend Alabama and suit up for the legendary Nick Saban. When asked why he chose Alabama, Henry was resolute in his response. "Who doesn't want to play for Coach Saban?" he said.

In Henry's defense, he's right. Nick is the most decorated college football coach in history. He has seven national championships under his belt and another 10 SEC crowns. He's won nearly every coach of the year award in existence and is hailed as the finest recruiter and talent cultivator around.

The question is, do Nick's Tide teams attract the best players because they win all the time? Maybe. But it's much more likely that the team wins all the time because the Tide not only attracts the best players but Nick Saban knows how to enable each of his players to reach their full potential and then welds them into a unified team.

In a similar vein to other great coaches—leaders like Vince Lombardi of Green Bay Packers' fame, University of North Carolina basketball icon Dean Smith, and Columbia University football coach Bill Campbell—Nick holds his team to high standards with full accountability. As a result, he leads his teams to greater heights than anyone believed possible.

Just as great athletes seek the best coaches, the best people want to work for leaders who are committed to helping them perform at their best. We believe it is time to rethink leaders not as directors and managers, but as coaches. While in recent years many leaders have hired external coaches, shouldn't your leader be your coach, not just your manager or supervisor?

The parallels between a coach in sport and the business leader as a coach are abundant. In both cases, *coaching* is about engaging a team and drawing out the best qualities and skillsets of each team member, and then finding their sweet spot where they can perform their best. The best coaches are deeply engaged and care about each team member, even in very large organizations. The coach and the team share a common definition of success that is measured by the same scorecard. They have a unified desire to win, yet everyone respects the different roles of the coach and team members.

However, the difference between sport and business is that the business coaching leader relies far less on positional power and more on trust, empathy, mentoring, and feedback. For context, look at the life and work of Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors (GM). Shortly after being named CEO in 2014, Mary faced an unimaginable crisis. Cars manufactured by GM were experiencing ignition switch failure, a botch that caused 124 deaths and an additional 275 injuries.

What Mary found when she explored the problem further was GM's culture—and several of its processes, to boot—needed a complete overhaul. A third-party report concluded that GM routinely sent accident reports to the legal department instead of the quality and design teams equipped to fix underlying issues. The report even went as far as to say, "No single person owned any decision." Ouch.

Like Nick Saban, Mary set high standards of behavior and empowered her team with full accountability. She testified in front of Congress, admitting that GM's incompetence was to blame for the deaths and injuries. Ultimately, Mary used the ignition switch crisis to create a burning platform to transition GM from a slow-moving bureaucracy to one that finally owned up to its faults—and the organization is better for it today.

In this section, we will explore the depths of your leadership, from inspiring others to holding the team accountable, and how the COACH model applies to you and what you do on a daily basis.

EXERCISE 10.1: EXAMINING YOUR LEADERSHIP

Describe an example from your past where you have been effective in inspiring others around a common purpose and shared values.

How effective are you at empowering others to step up and lead? What are you doing to improve your effectiveness?

Do you hold your individual team members to high standards? In what ways?

How do you hold your team members accountable for their actions? What actions do you take when someone falls short of expectations?

Engaged Leaders *COACH* Their Team

Remember Bill Campbell, Columbia University’s former football coach? Well, we would be remiss if we didn’t point out that Bill’s greatness largely took place off the field. He led the Lions to an rough 12-41-1 record over six seasons in the 1970s, never winning more than three games in any one season. Despite that lackluster performance, Bill became one of the best examples of successfully pivoting from sports to business, acting as a coach for Silicon Valley greats—including Apple’s Steve Jobs, Intuit’s Scott Cook, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, and Google’s Larry Page.

How did Bill make such a mark? He turned the idea of hierarchy on its head, saying, “Your title makes you a manager; your people make you a leader.” Bill had tremendous respect and love for his people. His manifesto proclaimed, “People are the foundation of any company’s success. The primary job of each leader is to help people be effective in their job and grow and develop through support, respect, and trust.”

To describe what it takes to be a great coach, we have developed the acronym “COACH.” As a leader, you need to Care for people, Organize and Align them, Challenge, and Help them (Figure 10.1).

Care

Understand the individual’s strengths, weaknesses, and motivations.

Organize

Get people playing as a team in their individual sweet spots.

Align

Unite people around a common purpose that inspires them.

Challenge

Summon each person’s best work; create audacious goals.

Help

Work with your team to solve problems and celebrate successes.

Figure 10.1 The Leader as Coach

Care: Build Understanding and Trust

We've long believed that the three keys to becoming an authentic leader are what we call the "3 T's": Truth, Transparency, and Trust. While the three are forever intertwined, trust is the coin of the realm.

Authentic relationships simply aren't possible without trust. And the capacity to develop close and enduring relationships through *care* with empathy and candor is essential to building trust. Without these meaningful relationships fortified by trust, you'll never deeply understand or care about someone—an integral part of the formula needed to help that person unlock their full potential.

Though the connection may not strike you immediately, trust is often hand in glove with vulnerability. The people you most trust are usually your parents, children, sibling, spouse, best friend, or co-worker. In each of those relationships, intimacy and informality are likely staples of your interactions. Casual moments, social dinners, coffee breaks, heart-to-heart chats, and fun activities set the scene for exchanges where you can let your guard down and be yourself.

At work, you may even find that the best discussions and creative ideas come from informal interactions, rather than back-to-back meetings around conference tables. It's through these discussions that people learn to better understand each other's truths and become thought partners.

Caring relationships are a conduit to empathy, the ability to walk in someone else's shoes and a hallmark of authentic leadership. In turn, empathy increases engagement and heightens humility, which strengthens the bond between two people and solidifies that you *care*.

Circling back to what we first talked about in this section, the *care* factor ultimately creates trust, which Stephen M.R. Covey asserts has quantifiable impact for organizations. When trust is low, there is a measurable "trust tax" that slows down decision-making and increases cost throughout the organization. When trust is high, speed is fast and alignment comes easily.

EXERCISE 10.2: BUILDING CARE WITH YOUR TEAM

Describe the ways in which you show care for your team.

Do you spend informal time with people on your team, just to understand what they are working on or how they are doing? What have you learned during this time?

What are some steps you've taken to instill trust as the team's leader?

What is a great idea you've been involved in that was first hatched or discussed in an informal setting?

In your opinion, do you struggle with being vulnerable?

Name an example of a time where you showed empathy to a member of the team, and it was clearly well-received and appreciated. How did that make you feel?

Organize: Get People in their Sweet Spot and Playing as a Team

It's a given that each member of your team will possess their own unique strengths, weaknesses, and motivations pushing them forward. What's not necessarily true is if team members are in a position to make the most of those driving forces—but that's where you come in.

Think back to the concept of the sweet spot, or the intersection of one's motivations and strengths, that we introduced in Chapter 6. When someone is operating in their sweet spot, they feel inspired, energized, and confident that great things are on the horizon. The sweet spot generates fulfillment and a realization of passion and purpose.

Your role as a leader is to *organize* individuals into a cohesive team where all members operate in the sweet spot that plays to their strengths, compensates for their weaknesses, and motivates them to peak performance. If you were building your dream house, would you ever task a plumber with installing the home's electrical panel? Of course not. That's an oversimplification, but it does demonstrate the importance of ensuring team members are working within the confines of their sweet spot.

So, what are the first steps to assembling an empowered and well-organized team—one where each member feels like they're positioned for success and the whole truly is greater than the sum of its parts? Getting your hands dirty and locking arms with team members on the front lines of the organization.

As Ford's Alan Mulally demonstrated when he arrived as CEO in 2006, building an empowered, well-*organized* team begins with your daily behavior as a leader. Alan was quick to buck a decades-long practice of executives avoiding direct discussions with factory employees. He also instituted weekly full-day business performance review (BPR) sessions with senior leadership to evaluate the automaker's shortcomings.

It was in those BPRs that Alan got a dose of the culture crisis he was facing. Despite the fact that Ford was expecting to tally nearly \$13 billion in losses for the year, projects were presented in BPRs as if they were proceeding as planned. By his fifth BPR, Alan confronted his team about the dichotomy between billions of losses and their consistent reports of positive progress. "Is there anything that's not going well here?" he asked. Nobody responded.

The next week, Ford America’s president Mark Fields alerted the group that a key new vehicle launch would be delayed. Much to the surprise of the senior leadership team, Alan applauded Mark for his candor, encouraging others in the room to come to his aid for assistance. “You have a problem,” he told Mark and the others in attendance. “You are not the problem.”

Through those BPRs, Alan was able to better *organize* his executives to bolster their collective strength.

EXERCISE 10.3: ORGANIZING YOUR TEAM

What steps have you taken to organize every member of your team into their sweet spot?

How do you determine each person’s sweet spot? In what ways do you engage them in discussions about their motivations and their strengths and weaknesses?

Thinking through the current construct of your team, is each team member’s strengths and skill sets utilized so they can perform to their full potential? What changes could you make to better organize your team, get more out of your people, and drive better outcomes?

Are you open to reviewing feedback from others—both internally and externally—on the team’s organization and areas for improvement?

Do you model appropriate behaviors and provide constructive feedback?

Align: Unite People around a Common Vision

In recent years leaders are recognizing the importance of having a clear mission that will **align** all members of the organization around a common purpose. There is great power in the words comprising mission statements. Inspiring team members to take on aspirational goals to bring those words to life can be the coaching leader's greatest challenge.

One way to think of mission and vision statements is like a magnetized umbrella. This language should both attract and envelope employees, all of whom are moving in the same direction and for the same cause. Your job as a leader is to routinely sprinkle those statements into the workplace, using the words as support for strategy, goals, and decision-making.

A mission and vision that are nothing more than a poster on the wall have no meaning and may even invoke cynicism among employees. But if you harness the power of compelling mission and vision statements like Jim Whitehurst did at Red Hat, you can find real magic.

Jim joined Red Hat from Delta Air Lines, where he was the company's COO. While at Delta, he ran a company that operated in a highly regulated industry with little strategic flexibility, so he managed by the numbers. Needless to say, Jim found that the world of open-sourced software was significantly less rigid than airlines—but it also moved at a dizzying pace that required constant transformation.

Given the uncertainty and pace of change, Jim chose to **align** his team around Red Hat's purpose: "If people just work for a paycheck, they won't go the

extra mile, but if they believe in a purpose that transcends profit, they will give all they have,” he said.

He implemented opportunities for learning about the company’s rich culture and history as part of the new hire process and adopted an open management system that empowered teams to innovate. In addition, he leaned in to modern methods of communication, utilizing formats like video and social media to engage the team.

EXERCISE 10.4: ALIGNING YOUR TEAM

Does your organization use its mission and vision as a guiding light for things like strategy, goals, and decision-making?

Do the people on your team believe in the organization’s mission and vision? If not, what can you do to achieve greater buy-in?

Challenge: Summon People’s Best

One of the most common tropes in sports is that teams often either play up or down to their competition. We all love a good Cinderella story, and an underdog toppling the heavy favorite is the thing dreams are made of for many people. In these scenarios, the underdog clearly doesn’t have the better players; but, more times than not, what it has is a coach who understands the value of *challenging* their players.

That’s not to say that coaches of winning teams don’t challenge their players. Nick Saban at Alabama clearly does, and so does Anson Dorrance—head coach of the University of North Carolina women’s soccer team. While Anson’s Tar Heels have won 21 of the 31 NCAA Women’s Soccer Championships, it’s what the coach does off the field that causes some to raise their eyebrows.

Anson creates a weekly stack ranking of every single player that he posts publicly. He calls the exercise “competitive cauldron,” as he rates each player on a list of factors such as their speed. On his team, players know where they stand and what they need to do to improve. We aren’t suggesting you publicize a ranking of the members of your team by their strengths, but the takeaway here is that **challenging** others engages them in improving their performance. It also helps them develop as leaders, themselves.

Kevin Sharer, former CEO and Chairman of Amgen, knows a thing or two about **challenging** others to bring out their best. Kevin worked for the legendary Jack Welch of General Electric (GE), a notoriously hard-nosed leader with a penchant for pushing people to (and sometimes beyond) their limits. But at Amgen, Kevin adopted a softer yet equally effective approach to beckoning the best efforts of his team. He asked his leadership team to commit to leadership behaviors, articulating specific examples of behaviors he expected, such as:

- Provides honest and constructive feedback.
- Establishes high performance standards, uses measurable goals to track progress, and continually raises the bar on performance.
- Conducts reality-based, results-focused operating reviews and drives quick corrective actions.

Kevin’s commitment to **challenging** his people in ways that he knew would pay off for the organization worked. Using that approach, he built an exceptional and stable management team that grew revenues from \$3 billion to \$15 billion.

EXERCISE 10.5: CHALLENGING YOUR TEAM

Do you make it a practice to stretch your team beyond their comfort zones? In what ways?

Have you ever identified someone who was delivering less than their full potential? How did you handle the situation?

What kind of impact do you think a refined focus on challenging your team could have on the organization and its goals?

Help: Solve Problems and Celebrate Success

In the old days, leaders relished the opportunity to take refuge in their offices with the shades drawn and door closed. Toiling away on this or that report and holding structured meetings in confidence was the preferred approach of many. And, for the time, it worked. Leaders did get stuff done, and there was an aura and mystique about the goings-on that took place inside the walls of that coveted corner office.

Things are much different in the current landscape—even when you consider that a large (and growing) percentage of the workforce will spend their days working on the couch, at the dining room table, or in a home office. In today's world, leaders cannot succeed sitting behind a desk. As a leader, you must be personally engaged with your team where they work. It's through that engagement that coaching leaders can *help* their team plot out the path to reaching their goals.

If you've ever worked in a corporate environment, you've likely experienced a meeting or two that didn't need to take place. Stephen Hawking once remarked, "Half the battle is just showing up." But how can one show up where they're really needed if they're too busy checking the attendance box for a meeting that could have been an e-mail? Showing up at important events or engaging on the frontlines means a great deal to people and enables them to take leaders off their pedestals and see them as real human beings.

Coaching leaders will frequently say both "thank you" and "well done!" And, if they go to the lengths that Roy Vagelos did in his time as Chairman of the Board and CEO at Merck, they'll offer up the *help* employees need to excel. Here's what Roy said when asked about supplying guidance to company researchers when needed: "I'd call them up and say, 'That's a tough problem, but here are a couple things you might try.' People love to have their leader involved. They feel you want to be part of the solution."

On occasion, the most beneficial *help* a coaching leader can provide is to genuinely listen. Active listening is a foundational trait of authentic leadership. It's essential because it lets the other person know you're legitimately interested in what they have to say—one of the highest forms of respect.

Whether it's delivering a fresh take on a recurring problem or giving a team member the opportunity to talk through what's ailing them, the onus is on you as a coaching leader to discern how deep your involvement should go. Judgments about your involvement depend upon your assessment of the effectiveness, capability, and experience of your team. Being deeply involved makes sense if the organization is in a crisis or team members are inexperienced. Being less involved makes sense when your team is on track and its members are experienced. Overall, engaged leadership is most effective.

The “Levels of Involvement” framework in Figure 10.2 enables you to decide how best to engage your team.

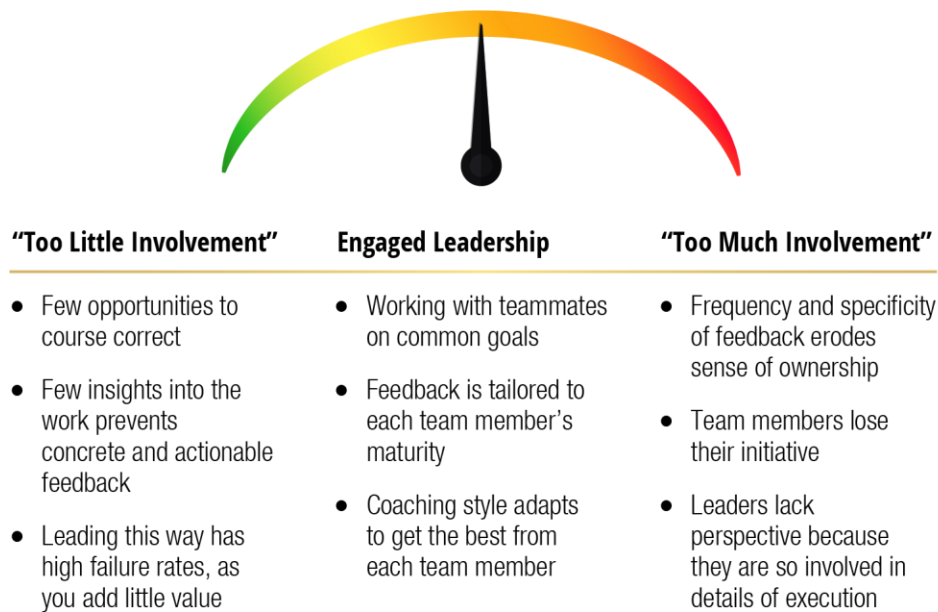


Figure 10.2 Levels of Involvement

EXERCISE 10.6: HELPING YOUR TEAM

How often and in what ways do you closely engage with your team?

As a leader, are you demonstrating “Engaged Leadership” by working side-by-side with your team members?

Think of a time when you were on the “Too Much Involvement” side of the Figure 10.2 spectrum. What was the situation? Why did you choose to become too involved? What was the result?

Think of a time when you were on the “Too Little Involvement” side of the Figure 10.2 spectrum. What was the situation? Why did you avoid getting more involved? What was the result?

Can you describe a time in your career where you would have appreciated more help from a leader? How did that leader’s hands-off approach impact your performance?

Key Takeaways

- Leaders must hold their teams to high standards with full accountability.
- The best people want to work for leaders who are actively helping them to perform at their best.
- The acronym “COACH” (Care, Organize, Align, Challenge, Help) can be used as a guide for leaders to coach their teams to achieving the very best.
- *Caring* about someone helps them unlock their full potential.
- *Organizing* a team member in their sweet spot generates fulfillment and a realization of passion and purpose.
- When trust is high, speed is fast; *Aligning* your team around shared goals is easier.
- *Challenging* others engages them in improving their performance.
- Leaders cannot succeed sitting behind a desk. Team members want their leaders *Helping* them solve problems and find solutions.
- The onus is on you as a coaching leader to discern how deep your involvement should go.

Suggested Reading



BillGeorge.org

Truth, Transparency & Trust: The 3 T's of True North Leaders

Truth, Transparency and Trust are essential qualities for building authentic relationships with your colleagues and teammates.

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