

Are you a Gold Medal Leader?

Six Disciplines of Leadership Success

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Summary:

The difference between peak performing leaders and the rest is that they focus on the few things that make the biggest impact. This article identifies the 6 disciplines of Gold Medal Leadership:

1. Be clear on what gold looks like
2. Effective communication
3. Get out of the way
4. Take your own medicine
5. Build your team
6. Focus on follow-through and results

October 2010: Athletes from 71 nations converged in New Delhi, India to compete in the 260 events of the Commonwealth Games. The “entry ticket” to the Games was that the athletes had to be at the top of their sports in their own countries. The competitors who were proudly marching in the opening ceremony had already been gold medal winners on their home turf.

I watched the final of the women’s squash. Malaysia’s world squash champion Datuk Nicol David looked cool and very efficient on her way to winning the gold medal. While she made it look easy, like all champions, she would tell us that winning takes a lot of effort. I imagined the years of discipline and focus that Nicol had devoted in her quest to becoming a peak performer, a world champion, and now, a Commonwealth gold medalist.

I then started to ask myself whether Nicol’s gold medal winning principles could be applied to the “game of leadership”. That’s the game that readers of this article most likely play. In doing so, I identified a number of principles that I have called the 6 Principles of Gold Medal Leadership. These are the disciplines of leadership that leaders and managers can learn from athletes like Nicol who consistently operate at peak performance.

A few common factors lead to success

Focus on a few things

Peak sporting performers focus on the few things that make the biggest difference to their success. No matter what sport, there will be some common factors, including fitness, diet, lots of rest, strength, technique and psychology. Nicol David undoubtedly disciplines herself to stay fit. Despite the calorie-filled temptations that she is exposed to in her world travels, she ensures that she eats food that will be good for her. There will be no shortage of social events and late nights available to Nicol. But she maintains the discipline of getting lots of good sleep. She goes to the gym to maintain fitness and strength. This takes time and lots of sweat – and it is not always a lot of fun! She no doubt spends time continually working on her playing technique. And I am sure that she keeps thinking like a winner.

So, what are the disciplines that leaders should focus on to create peak performing teams and organisations? What are the few things that leaders and managers have to focus on to be gold medal leaders? The first question for you is to ask yourself whether you have identified what you really need to focus on as a leader of your team or organisation. If you want to be a gold medal leader, the starting point is to be clear on what you need to devote your attention to!

Does your team have a clear picture of where they are heading?

The 6 Disciplines of Gold Medal Leadership

The first discipline is to **be clear on what the gold medal looks like**. As a leader, where are you leading your team to? Do you have clarity on what success looks like? Does your team know where they are heading, and what their common purpose is? Do you know what your company's vision is? How often do you talk about your company's vision in your team meetings? If you are clear on where you are taking your team, then you have a much greater chance of getting there!

Effective communication is a second discipline practised by gold medal leaders. I have been privileged to come across leaders who practice this discipline most effectively. They keep their teams up to date on progress. And they communicate one-to-one with individuals to stay on track. I have seen other leaders and managers who are focused on strategy and on doing reports and other "important stuff". These are leaders who spend far too little time on the discipline of being visible within the team, communicating with them, making them feel valued and connecting them to the higher purpose. These leaders keep asking themselves why their teams under-perform. It's a bit like a long distance runner who spends too little time on fitness training and then asks himself why he is coming last in his races.

Give your team members "head room" – get out of the way!

A third discipline is to **get out of the way**. John Harvey-Jones, the acclaimed British head of ICI said that it's important to give people "head room." This means trusting your team members and empowering them to do their jobs. Getting out of the way includes having your people feel free to come up with ideas on how to drive the business forward – and to be allowed to implement those ideas. The alternative is to micro-manage, with the result that the team will depend on the leader for decisions. A team that stands still until the leader says "it's okay to walk" will never be a high performing team.

**People believe
your
behaviours
more than
they believe
your words**

As a leader, it's important that you build trust among your team. A fourth discipline of success therefore is to **"take your own medicine"**. Your people will watch your behaviours. Your team members will believe your behaviours before they believe the words that you say. It's not what you say, but rather, what you do that makes the difference. As Gandhi said, "You must be the change that you want to see". This is about role modeling. If you want your team members to be responsive to their customers, you'd better make sure that you are responsive to them. Kouzes and Posner, in their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, refer to this as "model the way."

The fifth discipline is to **build your team**. This means taking time to get the best people on board. High performance is created by high performing teams. Building your team means spending time coaching them to better performance.

And, of course, the sixth discipline is to **focus on follow through and results**. Gold medal leaders WILL achieve results through their people, and they WILL build strong, committed teams, provided they focus on the disciplines of gold medal leadership. I have seen many managers who focus on the seventh discipline – results, results, results. They drive people hard to achieve their KPIs. The problem is that they do not build an organisation that is fit and healthy to play the game. They may achieve results, but create tired organisations and tired people. Imagine if Nicol was to focus just on technique. What would happen to her game? She would soon tire and run out of puff on the court. In short, focusing on results is important, but if the other disciplines of success are ignored, you will not build a sustainably high performing team.

**5 out of the 6
disciplines are
about the
"soft stuff"**

If you review the 6 Disciplines, you will note that the first 5 are about the "soft stuff" – the intangibles which have a big impact on people – clear direction, effective communication, get out of the way, role modeling and build your team. There is a message here. **It is that results are created through people.**

We are all busy and seem to have too much to do in too little time. Gold medal leaders are just as busy as the rest of us. The difference between these peak performing leaders and the rest is that they focus on the few things that make the biggest impact. Your mission for next week is to review your activities over a week. Categorise how much time you spend on each of the 6 Disciplines. You may find gaps which will present opportunities to quickly achieve a personal best. Until next month!

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