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Why Star Players Don't Make Great Coaches

By Dr. Woody

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Perhaps the greatest ongoing tragedy in the modern business world is the management promotion.

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The fact is, we routinely select and promote star performers to the level of manager or executive as a reward for their contributions. These contributions may be outstanding sales, heroic customer service, or simply time in the position. Regardless of the reason, one thing is for sure, we rarely promote an individual because of their potential to actually manage others. We have all experienced this phenomenon and we have all been frustrated by it. Yet, on some level, we all enable it.

Many refer to this tragedy as the "Peter Principal," which proposes that people will always rise to their level of incompetence. However, it really isn't an issue of incompetence, it is an issue of fit.

Managing is quite frankly a competency in its own right. It is not simply a byproduct of time in position or expertise at a particular task. Rather, it is about a combination of traits and learned skills.

Consider for a moment the sports world. If you look across all major American sports you will notice that it is a rarity to find a star player who has made it as a star coach. Sure, there are exceptions to every rule. But, my concern here is not the exceptions; it's about reality.

There is a reason for this.

The mindset is very different. Star players are successful because they want to showcase their talent and revel in it; they want to make the big hit, score the goal, or make the save. Coaches, on the other hand, enjoy the chess match. Their gratification comes from creating the team, motivating and presiding over successful execution. It's about delegating and choreographing from the sidelines. Coaches win through people because they have to.

For Managers

In their 2002 *Harvard Business Review* article on selecting management talent, Melvin Sorcher and James Brant, describe this phenomenon of promoting star players as the propensity for executives to overvalue operational proficiency when making promotional decisions. In other words, many senior managers tend to focus on promoting their star performers because of their talent as performers as opposed to their potential as managers. Apparently, their hope is that the magic will somehow spread. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case.

The successful coach focuses on ensuring their star players, and all their players for that matter, have the tools they need to be successful. They provide the training and support to give their stars an opportunity to shine.

In the same vein, good managers assess the strengths and weaknesses of their team members and develop strategies that align the complementary strengths of their team members, so as to fulfill the mission of the organization. Managers, just as sports coaches, must work with and through their team members in order to achieve success. When considering promotions, look for those who want to listen to, support, and develop your people. Pick someone who has the ability to harness the power of the star, not be the star.

For Star Performers

Most people's passions aren't aligned with their careers. Often times this is the result of moving away from being a practitioner and climbing the ranks of management. Just because you like what you do doesn't mean you will like guiding others in doing it.

Don't punish your peers by taking on a role you don't want. Life will just become harder for everyone. Having to deal with staff, budget responsibility, and performance reviews isn't necessarily a reward, especially if your talents are as a practitioner. The glamour and prestige of being the boss quickly fades when your efforts shift from scoring points to refereeing disputes.

Keep in mind, there is nothing wrong with the star player mindset. Star salespeople revel in making the close and top engineers find great joy in discovering the next breakthrough. The simple fact is that true practitioners enjoy the art of their craft. So, if you are a star player, ask yourself if it makes sense to take yourself off the field. Beyond just the impact on your team, also consider the true cost-benefit of prestige and financial gain versus your health and happiness.

The reality is that most people leave their jobs because of bad bosses. This phenomenon is perpetuated by our philosophy of encouraging and picking the wrong people to be the boss. We have structured the reward and ego system in this country based on achieving the role of manager. The problem is that this isn't necessarily a reward. Often times it's a punishment for all parties involved.

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