A Framework For Leadership Success.

by Jim Citrin

In addition to my 25 years in business, I've been an athlete my entire life. As such, I'm interested in the champions who have taken their success in sports and gone on to do great things with their lives. I'm just as interested in the many great business leaders who learned how to compete, win, lose, and excel on a team or individually through sports when they were growing up.

Studying the Champions

I've always wanted to find out what separates the enduring champions -- those who stay on a positive life trajectory, growing as people and contributing to the greater good -- from the other sports stars who fade out or crash and burn. What in all of this could be applied to help achieve one's greatest aspirations and potential?

So, for over three years, I've been working on a study to distill the most important lessons about leadership and business success from the world's most inspiring athletes. The culmination of this work is my book, "The Dynamic Path," which I'll provide an overview for in this column.

A Framework for Life

The Dynamic Path is a powerful framework that can help you live your life to reach your greatest potential. It allows you to set goals and move from stage to stage in your life, continually growing and developing from individual to champion, and from leader to legacy-builder.

You don't need to be Colin Powell, Bono, or Magic Johnson to inspire people and build a legacy. Anyone who has the motivation, energy, and a little bit of creativity can have a positive and enduring impact on those around them -- and even the world at large.

Through natural talent, dedication, hard work, and mental toughness, you can grow to achieve excellence in your chosen field. To become a top performer in any discipline, you need to sharpen your skills through highly directed practice over an extended period of time. And to progress from strong performer to champion in sports or business, you need to develop mental toughness.

Learning Mental Toughness

The ability to come through and deliver in the moment of truth is the single characteristic that distinguishes the greatest champions from everyone else. I'd always thought that they were endowed with a "mental toughness gene" at birth. However, to my great surprise and delight, I discovered from my research that mental toughness is in fact a learnable skill.

It turns out that the ability to achieve a personal best in the seminal time trial, to make the last shot at the buzzer, or to hit the RBI with two outs in the bottom of the ninth is something that can be practiced and developed. With knowledge of how your mind and emotions work, and with deliberate practice in training and competitive situations, you can develop this ability. Moreover, mental toughness is an important skill that applies far beyond the realm of sports into your most important career, community, and personal situations.

Mental toughness allows you to thrive when it counts most, remaining cool, calm, and collected during the ups and downs of a game, race, match, or business situation. It's this skill that allows you to act in an instinctive and automatic way at the most important turning points of a competition or other high-stakes circumstance.
Practice Makes Perfect

Expert performers are distinguished not by the characteristics they inherited, then, but rather by their ability to continue improving for years, even decades, until they become great. Expert performance is the end result of prolonged effort to improve through a regimen of deliberate, targeted activities specifically designed to optimize improvement in carefully selected areas.

Differences among performers, even the most elite, are a function of the amount and duration of deliberate practice they undertake. The top performers in the world not only work harder than everyone else in their field, they've invested many more hours of highly focused practice over the years.

Deliberate practice helps improve a specific skill or performance to enable you to reach for goals just beyond your level of proficiency, to provide you feedback on results, and to build a program that allows for high levels of repetition. Think about a few concrete things that are at the core of your role and focus on how to do them significantly better. And continue to focus day in and day out.

From Individual Contributor to Leader

At some point for people in sports, physical ability will ebb and athletic talents will fade. This is a critical turning point. Some ignore the telltale signals and try to hang on to what they have, relying on the skills that got them to their peak. That's a recipe for disaster, because inevitably you have to change in order to grow.

This is the exact parallel for a star individual performer in business -- the rainmaking sales leader, the hot designer, the brilliant trader -- who risks topping out as a solo act. The champion who breaks through to become a leader decides to confront the moment and stop focusing on himself and concentrate instead on the success of others.

When you're dedicated to making those around you successful, success will accrue to you as a natural end result. It's one thing to be a star individual contributor in sports, business, or life and quite another (ultimately more satisfying and sustaining) to extend beyond oneself to work with and through others. This is how a champion continues to grow as a person and transforms into a leader.

Leaving Behind a Legacy

Whether on a historic scale like battling to cure cancer, a large scale like helping inner-city youths find a way out of poverty, or on a small scale like becoming a mentor, the more you isolate something genuinely meaningful to you that's worth fighting for, the more that your leadership will propel you toward building an enduring legacy.

People everywhere have a deep-seated urge to be meaningful contributors in the world. When you decide to focus your attention on a particular calling that will make a discernable positive impact, you've moved into the realm of building a legacy. If your cause is worthy and if there's a credible reason for selecting it, then you'll be able to inspire others to follow along and make a sustaining and positive impact.

Becoming a true champion in sports or business requires sacrifices. This can only be sustained by a burning desire that needs to be fueled every day. Not everyone wants to assume the responsibilities of leadership or to focus on the success of others around them. And while many people want something that will outlive them and provide evidence of a life meaningfully lived, not everyone has the drive or passion to create a bequest of significance.

But for those who aspire to do all these things, The Dynamic Path is the way.

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