

*“The Score Takes Care of Itself”
My Philosophy of Leadership
Bill Walsh, Steve Jamison, and Craig Walsh
Book Note by Dave Kraft*

His ability to teach people how to think and play at a different and much higher, and, at times, perfect level.

He taught us to hate mistakes. If you aim for perfection and miss, you're still pretty good, but if you aim for mediocre and miss? Well, he didn't allow us to think like that. He was great at making people great students. Bill was a genius at making the complex comprehensible, the comprehensible achievable.

His creative and commonsense brilliance as a problem solver was unsurpassed and a major component in the installation of what he called the Standard of Performance. Failure is part of success, an integral part. Everybody gets knocked down. Knowing it will happen and what you must do when it does is the first step back.

For me to do this I had to have autonomy, the power to quickly make decisions in all relevant areas. Team owner Eddie DeBartolo understood this and named me general manager soon after I became head coach. Equally important, he let everyone in the organization know that I was the boss and that he would not undercut my authority. Without this power and support my task would have been virtually impossible given the abysmal situation. (good talent with bad attitude equals bad talent).

This is consistent with my conviction that an organization is not just a tool like a shovel, but an organic entity that has a code of conduct, a set of applied principles that go beyond a company mission statement that's tacked on the wall and forgotten. The dictates of your personal beliefs should ultimately become characteristics of your team; a perception of what should be done, when it should be done, and why it should be done. Your philosophy is the single most important navigational point on your leadership compass; turning the self-image of the organization on its head, from toxic to top-notch.

The losses hurt, and the wins felt good. But neither was the primary focus of my effort or attention. I directed our focus less to the prize of victory than to the process of improving—obsessing, perhaps, about the quality of our execution and the content of our thinking; that is, our actions and attitude. The bull-headed know-it-all is a destructive force on your team; and this organizational perception that “success belongs to everyone” is taught by the leader.

The culture precedes positive results. He was simply unbelievable in the way he could spot potential in a person and then develop it. I saw him work himself so hard over those ten years, and the toll was increasingly terrible. It didn't have to be. Bill just had so much trouble letting up, getting out from under the increasingly crushing pressure of expectations that got sky-high as the decade rolled on. Burnout is what they call it, I guess; but who can argue with success?

They were locked into the past and unwittingly locking themselves out of the future. Leaders do this to themselves and their organizations all the time. However, a more accurate name would be the Cincinnati Offense, the Walsh Offense, or perhaps the Lemonade Offense—my response to being given lemons in the form of a team with no ground game and a quarterback without a strong arm. So that was the new direction I brought to NFL offensive playmaking—turning the concept of relying on the running game for yardage and ball control on its head, replacing it with a reliance on short passes to multiple receivers running exacting and intricate, precision-timed routes.

It's often the case that a "game changer" takes a while to change the way the game is played. In your own challenges, are you receptive to new, even unorthodox ways of getting things done? Few things offer greater return on less investment than praise—offering credit to someone in your organization who has stepped up and done the job. That's when I got serious about scripting; never again would I walk into the future unprepared for foul weather. Planning for the future shouldn't be postponed until the future arrives. When you prepare for everything, you're ready for anything. Bill was smart enough, strong-willed enough, to get rid of talented people if they were contributors to a negative organizational culture—not team players.

Throughout his career, Bill Walsh was constantly underestimated. Bill Walsh was the consummate teacher. With the naysayers gone, he had a team of talented people who were ready and willing to be led to the promised land. We have, however, seen a move away from the dictatorial type of leadership, an approach that didn't fit me and that I do not think is conducive to long-term success, especially in a corporate setting.

(Walt Garrison, a former running back for Dallas, was asked if he'd ever seen Landry smile. He replied, "No, but I was only on his team for nine years.") What they share beyond expertise and great success, however, was their indomitable will. And once the decision was made, the discussion was over. My ultimate job, and yours, is not to give an opinion. Everybody's got an opinion. Leaders are paid to make a decision. The difference between offering an opinion and making a decision is the difference between working for the leader and being the leader. But at what stage does perseverance become pigheadedness? what is inexcusable—is it to fail because you are unwilling to admit that your way was the wrong way and that a change of course is your only path to victory? Proving that you are right or proving that someone is wrong are bad reasons for persisting.

Leaders who don't understand what their territory is and how to protect it will soon find themselves with no turf to protect. When you fall prey to the naysayers who eagerly provide you with all the reasons why you won't succeed, why you can't win, and why you should quit, you have lost the winner's edge. When that happens, the game is over, regardless of your profession.

Here are twelve habits I have identified over the years that will make you be a better leader:

1. Be yourself.
2. Be committed to excellence.
3. Be positive.
4. Be prepared. (Good luck is a product of good planning.) No leader can control the outcome of the contest or competition, but you can control how you prepare for it.
5. Be detail-oriented. High performance is achieved small step by small step through painstaking dedication to pertinent details.
6. Be organized. Great organization is the trademark of a great organization.
7. Be accountable.
8. Be near-sighted and far-sighted.
9. Be fair. Be clear in your own mind as to what you stand for. And then stand up for it.
10. Be firm.

11. Be flexible. Consistency is crucial, but you must be quick to adjust

12. Believe in yourself. Be a leader.

You must never second-guess yourself on decisions you make with integrity, intelligence, and a team-first attitude. “There’ll be plenty of time for pencils, parties, and socializing when I lose my job, because that’s what’s going to happen if I continue to avoid the hard and harsh realities of doing my job.”

Here are ten additional nails you can pound into your professional coffin:

1. Exhibit patience, paralyzing patience.
2. Engage in delegating—massive delegating—or conversely, engage in too little delegating.
3. Act in a tedious, overly cautious manner.
4. Become best buddies with certain employees.
5. Spend excessive amounts of time socializing with superiors or subordinates.
6. Fail to continue hard-nosed performance evaluations of longtime—“tenured”—staff members,
7. Fail to actively participate in efforts to appraise and acquire new hires.
8. Trust others to carry out your fundamental duties.
9. Find ways to get out from under the responsibilities of your position, to move accountability from yourself to others—the blame game.
10. Promote an organizational environment that is comfortable and laid-back in the misbelief that the workplace should be fun, lighthearted, and free from appropriate levels of tension and urgency.

To put it in a more personal way, if your staff doesn’t seem fully mobilized and energized until you enter the room, if they require your presence to carry on at the level of effort and excellence you have tried to install, your leadership has not percolated down. An organization is crippled if it needs to ask the leader what to do every time a question arises. This is a reliable indication of an effective leader, namely, one who creates a self-sustaining organization able to operate at the highest levels even when he or she leaves. You must be able to make and carry out harsh and, at times, ruthless decisions in a manner that is fast, firm, and fair. The leader, at least a good one, teaches the team how to talk to themselves.

The specifics of that inner voice varies from leader to leader, but I believe all have these four messages in common:

1. We can win if we work smart enough and hard enough.
2. We can win if we put the good of the group ahead of our own personal interests.
3. We can win if we improve. And there is always room for improvement.
4. I know what is required for us to win. I will show you what it is.

Others sought and fed off attention, but not Joe. This is a little unusual among superstars in sports (or business). Nevertheless, this superb player (by way of Pennsylvania's Ringgold High School and the University of Notre Dame), a guy who never saw a professional football game in person until he played in one, was a leader of the highest caliber who led with one fundamental and powerful leadership technique: his own example. Of course, Joe had the talent, but talent alone won't make you a leader

Equally impressive—perhaps more so—is the fact that in four Super Bowl games he never threw a single interception.

I have never seen that proved that you don't need to shout, stomp, or strut to be a great leader—just do the job and treat people right. Isn't that an essential element in getting people to trust and follow you?

I was lucky to have a quarterback in my years at San Francisco who exhibited this important leadership quality right from the start. His leadership example of doing your job, treating others with respect, expecting people to do their jobs, and holding them accountable is a formula for success that will work in any good organization. You should employ an approach that is based on the following principles:

1. Treat people like people.
2. Seek positive relationships through encouragement, support, and critical evaluation.
3. Afford everyone equal dignity, respect, and treatment.
4. Blend honesty and “diplomacy.”
5. Allow for a wide range of moods, from serious to very relaxed, in the workplace depending on the circumstances.
6. Avoid pleading with players to “get going” or trying to relate to them by adopting their vernacular.
7. Make each person in your employ very aware that his or her well-being has a high priority with the organization
8. Give no VIP treatment.
9. Speak in positive terms about former members of your organization.
10. Demonstrate interest in and support for the extended families of members of the organization.
11. Communicate on a first-name basis without allowing relationships to become buddy-buddy.
12. Don't let differences or animosity linger.

You are allowing others, oftentimes uninformed others, to tell you who you are.

It is an important element in why these great coaches succeeded. Employees can thrive in an environment where they know exactly what is expected of them—even when those expectations are very high. When it comes to telling people what you expect from them, don't be subtle, don't be coy, don't be vague. What is your version of, “Gentlemen, this is a football”?

“Don't mistake activity for achievement.” (John Wooden, *Wooden on Leadership*.)

Big Ears Are Better Than Big Egos

Leadership in sports and business has generally moved away from this forceful, heavy-handed approach, although there are still plenty of examples of it—some very successful, in fact.

(The second law is “When you’re not listening, ask good questions.”)

It’s usually a hell of a lot easier to tell somebody what to do than to listen to his or her suggestions and ideas (especially when you think that you have all the answers on a wide range of subjects).

The person most familiar with a topic—you, for example—can get myopic, in need of an outside perspective. Sometimes there are three sides to a coin.” While a healthy ego is crucial in leadership, it turns unhealthy when self-confidence becomes arrogance, assertiveness becomes obstinacy, and self-assurance becomes reckless abandon when your ego gets bigger than your ears.

Everyone understood the only welfare that mattered was the organization’s. If our ship sank, we all drowned. Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden has always urged, “Be more concerned with finding the right way than in having it your way.” A football coach with small ears and a big ego will soon be watching the game on television at home instead of from the sidelines.

In a highly competitive environment, feeling comfortable is first cousin to being complacent. An organization that witnesses its leader at loose ends when troubles arise will look elsewhere for strength and direction. The experience of recognizing ability in a person and then teaching that individual how to reach his potential in ways that helped our team was invaluable.

In my experience, this is what it takes to be a good teacher: passion, expertise, communication, and persistence.

1. Passion is not just having a desire to do the job of teaching. I was consumed by the process of developing the abilities of others.
2. Expertise is the inventory of knowledge and experience you possess on a particular subject.
3. Communication is the ability to organize and then successfully convey your informed thoughts. Your enthusiasm becomes their enthusiasm; your lukewarm presentation becomes their lukewarm interest in what you’re offering.
4. Persistence is essential because knowledge is rarely imparted on the first attempt.
 1. Use straightforward language.
 2. Be concise.
 3. Account for a wide range of difference in knowledge, experience, and comprehension among members of your organization.
 4. Account for some members of the group being more receptive and ready to learn than others
 5. Be observant during your comments.
 6. Strongly encourage note taking.

7. Employ a somewhat unpredictable presentation style.
8. Organize with logical, sequential building blocks in your communication.
9. Encourage appropriate audience participation.
10. Use visual aids.
11. Remember Sun-tzu: “With more sophistication comes more control.”

Companies that are led by good teachers, those with passion, expertise, communication skills, and persistence do very well. Looking back, perhaps the lesson I would draw is this: If you don't love it, don't do it. He wanted input, but once the decision was made, he wanted it carried out precisely. He had a brilliant mind coupled with a steel will. The most important attribute of any organization is the way it treats its people. We had a first-rate, compatible staff in sync right from the start.

My checklist of personal qualities—assets—in potential staff members:

1. A fundamental knowledge of the area he or she has been hired to manage.
2. A relatively high—but not manic—level of energy and enthusiasm and a personality that is upbeat, motivated, and animated.
3. The ability to discern talent in potential employees
4. An ability to communicate
5. Unconditional loyalty to both you and other staff members.

There is, in my view, no offense more serious than disloyalty.

My checklist for keeping good staff members on the same page:

1. You must establish clear parameters for your staff regarding the overall method by which you expect things to be done.
2. Any philosophical differences that crop up must be identified and addressed by you in private meetings with the individual(s).
3. You must recognize that staff members may work in different ways, using approaches that are at variance with yours.
4. To ensure unanimity throughout the staff, make unannounced visits to various department meetings.
5. Don't cede inordinate power or control to a staff member simply because you are relieved to have an experienced and proven performer come on board.
6. Sometimes a staff member may intentionally teach a philosophy that is at odds with your code of conduct, in the belief that it conforms to your philosophy.

Be alert for those staff members who seek to use their position to teach and express their personal beliefs.

Success Disease—overconfidence is a major symptom—can happen in any profession and can be as difficult to remedy as under-confidence. Over- and under-confidence are an ongoing challenge in leadership. Only six teams in the history of the NFL have won the Super Bowl and then repeated by winning it again the next year.

I had been willing to remove players—even those with great talent—whose actions or attitude didn't conform to the Standard of Performance, who didn't get with the program.

A leader must be able to identify these types of situations and not shy away from removing malcontents from the organization. Many people have lofty aspirations. Unfortunately, aspiring isn't enough. You must also have the strength of commitment and sacrifice to adhere to those standards and ideals in both good times and bad.

He simply demanded maximum effort and effective execution from himself at all times and refused to quit until it was achieved. His character transformed those around him in a positive, even profound way.

In building and maintaining your organization, place a premium on those who exhibit great desire to keep pushing themselves to higher and higher performance and production levels, who seek to go beyond the highest standards that you, the leader, set.

Coach John Wooden: "I wanted players who had character, not players who were characters."

In evaluating people, I prize ego. It often translates into a fierce desire to do their best and an inner confidence that stands them in good stead when things really get rough. The damage a swaggering egotist can do to the organization always outweighs the good.

These four words—or their equivalents—constitute the most inspirational message a leader can convey. There are many different ways to do it, but the fundamental and underlying message must always be the same: "I believe in you. I know you can do the job."

"I believe in you." I said it, meant it, and had the expertise to teach them how to get better and better.

As a leader you must have the strength to let talented members of your organization know you believe in them—nurture nurture their belief in themselves, teach them what they need to know, and then watch what happens. Nobody will ever come back to you later and say "thank you" for expecting too little of them.

A good leader believes that he or she knows the secret (or secrets) for bringing a group up to maximum productivity, and in fact, if you don't know how to do it you'll soon be gone. One of your great challenges is finding the middle ground between the well-being of the people who work with you and the achievement of your goals.

The art of leadership requires knowing when it makes sense to take people over the top, to push them to their highest level of effort, and when to take your foot off the accelerator a little. The best leaders are those who understand the levels of energy and focus available within their team.

When it comes to demanding extreme effort, a good leader must exercise extreme prudence.

Here's my point. Occasionally, when striving to go beyond conventional results, you must go beyond the conventional and against popular opinion. This means trusting your own judgment enough to be resourceful, innovative, and imaginative. It means resisting the herd mentality.

To put it another way: Conventional wisdom often produces conventional results. Conventional thinking didn't produce Jerry Rice. It's a maxim that one enemy can do more damage than the good of a hundred friends. Open and honest communication with your superiors, both written and verbal, is a valuable tool in keeping them from coming to the wrong conclusions.

Jerry Rice understands the connection between preparation and performance; between intelligently applied hard work and results; for me, the starting point for everything—before strategy, tactics, theories, managing, organizing, philosophy, methodology, talent, or experience—is the work ethic. I think top performers in all professions have that same deep respect—even reverence—for their work.

If I have a vision, a concept, I know how to find a way to implement it and not back away from it, a determination to see it through and, if necessary, take risks to make it happen. That part of it never stopped—looking for innovative ways of doing things. I was always looking to build a better mousetrap.

Be careful not to quash an idea-friendly environment in your organization. It is critical that employee expectation levels be reasonable, attainable, and high. If you care about how you're perceived by others, including the public, it's good to remember the following: Criticism—both deserved and undeserved—is part of the territory when you're the one calling the shots. Ignore the undeserved; learn from the deserved; lick your wounds and move on.

High-risk decisions are very necessary at times but should not be an ongoing course of action.

Pretty soon you're on overload while very talented people in the organization are being underutilized.

Of the various failures I cite myself for, one of the most problematic may have been my inability to delegate to the extent I could, and should, have.

Well, that kind of thinking can only take you so far. Eventually, you're working seven days a week, sixteen hours a day with little good sleep, eating poorly, and dealing with all kinds of forces. The exhaustion I experienced, the track I was on, was partially the direct result of not being able to delegate more intelligently.

When you make a mistake, admit it and fix it. Don't let pride, stubbornness, or possible embarrassment about your bad decision prevent you from correcting what you have done. The world's best promotional tool is a good product. Winning can become insidious for the same reason, that is, you allow the victory to begin determining your self-worth, how you feel about yourself.

Either way, you are putting yourself on a slippery slope when you start believing that the outcome of your effort represents or embodies who you really are as a person. When people are frustrated, they look outside themselves for someone to blame;

Looking back on it, I concluded that there are times when you must stand up for yourself even if the consequences include being fired. That's easier said than done, as evidenced by the fact that I didn't do it.

Football coaches, just like executives who push themselves to the brink and beyond, often have no support system and become isolated from family, friends, and normal interactions. An ever-growing loathing of failure, which, uncontrolled, can eventually take over to a point of making you almost dysfunctional.

You must derive satisfaction and gratification from winning without letting it define your self-worth. I must admit that I'm not sure any of this would have benefitted me by the time I reached the end of my rope. The time to do it is before your tank is empty.

1. Do not isolate yourself.
2. Delegate abundantly.
3. Avoid the destructive temptation to define yourself as a person by the won-lost record, the "score," however you define it.
4. Shake it off.

Like many who wear blinders and focus on victory to the exclusion of everything else, I barreled down the highway until the engine burned up. While you can influence the result to a greater or lesser degree, you do not control the result.

The cruelty of the sport,

One of the lessons I learned was how people change with success or failure. People's behavior and attitudes can be transformed in the most positive or most disturbing ways. Starting in 1979 when he was appointed president, general manager, and head coach of a lowly franchise in San Francisco, a distant outpost in the eyes of many throughout the league.

I've come to understand that, in some ways, my father's life was almost Shakespearean, because what got him to the top professionally was his downfall personally; in spite of his incomparable achievements, he had trouble ever feeling fulfilled on a continuing basis.

When you achieve what he achieved, the inability or unwillingness to grant yourself happiness and satisfaction is perhaps tragic. In this and many other ways big and small, nobody had ever done it like Bill Walsh did it. His unorthodoxy put off owners who subsequently held him at arm's length.

Regardless of what he did, it seemed the powers that be would not accord him equal status, would not recognize the legitimacy of his approach and his leadership skills. Thus, he increasingly became driven by a simple but almost obsessive goal: to prove them all wrong. And he did.

As you've read in his own words, this desire to "do it all myself" eventually became an Achilles' heel for him. Improvement was his obsession—always looking for ways to improve his coaching, his team, his organization.

Bill Walsh may not have sold his soul to the company store, but he leased it to the game he loved for many years.