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Top performance starts with personal leadership

Top performance with a team can only be accomplished if the personal leadership factor is correct. This has more to do with attitude, energy, intuition and authenticity than pure skills and technique. Personal leadership factors of the Dutch women water polo team that won the 2008 Olympic title a few weeks ago are discussed here. It seemed to be a victory out of the blue. Let's have a look at their personal leadership.

We will do so by asking 6 questions. You even might think about the answers for yourself as a Coach, athlete, sponsor, trainer, teacher, manager or CEO. They could inspire you and stimulate your personal leadership...



1) Do you have a (dream) goal?

Do you have an ambitious dream (goal) for yourself? Is it leading with everything you do? So you always can ask yourself the question: does this lead towards my dream goal yes or no? The goal of the Dutch water polo team was to reach the semi-finals in the Olympics 2008, that was their mission. It is almost spiritual but in a very concrete and guiding way. It makes making choices easier and helps you stay on the right path, even if sometimes you experience setbacks (in the long 3 years of preparation as well as the tournament itself: the Dutch team lost to Hungary in the first game). Ambition is very important here, look where the Dutch team came from: they did not even qualify for the 2004 Olympics and now their ambition was huge, a dream goal to be proud of.

2) Do you have a plan (and do you stick to it)?

If the goal is clear the question is how to get there, so you make the plan and you stick to it. The plan in this case was very clear: bring the best talents together and create a team by keeping them together (literally) for 3 years in the same location and train 5-6 hours every day. There might be contingencies that you have to deal with, this was the case when some very talented top players (3 years ago) chose not to join the plan. So the team that started preparations at that time was not the best team that they could bring together. By now we know that this team is even better, this works macro and micro, with respect to your dream goal as well as the tactics for the match and the adversary of that day. The Dutch water polo team lost their first game to Hungary and lots of pressure was put on the team from the outside to change tactics but Coach Robin van Galen resisted and did not change anything, he knew what he was doing. They had been preparing and working on the plan for 3 years... and he stuck to it.

3) Do you use authentic power?

Do you trust that every player has his or her own specific abilities that contribute to the team performance in a very unique way? From a coaches' perspective as well as a players' perspective, instead of trying to develop somebody against their character the idea is to build a team that is balanced out and works together based on every individual's strengths. Coach Van Galen created a balanced team based on performance, technique,

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experience and character. He started to recognize the strengths of the team (being introverted for 75%) and acknowledged that although contrary to his extraverted personal style he was able to make them perform in flow at their introverted best.

4) Do you give trust?

Goalkeeper Ilse van der Meijden is still very young at only 19 years of age, but Coach Van Galen regards her to be one of the most highly talented goalkeepers in the world. Although she did not play her best game against Hungary, she was maintained in the team, despite high pressure in the media, from spectators and a number of internet forums to substitute Van der Meijden, Coach Van Galen decided to keep her in the team. From that moment on she played brilliant matches with heroic saves showing a high degree of self-confidence and impact in the centre of her defence.

5) Do you follow your gut feeling?

In all kind of important decision making situations in life the first hunch is the right one, after that we start analysing and rationalising in order to try to make no mistakes in the decision making process, which in turn often leads to the wrong decisions. This does not mean that we have to stop thinking, what we have to do is learn to rely more on our intuition and gut feeling. The critical issue here is to make the distinction between intuition and mental noise. Mental noise is the product of over rationalising and wrong attribution. If you have stopped and eliminated mental noise just see what happens...the body knows what to do. We have to let go and trust after all the hard work we have put in that the results it will come out. The example here is Danielle de Bruijn. Being top scorer of the tournament she made the difference in the final game versus the American team. She trusts on her instincts and never let herself be taken

off track by dirty tricks and heavy American power.



6) Are you inspiring others?

Are you an example for others? Do you inspire them and do you bring out the best in them? Because you walk your talk and vice versa? Because you have a clear goal and a clear vision? Because you are who you are and you know what you want? Because you are not afraid to give feedback if necessary and because your attitude is open towards others, they do the same to you? Do you bring energy instead of taking it away? Do you inspire others? Do you inspire yourself, resulting in moving things and people, and getting things done. An example of this aspect is Gillian van den Berg, with her 36 years and just having become a mother she moved from Palermo Italy where she lived with her family three years ago back to Holland and decided to almost completely give up family life in order to prepare with the team for their big dream goal. That is sacrifice that speaks for itself, it brings inspiration of a depth that is hard to imagine.

So for personal leadership questions, I hope that these questions and answers from the Dutch water polo woman Olympic Champions team have inspired you just a bit to think about your personal leadership and that it will bring you further on your search for excellence in whatever you do.

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