

Career Coaching International

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GRETZKY MAY NOT BE A GREAT COACH¹

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Is the best coach the one who has excelled in a trade or might it be the specialist, classified perhaps as less-than-great, who has had to learn the ropes, not from so much innate skill, but from mistakes? While there may be no doubt of the greatness of Wayne Gretzky 'the great one', his stature as a coach, yet untested, will probably not be so great if the conditions outlined in this paper prove relevant to his situation.

The Basic Premise

People who are particularly gifted pass along the route of success more swiftly than the less talented ones. They make excellence look easy compared with the larger group of hard-working, yet talented majority of well-skilled, but not-so-great, ones. Whether it is Gretzky scoring a goal, Tiger Woods winning another tournament or Pavarotti hitting a high C, they are able to do it with composure – no sweat – compared with the struggles of their capable, but nevertheless, lesser peers. Instead, the journeymen skilled persons, while adept enough to hit and stay in the upper echelons of their professions, must work hard, and they learn by trial and error to get at or near the top and to stay there. Even so, their duration in the top ranks is often half the time or less of that of the superstars.

It is this learning the 'hard way' that teaches the individual what to avoid, something they may be able to convey to others. Thus they often make good teachers and good coaches. The superstar, who takes the same steps 'naturally', not hitting those obstacles remains for the most part unaware of, or lacks an understanding of, many of the difficulties.

The Examples

Looking back to Mozart or Beethoven, we find that their teachers, while excellent at their craft, never excelled as performers. And what of Tiger Wood's coach? How many tournaments did he win? What

operas do you remember Pavarotti's voice coach as a star? If you look in the National Hockey League winning coaches – Jacques Martin, Ken Hitchcock or Pat Quinn – what do you recall of them as players?

In the Canadian Football League who remembers Frank Clair as a player; but most devout CFL fans remember him as an exemplary coach. Among the winning-est coaches in the CFL today, Wally Bueno, to give an example, was an average defensive back. Can you even remember for which team? While the most successful CFL coach ever, 66-year old Don Matthews, continues to have his teams compete in the Grey Cup; yet, who knows which team employed him in his CFL playing days, let alone his actual position? Russ Jackson, touted as the greatest CFL player ever, had a miserable one-year career as a coach in the CFL. Matt Dunnigan, one of the finest quarterbacks, had an equally abysmal one-year long coaching career leading his Calgary Stampeders to last place in the entire league only to be eclipsed the following year by Tom Higgins as coach (now who did he play for?) who took, essentially, the same Calgary team into the playoff finals. There are exceptions. Ron Lancaster was a great quarterback, and a good coach. However, despite 20 years in the coaching trade, he has no Grey Cup appearances to his credit and ended his career being fired by the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. Greatness as a coach eluded him. Similar stories will be found in the NFL, the NBA and major-league baseball.

Why is it so?

All humans and all animals learn by mistakes and build from those. A superstar does not make the same mistakes as a journeyman. Therefore gifted athletes or business-people have no knowledge or appreciation of the kinds of problems or difficulties that the average skilled person will encounter. Someone who has been through those difficulties does. Conversely, super-skilled people attribute their own abilities to others. Because the tasks are easy for the superstars to accomplish personally they don't see them as possible shortcoming for others.

¹ This note was drafted before the 2006 Olympic hockey series and was not influenced by the poor results of that event; in fact the Canadian men's hockey team's poor results add weight to the ideas of this paper.

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They don't even understand the problem. "Just skate out there and score a goal." (Great quarterbacks who coach end up having the team quarterback as the worst player on their team: e.g. both Russ Jackson and Matt Dunnigan as coaches had terrible quarterback players selected and coached).

What makes for a good Coach?

I believe that, besides the obvious requirements of intelligence and success in past endeavors, there are six necessary, and sufficient, ingredients that make for a great coach:

First, the coach will have a deep commitment to, and interest in, the subject matter.

Second, the coach will have considerable knowledge of the subject matter.

Third, the coach will have gained that considerable knowledge of the subject matter by experience, which was arrived at through learning by painful mistakes.

Fourth, that knowledge will be supported by an inordinate curiosity of what the system or tradecraft entails and how it works.

Fifth, the coach will be empathetic and selflessly interested in others. They will sacrifice themselves for others – sometimes giving up payments for services rendered or working unusual hours for their protégés.

Sixth, great coaches will get a thrill out of seeing other people improve and excel – even beyond the coach's own skills or achievement levels, being quite happy to set aside their own egos.

Conclusions

Getting back to Gretzky: he, by virtue of his superb talents, lacks the third condition above, the principle subject of this paper. Greatness as a coach, therefore, may elude him.

This paper's secondary and equally relevant conclusion, beyond experienced difficulties as a teacher, is that coaching requires six ingredients. Before you engage a coach for yourself, ensure that this mentor has as many of the six as possible².

Good luck to you in your search for answers to your profession or trade's conundrums and dilemmas. May a good coach be at your side to assist you.

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² CCI hires only coaches who have (a) been very successful in their careers (usually other walks of life) AND (b) have suffered a loss of employment and an extended job search themselves.