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Leadership Lessons via Michael Jordan

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Publication Information

Wittmeyer, Carol (2020). "Leadership Lessons via Michael Jordan." *Shoe Retailing Today*.

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Abstract

COVID-19 was a time that our stores closed to our customers, many for the first time in decades and even generations for the scores of NSRA members who are family firms. During the COVID-19 “work at home period,” when many owners and employees were hunkered down where they live, one of the interesting distractions was being able to watch “The Last Dance,” ESPN’s 10-part docuseries sanctioned by Michael Jordan about his and the Chicago Bulls’ dynasty of the 1990s. The series holds many leadership lessons to consider relevant to family firms and to organizations considering how to stay resilient in the global pandemic’s very “unprecedented” turbulent times.

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Published in the September/October 2020 issue of Shoe Retailing Today, Copyright © 2020, National Shoe Retailers Association, Tucson, AZ, www.nsra.org. All rights reserved.

Leadership Lessons via Michael Jordan

CAROL WITTMAYER, ED.D.

COVID-19 was a time that our stores closed to our customers, many for the first time in decades and even generations for the scores of NSRA members who are family firms. During the COVID-19 “work at home period,” when many owners and employees were hunkered down where they live, one of the interesting distractions was being able to watch “The Last Dance,” ESPN’s 10-part docuseries sanctioned by Michael Jordan about his and the Chicago Bulls’ dynasty of the 1990s. The series holds many leadership lessons to consider relevant to family firms and to organizations considering how to stay resilient in the global pandemic’s very “unprecedented” turbulent times.

Whether you are a basketball fan or not, most Americans recognize Michael Jordan as one of the best athletes ever. He is credited with having drawn nearly countless fans, as well as future professional players, into his sport – and he earned millions of dollars, not just by playing but also from his partnership with Nike producing the famed Air Jordan shoes. His post-basketball career saw him become both a product pitch man and a frequent guest on talk shows, in addition to becoming an often-quoted individual – and earning even more millions. But the likeable Michael Jordan the public saw was not necessarily the same man his professional teammates saw.

The Captain as a Type

Leadership guru Sam Walter has studied and written about the 17 most dominant sport teams and noted that

they had one thing in common: Each employed the same type of captain – a singular leader with an unconventional set of skills and tendencies. As Walter studied “The Last Dance,” he wondered, “Was Michael Jordan a brilliant leader, or



Carol Wittmeyer, Ed.D.

a merciless tyrant?” In a *Wall Street Journal* article published on May 16, 2020, Walter said he “long argued that while Jordan was an otherwise worldly athlete with many outstanding leadership traits, he was a defective captain.” In his analysis of “The Last Dance,” Walter noted that there was a chapter missing from the series. It related to the Bulls’ decision to add co-leadership, ostensibly to round out Jordan’s leadership abilities. As Walter said, “The best way to evaluate Michael Jordan’s leadership is to travel back to Dec. 19, 1990: the day the Bulls decided to stop losing. At the time, nobody thought this ninth-place team was a contender. Jordan

was in his seventh season under his fourth coach and had never been to the NBA Finals. The night before, he’d dropped 33 points on the Detroit Pistons, but none of his teammates cracked double figures. The Bulls lost by 21.

“Michael Jordan was known to ridicule anyone who didn’t meet his standards. The following day, however, Chicago stopped playing like a one-man band. Five players, including Jordan, scored in double digits, kicking off a stretch of 12 wins over 13 games. By March, the Bulls had the best record in the NBA. They went on to win their first championship.

“The only possible explanation for this turnabout I could find came from a brief item in the *Chicago Tribune*. ‘The Bulls have named center Bill Cartwright a co-captain along with Michael Jordan, who had held the job by himself.’

“Cartwright, an 11-year veteran, seemed like a curious choice. He was Jordan’s polar opposite; a quiet, modest, brooding, unflashy grinder who rarely smiled or sought the spotlight.

“As a captain, Cartwright’s job was to rebuild something Jordan had constantly undermined: the team’s connection and camaraderie. He was a mentor to younger players, who called him ‘Teach.’”

Team Sets Stage

It appears that a trigger for the Bulls’ long, successful run had to do with the Bulls setting the stage to bring in Cartwright to help rebuild the team’s connections and to mentor the young



Michael Jordan

players. His strengths were not Jordan's strengths, and vice versa. Their co-leadership resulted in their building a team of outstanding players who were in sync.

How does this relate to family businesses in NSRA? There are many parallels in Michael Jordan's intense leadership behaviors that can be noted in family business entrepreneurs. These relate to his relentless toughness, competitiveness and a lack of showing vulnerability, which can be viewed as weakness. By adding a co-captain, who was able to relate to the players – young and old – and who spent time developing them, the team became unified towards a common goal.

Are There Parallels?

So in thinking about your family business, I invite you to think about any parallels with "The Last Dance."

First: Does the leader have weaknesses that might cause a team to not win? Are there other leadership structures and development plans that can be implemented to help the next generation thrive? Could a co-captain take some of the burdens off the leader, giving the leader more time to focus on business questions beyond the day-to-day (such as expansion, eventual leadership succession, how best to train new workers, building relationships with new vendors)?

Next: At what point does a business need a "co-captain"? Who on your team is potentially that person? What characteristics and experience does that individual have that will allow him/her to mentor others? To "balance" your leadership style? To reach people who may be either in awe or fear of you as the boss? Is that person interested in co-captaining with you?

Next: How do you introduce a "co-captain"? Other staff members need to know how much authority is vested in him, whether he can serve as their liaison with you, whether he is being groomed to take your place.

Evaluate Your Captaincy

Love for basketball – or for business – may help someone become an excellent performer. But personal performance isn't always enough. "The Last Dance" showed us that brilliance can show itself as tyranny that leads a captain to become "defective" – so take the time to evaluate your own captaincy, and ask yourself if a co-captain might be a helpful addition, to you or to your employees, or to both. If the answer is "yes," start grooming one. ■

Carol Wittmeyer, Ed.D., is Interim Dean of the School of Business, St. John Fisher College, professor emerita at St. Bonaventure University, and teaches at Loyola University of Chicago. She is also a founding faculty member of NSRA's NextGen initiative.