



Don't Just Lead. Coach.

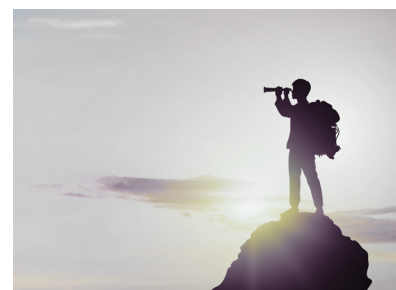
A servant leadership approach to improving results by bringing out the best in the people you lead

Leadership isn't about being the smartest person in the room or barking out the sharpest critique. It's about enabling people to reach their full potential — and often, far beyond what they believed possible. Yet many leaders, especially in high-pressure environments, still default to pressure and correction as their go-to tools. They assume that tough goals and a tough tone are what drive results.

That belief is common. It's also incomplete.

Most of what I've learned about leadership didn't come from a boardroom. It came from the locker room. As a multi-sport athlete in my youth and into college, I played for some truly outstanding coaches. They taught me that success wasn't just about talent. It was about hustle, courage, and resourcefulness. And more than anything, they showed me the power of belief — how a coach's belief in you can change how you see yourself, how you perform, and how you grow.

My best coaches were demanding. They set a high bar. But they never let their intensity override their ability to connect and inspire. They understood the value of catching players doing something right and using that as a teaching moment. They didn't just critique — they coached. And that distinction stuck with me. So much so that it led me to pay it forward by coaching youth sports myself as my avocation.



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Why Critique Alone Falls Short

Over the last four decades, I've coached hundreds of athletes and I've learned a great deal about human behavior in the process. I've also seen how often coaches, and by extension, business leaders, get it wrong.

Too many coaches treat the game like whack-a-mole. They chase every mistake. They yell from the sidelines. They're so focused on what's wrong, they forget to reinforce what's working. I've coached underdog teams that outperformed much more talented opponents, not because we had more skill, but because the other coach had lost their players by the end of the game. You could see it in the players' eyes. Their enthusiasm had flatlined. They were playing not to mess up. And that mindset is contagious.

Sound familiar? It should. The corporate world is full of managers who elbowed and climbed their way up the ladder through sheer ambition and intellect but never learned how to bring out the best in others. They lead with control and pressure, not coaching. They're quick to point out flaws, slow to praise, and often blind to the damage they're doing.



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Culture of Failure Avoidance

Even if you are a leader who understands this concept, you may find yourself swimming against the tide. Early in my career, I worked at a large company where the CEO was notoriously critical. Most meetings with him were focused on a game of “gotcha” rather than working collaboratively to build the business. He was determined to be the smartest man in the room. One wall in his office was designated the “Wall of Shame.” On the wall were pictures of people who had erred, along with information documenting their blunders — the opposite of catching people doing something well. While the wall was an object of humor for some, it set a tone that mistakes would be publicly ridiculed. There was no Wall of Fame for good deeds and accomplishments.

Focusing on punishing people who exhibit unwanted behavior and poor results rather than fueling and rewarding success breeds an unhealthy culture of failure avoidance. A leader's own successful career and ascent to the top may have been driven by a keen desire to win, but disdain for bad news and failure can inadvertently send a signal that what matters most is avoiding failure.

People learn to protect themselves by manipulating and editorializing information to avoid the “Wall of Shame.” This fear of failure breeds a lack of courage and willingness to embrace smart risks that might lead to success. Rather than a vibrant culture of learning and innovation that fuels profitable growth, you’ll find a cover-your-ass culture that persistently underachieves.

Coaching That Builds Performance and Growth

Now, let’s be clear. I’m not suggesting leaders avoid tough conversations. Accountability matters. Honest feedback matters. But so does balance. A leader can be tough, demanding, and forceful without being an egocentric jerk driven by personal insecurities. Praise is not about coddling. It’s about reinforcing what works and helping others connect the dots.

Coaches like John Wooden, Pat Summitt, and Dean Smith understood this intuitively. They paused practice to celebrate excellence — not just to congratulate but to dissect. They turned excellence into a teachable moment, helping others see what success looked like and how to replicate it. Their players didn’t just perform; they grew.

I had the chance to work with Pat Summitt and attend a Lady Vols game as her guest coach earlier in my business career. Watching her coach up close was a masterclass in emotional intelligence. She balanced the benefits of both challenging and supporting. She could be demanding, but never demeaning. And she understood how to build belief in her players and bring out the best in her team.

Reframing Failure

John Hamm wrote in his book *Unusually Excellent*, “Winners don’t see the opposite of winning as losing. They see it as not winning yet.”

The best leaders adopt that growth mindset and force-multiply their leadership influence by teaching it to others. They view failure not as something to hide but as a signal, a clue, a moment to reassess and improve.

These leaders are also self-aware enough to know that their keen desire to win can be perceived by others as intolerance of bad news and failure.



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They work hard to break down the filters that keep uncomfortable truths from reaching them. That means putting systems in place for objective performance assessment — and creating an environment where people feel safe telling the truth even when it is unpleasant.

They send an important message when they salute and reward those who have the courage, integrity, and initiative to deliver bad news with a plan for astute and swift course correction. This encourages people to seek opportunities to improve performance rather than hide screw-ups, and it sends a message to the troops that “we are in it together.”

The ultimate result is a vibrant culture of collaboration and innovation that fuels sustained growth, rather than a culture that misses learning opportunities because it hides mistakes to avoid punishment.

Final Thought

The best leaders spark belief. They fuel the fire in the belly that inspires people to raise the bar — not just for the business, but for themselves. They help others see what’s possible.

Many of us were taught that adversity and tough love shape resilient individuals who overcome obstacles. And I have no doubt that the significant challenges I faced during my formative years taught me valuable lessons that fueled some of my achievements. But the truth is, none of us succeed entirely on our own.

While adversity can make us tougher and more resilient, it was the coaches and mentors in my life who guided me toward overachievement. Most of them were builders of people. They lifted me up by modelling what excellence looks like, and they instilled in me the belief that I had what it took to achieve it *if* I gave it everything I had.

That’s what great leaders do. They bring out the best in their people and find the utmost gratification in helping them achieve more than they ever thought possible.



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About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at jdrgrowthpartners.com and [The Bridge to Growth](#).



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