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Go for the Gold

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For some managers and their work groups, everything they do seems to result in gold-medal performance. Roadblocks appear to fall away. Goals are achieved even when opportunities or resources are slim, or conditions are rapidly deteriorating. They have an uncanny ability to sell new ideas and get buy-in for new approaches that give them a competitive advantage. They consistently do the right thing at the right time. Breakthrough performance occurs beyond anyone's expectations. Meeting customer needs ahead of competitors. Like gold medal teams, they find a way to work together, communicate effectively and combine their efforts to reach the goal.

What prevents your team from reaching gold-medal status? You know your staff is talented, but certain people seem to underachieve. You have a hard time convincing your peers to support your innovative ideas because they have little confidence your team can deliver. Meanwhile, your team thinks you don't support them, and you can't get the resources you need. It seems that even a bronze medal could be a stretch for your team.

Why aren't you the one who rewrites the rules when times change? You may be so deeply involved in daily fire-fighting that any new ideas seem impractical. Or you may feel worried about your staff's willingness to adapt to a proposed change; rather than lead them into different thinking, you become their advocate for the status quo.

Here's what you need to do to take the reins of change and be heralded as a highly accountable, results-oriented leader who leads their team to gold.

What Holds You Back?

Ask yourself these three questions:

Am I a "pleaser," without the ability or willingness to follow-through in action?

When you avoid saying "No," you risk over-committing what you and your staff are capable of doing. Don't think your "yes-saying" is some sort of noble sentiment of wanting to serve. Motivation for "pleasing" people generally springs from fear of upsetting them by not saying what they want to hear. Being too agreeable hurts your relationships and your credibility in the long run. Are you striving for gold for your team or to impress someone else?

Do I avoid planning and, instead rely on the "wing it" approach, assuming that "things always work out?"

This set of habits often results from procrastination and last-minute-itis, leading to unnecessary stress. Reflect for a moment to see if your avoidance is actually a fear of exerting your influence, thus leaving yourself open to negative feedback about your plans. Or are you are afraid to fully invest yourself? A great fallback is always, "did the best I could, given I only had the last two days to work on it." Then if it's not good enough, you've already got the perfect explanation lined up. How much preparation and planning goes into gold-medal performances?

Am I afraid to seek help or advice from others because this brings up my own failure to "think of everything," leading to feelings of inadequacy?

Examine the last few decisions you made in challenging situations and find the common thread in your decision not to reach out to others for their guidance and input. Do I avoid change by keeping my head in the sand, "wishing away" the reality of a changing world? It's hard to face this particular trait but many people focus more on finding reasons to justify not making a change than aligning their organization around the need to change and then driving it to conclusion. Even Olympic

gold medalists have coaches, and usually, often more than one.

Achieving Results, Leading Change

Now take these seven actions:

1. Only make commitments you intend to keep.

You may not know how you'll get to the end result and meet the schedule constraints, but make sure that you're committed to deliver, no matter what it takes. You will build a reputation for being reliable and acting with integrity. No one ever won a gold medal without first committing to do so.

2. Plan carefully for success.

Get agreement from your group and managers on goals, strategy, and measurements. Estimate and negotiate resources needed to achieve goals, and make a game plan.

3. Don't do it alone.

Combat isolation by collaborating with others to identify cross-functional issues that emerge from change. Form teams to capitalize on change. Make improvements across organizations. Find reliable coaches and teammates who will help guide you to the gold.

4. Work with your group to identify roadblocks.

Identify allies who may help diminish barriers to implementing the ideas, and build contingency plans if insurmountable barriers arise.

5. Anticipate change.

Set plans each year based on multiple scenarios rather than single forecasts. Operate with three different forecasts of key conditions that impact your operations, and position yourself across the uncertainty of which scenario might occur.

6. Take charge of chaos.

Propose incremental and breakthrough changes, including details of purpose, scope, resource requirements, milestones, measurement systems, and implications. Show the benefits of short-term successes and long-term wins that support the company's direction.

7. Own your contribution to problems and unexpected glitches.

Someone may not have done something you expected, but look first at your communication about your expectations, not at their failure. By role modeling ownership and accountability, your own team will begin to claim their contribution to problems, speed up learning, and go for the gold.



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