

MANAGEMENT LESSONS FROM MOVIES

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LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM **COACH CARTER**

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THE STORY IN BRIEF

Coach Carter is possibly one of my all time favourite movies. I have used it to illustrate many leadership lessons - even during my 'formal' training programs. It is also one of the first movies I sat my daughter and watched together when she took on a leadership position for the first time. To me, it was almost as if the movie was made for leadership lessons.

This true story is based on the amazingly inspiration story of Coach Ken Carter who takes on the rather unenvious job of Coaching his former High School Basket Ball team who is at the bottom of the league table : and also, hugely indisciplined. With many children coming from broken homes, without positive role models, and running amok.

The movie outlines the rather hard nosed approach the Coach takes : and also, his bigger ambition of ensuring every single player in the team does well in their studies as well as winning matches. The head on collision with both players as well as their parents makes the story an eventful rollercoaster ride : filled with joys and desperation to the nail biting end which you will not generally expect !



1. A LEADER NEEDS TO 'SET THE TONE'

Coach Carters 'introduction' to the team sets the tone for the movie : and also for his tenure as Coach.

Often, 'setting the tone' is important for a leader. Often this needs to be at the very outset. Often, not doing so becomes a huge impediment for the future plans.

The Coach Carter approach is a rather severe and a drastic one : however, the situation demanded it : and if it was NOT done, chances are he would have fared no better than the previous Coach - who was an extremely 'sweet' guy who had his heart in the right place - but haplessly ineffective in bringing in results.

Tone is set not only by what you say and do : but also in creating simple 'frameworks' to work collectively on. Getting the team to sign 'contracts' sound ludicrous (in a school setting) but it was a 'tactic' that was used to demonstrate how 'serious' playing basketball was. Ensuring they wore tie and jacket on game day, spoke to each other with respect and dignity, came for practices each day, ensure they maintained a healthy grade score average for their studies were ALL part of the contract. Notice that this was all about 'creating a framework' that was common to EVERYONE : which is fundamental to ensuring the tone is set right - from the very start...

Moral of the story : you need to take charge of a situation : and set the tone. Unless you do, you run the risk of not 'being taken seriously' as a leader.



2. DISCIPLINE BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

A thematic that runs right through the movie is **Coach Carter's** rather obsessive focus on discipline. He enforces it rigidly for two main reasons :

- You cannot play a solid game without being fit first
- He understands that building discipline will also build character : which I believe was the more overarching principle he was driving

Discipline is often forgotten in today's leadership conversations. However, without having base discipline in place, getting results in any organisation (of any shape or size) is virtually impossible. No matter what the strategy, how good the people, how extensive the resources, without discipline - and being disciplined as a team, chances are, success will be short-lived.



3. STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT IS CRITICAL

Carter garners the support of all his stakeholders. He has ongoing conversations with his wife - and ensures she is onboard. He ensures his son understands. He ropes in the parents. He ensures his players buy into his 'bigger' vision of academic excellence. He ensures the teachers and the principle are also on board (even though it maybe grudgingly at times).

Bottomline is this : unless you get wide support details you from your objective. This was the case with the 'lockdown' situation : which was a clear example of how stakeholders can completely upset your (otherwise well thought through) plans. The fact that the players understood his bigger Vision and bought into it, and supported it was the only saving grace : and the ONLY reason the Coach could come back to finish what he started.

Two critical lessons :

- Ensure you have the right support
- In case key stakeholders 'rebel' against you - ensure you have a power base built to be able to hold away none the less.



4. THE RULE BOOK IS THE SAME FOR EVERYONE

When his own son turns up late for practice, **Coach Carter** mercilessly punishes him - on his first day of practice mind you !

This makes a very very important impact. The team understands that the Coach does not play 'favourites' and that he treats everyone fair and square. This ensures that he has credibility.

Losing credibility is the fastest way to failure as a leader. Most of the time, leaders lose credibility because they don't 'play it square' with the team : and resorts to having 'different rules' based on either seniority or based on 'favouritism'.

The movie is a brilliant example of how to build credibility as a leader by ensuring you have the 'same rule book' for everyone...



5. BEING CONSIDERATE AND GENUINELY CARING AS MUCH AS BEING TOUGH

One of the biggest mistakes leaders make is either being too tough or being too soft. Being tough is important : and being 'soft' is also important.

The movie is dotted with examples where Coach Carter shows his 'softer side.' Being considerate towards a concerned mother who wants her son to keep playing (when he disrespected the Coach and left) : and the Coach taking him back in, to Timo Cruz being hugged and taken into his home when his cousin Renee is shot dead are two classic examples of the Coach making exceptions : and truly truly caring.

Something that is absolutely clear is that the Coach **LOVES** his team - and every single one of his players. He wants **ALL OF THEM** to succeed - not only as players but also as individuals and young men. **EVERYTHING** he does is to ensure this becomes the end objective : and the team sees this...

As a leader you really do need to demonstrate love and consideration for the team. Many will take all your tough rules **PROVIDED** they understand the 'bigger picture' and 'feels' the love from the leader.



6. TEAM MEMBERS NEED TO TAKE LEADERSHIP WHEN REQUIRED, AND LEARN TO FOLLOW WHEN REQUIRED TOO

Once a team is 'drilled' into place, a leader needs to trust them to deliver : and make their own decisions.

The movie illustrates this extremely well : where even the military styled Coach offers attitude and leeway to the team having satisfied himself that they are 'ready'

The role of both mentoring (telling and specifying what to do in an effort to teach) and Coaching (guiding an individual to find their own answers in an effort to grow them as individuals) are both demonstrated in the movie : and it is important to understand that both are actually required in leadership positions. Knowing when to Mentor and when to Coach is critical as much as understanding that there is a role for both in a leadership role.



7. STAND BY YOUR PRINCIPLES - IF IT IS FOR THE BETTERMENT OF THE OVERALL PURPOSE - EVEN IF IT COSTS YOU PERSONALLY

Coach Carter is a classic example of Principle Based Leadership.

The Coach is absolutely unwavering in his convictions : and his bigger purpose. When the purpose is challenged, and 'winning' games becomes more important than 'becoming better men' and the whole community rises against him, the Coach is still stoic and rooted in his convictions.

In many leadership journeys we have to decide whether we play 'populist' or whether we play by our convictions. Standing up for what is truly more important : even when no one else supports it ultimately is the litmus test of a principle centred leader.

The pivotal point to remember is that being a leader and 'keeping your job' are two very different things indeed - and sometimes, you got to choose which is more important to you...



8. WINNING THE GAME AT THE COST OF PERSONAL DETRIMENT IS NOT SUCCESS

- Too many times we achieve results at the cost of people.
- Too many times we lose sight of what is more important.
- Too many times we compromise on what matters more - for the sake of short term gains.

Coach Carter was resolute in his conviction that Winning a Championship was **NOT** the most important goal to achieve. Every single player that played for Coach Carter ended up going to University, educating themselves, and also, having better lives than they ever could have imagined for themselves.

As a leader you must always ensure you team members succeed : as much as ensuring the organisational objectives are achieved. Never losing sight of that, and the obligation and commitment you need to have for the betterment of your team is a sacrosanct duty for a leader.



9. OWN UP TO YOUR OWN MISTAKES

As tough a task master as he was, **Coach Carter** was 'big enough' to admit to his own mistakes : and make an apology.

This is critical to a leader. We **ALL** make mistakes - and being able to humble yourself to admit to it and accept it - and then, go on to ensure you correct it sends a very powerful message to the entire team.

Leaders need to 'show the way' to better behavior. Simply talking about it is not enough : you really do need to walk the talk when it comes to values.

Owning up and apologising creates a culture of being open to making mistakes and learning from it - rather than being defensive and playing hierarchy - a critical ingredient to an egalitarian culture and a meritocracy.



10. GROW A TEAM - NOT INDIVIDUAL BRILLIANCE

Coach is clear that the **TEAM** is far more important than any individual player. This he drums in early - and drums in hard. When the 'best players' leave he is utterly unmoved - and simply states 'we will have new top scores this season' and never backs off from his rules or expectations.

The **TEAM** is what the Coach drives : never an individual. **ALL** individuals are expected to contribute towards the **TEAM EFFORT** : not to shine as individuals. Infact, he actively discourages 'showing off' and taking the 'spotlight'

A big lesson to learn as a leader is that over reliance on a few 'superstars' is always counterproductive : and that as a leader you need to grow the entire team. Working together is the key : not 'supporting the star' : an important distinction one is wise to learn as a leader.



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