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Playing the Whole Game

Leadership Lessons
from Sports and Business

Brandon Steiner

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As part of the ongoing Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series, Brandon Steiner, founder and CEO of Steiner Sports Marketing, along with John Zenger and Joseph Folkman, discuss Brandon's successful sports marketing and memorabilia company and the similarities between sports and business as it relates to leadership.

This eBook is a brief summary of that conversation. Listen to the podcast for the full conversation.

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How did you get started in business?

This is our 28th year at Steiner Sports. We started as a marketing company, marketing athletes and booking athletes all over the world. There are a lot of companies that do this now, but 30 years ago, not so much. About six or seven years after that, we started the Steiner Collectible company.

We have collections around teams and players. My ultimate goal is to get fans and people that love sports right inside the game by meeting players and providing them with fun stuff to help them remember sports moments and players on a day-to-day basis.

Can you tell us how you get a sense of what people want?

It's funny, because people always talk about our stuff as being crap. I say C.R.A.P. stands for Collectables, Rare, and Precious. I think people like to save memories.

Most people have a feeling about something that happened in their lives and a connection to those moments. It's not really the value of the things you collect; it's how they make you feel.

With our stuff, we really want to make you feel great and get you right back into those moments that were really fabulous to you. I like all the stuff connected to great moments. That's how it all works for me in my head.



What memorabilia piece surprised you the most that you thought wouldn't be worth much but ended up being worth a lot?

In 2004 we had the home plate from Yankee Stadium and I was just about ready to jump off a bridge.

The Red Sox had just beaten the Yankees, even though the Yankees had been up three games to none. If you remember, the Red Sox then went on to win the World Series. It was the “Reverse of the Curse.”

I had all of this stuff from Yankee Stadium and Yankees fans wanted no part of that memorabilia. Many fans considered that one of the worst losses in franchise history. I then thought that it could be sold to Red Sox fans. I signed a bunch of Red Sox players and had the best year in the company's history.

Sometimes you look at things and you need to get up and sit in a different seat and get a different view. I tell people, “Move your desk. Move your chair in your office. Sometimes you get a different view and you look at things differently.”

That home plate from Yankee Stadium sold for \$215,000 to a Red Sox fan.

Sometimes you think you are doomed and you might just need to get up and change your seat.

You are in this intersection between business and sports. Which principles apply to both arenas?

Business is the ultimate sport. It's a 24/7 sport, 365. The fundamental difference is that in sports you know your competition. In business, there are all kinds of people competing against you and sometimes you don't even know who you are competing with.

Besides the competitive spirit, you have to be well prepared to be successful in business. You also need the fortitude to be able to play the whole game.



Many times in business you are having a great week and then the last couple of days you just drop off. Or you are having a great day and the last few hours you just drop off. It's the same with a team: they play great for three quarters and in the fourth quarter they drop off. When you go to a game, you don't want to see a team do that. You have to play the whole game.

I think teamwork is really understated these days in many companies. It is not only what you can do for your company, but also what you can do for your teammates and other employees to make them better.

We know that the great players in sports, the ones we all respect, have all wanted to make major impacts, not only on the sport, and not only on their teams, but on the individual players around them. They've made them better. You look at Michael Jordan. I mean, Scottie Pippin, Will Perdue, and Craig Hodges. You can go down the list. These were good players, but he made them great.

What impact have you had with the people sitting in the carrel or office next to you?

The great leaders, the ones that move up the ladder at companies, not only take care of their own business, but they are always looking out for others and do things that don't get on the scorecards.

You've had the privilege of meeting some great names in sports. What have you seen these people do that really stands out to you?

When I look at great athletes, the best of the best all have amazing similarities. Peyton Manning, Joe Namath, Derek Jeter, Mark Messier, and Eli Manning all have great families and great connections to their families.

There is no question that a big part of their leadership and some of their greatness comes from who raised them and who they've grown up with. I think this definitely transcends because these people understand how important it is to be that way with their teammates and their organizations.



They also put their teammates first. I remember asking Mickey Mantle to help with a video. He agreed if I also gave money to a few of his teammates, which he matched. He was willing to give some of his own money to help his teammates.

Another example, a hockey rookie came up and didn't have a suit to wear to the game. And sure enough, he shows up in the locker room and Mark Messier had bought him a suit.

These little things show leadership: knowing the importance of your role and helping others that aren't quite there yet, especially when they are young.

Think about in your organization, any time new employees start, whatever is your position, besides going over and saying hello? They don't know where to eat, where the bathroom is, where they get paper clips, and who they ask for this and for that. How much do you go out of your way?

With great players, it is more about their approach and not so much about their game. They are all playing on a high level. I think that the difference makers at the leadership level have a real concern for others so that they can produce and feel part of the team.

You have observed some great coaches. What do they have in common and what lessons are translatable to the business world?

Coaching and managing today is at its most difficult level because we are dealing with a very changed culture. We have young people in the marketplace and we have old-school people who are working longer in their lives than ever before.

Something I have learned from watching the Joe Torres and the Bill Belichick is that you can't treat everybody the same—you just need to treat everybody fairly. Many people get caught up in trying to treat everybody the same. You need to be firm, fair, and consistent. You don't need to be everybody's best friend, and you don't need to be hard. They say, "Nice guys finish last." I think in management, nice guys finish first, but being firm and fair is what people respect.



I've seen managers hurt their teams in the short run because they knew that disciplining a player was best for the team in the long run. This is a hard lesson to learn. It sends a bad message when you let things go.

One of my favorite messages to managers is, "If you see something wrong and you don't say anything, it is like saying it is okay."

It is important that you respond to things going on in your workplace, even though it might affect productivity in the short term, because in the long term, everybody is looking. If they see one person doing something wrong and it seems like it is okay, eventually you'll have your whole company doing it.

The second point I want to make to managers is that your company and your management team are a reflection of you.

If they are down, out, and flat, that means that you are down, out, and flat. If they are enthusiastic, lively, and have the attitude to do whatever it takes, it usually comes from management. Everything starts from the top. Understand that the company is a mirror of you. The energy and enthusiasm you see is the energy and enthusiasm you are putting out.

What's the secret to networking?

I hate to give you the bad news, but the first thing you need to do is forget about the word "networking." If you want to network, stop networking. It is so hard to call someone up cold or to be in a room where you don't know anyone and start introducing yourself. You shouldn't have a high expectation of meeting a lot of people this way.

My mother said, "If you want to meet somebody, figure out how you can meet their best friend." The way I have gone about meeting new people and expanding my flock, so to speak, is getting to know the people I already know better. This is a real problem I have with younger people: they are always looking to meet the next person or to do the next thing. Meanwhile the thing right in front of them has so much more opportunity.

I ask people, "How well do you know your neighbors, your friends, your classmates, and your employees?" These people will lead you to a lot of new contacts and networks.



The average person meets something like 10,000 people in his or her life. That's a lot of people. If we actually just slowed down and took measure of all those people that we naturally meet through family, friends, classmates, and employees, the networking takes care of itself.

What advice about being a better leader would you give a young person?

First of all, be prepared to fail. The great leaders know they are going to fail, but they know how to pick themselves up and they know how to get themselves going again. They don't let a bump in the road put them on the side of the road. This is a big thing with leadership, because when you are leading and you fail, people are looking at how you respond and what kind of fortitude you have. You can easily lose or gain respect.

You wrote a book called, *The Business Playbook: Leadership From the World of Sports*. What is the one thing in this book that everyone should focus on, the big insight?

When I got out of college, I applied for about 200 jobs and the result of those applications was zero offers. I did probably 100 interviews. The thing I learned is that getting a job is a job. If finding a job is important, you need to schedule the work necessary to find that job.

And for those that have a job, maybe part of your job is to get more clients or more work. You need to schedule time to go find more work. Getting more work is a job.

That's what I was hoping the first book would accomplish—for people to understand that the work and the preparation, the underneath of it all, the processes that get you to the next step are important. You don't just go and get more work.

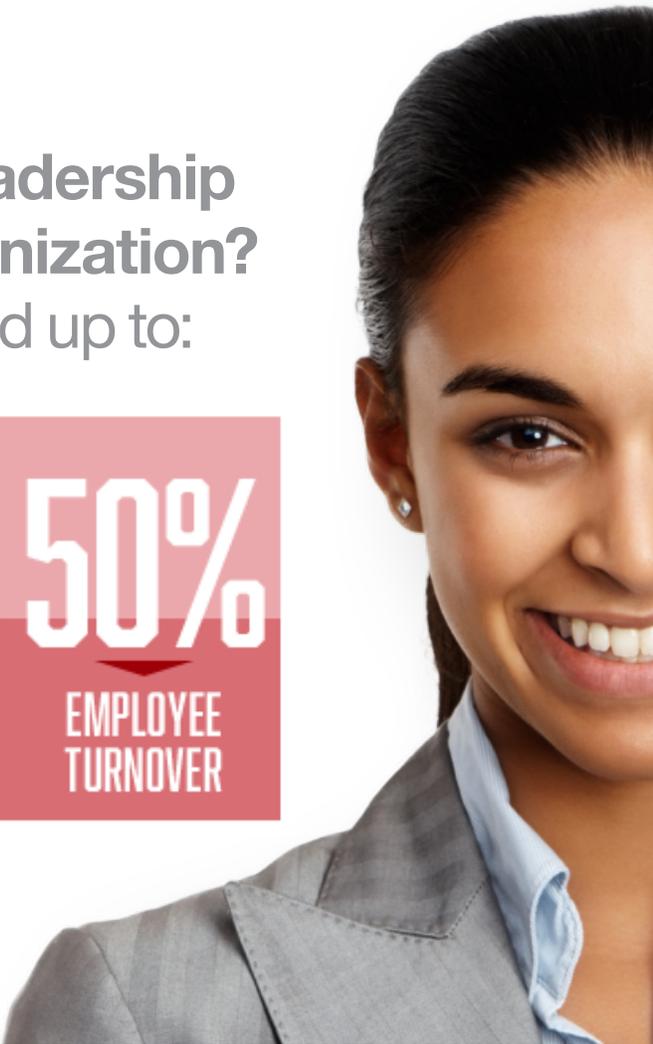


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