What It Means to Be a Man
Mullen, Bill

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Chapter 4

EXCELLING VERSUS COMPETING

Most people love competition. It sharpens the edge of the game at hand and pushes us to work harder in the interest of winning—or maybe not be embarrassed by losing. While this motivation can be useful in the pursuit of forming teams and enabling them to win, on an individual basis, outside of individual sports such as running or swimming, it can be poisonous. It engenders the desire in some to cut others short or try to make them look bad so that they can advance. Competition can also kill the trust that is required for successful teams. Consider team sports and, when a team does not get along or has too many individuals instead of team members, it is almost guaranteed to be a losing team or at least not as successful.

A good illustration of this was when a friend in the Marine Corps was stationed in Cleveland, Ohio, training reservists about 15 years ago. He had developed such a strong relationship with the Cleveland Browns football team that he traveled with them on occasion. On a return trip to Cleveland from yet another loss, he looked around the
airplane at the team and remarked to one of the coaches that he did not see a team, he only saw a collection of individuals. They were all in their own world and did not interact much with each other like a good team naturally does. This might explain why they had losing records for so many years. The opposite side of this coin would be the approach Coach John Wooden always took, “A player who makes the team great is better than a great player.”¹

In essence, we should never seek to compete with our peers in the game of life. Doing so breeds aggressiveness and enables the ruthless to win at the expense of everyone else. This is not the environment that breeds the trust essential to the teamwork required in many walks of life, but most particularly in the profession of arms. Those who compete with their peers take pleasure in beating others regardless of the topic or enjoy when their peers fall short. Their entire concept of self-worth relies on them being better than anyone else and they are crestfallen when they realize they really are no better than anyone else. The root of the issue is that, no matter how skilled or knowledgeable, with a global population of 8 billion people, there is likely someone out there who can do it better than you. For hypercompetitors, the frustration that comes with realizing this fact generally causes them to either push harder in their pursuit of being the best, usually at the expense of everything else in their life, or they quit.²

During my time in the Marine Corps, I saw the ill effects of careerism in the officer corps of the Service. But, from my experience, it is

¹ Pat Williams and James Denney, Coach Wooden: The 7 Principles that Shaped His Life and Will Change Yours (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, a division of Baker Publishing, 2011), 180.
² The term hypercompetition refers to an incredibly dynamic and competitive world where no action or advantage can be sustained for long and advantage quickly erodes. See Richard D’Aveni, Hypercompetition: Managing the Dynamics of Strategic Maneuvering (New York: Free Press, 1994).
much worse in the other Services. This might be due to the relatively small size of the Marine Corps compared to the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the fact that the Corps rarely promotes anyone early. During several Joint tours, I witnessed the toxic atmosphere that developed among officers in particular as they competed against each other for the premier jobs, the best marks on their fitness reports, and the early promotion for each rank. Those who were successful in this “race” then used these “accomplishments” as bragging points in discussions with others. Those who either could not or would not compete for an early promotion opportunity became second-class citizens who never got the best jobs or best fitness reports. This destroys trust and demonstrates to those lower in the chain of command that these officers do not care about their subordinates. It is about them and how fast they can move up the ranks. Many of these officers do not spend enough time in one position to truly be considered competent or to make the organization they are in charge of better. They are merely “checking a box” as they move along, and everyone knows it. Though it takes place in the Marine Corps, it is relatively rare.

Ladder climbing is not uncommon in the civilian world either. In Jim Collins’s book *Good to Great*, he talks about chief executive officers who arrive with a loud crash and stir things up to enhance their reputations or to generate the short-term financial gains that the stockholders demand. The challenge is that, since it is really only about them, when they leave, the company falls back into whatever rut they previously occupied, or worse, collapses. Imagine the damage these

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types of people have caused to countless others and the companies involved. They stop at nothing to achieve short-term gains for appearances and dividends, but what about the human beings who work in these organizations? Somehow, this element is not part of the equation for the hypercompetitive superstars who make business headlines.

The more effective approach to personal or group motivation is to excel at every task given, with the pursuit of personal and/or unit development/improvement being the end goal. The key is competing against ourselves and not anyone else. When we strive to achieve our own personal or team best with every task, we can live with the results, no matter what they are. I have seen many examples of these types of people during my career, and they always stand out above their peers and they are admired accordingly. In civilian life, legendary Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski believed that “when our goal is to try to do our best, when our focus is on preparation and sacrifice and effort—instead of numbers on the scoreboard—we will never lose.” In other words, for those who focus on excelling and being better than they were yesterday, winning is a byproduct of the effort they put into improvement.

A corollary to this is that if we can help others along the way to improve as well, so much the better. Consider the old adage that a rising tide lifts all boats. Personal excellence sets the example for others to follow and can inspire them to new levels of effort and professionalism. Taking the time, especially when it comes at the expense of our own effort, to help someone else overcome a challenge and grow often proves better than breaking a personal record. Jim Collins called

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6 This concept was used frequently by John F. Kennedy, though he did not coin the phrase that was typically used regarding political or economic theory.
this type of leadership “great” and the opposite of the approach that hypercompetitives use. For those leaders who came in and helped a company improve by working with people and focusing on what was best for the company and its employees, the success they achieved was remarkable. Most notably, when they moved on, the companies continued to improve instead of reverting or collapsing.

The unfortunate fact is that of more than 1,400 companies examined in Collins’s *Good to Great*, less than 20 experienced the type of leadership described as great. The essence of what Collins was talking about is that being a team player is important, but never more so than

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8 Collins, *Good to Great*. 
when in a leadership position where your actions are always being observed and judged by those being led. Being a team player as a leader means being loyal to the people who work for you and ensuring they have what they need to be successful. If we take care of them, there is a strong chance that they will take care of us.

One of the best movie scenes, in my mind, comes from *An Officer and a Gentleman* when the character played by Richard Gere was running the obstacle course at Navy Officer Candidate School (OCS). He had been extremely self-centered throughout the movie, which had gotten him into trouble, but he had apparently learned from his mistakes. As they were preparing to graduate, he had a good chance to break the obstacle course record and his classmates were cheering for him. As he was cruising through the obstacles, he came across one of his classmates (played by Lisa Eilbacher) who, because of her height and strength, on previous attempts at the obstacle course could never get over the rope wall obstacle. Before the class ran the course for the final time, their drill instructor told her that if she could not get over the wall she would fail out of OCS. Gere’s character cruised past her as she attempted the rope wall obstacle, once again without success. He said a few encouraging things to her as he went by her, but he seemed to be more intent on breaking the record than the welfare of his classmate. When he got past the rope wall, he stopped, realized what was more important, and went back to help her. The two of them finished together amid the celebration of their classmates. Even though this was only a movie, many of us can think back to instances from our own experience of something similar and they stand out as shining examples of teamwork and camaraderie that mean so much.

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more than those times when we saw someone achieve their personal best—by themselves.

For example, I had been taught how to climb a rope by my instructors at the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps unit at Marquette University; so when I arrived at Quantico for the Marine Corps OCS in the summer of 1985, I quickly and efficiently climbed any rope I encountered—and it happens frequently since the course is very physically challenging. A fellow officer candidate from the Merchant Marine Academy was less fortunate. He did not have the proper technique for repeatedly climbing the rope, and he was not strong enough to use his arms each time. This left him in danger of being dropped from the course. Late one night, I snuck out of the barracks with him, and we went to the obstacle course where I taught him the proper technique. It was risky, as both of us could have been kicked out of the school for being out of the barracks at night, but it was worth the effort and the risk as he was a good person. More important, he was my classmate. The next day, to the surprise of just about everyone, he succeeded in climbing the rope. He subsequently graduated from OCS and became a Marine officer and helicopter pilot. I have always been grateful for taking the risk to help a fellow candidate.

There are some who think that if they do not compete and their peers do, they will lose out. While this may be true in the short run, if we can take it philosophically and not let it bring us down, we are much better off in the long run. We can look at ourselves in the mirror knowing that we did our best and did not take advantage of those around us to achieve what we wanted. Life is full of wins and losses. This is a simple fact of existing on this planet. We will never win every game or overcome every challenge we face, but if we can come away—win or lose—with the knowledge that we did our best and left everything on the field, we will be fine. Coach Krzyzewski was once asked about his team’s loss in the Final Four of the NCAA tournament and his reply...
was simple: “I don’t think I have to apologize for us getting to the Final Four three or four times and not winning. I’d rather play and be beaten than not be there at all.”

The secret is that our peers have the ability to do the same, but it is a choice that some do not make. They wear themselves out trying to compete and therefore miss out on the joys of life that can best be seen when one takes the time to slow down and observe those joys instead of rushing about trying to be the best, the richest, the most popular, or the most successful—all of which can only be determined in comparison with others. A hundred years from now, everyone alive today will be dead and who will remember all the effort that was expended on fleeting opportunities or moments of perceived greatness. We should instead try to be great in comparison with who we were yesterday and seek to help those around us be great also. As Winston Churchill said, “Think what your actions now will mean, years hence, when you remember them again. What kind of person will you wish you had been, what kind of sacrifices will you wish you had made, when you or those who survive you look back upon this in the future?”

Questions to Consider

1. Do you compete with others, or do you excel against the person you were yesterday?
2. Have you helped those around you to improve?

Suggested Further Study


10 Krzyzewski and Phillips, Leading with the Heart.
Another good study on leadership and what it really takes. Great leaders are few and far between.


This movie came out as I was starting on my path to become a Marine officer and really had a positive impact on me. It was the memory of what the main character did in this movie that caused me to work with my fellow officer candidate and teach him to climb the rope so he would not get dropped from the course.


This title highlights yet another extremely successful basketball coach who is also an incredibly impressive person. I learned a lot from this book.