

START WITH COMMITMENT

We tend to only notice people once they have risen to the top of their profession. The big name speakers, the top athletes, the well-known leaders of countries, the bands and lead singers, we see them once they have arrived. But how did they get there? That's what I'm interested in. Because if I can see how *they* got there, I might be able to see how *I* can get there too. The problem is, once they have 'arrived', someone writes their biography, and usually what happened along the way either is embellished or lessons along the way get forgotten, or the accuracy of the memory becomes clouded. Listen to people talk about the past in a family get-together and you will see what I mean. Someone shares a story, another member says "That's not what happened" and now the fun begins. As they tell what happened, someone else chips in with a "I think you're forgetting..." and on it goes. That's to do with perception as well, but also what we sometimes call 'selective memory'. I choose to remember only the good parts, or the parts that affect me, or the things I want to hang on to.

So as I said, I want to know how they got there, because maybe I can get there too.

I have been working with various sports personalities over the past three years behind the scenes to help them achieve in certain areas in their lives, and it has given me an insight into one aspect of leadership from a different vantage point. Most of the athletes I have worked with are at the top of their field; they are alert, athletic, determined, and realistic (in the main). Realistic, because they know the toll their sport has taken and is continuing to take on their bodies. Having interviewed multiple numbers of our top athletes, the one question I have consistently asked is this one: "How come you made it? How come you made it, yet others around you, friends you had who must also have wanted to be the sort of athlete you are - they didn't make it? How come *you* made it?"

Without a doubt, the overwhelming response has been "commitment and determination". What do they mean by that?

Let's look at commitment first.

Their commitment was so real that when their friends went out partying, they went to training. Sometimes their friends would say "come on and join us, you've been working hard for the past few months, you need a break" they said "you go ahead, I'm going to training". Come Friday night and it would be "Let's go out for drinks" - except for these people, they would say "I've got training tomorrow and coach told us not to drink before practice" and the guys would say "Hey, it's just one night" but these athletes said they were determined to get into the squad, and the next day you could usually tell who had been 'out on the town'. They were committed to making this happen, and if that meant sacrificing having a good time or being out late with the mates, they chose to be committed to the task at hand.

My next question was to ask whether they still kept in contact with their old friends who never made it, and the sad reply was that, in most cases, they did not, because they now represented the one who had made it - and were a reminder to their friends that they hadn't.

The lessons learned here from these sports people could well be applied for us all. It is about commitment, even when you don't know the end result. Think of the player who sits on the bench week after week, not knowing if this is their week when they will be chosen. Yet they train the same as their teammates, they attend the same sessions, they are there every week, they do the same weights, run the same distance...it's about commitment. Commitment is not about waiting until you have been chosen and then being committed, it's about being committed before you get chosen and then showing that you shine once you have been chosen! Being chosen is usually a recognition of the commitment put into the training before it all comes together, and the only reason it comes together is because you were committed!

In all the interviewing I have done, it has never been about the school the person went to, the education they received, the wealth of the family, the position in the community or where they were born. People from the 'wrong side of the tracks' have often been at the top as well as those from rich heritages. The difference is not necessarily in the background; it's in the person and their level of commitment.

Think of the 2002 Winter Olympics and there's one Australian who comes to mind - Steven Bradbury, short track speed skater, representing Australia. He got into the finals due to the failure of several other skaters. He knew he would not do well, and his strategy (and his coach's) was to simply 'hang in there' and hope someone falls. Well, that's what happened in the semi-finals and Bradbury ended up in the finals. He was the slowest skater, and he knew it. Comes the final race, and he knows the rest of the bunch are far better than he is. In fact, it was always tipped that Apolo Anton Ohno, the American speed skater, was favoured to win. So much so that apparently Steven had said to Ohno (who he knew): "When you win, make sure you mention my skates" - Steven has a company that makes skates and he supplied them free to Ohno - that's how sure people were that Ohno would win. Even Steven was sure of that. His strategy again was to hang out at the back of the pack in case someone fell, but reality was it was unlikely to happen at this high level.

So what happens? The unthinkable, really. The race begins and as expected, Steven is coming last - until the final lap, the winning lap, where one skater well in front of him clips the skates of another, both fall, taking out the others tightly bunched around them - except for Bradbury, who is well behind them. The only person left standing - is Steven. He slowly glides through the mass of bodies and crosses the finish line to win gold whilst behind him, bodies are scrambling, literally clawing and scrabbling their way across the ice to get to the finish line and at least get a placing. It is one of the most confusing moments of Winter Olympic history, even Steven himself not being sure what's going on. He looks totally bemused, almost as if he isn't quite aware of what's happened. Yes, other skaters put in a protest, but in the end, Steven won out.

What made it possible for Steven to win? Can we put this down simply to the fact that he was 'in the right place at the right time' as some people would say? Or is it something more? I'm going to suggest it is something more. Yes, in some ways he was in the right place at the right time - but we have to ask *why* he was in the right place at the right time. And I am going to suggest to you that it was because of all he had done up until that moment.

It was *commitment* that won Steven Bradbury the Gold Medal.

At any stage of his journey as a skater, he could have given up. The "I'm not going to make it so why should I keep on trying?" attitude, maybe not even making the effort to do the training. But he had done the training, he had qualified to be on the team, he wasn't seen as a serious contender for the race he was in, but he was committed. Committed to his team, committed to his cause, committed to do what he knew he could do and to do it as well as he could.

Steven actually had good reasons to give up. He had been in a serious accident on the ice in 1995 in Montreal where his thigh was slashed open by another skater's blade, losing massive amounts of blood and requiring a hundred stitches and redevelopment of his quadriceps muscles. In 2000, he broke two vertebrae in his neck whilst training and had to miss the 2000-1 season. Some people thought he would never skate again on a competitive level. When he returned the next season it was with the idea of competing in one last Winter Olympics in 2002.

At any time on this journey, he could have given up. He could have given up after his thigh and muscle were slashed. He could have given up when he broke his neck. He could have given up with all the hard training he was ordinarily doing, plus the additional work he had to put in after serious injury. All along the way, the thoughts must have come to him: it's too hard, it's too tiring, it's too dangerous, it's too demanding.....many excuses he could have come up with, but he was committed. I wonder how many people, whilst on the outside encouraging him, on the inside said "He'll never make it". Maybe Bradbury knew this, maybe he didn't, and maybe there were times when he felt like listening to the people who openly said this. But one thing is certain - he didn't give up, and history was made. He was at that time the only Australian - in fact, the only competitor from the Southern Hemisphere - to win a gold medal in such an event in the Winter Olympics ever!

In an interview afterwards, Bradbury made this comment: "Obviously I wasn't the fastest skater. I don't think I'll take the medal as the minute and a half of the race I actually won. *I'll take it as the last 12 years of hard slog I put in.*" That's commitment speaking.

Commitment. A really important basis for any good leader.

Determination comes hand in hand with commitment.

A good leader remains committed to the cause even though others may have given up on that cause. Commitment is different to determination, even though they go along together in the best leaders.

Together they make for a strong leader who gets things done. Together they make things happen. Although there are some similarities with both words, they are different enough to look at separately.

Commitment is about keeping to a decision made, pursuing the goal you had in mind. Determination is the strength to keep on going when all else fails. Commitment

will carry you so far, determination takes you past the 'so far' to the outcome you want to achieve. Commitment gets you started, but determination helps you finish. Commitment is about cause; determination is about strength and continuance. That's what Steven Bradbury showed in his life to win that Olympic Gold.

Another example of this combination of commitment and determination is seen in one of the most controversial brain surgeons in Australia, Dr Charlie Teo. Dr Teo operates on people who have brain tumours when others refuse to do so. Many of the surgeons will say "this is inoperable" but Teo says there is no such thing as inoperable. He says that anything is operable, it's just the results that might be a concern. The fact that many surgeons even set a deadline - this person has only three months, that person six months, this one a year to live - this becomes an issue for Teo. His feeling is that we cannot and do not have the right to determine how long a person might or might not live. He believes that people often resign themselves to this prognosis and that belief becomes reality. Somehow the time limit given comes true. Although this verges on the whole area of positive thinking, there is enough evidence (of a kind, maybe not as scientific as some might want) to prove this a reality.

Teo's 'trade' was learned overseas, as he felt that the type of surgery - almost a surgery of hope - was being completely disregarded here in Australia. He learned new techniques overseas, and apparently pioneered neuroendoscopy for brain cancers and tumours. He then returned to Australia and attempted to implement it here. The problem for him was that he was - and still is - outspoken, and openly disagreed with his fellow surgeons. He was abrasive in manner, and had no problems in challenging the status quo. He was soon not welcome in many hospitals and operating theatres. He continued to go against the traditional approaches, and would operate when others wouldn't.

People began seeking him out as they heard about this miraculous surgeon. People who had been given a death sentence by other doctors, or their children had been given a death sentence, began to see Teo as their last hope. Because of all of this, many doctors refused to refer patients to him. In fact, some doctors actively dissuaded people from seeing him, some going as far as removing them from their books if they went ahead to see Teo.

There have been neurosurgeons who have criticised Teo as being radical and giving out a false hope of a cure to patients who they 'know' are going to die. Teo's continues to operate and care for the seemingly incurable because, as he says, he can. He is a much sought after speaker and surgeon overseas.

One mother here in Perth was happy to discuss with me her son's condition, a life-threatening brain tumour. The doctors had given up on him, said that all they could do was the chemotherapy without any guarantees of success but said they could expect him to die. So she turned to Dr Teo. She and her son flew over to the East Coast to talk with him, and to see if he could help and remove the tumour.

And here's an interesting thing. Dr Teo examined the young boy, and determined that it would not be right to operate, as the tumour was too close to vital structures,

and he could not operate without causing severe and possibly fatal damage. His advice? Go home and continue doing what you are doing.

In another instance, Teo agreed to operate on a another young boy who had been given up on by the other specialists around him. This boy had been given six months to live (check out "Matthew's Fight for Life" on YouTube). Now, five years later, he is still going strong. Is he out of the woods? Not necessarily, but at the time of those clips he was still alive and enjoying a great life with only minor problems. Will the cancer come back? Possibly, and even probably, but he is still alive. Five years is certainly better than six months, wouldn't you say?

What's the lesson here, aside from commitment and determination?

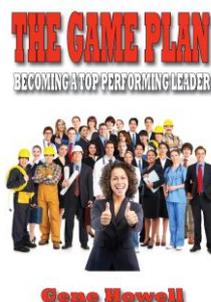
The lesson here is to learn when to say yes - and when to say no, to not be so swallowed up by arrogance or 'blind faith' that you keep on going down the path you have chosen, even though it will end in disaster. The good leader knows when to keep persisting, but they also know when to stop 'flogging a dead horse'.

This is the other side of commitment and determination. You have to be really careful not to replace determination and commitment with arrogance and stubbornness. This is really hard, as people will assume that they are being determined when they are really being stubborn. Or they think they are being committed when in fact they are being arrogant. Sometimes we have to listen to other people and get their evaluation, because it is about perspective, being able to see from outside the situation. When you are in the middle of it, it's hard to see or be objective.

Some people never learn that. They are natural disasters, looking for somewhere to happen. They've done it before, they are committed and they are determined, and they just keep on going, even though all the pointers around them are saying "stop"!

Good leadership is not stupid leadership. It is not about proving yourself right in every circumstance. It is about knowing when to stop and let go because even you know, if you are honest, that it just isn't going to work out.

Excerpt from:



available from Amazon, and other leading online booksellers