

# BUILDING AND LEADING TEAMS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

BY MIKE LORENZEN

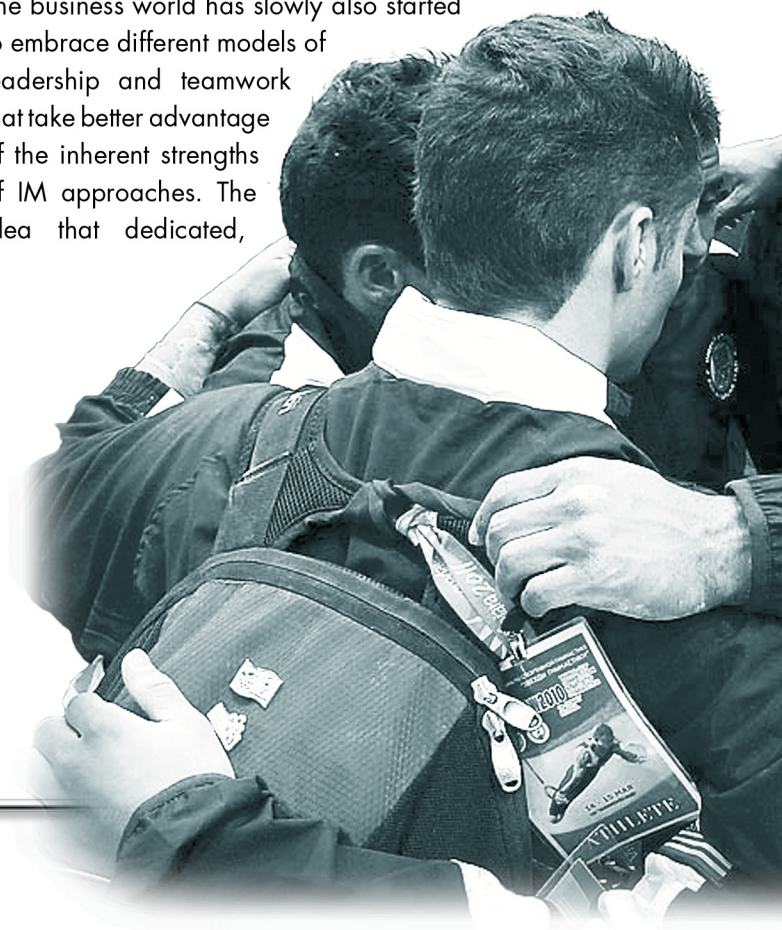
**T**he world has changed dramatically in the less than 50 years that I've been alive. As researchers have learned more in the fields of technology and medicine, the approaches in motivation have also drastically changed. It seems that the only constant in change for folks in almost every area of life is the acceleration of the pace!

Human interactions have tended to lag behind other types of evolution. An area that has been especially problematic is the field of teambuilding and leadership. Operating principles have always impacted the way people work together and manage each other. For example, Henry Ford is largely credited with the invention of the assembly line for manufacturing cars in a relatively efficient manner. Semi-skilled jobs on Ford's assembly line and others in manufacturing played an enormous role in the development of a middle class and the elevation of economic status for millions of people.

In order to get the most out of the factory workers, management decided that the best way to motivate them was to use extrinsic rewards and punishments meaning that if you made more widgets in your eight-hour shift than you were supposed to, you got paid more. If you made fewer widgets, you made less money. Eventually, the model was improved to recognize that we didn't just want more widgets, we wanted more with fewer defects. Bonuses and external rewards were modified appropriately. While designing motivational systems, management also decided that the only way to effectively lead assembly line workers was through a dictatorial model that was completely top-down, giving workers very little say in their day-to-day responsibilities.

As the industrial age moved on, business leaders have found better ways to assemble things and more creative ways to motivate people, largely driven by recognition that intrinsic motivation (IM) can be at least as effective as the extrinsic (EM) methods that worked so well through most of the 20th century. IM is motivation that comes from enjoying the task at hand, rather than motivation coming from the promise of an external reward. For example, the transition from strictly commission sales to salaried salespeople in the electronics world was part of a recognition that ultimately more sales came about when salespeople invested in meeting customer needs and building relationships, more than pushing certain products or trying to maximize sales volume.

The business world has slowly also started to embrace different models of leadership and teamwork that take better advantage of the inherent strengths of IM approaches. The idea that dedicated,



uniquely connected and committed groups of people, a team, can accomplish more than disconnected individuals has gained widespread acceptance. An important step in building effective and high-functioning teams has been investment in new models of leadership that prioritize collaborative and democratic models.

These types of models allow followers to be more invested in what they are doing, as well as more satisfied with the process of doing it.

To me, as a coach and team builder, it is incredibly ironic that the primary source of team concepts, the world of athletics, may be the last segment of society that has resisted following the evolution of leadership from dictatorial to more democratic and collaborative models. Athletes and coaches have long understood how powerful and effective team concepts have been, but we have also been the most stubborn when it comes to re-evaluating how we motivate, how we lead, and how exactly we maximize our teams' potential.

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In the new millennium, effective leaders and team builders in every realm are confronted with the reality that people work more productively when they have a few basic needs met. Those basic needs include: when they are

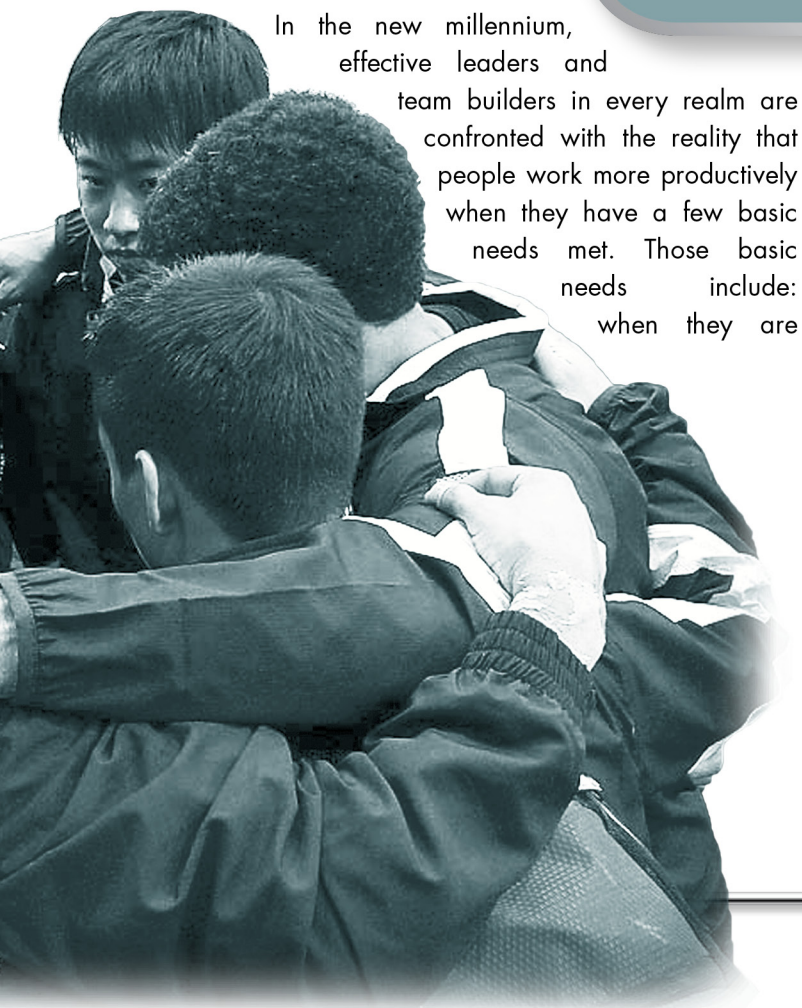
connected to the people around them, when they feel they have a say in how they go about their business, when they have a sense of greater purpose behind what they're doing, and when they believe that they have the opportunity to become better/smarter/stronger at what they do. When

those needs are met, research and practical experience suggests that more successful outcomes result. The implication is as troubling for some as it is powerful for those that embrace it – the more you focus on utilizing a great process and on meeting people's needs, the more you end up with great outcomes.

The academic theory behind all of this is something known as Self Determination Theory (SDT) and you can read all sorts of intellectual processing by people inside of academia, if you want the theory. The best practical application that I have found, however, comes from Africa and the philosophy of community that you can find in so many tribal cultures there, particularly the Xhosa people. The Xhosa word that captures the concept is "Ubuntu." It refers to an understanding that *"I am who I am because of who we are as a community."* It is more simply and powerfully

represented in the African metaphor of "unbreakable sticks": If you collect a bunch of individually fragile sticks and bind them together in a connected bundle, they become unbreakable. The same theory applies to human beings working in teams.

If you are a coach managing other coaches or a gym owner managing a diverse staff, you presumably want to have the best possible outcome in your business, which is happy and successful children (whose parents cheerfully continue to pay tuition). You could choose to focus exclusively on enrollment and incentivize your staff based on keeping numbers high but that is the old school model, relying on EM. You might get decent enrollment, but I would argue that employee and customer satisfaction will both ultimately lower. Alternatively, you could recognize that a little investment in leading and in the team-building process has the potential to create wildly successful outcomes. By working at improving the connectedness of your staff with each other, by granting



them the authority to make some decisions about how they do their job on their own, by constantly communicating the overarching purpose of the business, and by regularly providing opportunities for improvement and professional growth, you begin the process of developing an environment driven by IM. An IM-based atmosphere is the key to building an effective team in our current culture.

If you are a coach, you have probably learned how to lead and motivate mostly by watching other coaches. The most visible coaches and models (and the easiest to follow) tend to be those with the highest profiles, either professional sport coaches or, perhaps, gymnastics figures, who have become media celebrities. Unfortunately, the majority of coaches who have captured media attention are the ones who are entertaining characters or have achieved notable outcomes. Entertainment quality and success are not, however, necessarily, the most meaningful measures of coaching success. For all of the pithy quotes ascribed to coaches like Vince Lombardi or Bill Parcells or Bobby Knight, I would never recommend that aspiring coaches emulate their autocratic style – especially coaches working with pre-adolescent boys and girls.

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The vast majority of gymnastics coaches feel that their primary responsibility is the shaping of young lives, not the creation of Olympic champions. If our job is to develop young people, then our focus should be on following models that create the most healthy and productive experiences. If you want to have great competitive success, then take a step back and evaluate how you are relating to the athletes that you're training. Do you communicate with them well? Do you treat them with respect? Do you act with integrity and base relationships on grace? If the answer is yes to all of those, then you're actively working on improving connectedness within your team and creating your own unbreakable bundle of sticks. If you're also working with them collaboratively to plan training and competition, helping them to find purpose and meaning beyond sport performance, and giving them the confidence that comes with growing mastery, then you're actively cultivating the other key ingredients in an IM environment. Your choice of leadership style will obviously impact whether or not you value and invest in those approaches. A leader who recognizes the power of team and collaboration and who emphasizes an IM model has the greatest chance to create sustainable, long-term and satisfying success in the new millennium. ✧

