

The Last Question: What Can Today's Leaders Learn From Michael Jordan?

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Like millions of people, I watched *The Last Dance*, the Netflix ten-episode Michael Jordan promotional video thinly disguised as a documentary following the 1998 championship season of the Chicago Bulls. Way back in the last millennium, I played basketball in college and, later, in a few beer leagues and loved watching His Airness and the Bulls dominate. So, *The Last Dance* was some much-needed nostalgia during a sports-free spring.

But as an executive coach looking back at Jordan in 1990s, I can't help but wonder if his leadership style would work in today's business world. An entire generation has entered the workforce since Jordan last lifted the Larry O'Brien trophy. How will the Everyone Gets a Medal generation in the workforce respond to a Michael Jordan-style personality punching them (metaphorically, let's hope) in the face?

In other words, should you try to Be Like Mike in the workplace?

If you saw *The Last Dance* and Jordan's behaviour back then and today, the quick answer is No - don't try to emulate number 23 at your next staff meeting. Without question he was a great a player, perhaps the Greatest of All Time (GOAT) given his personal statistics and six championship rings. But the 1990s Jordan is not a leader for today.

Watching and listening to Jordan comment to the camera, he comes across as petty and immature, still battling decades-old vendettas. Some moments of vulnerability exist when he talks about his late father or the father figures in his life, but those are as rare as a Bill Laimbeer friendship bracelet.

Michael was a star ever since he hit the jumper that sunk Georgetown in the 1982 NCAA championship. As a rookie, he excited the NBA and created new fans. He was both artist and athlete, and the heir apparent to Julius Erving, Larry Bird, and Magic Johnson. Jordan snatched the baton and elevated the game and the league to new international heights.

Jordan won scoring titles, dunk contests, and leveraged his iconic tongue wag to become the spokesman for Gatorade and McDonald's. He also elevated Nike's stylized checkmark into a global brand.

But Jordan was not a champion until 1991, a full seven years after he was drafted. His path to becoming a champion tells us three positive lessons on leadership:

1. Honest self-assessment:

Jordan was an offensive force early in his career. He personally won games by putting the Bulls on his back and scoring bucketloads of buckets. His athletic prowess was fun to watch, but he didn't elevate his game until he extended his jump shot range and embraced defence. He conquered his weaknesses and rounded out his game.

Leadership Lesson:

Be honest with your self assessments and always seek opportunities to improve your performance. Jordan's work ethic is to be admired - strengthen yours and keep investing in your development.

2. Buy into the Team Concept:

Jordan didn't win championships until he had a stronger team around him that he could trust in high pressure situations. Teammates like Scottie Pippen, Horace Grant, Dennis Rodman, John Paxson, Toni Kukoc, and Steve Kerr arrived and hit key shots to elevate the Bulls from decent playoff performers to NBA champions. He learned to pass the ball at key times and his trust was rewarded.

Leadership Lesson:

You can't do this alone. You can only take your business unit/company so far on your abilities and determination. Surround yourself with the right people, and then trust and empower them to hit the open jump shot at the right moments. Pass the ball. Cultivate and embrace the team culture and others will join the group hug.

3. Coaches Make Winners:

Jordan had the talent and the teammates, but they didn't spray the victory champagne until they united behind Phil Jackson. The Zen Master unified a group of diverse personalities and marshalled their talents towards one common goal, managing egos and positioning the personalities to succeed. He protected his team from outside attacks and challenged them to be better. He owned the criticism and shared all the credit.

Leadership Lesson: Find a mentor or coach you can trust to tell it to you straight and keep you accountable to the bigger picture. Someone who can reign in your ego and give it a boost when needed. Your annual results (and bonus check) will thank you for it.

Leaders Leave Legacies

There are important lessons to learn from Michael Jordan's negative behaviours and traits - why *not* to Be Like Mike. His bullying style and his propensity to publicly humiliate his teammates may have motivated them for short-term goals. And make no mistake, six championships, including two three-peats, are in the record books. His aggressive leadership style contributed mightily to some journeymen players wearing more rings than Liberace.

But Jordan's leadership style did little to build a long-term culture of franchise success to be embraced by future Bulls' teams. Sure, ownership and management carry some responsibility for the moribund franchise, but the legacy of winning in Chicago doesn't exist the way it does in Boston or Los Angeles, franchises that have won championships over several decades. These legacies were built and passed along by the star players who put their teams first.

How many championships have the Bulls won since 1998? Exactly.

True leaders leave positive legacies that future generations will admire and emulate. They often transcend their industry and enter the broader social conversation to influence others across society. They tend to be humble and are never bigger than the game. They don't dwell on past successes; instead, they focus exclusively on the future. They also keep their dirty laundry away from the public.

Examples of great leaders from basketball include college coaches John Wooden, Pat Summit and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, among many others. Athletes from other sports, like Arthur Ashe, Billy Jean King, Wayne Gretzky, and Muhammad Ali all have legacies as leaders that transcend their sport that we can learn from and admire.

To paraphrase another great artist: To Be, or Not To Be (like Mike)? That is the leadership question. Find your own answer in Jordan's success and legacy and adapt to suit your style. Ask yourself if your short-term tactics, aggressive or otherwise, will translate to a culture of long-term success.

Know the court and your team. Remember, Jordan didn't shy away from taking the big shots to win games; but he also learned to trust his open teammates. Prepare to take the last shot; but trust enough to make the right pass - just like Mike.

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