

Growing Champions

The best leaders master this art.



by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

WHAT DO CLINT EASTWOOD IN THE movie *Million Dollar Baby*, Tom Cruise in *Jerry McGuire*, and Denzel Washington in *Remember the Titans*—have in common? They are characters who supported and sought the best in others, even in their darkest hours.

Growing champions isn't necessarily about applause, cheers, or approval. Those actions may be present, but champion growers go above and beyond run-of-the-mill recognition. They use the philosophy: if you want something to grow, pour champagne on it.

Five Habits of Champion-Growers

Leaders who grow champions do four things consistently:

1. Focus more on the outcome of your efforts, less on the process. Great leaders focus on *the effect* they're trying to create, not on a set of *recognition tasks*. It's like empowerment. Leaders don't embed power—they remove barriers to power. They don't motivate—they create conditions that help people motivate themselves. Great leaders don't merely recognize or appreciate—they nourish spirit. The by-product of great championing is enhanced self-esteem, confidence, pride, and commitment.

2. Make someone feel treasured, not just appreciated. Once, we were at a retirement banquet as guests of a client. Every aspect of the ceremony was well-trodden ground—until the final retiree was announced. For this security officer retiring after 40 years, the applause was longer, smiles broader, spirits higher. The audience hushed as the officer's accomplishments were listed. The president then announced a special gift to celebrate this retiree's contributions. The suspense was palpable. We then heard a buzz as a man appeared in the doorway. We could hardly believe our eyes! Down the aisle walked one of the most famous people in business. The surprise visitor walked straight to the

security officer and embraced him warmly. Through tears, he thanked the retiree for being a wonderful tutor during his two-year stint with the organization. After a few stories about their association, he left the banquet hall to board his limo and jet back to the opposite coast. The crowd sat stunned—no one spoke for a time. Then, one by one, they filed forward to express their gratitude to all retirees.

A second example helps illustrate the difference. The CEO of a manufacturing company was expected to make an appearance at an annual employee recognition dinner. His chief of staff had prepared his remarks. The goal was to make the audience believe that the CEO knew each winner personally. But the choreographed charade came unraveled when one honored employee had the same name as an employee



who had been forcefully retired a few weeks earlier. The awkward moment came when the CEO commented that he was surprised to see the person on the stage since he had thought he was on his way to the golf course in retirement. It left a black mark on the reputation of the CEO. Contrived championing almost always misses the mark.

3. Advocate, don't just celebrate. A celebrator recognizes and affirms what you *accomplish*, but a grower of champions shows respect and admiration for *who you are* and believes in you when others may write you off. A grower of champions campaigns on your behalf, backs you against all odds, and defends you against all foes. The concept of leader as a grower of champions goes beyond the usual affirmation. Leaders as champion growers don't view their role as cheerleader—they see themselves more as stewards of reputation.

4. Align advocacy with vision. When famed tennis coach Mike Estep talks

about coaching *Martina Navratilova*, he focuses on bringing out the best in his client. He speaks of elevating her playing to match the greatness of the game. *Tiger Woods* credits his late father, Earl, with helping him think about making an impact on the world beyond golf and his awe-inspiring athletic feats. Mike Estep and Earl Woods, great champion growers both, zeroed in on a vision of greatness that was more the sum of the competitor and the contest. Champion-growers are committed to a service vision and use it as a tool to direct and align performance, and affirm and motivate people.

5. Affirm unconditionally. Did you ever have someone who believed in you *unconditionally*, even though you didn't feel you deserved such backing? Chip's first job was as a management trainee in a bank. He started his rotational training as a teller. After he had mastered that job, the branch manager assigned him to train a new teller—a woman 20 years Chip's senior who had come from another bank.

Armed with a new college degree and 34 days of work experience, Chip thought he was hot stuff. But his freshman attempts at affirmation came to a screeching halt when he placed a loud "but . . ." at the end of a compliment. She rose to her feet and coldly looked Chip over. "Young man, you can never boss me! I was bossing when you were just a gleam in your father's eye." She then marched into the branch manager's office and demanded a transfer. Chip never dreamed that one word—"but"—could render an attempt to affirm so ineffective and inflammatory.

Conditional affirmation ("You're doing a great job, *but . . .*") turns receivers deaf to the positive commentary. And if the critique carries parental tones, power and status issues are raised. The best leaders separate praise and criticism. If your goal is to praise, praise. If your goal is to criticize, then criticize. Mixing the two in the same sentence or session can turn a *confirming pat on the back* into a *controlling kick in the pants*.

The word *champion* comes from the Latin *campio*, meaning trial by combat. Champions are tested in adversity or challenge and found to be with substance and character, not just someone with talent or tenacity. Leaders who grow champions zero in on surfacing, nurturing, and affirming the best. LE

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ACTION: Be a leader who grows champions.