

# Leadership — It's a Marathon, not a Sprint

By Meb Ke ezighi

This February 16th, I had the honor to be the and subsequently keynote speaker at the TECO Energy Center for Leadership's (CFL) Leadership Summit at The Distinguished University of Tampa Leadership. Being a relatively

new Tampa resident, it felt invigorating to be among business and community leaders who have been contributing to our city's commercial and civic life for a far greater period than I have. I am certain that I took away far more than I contributed. The panelists--Bill Goede (President Tampa Bank of America), John Bell (CEO of Tampa Theater), Suzanne Perry (founder and owner of Datz and Dough), all generously recounted their successes and challenges, especially stemming from the pandemic. I commended the CFL for assembling these notable Tampa leaders for the benefit of their students.

Fittingly enough, the conference theme, "Leadership - It's a Marathon, not a Sprint" is a topic near and dear to my heart. As a professional marathoner, over time, it became apparent to me that the daily habits, behaviors, and lessons learned in my marathoning career, were also serving me well in all aspects of my life. This became the premise of my book, "26 Marathons - What I Learned About Faith, Identity, Running and Life from My Marathon Career."

To hear my fellow panelists discuss cite leadership lessons during our panel discussion left me honored and proud. Who would've thought an athlete could lend guidance to these already successful and esteemed leaders? But to take an even bigger step backward, who would've thought a child born in Eritrea, Africa in 1975 during a war would be able to write such a book,

My life began as the 4th child born to my parents in an Eritrean village amidst a war of independence with Ethiopia. My father was a wanted man. When I was about 5 years old, he began an arduous journey to Sudan (over 200 miles walking through rough land), and ultimately found his way to Italy. There he worked numerous jobs to save money so that our family could leave Eritrea and rejoin him in Italy 10 years later. I think back and am in awe of my father's bravery and my mother's wisdom. Breaking up a family with so many young children wasn't easy, but they both knew that his departure to Italy would save his life and create the potential for future family success — what turned out to be unimaginable success. How could they imagine that one day their family would grow to 11 children who have become doctors, lawyers, Engineers, graduates

this led to a full scholarship at UCLA where I won four (4) NCAA titles and graduated with a Communications Degree and a Specialization in Business.

I don't wish to imply that any of this was easy. Nor is running a marathon easy! Along the way we received tremendous support and guidance. On some occasions, this meant accepting family or government support. My parents are proud people, yet they were willing to accept this help to benefit our family. My father's Italian employer, Dr Brandicci, unexpectedly gifted him the balance of funds necessary to support our entire family to rejoin each other and to start our new life. How do you repay this type of gesture? By impressing upon your children that we now had a duty and obligation to be the best successes that we could be.

In my case, I've been fortunate to start my own charitable foundation, the MEB Foundation, which stands for Maintaining Excellent Balance, to support youth health, education and fitness. It thrills me to think that funds raised and deployed through my Foundation might impact the future of a young person in the impactful way that Dr. Brandicci's act of charity benefited my family.

In 1987, our family journey brought us to the United States of America, specifically to San Diego. This is where I spent my formative years and it's also where I discovered my athletic talent. Task number one was to learn English. My Dad woke me up and my older brothers at 4:30am to go through the dictionary. By the end of the school year, we were not only conversant and fluent, but my oldest brother Fitsum had actually been named the Most Outstanding Student in his 9th grade class. Fitsum and my other older brother AK soon joined the high school cross-country team and started seeing athletic and academic success.

My role models were multiplying. There were my parents, my older brothers, Dr Brandicci, and now many other coaches, teachers, and mentors. All of these people were positively impacting my life. When I reflect, it is clear to me, that their example drove my success. And I was also very willing to accept their example and guidance. Ultimately,

Upon graduation, I was blessed to embark upon a career as a professional athlete. Many people are unfamiliar with the leadership aspects of a professional athlete, particularly as an athlete outside the major sports. Effectively, I was an independent contractor and became the CEO of my career. The first step was assembling a team, during out a training situ

## A Triple-Dog Dare: To Pause, To Reflect and To Recalibrate

If you had \$86,400 deposited into your bank account today with no strings attached, how would you spend it? Shopping spree? Paying down debt? Investing? Charitable giving? The list can go on. Now, what if I told you that whatever was spent by 11:59 p.m. disappeared and a new round of \$86,400 was deposited at midnight; and you had until 11:59 p.m. to spend it, and this cycle went on for the rest of your life. How would that change your life? What would you do differently?

While you do not have \$86,400 deposited into your bank account each day, you do get a deposit of 86,400 seconds to spend as you choose. The time is a "present," and a new batch is deposited each day until you exit Planet Earth. How are you spending your 86,400 seconds, and are adjustments needed in your life to better use that time?

Life continues to be busy. As society continues to adjust to a "new normal," many things have changed. From hybrid work and school environments to less shopping in person to being a big part of human interactions, life is different. Despite going through a pandemic and society as a whole continues to be fast paced, most humans (including myself) find it challenging to slow down or wait. Watch the non-verbal language of those in line at a store waiting for service or to check out. Many seem like they are going into battle or are preparing for a major catastrophe. The stress from the inconvenience of having to wait radiates from their faces and bodies and provides free entertainment for watchers like myself. Another comical example is watching people try to avoid speed bumps in parking lots or areas with high foot traffic. The thought of slowing down to 5 mph also stresses many people out, and I've watched people close to wrecking their cars or running into parked cars just to avoid speed bumps. The reality

is that those changes be made? What changes have you previously made that worked, and which ones did not work so well? When the chaos and noise are paused, reflection is more easily prompted. Years ago, I read a valuable neuroscience article from Nature Publishing Group titled "Remembering the past to imagine the future: the prospective brain." As a former psychology major, this type of work intrigues me and I geek out a little. Long story short, "a rapid growing number of studies show that imagining the future depends on much of the same neural machinery that is needed for remembering the past." While walking down memory lane can be fun and exciting or painful and stressful, it can also be quite rewarding in preparing for what may be next in life and planning for the future. By design, your mind is able to take what was and help you contemplate and design what might be. Think about how much time and mental energy is wasted each day on things out of your control which in turn increases your stress levels and blood pressure and decreases your effectiveness with the things you can control and the satisfaction of accomplishing them. By taking time to pause and reflect, you also become more aware of the details that are easily and normally missed while speeding through each day. Think about the last time you walked down a street that you normally drive and see things you never saw before and think, "I never knew that was there." Pausing and reflecting allows your mind to adjust and sort through the facts and flush out the emotion. It is easy to spend way too much time worrying about and focusing on the things you cannot change instead of actually doing something through the things you

**Dare #1: To pause.** The pandemic taught valuable lessons, and two of them are spend your time wisely and do not take anything for granted because you never know what tomorrow will bring. For many, recalibrating focus and goals was and is needed. However, before you can recalibrate and make changes, you have to stop and push pause. The key to pausing is intentionally blocking any distraction or stressor (i.e., smartphones, computers, screens, people, calendars) and take time to stop and exhale; and this could be 10 minutes, an hour, a day, or a week. You might think, "I don't have time to pause" and the reality is you cannot afford not to pause. You cannot afford not to step away from the busyness of life and allow your mind to rest and slow down and change the scenery to something enjoyable or relaxing brings you peace. Have you ever had a brain cramp and could not think of something and sat there trying to think about it for 15 minutes (or longer) with no success; and then you give up in frustration and walk away only to remember an hour later or after you changed the scenery? The human mind is powerful, and when you pause and allow it to rest, it's amazing what can be accomplished.

**Dare #2: To reflect.** When you take time to pause, you become more aware of the thoughts that are flowing between your two ears. What's bothering you and why? Do you like the way your life is going? What's stopping you from improving your life? What needs to change, and how quickly

can control and change. Most leaders and influencers are selfless and constantly pour themselves into others, and they rarely take the needed time to be poured into. They are quick to give and help but often find it difficult to receive help or ask for it. Yet, they often wonder why the “gas tank” is empty, and they are not able to make as much progress as desired. The common theme: they are not taking the needed time to pause and reflect and make themselves better. When they make themselves better, they are enabled to make others better.

**Dare #3: To recalibrate.** Recalibrating is making changes to an existing process to bring it back to proper alignment or the way it was designed. These are normally small changes. An example of this is the front-end alignment of your car. Hitting speed bumps too fast or driving through holes can knock the alignment slightly out of balance. You notice when your car wobbles or vibrates.

others beside you. When you notice this, you can adjust the alignment. Similarly, you can adjust your process to get back on track.

**Dare #3: Daily it can be done.** You can make small changes to your process every day to keep it on track.

You can also make larger changes to your process when needed. For example, you can change your process to better align with your goals.

focused on figuring out how to turn a profit and it was easy for our team to buy into the mission. And the better we became at delivering our guests and our team members. This realization started us on a journey of discovery that led to the Ritz Carlton organization. They had just received the Malcom Baldrige award, the first – and to this day, only – hospitality company to achieve this recognition, and the only organization to achieve this honor more than once.

We flew our ragtag group of franchisees to San Francisco and stayed one night (because that's all we could afford). As you would expect, they treated us with the utmost courtesy and respect in spite of our not being their target customer. What drove them to be willing to have their management team meet with us for the day and share their secrets? Their culture. They didn't judge us as if we were beneath them; they served us as if we were their best customer.

The Ritz has something called a credo card that summarized the principles of the organization. This tri-fold card is given to each employee as the basis of their training and life as a Ritz team member. The opening words on the card are "We believe that we are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." This firm belief, that each team member is no different – no better, no less – than the guest, struck a chord with us.

To craft our own collection of principles and beliefs, we met with our team members, franchisees, and suppliers, and began to document what was important for us to stand for. We knew that it had to be based on who we were, so it was authentic and comfortable. All too many businesses write clever things on posters and put them on the wall, but what is going on around them does not resemble the written words. From there, we identified what our mission was and from that, our heroic cause. We believed that the guest did not come to us just to eat – they could go anywhere for that. They chose us because something special was going on in their lives, and they wanted to celebrate it in a fun and memorable way. We felt it was our duty to make their night perfect, so the memories created around the fondue pot would last. This worked

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Soon, we felt a pull to do right in addition to well. We forged a now 16-year-old relationship with St. Jude Children's Hospital and began to support the groundbreaking research undertaken there. Why St. Jude? Because we share the research they do freely with the patient families at their most frightening and valuable times. Their culture and our culture were a perfect fit. Because of our beliefs, our team members wanted to become part of something beyond the work. Working with St. Jude has inspired us to create a culture that endures requires it to be authentic and possible. Being true to our principles and beliefs and weaving them through all that we do every day with energy and focus keeps this culture safe and sound.

As the company journey continued, and we began to meet with greater business success, we focused on improving our leadership. Because of the cultural foundation supported by our principles and beliefs, it was simple for us to adopt servant leadership as our leadership model. We believe in serving first in order to lead well.

This decision provided us a second heroic cause. Most of the young team members we serve are temporarily. The casual dining business is notorious for being a stepping-stone employer for its workforce, often made up of students. This brings me to our obligation to the team to do more than just provide a day's wage for a day's work. We have a deep sense of duty to help each of them along the way. To make them feel like they put themselves on. We know they won't stay forever, but that fact should not diminish our commitment to them.

This journey and the learnings along the way have helped us weave a strong cultural fabric that, while far from perfect, provides a foundation from which to recruit, coach and develop our



Melting Pot Restaurant in Pittsburgh

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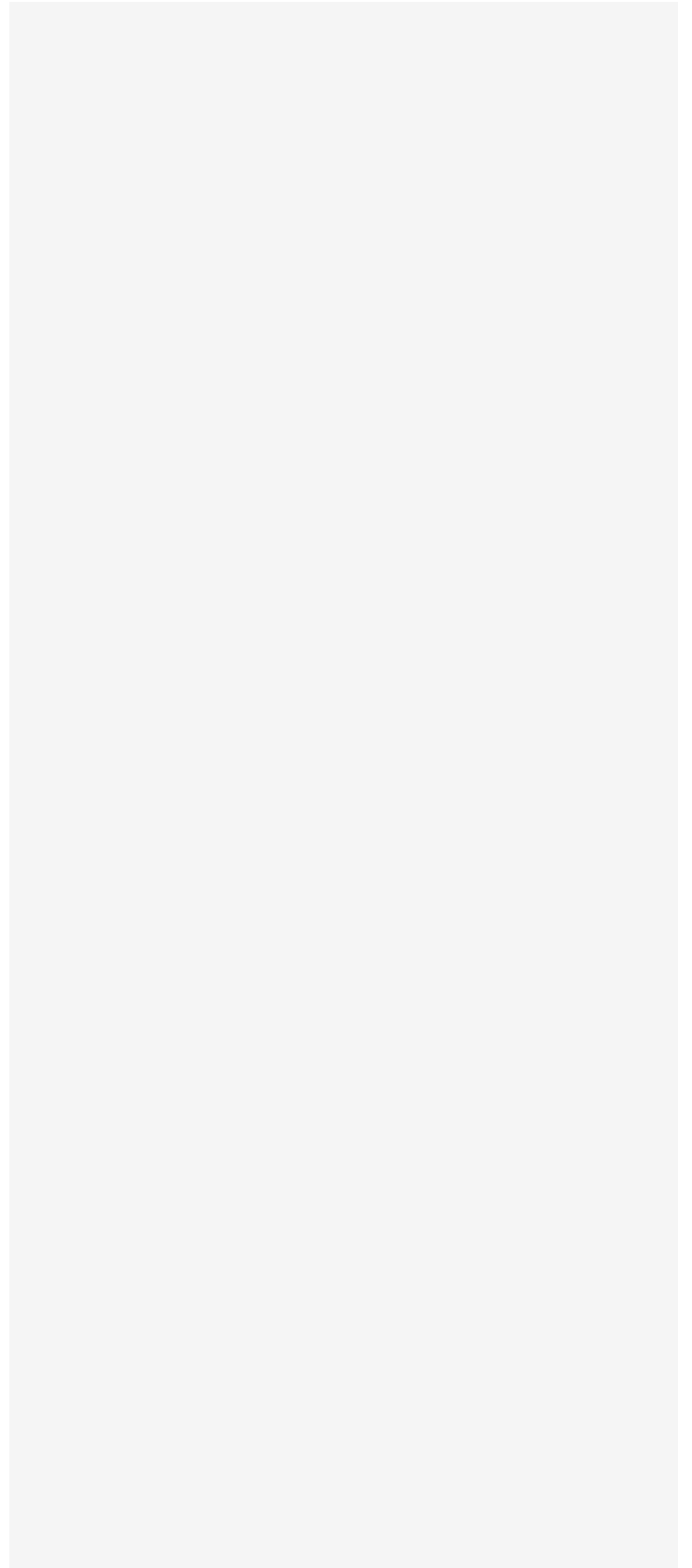
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