KEYNOTE SPEECH

FOR

STEVE VACENDAK

Hello everyone and thank you all for being here today and for giving me an opportunity to speak with all of you. (**If there are any people in particular you would like to thank for organizing the function you are attending, do so here**). I would like to thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for organizing this great event, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu taught, “To lead the people, walk behind them.” Although I stand **before** you right now, I want to you to know that I really stand **behind** you, as I encourage each one of you to find the leader **within YOU**. Although I am proud and humbled to say that I have experienced a degree of success in team building and have witnessed excellence flourish within the context of teamwork, I want you to know that leadership and effective team building is not an exclusive domain. With dedication, drive, respect, self-awareness and confidence, any one of us can be a powerful and valuable asset to guide people in any situation. Leaders reveal themselves organically, and it is up to all of us to identify the technology that supports those characteristics to be revealed. A true leader owns his or her task or position. He or she takes responsibility and maintains an entrepreneurial stance in the situation at hand. Before anyone can choose a leader, the person in question first self-selects.

The logical anatomy of any team is that there is a leader and members of the team. In any given time, the dynamic may change, as the beauty of human nature is that we are all different and each one of us has a purpose and function and excels at different skills. But no matter what any one of us brings to the party, **team building is a group effort**. We all know that “There is no ‘I’ in Team.” The great American football coach Vince Lombardi had this to say about teamwork. He said, “Individual commitment to a group effort-that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” This wisdom applies to any situation. The mechanics of team building and effective leadership are universal. Enthusiasm, commitment, resilience, tenacity and a certain degree of boldness are all required. And it certainly helps to have self-confidence, but remember to **leave your ego at the door**, keep an open mind, keep your eye on the goal, and be willing to constantly learn, even while guiding others.

I started participating in sports as a kid. What drove me, back then, to strive for excellence? When I was younger, I recall having boundless energy and was committed to practice, and as my game evolved, I learned to take criticism constructively, and I also came to realize the obvious-that if my teammates didn’t succeed, neither did I. I didn’t start my sports career playing as a leader, but innately I knew that the job could not get done single-handedly very few jobs can be done that way. My game improved for several reasons. It improved because I practiced and was tenacious. It improved because I had good coaches and mentors who knew how to identify my strengths and encourage me to emphasize them, and who inspired me to perpetually hone my skills. And it improved because I learned to be an integral part of a team. My basketball career informed and inspired how I live my life. There is nothing more rewarding than guiding a person to discover and revel in his or her own personal strengths and it has always been a privilege for me to work with people in this capacity. As I was inspired by my mentors, I knew when it was my turn to do the same for others. I’ll never forget some of the words my college coach, Vic Bubas, has used to describe me-when I was a rogue guard playing for Duke. Granted, this was a long time ago, and the maverick has grown into what stands before you here today. I use these descriptions to try and give you a sense of what my “unbridled spirit” was like during my college basketball days, and I also mention this in the hopes that it will give you some insight as to what it takes to succeed within the team framework. He said I had “relentless hustle” with “all out effort.” He mentioned, “A competitive quality coupled with smarts and skills.” Those words were used to describe a college athlete. A little later on, we’ll explore what it takes to hone those characteristics into an effective and inspiring leader.

The playing of sports is a metaphor for many situations in life. It can be compared to circumstances in which effective team structure and management is critical to survival. Since the beginning of time, people have participated in sports as a means to participate in more “socially acceptable forms of “war games.” Although this may seem a bit violent to some, sports historically and sociologically have served an essential purpose with regard to the human condition. Here’s a little insight from the late American author, essayist and early environmentalist, Edward Abbey. He said, “The function of football, soccer, basketball and other passion-sports in modern industrial society is the transference of anger and rage into socially acceptable forms of combat. A temporary substitute for war; for nationalism; identification with something bigger than the self.” Perhaps his wording is a little strong, but I think we can all see the correlation between sports and war. And I also believe we can further the analogy and extend it to the corporate world. Any situation that breeds healthy competition can be seen as a metaphor for this with a little difference. Functioning within the context of a team with regard to sports, business or other cohesive activities inspires camaraderie, productivity, and personal growth. The same goes for any activity that involves competition-and what doesn’t?

In an article entitled, “Business is War, Learn from the Battlefield,” written for CNN, journalist Matthew Knight features an interview with former British Royal Marine, Ian Gardiner. Some of Gardiner’s words of wisdom are:

* “Organizations need guidance not interference from their top brass, he says, “and importantly, they need to encourage all their staff to make decisions.”
* “Both business and war are very similar. "They are both trying to achieve goals in a fast moving, dynamic sometimes hostile environment with scarce resources through the agency of people.”

The article goes on to highlight business lessons that can be learned from the military analogy, and I think we can all agree after reviewing this comparison, that a strong leader is essential in carrying out the successful functioning of a team, a business or an organization. Here are some of those lessons:

* **MISSION**-First, you need to know what you’re doing. Gardiner mentions “Mission-based leadership.” He believes that one does not go into action without knowing what he is trying to achieve and why. That makes sense, doesn’t it? Gardiner feels that many businesses have no clear idea of what they are trying to achieve, which brings me to a question-how many of you leaders identify your mission and have a plan before leading your “troops”- your team, your colleagues, your employees into each project? Think of the clarity that would come from creating and referencing a clear and succinct mission statement? Gardiner also cautions that some multinational corporate mission statements, are-and leave it to a military man to forget the “sugar coating,” “PR nonsense.” He emphasizes that the mission is to be created at the highest level-that would be from YOU, our leaders, and must be “functional, realistic, and sustainable.” Simply put, he says, “We are going to do **this** in order to achieve **that**.”
* **CULTURE**-Provide training and encouragement to your people. The only assets that the managers manage are the **people**. Effective leaders know how to identify substance and characteristics in people required to get the job done. They also know how to encourage performance from the people in their command. Gardiner invoked the example of the British military legend, Lord Admiral Nelson. We learn that “he sat down before each battle with his captains and invited them into his brain. They discussed the mission-they BRAINSTORMED.” A true leader leaves his ego at the door, shares his knowledge, and honors, encourages and supports his team to be great.
* **TRUST**-Gardiner believes that leaders should be judged by the teams they are able to build, and a central component is trust. Trust breeds excellence, and Gardiner goes on to point out that “excellence comes when you get ordinary, normal people to give and do their best.” He believes “excellence doesn’t come because you have excellent people on your team-there aren’t enough around!” Gardiner concludes by confiding, ”In the armed forces we don’t have extraordinary people. What we’re good at is getting ordinary people to do **extraordinary** things.” That’s certainly something people in business can learn! And it is the effective leader who will hear these words and be inspired.

Many people are seduced by the idealism and “legend” of being a leader, but how many of us feel a true calling to lead? I bet at one time or another, in varying circumstances, everyone has had at least a fleeting thought they he or she wants to be at the helm. Each one of us has the capabilities within ourselves to be that leader; it just depends on relationship and positioning. There are people who are leaders by default; there are “dreamer” leaders-those who love the idea of leading, but don’t necessarily want to “break a sweat” and do whatever is needed and wanted to “own a leadership position.” I guess we might call that sort of person a “weekend leader.” The uninitiated want the glory of the position without the accountability-Guess what? That’s not a leader! Just as well as we can use the riddle, “How do you carve an elephant from a block of marble? By removing all of the parts that are **NOT** the elephant,” in the same way we can “carve” and identify the leader in all of us.

So what are the parts in each one of us that are NOT the leader? If we can distinguish those, banish them to the rear of our minds, and bring forth the characteristics within us destined to lead, then that would place each one of us on our own personal journey to leadership.

(**At this point, you can possibly open the discussion to the floor and ask the audience to give you descriptions of what a leader is not, or you can lenumerate those characteristics yourself**).

* **Hesitation**-The archetypal leader is strong and decisive. **YOU** are a normal and **human** being. You may not always be sure of your actions, but courage of one’s convictions goes a long way in the leadership discussion. If we remove hesitation from the block of marble that is leadership, our strength becomes more clearly defined. Also remember that “he who hesitates is lost” and many an interchange has been won and lost on a few fleeting moments of uncertainty. Someone once said, "Leadership is the ability to hide your panic from others." We all know you’re human, but true leaders do not allow their fear to betray them.
* **Ego-**There’s no “I” in team and there’s no “I” in leader either.The essence of being a true leader is to allow the members of your team flourish. Although we lead by example and success can be somewhat intoxicating, it is the true leader that will consistently take the energy and positivity created by true team synergy, and he or she will reinvest that enthusiasm back into the team. Also remember that leadership is not tyranny. Most people do not want to be motivated by aggressive behavior or threats. If a person finds that gestures and communication get to the point of bullying, he or she should take a good long look at what is really going on. The people in front of us can be a mirror of who we are and how we handle situations. If the team is not producing, then what might YOU be doing that is sabotaging your effectiveness?
* **Unfamiliarity**-Know your subject. Know your technology. Know the potential of your team. Leaders are defined by what they bring to the table. Remember one thing. I know someone who says, “I don’t know what I don’t know.” A true leader knows that and concentrates on discovery. Involvement, practice and passion work to form the true leader.
* **Ambivalence**-This is obvious. How does one lead with conviction if one does not care about the task and the team? The leader is invested in the cause, the process and the people involved in order to succeed.
* **Lack of Confidence**-A true leader must believe in his or her innate abilities. They must believe that they have what it takes-or the determination to create and practice what is needed to get the job done. As I said, a true leader guides and mentors by example. Who wants a support team that lacks confidence? Remember the words of Malcolm Forbes. He said, “Too many people overvalue what they are NOT and undervalue what they are.” We all have the raw materials within us to lead and succeed. We need to tap into the technology that supports the development-but we have it.
* **Superficiality**- a true leader is **AUTHENTIC**. The leader possesses real enthusiasm, genuine interest, and a passion to mentor other people. One does not lead for the sole purpose of receiving kudos at the end of the game or task or project. The real leader has tapped into the DNA needed to MAKE A DIFFERENCE while mentoring and inspiring those who are being led.

Let’s re-examine the block of marble we have. We’re distinguishing and shaping what it takes to be a leader. We have now chiseled off hesitation, ego, unfamiliarity, ambivalence, lack of confidence, and superficiality. What are we left with to form the model of what a leader is? Aristotle said,"You are what you repeatedly do. Excellence is not an event - it is a habit." That’s a good place to begin. Let’s identify the characteristics essential in a leader in addition to excellence-and by the way, I invite you to consider that excellence is to be present in each of the qualities listed. **Practice being excellent**:

* **Interest and determination-**This is a given.Be enthusiastic about the project and invested in the results you’re about to produce. If **you** don’t believe in the project and it’s outcome, who will?
* **Management skills-**know what needs to be done, what manpower will be required to get the job done, and know how to inspire the team to complete the task
* **Familiarity and knowledge of the topic or project**-A leader needs to understand the mechanics involved in getting the job done at every level. How can someone guide others, if there is unfamiliarity with what needs to be done. Clarity is key.
* **Sustainability**-Sometimes projects are overwhelming. It is the sign of a true leader to avoid burnout. It is the mandate of the effective leader to preserve and nurture his or her most important asset-the members of the team. We’re all overwhelmed, but we have to learn to respond to demand, work efficiently and sustain our most precious commodity
* **Compassion**-Leaders accept a task and search to discover and implement the means to effective and successful completion. Encouragement is essential, coddling is overrated, and tough love doesn’t always work. As a leader, one needs to have finely honed people skills, or let’s face it; you’ll be leading an army of one. Not necessarily too effective, is it? Develop empathy, keep your eyes and ears open, trust your gut when it comes to honestly assessing what each member of the team brings to the table, and remember to push-just a little farther than that team member thinks they can go.
* **Accountability**-Look down at your shoes. That’s where the buck stops. You are the leader and you are ultimately responsible for every phase of whatever it is that has to be achieved. Create a sense of ownership and pride of accomplishment and it will be contagious…. but the leader is still the one ultimately responsible for producing the result.

So here we are. We’ve looked at the mechanics of leadership from both sides. I hope that you’ve been inspired by at least some of what I’ve shared today, but keep this in mind. We are all leaders just waiting to reveal ourselves. Some of you have already demonstrated the skills required and have produced amazing results. Congratulations. That’s just the **beginning**. In every phase of life, whether it is personal, social, business related or community based, our world needs creative, passionate, effective and skilled leaders. Clearly, that’s **YOU**. How do I know that? You’re here listening to me, aren’t you? Each one of you possesses all the natural resources needed to succeed as a leader. Each one of you has the ability to follow the voice within you that urges you to dare to be magnificent, and each one of you has the courage, determination and resilience to lead. We don’t choose to be leaders for the reward; we become leaders to inspire our team, to produce a result, and to be thoroughly exhausted with satisfaction at the end of the day knowing that we gave our all for a positive outcome.

Think of the people in your lives who have been leaders. Think of how their actions and skills motivated you to want to achieve. Think of your favorite teachers who made learning fun. Think of the founding fathers of this country that sacrificed and brainstormed as they created and fine-tuned the US Constitution. Think of people like Nancy Lublin, who took a $5,000.00 gift from her grandfather, “Poppy Max,” and created an organization called Dress For Success, whose mission it is to prepare marginalized women with job interview clothing and coaching so they are able to enter and re-enter the workforce and become viable members of their communities. Nancy founded the organization in 1996, and today thousands of women are finding self-confidence and dignity thanks to Nancy’s leadership and vision. Dress For Success is now considered “Worldwide” and has a presence in 108 countries around the world.

In conclusion, I want to give you one more thought. Leaders need to be flexible, and adaptable. Actually, everyone needs to be flexible. We live in fascinating times. Information and technology are right at our fingertips-who knows-maybe soon this technology will all be **implanted** in our fingertips! (**Wait for the laugh**) There is an expression that teaches us to “Adapt or dye.” It’s simple. Stagnation doesn’t work. As a leader, be informed, stay informed, and find the place within you to perpetually renew your commitment and interest in that which you lead. Eric Hoffer said, “In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

I congratulate all of you on the accomplishments you have already achieved and I will “pay it forward” and acknowledge you for your future efforts and successes as well. I know you have it in you. I know YOU know your companies and communities need you to guide them, and I know you also know that we are responsible for identifying and encouraging the next generation of leaders.

Thank you all for being here; it was truly a privilege to have this opportunity to speak with all of you.