



The management wisdom of Bill Campbell

The best managers need to be coaches

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AS YOGI BERRA, a legendary Yankees baseball player, coach and master of malapropisms, once said, “baseball is 90% mental and the other half is physical.” Managers might need a better grasp of maths than Berra. But they require a similar focus on instilling the right mentality, not just in themselves but in their team.

That view is held particularly strongly by three Google executives—Eric Schmidt (a former director of *The Economist*), Jonathan Rosenberg and Alan Eagle—who have written a book in praise of their mentor, Bill Campbell. His influence on Silicon Valley was so profound that they have called the book “Trillion Dollar Coach”.

Most outsiders will not have heard of Campbell, who began his career as a college coach of American football. Later, he worked at Apple, heading the marketing campaign for the original Macintosh, and then became chief executive at Intuit, a financial-software company. But his most effective role, until his death in 2016, was in the background, as a board member at Apple (and close friend of Steve Jobs) and as a coach to companies backed by Kleiner Perkins, a venture-capital firm.

Google was one of Kleiner’s investments and when Mr Schmidt was appointed chief executive of the company in 2001, Kleiner’s John Doerr suggested that he recruit Campbell as his coach. Although Mr Schmidt was initially reluctant to accept the need for coaching, he learned to value Campbell’s advice. In 2004 Campbell helped to persuade the Google boss not to quit when his roles as chairman and chief executive were split.

Campbell acted as an unpaid mentor at Google until his death in 2016. He also coached executives at eBay, Facebook and Twitter, among others. In 2000 he advised the Amazon board not to replace Jeff Bezos as chief executive of the e-commerce company.

As a coach, Campbell’s role was not to be in charge of particular projects, or to make strategic decisions, but to make other people work better. Although he advised individuals, his focus was on ensuring that teams were able to cooperate properly. His motto was that “your title makes you a manager, your people make you a leader.”

While he was happy to dish out praise in group meetings, and was a generous man in his spare time, he was not a soft touch. He simply believed in giving harsh feedback in private, and was usually adept enough to make the recipient grateful for the telling-off.

When he talked to people, he gave them his undivided attention; the discussions were never interrupted and he never checked his smartphone. But coaching had to be a two-way process. Some people were temperamentally incapable of responding properly. To be coachable, Campbell believed, managers need to be honest, humble and willing to learn.

A sign of his unique personality is that he has not been replaced since he died. Instead Google is attempting to incorporate his principles into the way the company is run. All managers should, in part, be coaches. The idea seems to be gaining popularity. In their book, “It’s the Manager”, Jim Clifton and Jim Harter of Gallup, a polling organisation, include a whole section called “Boss to Coach”.

This is linked to the importance of employee engagement. Gallup cites research showing that when managers involve employees in setting their own work goals, the latter are four times more likely to report feeling engaged. Managers are responsible for 70% of the variance in how engaged employees were.

The primary job of any manager is to help people be more effective in their job. One benefit should be that workers will stay with the company; the main reason they change jobs, according to what they tell Gallup, is for “career growth opportunities”. Workers should get regular feedback from their managers—daily if possible, surveys show. An annual performance review is of little use.

But this approach will only work if it comes from the top down. Middle managers tend to emulate their superiors and to respond to incentives; they will coach underlings if this behaviour is reinforced and rewarded.

Of course, even the best coaches and managers have to give their employees scope to find their own way, and make their own mistakes. As Yogi Berra put it, “I’m not going to buy my kids an encyclopedia. Let them walk to school like I did.”