

## Above the Line: Lessons in Leadership and Life from a Championship Season (Meyer, Urban)

The defining characteristic of every championship team is leadership. Leadership isn't a difference maker, it is the difference maker. Talent will get you about seven or eight wins. Discipline pushes it to nine wins, maybe. But when you add leadership, that's when magic happens.

Leadership is influence based on trust that you have earned. A leader is not someone who declares what he wants and then gets angry when he doesn't get it. A true leader is someone who is going someplace and taking people with him, a catalyst for elite performance who enables people to achieve things they wouldn't achieve on their own. A leader is someone who earns trust, sets a clear standard, and then equips and inspires people to meet that standard.

There is a red line at the edge of our practice field. Every day before practice, I stand at that red line and watch the guys take the field. The rule is that once they cross that red line, they are not only running—they are prepared to give all that they've got.

Leadership is a skill, and like all skills it takes time and effort to develop. The timeworn quotes that have been hanging around locker rooms for years are not nearly enough.

Now I understand. Average leaders have quotes. Good leaders have a plan. Exceptional leaders have a system.

Honesty is one of our core values at Ohio State. Honesty and its first cousin, accountability, are the heart of what we do, and that goes for everybody, staff and players alike. If you avoid the truth as a coach, you are teaching your players that it's OK to do the same thing. If you don't hold yourself accountable for your decisions and your actions, why should your star quarterback or punter hold himself accountable? You cannot have a close, meaningful relationship in this world without honesty.

That process began with establishing our Clarity of Purpose, capital letters intended. Defining that Clarity of Purpose, I believe, is the most

important first step a leader can take, whether you are in charge of a high school or a global conglomerate or a football team. It is fundamentally a mission statement, stripped to its most basic level. Think hard. Be as specific as possible. Ask yourself: "Exactly what is it that I am after every day?"

you are the Ohio State football team, it is Nine Units Strong.

Purpose is what drives all that we do, the high-octane fuel that energizes us. Without it, you can work hard and do all sorts of things right and still not get the results you want.

Rich invoked the West Point mission: "To educate, train and inspire."

To summarize, I think that at more than any time in his coaching career, Urban focuses on the powerful combination of these elements: clarity of purpose + deep trust + high standards + consistent accountability + tools that empower. He fully understands that these things are what produce elite team performance.

I truly believe in the maxim that if you are not getting better, then you are getting worse.

As I often remind our coaches and support staff, we are at Ohio State for one reason, and that is to make the student-athlete's experience as successful as it can be, equipping him with the tools and the work ethic that will enable him to compete and win in every aspect of his life.

The performance of a team rises or falls on behavior. Winning behavior is intentional, on purpose, and skillful. It is Above the Line. But it's easier to be impulsive, on autopilot, and resistant. This is Below the Line. Below the Line is dangerous because it is comfortable and convenient.

It is the path of least resistance. Below the Line takes little effort or skill, and the best it can produce is "just OK." Eventually, it produces failure.

My advice to leaders: ruthlessly eliminate BCD. Instead of accountability, BCD creates a culture of excuse making and victimization—things that are toxic for your organization and performance. It has never solved a problem, achieved a goal, or improved a relationship. Stop wasting your time and energy on something that will never help you.

Above the Line behavior is intentional, on purpose, and skillful. Below the Line behavior is impulsive, on autopilot, and resistant.

Beware of BCD: blame, complain, defend. BCD has never solved a problem, achieved a goal, or improved a relationship. Stop wasting your time and energy on something that will never help you. Ruthlessly eliminate BCD

The R Factor IT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENS THAT MATTERS. IT'S HOW YOU RESPOND.

It begins with a simple powerful equation that affects everything we do.  
 $E + R = O$

Event + Response = Outcome

This equation teaches something very important about the way life works. We don't control the events in life, and we don't directly control the outcomes. But we always have control over how we choose to respond. How we respond means everything. We call it the R Factor.

Tim Kight, founder of Focus 3,

There are six R Factor disciplines that we teach to our players.

R:1 Press Pause We teach our players, in response to any situation they face, to press pause and ask: What does this situation require of me?

There are two important benefits of pressing pause: A) It helps you avoid doing something foolish or harmful. B) It focuses you on acting with purpose to accomplish your goals.

## R:2 Get Your Mind Right

Getting your mind right means managing two things: A) What you focus on. B) How you talk to yourself.

If you focus on productive things and talk to yourself in productive ways, that will put you into a productive mindset. Your performance will be enhanced. We teach our players to replace low-performance self-talk with high-performance self-talk. We tell our players, “The voice in your mind is a powerful force. Take ownership of that force.”

There are three distinct mindsets that affect how our players train and practice. The first two are Below the Line, the third is Above the Line.

Irritated mindset: Comes from negative focus that is born of laziness and is resistant to the productive discomfort that real growth requires. The self-talk sounds like: “Forget that drill! Why are we doing this stuff?!”

Survival mindset: Comes from a desire to take the path of least resistance. It focuses on what’s comfortable and convenient. It’s not focused on getting better. The self-talk sounds like: “Man, this workout sucks. When will this be over? Just get through it.”

Purpose mindset: This is the Above the Line way of thinking that we look for, encourage, and reward. It embraces productive discomfort because it knows that discomfort is necessary in order to practice and perform at an elite level. It wants to compete. The self-talk of the purpose mindset is: “This drill makes me better. It makes our team better. Bring it on!”

## R:3 Step Up

There is an Above the Line response to every situation you face. It is your responsibility to understand the situation, be clear about what is required of you, then respond Above the Line. This is what it means to step up.

Under pressure, we do not rise to the occasion. We rise or fall to the level of our training.

We must prepare and develop our R Factor capacity before we experience challenging situations.

Every team faces some kind of adversity. Mediocre teams are destroyed by it. Good teams survive it. Great teams get better because of it.

#### R:4 Adjust and Adapt

It is foolish to resent or resist change. A rapidly changing world deals ruthlessly with people who fail to adapt. If you don't like change, you are going to like irrelevance even less.

Don't hold on to what's holding you back. Get rid of anything that does not make you better.

#### R:5 Make a Difference

Make a Difference means taking complete ownership of the experience you give to teammates and the contribution you make to the culture of the team.

The experience you give to others may be the single most important element of teamwork. You will be no better as a team than you are to each other. Make the people around you better.

#### R:6 Build Skill

Elite performers are the ones who are relentless about building skill beyond their talent. Talent is a gift. Greatness is a choice.

Exceptional performance is the result of an uncommon level of focus and discipline in the pursuit of greatness. Build skill every day and consistently get better. Be coachable. Train and practice

We call it “reaches and reps.” You reach a new level—an elite level—by continually pushing yourself through specifically designed repetitions, and doing it with uncommon dedication

We showed our team a video of Stephen Curry practicing, in which he displayed this kind of Above the Line training. It wasn't just that Curry took five hundred more shots a day than anybody else to become the NBA's Most Valuable Player, and to help bring an NBA championship to his Golden State Warriors for the first time in forty years. It was how purposefully he took those shots, how the specific techniques, whether shooting a jumper off a left-hand dribble or making a step-back three-pointer, would sharpen his skills so that in the heat of a playoff battle he would be masterful.

Sometimes we express it another way: Don't give me theory. Give me testimony. We are not measured by our intentions, but by our actions.

Embrace productive discomfort. Discomfort marks the place where the old way meets the new way. Push through the pain. If it doesn't challenge you, it will not change you.

Creating a Culture LEADERS CREATE CULTURE. CULTURE DRIVES BEHAVIOR. BEHAVIOR PRODUCES RESULTS.

Culture is what we believe, how we behave, and the experience that our behavior produces for each other. That last point is critical. People experience culture through behavior. Strategy determines scheme and technique. Culture determines attitude and effort. Once strategy has been developed, success becomes a matter of attitude and effort. And that's where culture comes in.

Notice the reinforcement loop between culture and behavior. This is the flywheel effect. Behavior reinforces the culture that creates it. Over time this mutual reinforcement gains momentum and becomes increasingly difficult to change. If you have the culture/behavior that you want, the flywheel effect works for you. If you do not have the culture/behavior that you want, the flywheel effect works against you.

Culture eats strategy for lunch. Talent, schemes, tactics, and plans cannot replace a strong culture. A great culture can make even a mediocre strategy successful, but a weak culture will undermine even the best strategy.

The foundation of culture is core beliefs. Not platitudes or quotes. Core beliefs. The beliefs that are the heart of the team.

As part of our leadership training in the winter of 2014, we created a blueprint to communicate our culture to everyone on the team. The goal was to be so clear about our culture that there would be no confusion, no uncertainty, and no excuses.

We communicated the culture blueprint with exceptional clarity and nonstop consistency to our team. And we held everyone accountable to it.

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Believe How We Behave Outcome We Achieve Relentless Effort Go as hard as you can, four to six seconds, point A to point B We are tougher than any situation or opponent we face Competitive Excellence Constant focus on mental reps and game reps You are prepared to make the play when your number is called Power of the Unit Uncommon commitment to each other and to the work necessary to achieve our purpose Brotherhood of trust. Combat motivation.

Our first core belief is relentless effort, and it means going as hard as you can. On every play. In every rep. All the time.

At Ohio State, we believe that being elite is not about how talented you are, it's about how tough you are.

Too often, coaches overemphasize avoiding mistakes, and as a result they paralyze the performance of their players. We acknowledge up front that mistakes are going to happen. I can handle a player making a mistake as long as he is going four to six, A to B, because a mistake is something we can and will fix. But a player who is lazy and gives partial effort will never perform at the standard that our game demands

Our second core belief is competitive excellence, and it means a constant focus on mental reps and game reps.

It is consistent engagement in your training and preparation.

Our third core belief is power of the unit, and it means that our players have an uncommon commitment to each other and to the work necessary to achieve our purpose.

Once your culture is clearly defined, communicate it to your players and staff with clarity and consistency, explaining why it is essential to the success of the program.

Your culture message must be exceptionally clear: no confusion, no uncertainty, no excuses.

When you determine what the culture is and communicate it with exceptional clarity, it is imperative that you hold people accountable to it.

Remember this: if you permit it, you promote it.

You don't get the culture you want; you get the culture you build.

Every organization has a culture either by design or by default.

## Relentless Effort EMBRACE THE GRIND

The challenge is to build a culture—a competitive environment—where everyone gives relentless effort every day. A culture everyone wants but few get.

He does this by adding sets and reps just when the players thought they were done, not telling them until right before the workout what the training regimen is for that day, and mixing up their training partners,



among many other tactics. It's all part of the mental stress that he induces to create the chaos for players to work through and overcome.

He says, "Chaos, confusion, and conflict. Our players are going to experience it on the field. It's our responsibility to train them to learn how to deal with it and rise above it."

Success is cumulative and progressive. It is the result of what you do every day. Both successful and unsuccessful people take daily action. The difference is that successful people take action Above the Line. They step up and act with intention, purpose, and skill.

Do you decide what to do based on what is comfortable and convenient, or based on what is productive and necessary? Following your passion isn't always 100 percent pleasurable. Sometimes it means doing things you don't want to do for the sake of achieving your goals.

If you want to win in the future, you must win the grind today.

Competitive Excellence THE BEST "GAMERS" ARE THE BEST "PRACTICERS"

Every player is required to be engaged in the drill. If you're not taking the physical rep, you're taking the mental rep. There are no wasted reps. Every. Rep. Matters.

The mystery is this: What motivates a player to give maximum effort and play with selfless commitment to the team?

The military has the same challenge we do, except they call it combat motivation. What motivates soldiers to engage in combat? How do you train soldiers to fight and win? And how do you train and equip soldiers to sustain combat motivation during periods of prolonged conflict?

Research by the U.S. military on battlefield experience has revealed that even when confronted by an attacking enemy, many soldiers hesitate to fight. The stress of battle, the fear of death, and the natural hesitancy to shoot another person all combine to produce low levels of combat

motivation and thus poor battlefield performance. However, a person will fight for the guys in his unit. Tenaciously. For however long it takes.

Writes Reilly, “The strongest motivation for enduring combat, especially for U.S. soldiers, is the bond formed among members of a squad or platoon. This cohesion is the single most important sustaining and motivating force for combat soldiers. Simply put, soldiers fight because of the other members of their small unit.”

The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him.

Trust is something that every team talks about and wants, but few truly get. Trust is belief in the reliability of a person. It is confidence that you can count on a person. But the trust we seek to build at Ohio State goes deeper than that. It is the kind of trust that the Navy SEALs have for each other, the kind that is earned over time as guys demonstrate they can be counted on in difficult—even extreme—conditions.

It is in the crucible of training that the bond—the uncommon commitment—of the SEAL brotherhood is built.

The core message was very straightforward: trust is earned through your behavior, not granted by your position. And it is earned through repeated behavior over time. Every day, through your actions, you make deposits into or withdrawals from your “trust account” with the players you are seeking to lead and coach.

Trust is earned through how you behave in three areas: character, competence, and connection. All three are essential.

Character is ethical trust. It is built through repeated experience of you doing what you say you will do. Competence is technical trust. It is built through repeated experience of you doing your job and making the team better. Connection is personal trust. It is built through repeated experience of you caring, listening, and fully engaging with the people on the team.

It is important to remember that players do not experience your intentions; they experience your behavior.

When our soldiers engage the enemy, when contact is made and the bullets start flying, it all comes down to training and how much our guys trust each other. We train relentlessly to fight and win. And we train in squads, which are small units. In addition to our training, what is critical to our success in combat is how much the guys in a squad trust each other and their sergeant. They build that trust in training, and they build it by spending personal time together and getting to know each other.

So much of the brotherhood of trust is developed based on the amount of time invested with those you care about. There is no substitute for it.  
I

“You spell love T-I-M-E,” he said.

It’s just recognizing that if we’re going to put these guys under such pressure and in such hard situations, let’s not forget to be positive, too.

It wasn’t just getting through the week anymore. It was enjoying the week. Sure we had a winning streak going and we were going for a title, but the focus every day was on working as hard as we could and getting better tomorrow than we were today.”

When a team is aligned, everyone understands and is fully committed to the team’s purpose, culture, and strategy. In an aligned organization, every employee—from the executive suite to the loading dock—understands not only the strategies and goals of the business, but also how their individual contribution matters.

Bill Belichick has often told me, “Always bring in people who can enhance what you do without changing the basics of it.”

Bring in people who believe in what you are doing and will help you make it better.

## The 10-80-10 Principle HOW TO BUILD AN ELITE TEAM

But remember, your goal as a leader is to build and motivate your whole team, and the way to do that is to focus your attention on the 80 percenters.

The lesson I learned was this: time is a nonrenewable resource. If you waste it, you never get it back, so it's essential to pick your battles wisely.

I am going to lay out specific ways of moving the 80 percenters into the high-performing group, but before I do let's look at the bigger picture of the 10-80-10 principle and the whole concept of talent.

Here are four approaches to getting as many of your 80 percenters as possible into the inner circle:

### Mastery and Belief

If players are going to make the big push to join the elites, they need to believe it will be worth it. It's important to remind them of the quality of the leadership at Ohio State—let them know they are being taught by masters of their craft who have made a significant difference in other players' lives. I make sure that my assistant coaches showcase the achievements of other great players they have worked with. Visuals such as videos and images are incredible tools to convey a message. It is not about bragging. It's about reinforcing that this is a special place that has produced special players. It's about motivating the 80 percenters.

It's a natural human reaction to want to be connected to greatness. The moment you arrive in the lobby of our football complex, you see trophies, photos, and multimedia displays of some of the great moments in Ohio State history, dating to the first national championship in 1942.

### Harness the Power

In other words, the top 10 percenters will stick with their fellow 10 percenters, and the 80 percenters will do the same with their group. We

work hard to change that inclination, pairing a top 10 percenter with an 80 percenter as much as possible in workouts, drills, and unit meetings. Harness the power that the elites have. Leverage the ability of the top 10 percenters to bring more 80 percenters into the nucleus.

## Building Ownership

## Positive Peer Pressure

“Failure is not fatal,” John Wooden said, “but a failure to change might be.”

Every team or organization consists of three groups: The top 10 percent: disciplined, driven, self-motivated, want to be great, and work relentlessly. The 80 percent: the majority—those who do a good job and are relatively reliable. The bottom 10 percent: disinterested and defiant. The key to success is moving as many of the 80 percenters into the top 10 percent as you can. Time is a limited resource. Stop wasting it trying to motivate the bottom 10 percent.

Think Like a Leader “A public opinion poll is no substitute for thought.”  
—WARREN BUFFETT

That is true. We go after Nine Units Strong every day. We pursue relentless effort, competitive excellence, and the power of the unit every single day. Champions Day is different. Champions Day is about creating a vision, a crystal-clear picture of what winning a championship looks like and feels like. The centerpiece of Champions Day is a video presentation that shows champions in a variety of sports celebrating in all of their glory. There’s Joe Namath holding up his ring from Super Bowl III. There’s John Madden and Phil Villapiano telling stories about the 1976 championship team. There’s Tom Brady and the New England Patriots, Ray Lewis and the Baltimore Ravens, LeBron James and the Miami Heat, and, of course, it features Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls. It’s a nonstop display of champions. This unique day’s purpose is to give every player and every unit leader a chance to observe testimony of the amount of work, commitment, and sheer toughness it takes to win a championship.

Then the video takes you inside the winners' locker room because until you've experienced that magical moment, there is nothing like it. To close the day, we have a special guest, someone who has won a championship, speak to our team in order to drive home how special an experience it was for him and his teammates. Billy Donovan came in once. We've also had Teddy Bruschi, Tony Dungy, Bob Knight, and Doc Rivers, all of whom had incredible stories to tell.

Doc brought along his own video to show how his team responded during those incredibly difficult series. It was as if we were all right there alongside Kevin Garnett, Ray Allen, and Paul Pierce.

William Deresiewicz, a gifted author and essayist who gave a lecture at the United States Military Academy at West Point titled "Solitude and Leadership." His central point was that true leadership comes from within. It comes from a deep introspection into your beliefs.

But if you can't put aside distractions long enough to be alone in reflection, formulate your own ideas and opinions, then you are handicapping your ability to think, make decisions, and lead. As your problems become more challenging and unique, your thinking needs to become more original.

"Thinking means concentrating on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it," Deresiewicz writes. "Not learning other people's ideas, or memorizing a body of information, however much those may sometimes be useful. Developing your own ideas. In short, thinking for yourself. You simply cannot do that in bursts of twenty seconds at a time, constantly interrupted by Facebook messages, or Twitter tweets, or fiddling with your iPod, or watching something on YouTube."

He says that the way to cultivate the strength and wisdom to do the right thing is through deep, fully engaged, solitary thinking.

TEN The Power of Belief

Research shows that the highest levels of human performance are empowered by the deepest levels of belief.

Why? First of all, belief creates vision. It enables you to see possibilities that others do not see. It sees not only the goal it wants to achieve, but the pathway—the effort and action—that is required to accomplish that goal. A player who believes sees himself training, practicing, performing, and achieving. He sees himself competing and winning with such powerful focus that he ignores all distractions and doubters.

Players who believe say, “I will.” Their mindset is: I will do the work. I will do my job. I will make the play. No matter how difficult, no matter how big the challenge, I will do whatever it takes for as long as it takes. Their belief empowers them with unshakable resolve and determination.

Strength of will is not about the commitment to start; it’s about the commitment to continue. It’s about the many recommitments that are necessary to sustain the journey when it gets difficult, tedious, and painful.

Another thing that belief fortifies is your resilience. Resilience is what enables you to bounce back from adversity. It’s about making your R stronger than any E you face. When confronted with difficult situations, elite performers waste zero energy worrying or engaging in BCD behavior. Their belief-driven resilience gets them through it and actually makes them stronger.

Randy Pausch, the author of *The Last Lecture*, wrote this about adversity: The brick walls are there for a reason. The brick walls are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something. The brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want it badly enough.

It’s the R Factor principle we talked about earlier in this book: under pressure, you don’t rise to the occasion; you rise or fall to the level of your training.

I was on the field at Miami's Sun Life Stadium before the game, paying close attention to the Alabama players' warm-up, and I was blown away by everything I saw. The pace. The crispness of the execution. The unmistakable we're-here-on-a-mission demeanor.

So I grabbed my phone and sent a text to every player and every unit leader, right there from the sidelines: The Chase is on immediately, because we are not the best team in the country. Alabama is.

It was The Chase to close that gap. The Chase to beat the best, so we could become the best. It was purposeful and intentional, and if we did everything we hoped to do—if we were fully aligned and giving our all for each other, and if we were driven and committed to pursuing our shared purpose with Above the Line behavior—I knew in my heart it was within our reach.

I learned an important lesson from Lou Holtz: when playing a quality opponent, always build them up. We kept telling our players about what I had witnessed at the national championship game a couple of years ago and of how great a team Alabama is. We wanted to make sure our players knew exactly what we would be facing and what a challenge it would be to play them. We wanted them to be ticked off even at the mention of Alabama. We wanted them to play with an edge, driven by a desire to shut up all the people—and there were millions of them—who thought Ohio State was the second best team in the Sugar Bowl. After that, we gradually changed the narrative, building our guys up, empowering them. We did it initially with a message called "Six Percent," which we introduced with the game still a few weeks out.

"You don't have to beat Alabama today. You don't have to beat them tomorrow, or even the next day. So you don't have to do everything right now to beat them today. Today, all you need to do is get six percent better. That's all. Give us relentless effort and get six percent better. If every one of you does that every day, by the time the foot hits the ball in the Sugar Bowl, you'll be ready." Day after day, guys would show up for practice, and we'd keep harping on the Six Percent. You could feel something special building. You could feel belief building. Our players were Above the Line in every aspect of their



Every game day we have a pregame motivational video that the team and staff watch together at the hotel right before we head to the stadium. I give a brief message, followed by the video. This video features season highlights set to music and concludes with a specific movie clip. I had met with David Trichel before we left for Dallas and told him exactly what I wanted.

As they say in the military, when contact is made, you revert to your training. And we had great faith in the rigor of our training.

In so many ways, this game was a microcosm of what I've long believed and what we looked at earlier: relentless effort will win out over mistakes every time.

It is about equipping people with the tools necessary to get and stay Above the Line. It is about maximizing their talent and their lives. It's one of the greatest gifts you could ever have because you are doing something that has far more importance than the outcome of a football game. You are stretching people, helping them change and grow. You are taking people to places they never thought they would reach. You are helping them live better lives. Think about that. It's deeply humbling to be able to have that kind of impact.

**Our Purpose Is Clear: NINE UNITS STRONG** I am a member of an elite team of warriors, a group of men with an uncommon commitment to a common purpose. Our brotherhood has been forged through rigorous training, unrelenting discipline, and painful adversity. We train to fight and we fight to win. I have an obligation to hold my unit accountable and be held accountable for our actions. I will do my job. I will hold my point. Nothing is more important than my connection to my unit. My actions, my words, and my attitude are all in alignment with our purpose. I trust my unit leader and his vision for our unit. I seek no glory for myself but for my unit and for my teammates. To be a brother in such a unit is a privilege that I must earn every single day. The culture of our unit begins with my character. The team's core values are my core values. I am not perfect and strive to fix the problem areas in my life. I behave in a way that shows my unit that they can count on me in the most difficult of situations. My response will be greater than any event I face. I am that man.