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Winning Isn't For Everyone

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This past week, I started my day as I normally do – reading articles and posts to help me become a better leader and to help others become better leaders. One article attributed this quote to Steve Jobs: "My job isn't to be easy on people. My job is to make them better." As a professor in the Department of Organization and Leadership at Teachers College Columbia University , I've seen this play out in the classroom, the

boardroom, and the locker room. His words echo the spirit of great coaching—whether on the court or in the workplace—because ultimately, leadership is about raising the game of those around you. This notion ties in neatly with Nike's recent slogan: "Winning Isn't For Everyone." Both statements speak to an uncomfortable truth: growth is sometimes a challenge, and not everyone is ready or willing to push through the discomfort that comes with real improvement.

For both veteran and aspiring leaders, the temptation to be "easy" on people is real. Who wants to be the one delivering hard truths when a project has gone sideways? Or telling a member of the team that their work isn't up to par? And yet, just like the best coaches, effective leaders know that growth often comes through challenge. Think about elite sports coaches—Nick Saban, Pat Summitt, John Thompson. They didn't become legendary by coddling their athletes; they became icons by pushing their teams beyond what they thought possible. Their job wasn't to make practices fun or easy, but to make their players better—mentally and physically.

In the business world, it's no different. Leaders often need to challenge their teams, push them past their comfort zones, and yes, sometimes make people uncomfortable in the process. If you want a high-performing team, you need to demand high performance. And that means not being afraid to hold people accountable, even when it's tough. This doesn't mean being harsh for the sake of it. The most successful coaches and leaders have a rare blend of high expectations and unwavering support. They push hard but are equally invested in the success of their people. It's this combination that turns a few "talented individuals" into championship teams.

Here's where Nike's slogan comes in: "Winning Isn't For Everyone." It's a vivid reminder that not everyone is willing to do the work it takes to get better. In leadership, as in sports, you'll meet people who have all the talent in the world but lack the hunger, the discipline, or the resilience to really excel. Winning—or in a broader sense, success—requires more than talent. It demands persistence, sacrifice, and the ability to recover after failure. As leaders, part of our job is to figure out who's ready to make that journey and who isn't. Not everyone is cut out for the grind—and that's okay. What's not okay is lowering the standard because it's difficult to maintain.

After high school, I decided to attend Grambling State University because I wanted to join the world-famous Tiger Marching Band. We were called to report for Band Camp during the last week of July. Classes didn't start until the last week of August, so we

were there a full month ahead of the other students returning and still others coming to college for the first time. Picture this: learning how to march, play music and dance all at the same time on an asphalt practice surface in the Louisiana sun. A number of people quit after the first day; others quit after a week and some completed band camp and still quit. All summer I wondered, "Why are we doing this? What did I get myself into?" I suffered through fallen arches, but didn't quit. I did question why, but persevered. I will never forget getting the answer to that question at the first game of the season at Independence Stadium in Shreveport, Louisiana. It was that moment when the drums rang out in the stadium and we took to the field. Almost 50,000 people stood simultaneously and screamed at the top of their lungs. I can still remember standing on the sideline thinking, "This is why—unmatched. We are the best." I almost missed my count to step onto the field taking in that moment. Not everyone wanted that win. Those that did were there. We had endured the sun, the exhaustion and dehydration – to win.

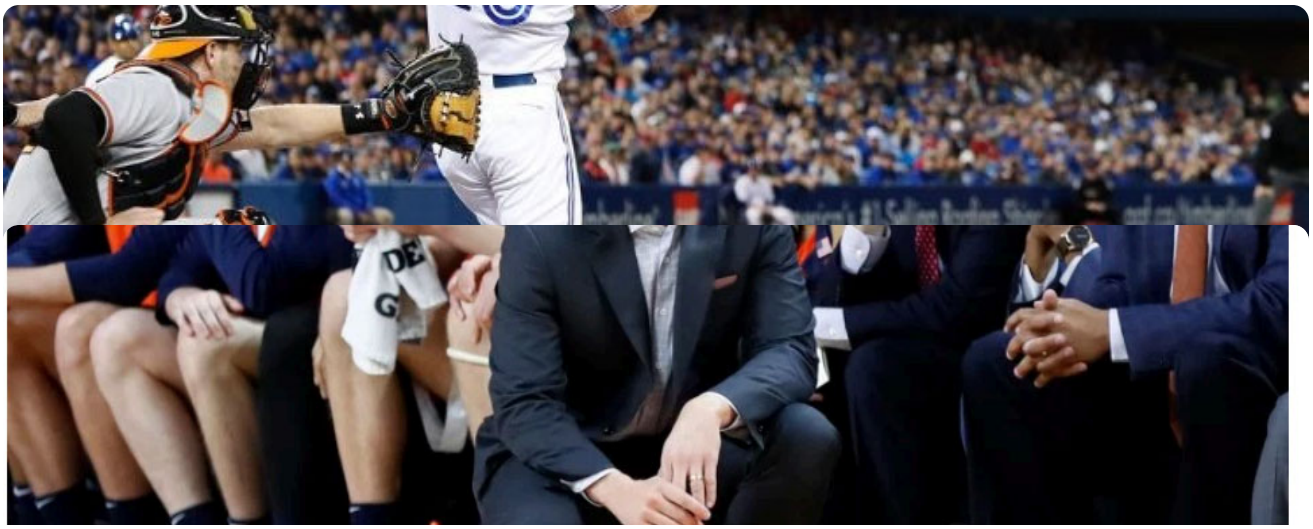
The key takeaway for leaders is this: Don't aim to be easy. Aim to elevate. Be the coach who challenges their team to reach new heights, even if it's uncomfortable. And recognize that not everyone is built for the climb. If you can live in that tension—between high expectations and genuine support—you won't just be leading. You'll be transforming.

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"Not everyone is cut out for the grind—and that's okay. What's not okay is lowering the standard because it's difficult to maintain." These words resonated with me as I reflected on my experiences as part of the team and leading the team. Thank you for sharing your article, Dr. Perkins.

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Love these insights Dr.P!!!

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Taiwana Walker, Ed.D 4w
Instructional Coach| Assistant Professor| Professional Development

Brian, this is a much-needed evaluation of leadership. Thanks for challenging my perspectives on the power of having courageous conversations. While it is tempting to creep into my comfort zone and avoid challenging my team, it is ultimately through pushing them beyond their limits that I can facilitate significant growth.

Don't aim to be EASY, aim to ELEVATE! I love it!

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Transformational Leaders is t about tweeking what you're already doing, but fundamentally rethinking how to approach & solve a problem. Thanks Perkins for stiring this pot.

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