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Redefining Executive Leadership: Making the Extraordinary Achievable

By **Michael Beas** November 2, 2026



Dr. Christian Marcolli, one of the world's foremost leadership experts, has pioneered Strategic Leadership Sparring — a systematic leadership practice for making the best even better and leading individuals with game-changing potential toward extraordinary achievements.

What separates exceptional organizations from the rest is not simply their ability to attract outstanding talent. It is their ability to recognize individuals with game-changing potential — and provide the specific leadership they need to become even better.

For more than two decades, Dr. Christian Marcolli has occupied a distinctive position in the global leadership landscape. Globally recognized as one of the world's leading executive coaches, leadership experts, and performance psychologists, he has explored the intersection of executive leadership and world-class performance with a depth and breadth few others can match.

Building on this exceptional breadth of experience, Marcolli has pioneered a new frontier in executive leadership: the systematic development of individuals with game-changing potential through Strategic Leadership Sparring — a distinctive leadership practice designed to make the best even better and lead Game Changers toward the extraordinary.

While executive leadership has traditionally focused on managing performance and developing talent more broadly, Marcolli's pioneering work addresses a more specific and consequential challenge: how to identify individuals with game-changing potential, systematically make the best even better, and enable them to create disproportionate value.

His groundbreaking work has attracted extensive international media attention, reinforcing his standing as a global thought leader and a distinctive voice in the evolution of executive leadership.

Strategic Leadership Sparring sits at the heart of his proprietary WINNING MATCH® framework, presented in his international No. 1 bestselling and award-winning book, *WINNING MATCH: Leadership for Game Changers – Together Toward the Extraordinary*.

From Personal Experience to a Global Perspective on World-Class Performance

Marcolli's understanding of exceptional performance began long before he entered the executive boardroom.

As a very promising young professional footballer in Switzerland, he experienced firsthand how leadership can influence the development, confidence, and performance of highly talented, ambitious individuals. He also experienced its destructive potential.

A toxic environment, dysfunctional leadership from his coach, and his own determination to prove himself contributed to a period of excessive training and ultimately an injury that ended his professional playing career.

For Marcolli, it was a defining, life-changing experience.

Rather than simply attributing responsibility to poor leadership, he became determined to understand the psychological dynamics that enable exceptional people to perform at their best — and the conditions that can prevent them from doing so.

He went on to earn a Ph.D. in Applied Psychology from the University of Zurich and specialized in performance psychology at the University of Ottawa.

Over the following decades, his work took him into some of the world's most demanding performance environments.

He collaborated with several Olympic Champions, World Champions, and leading international athletes. Among them was tennis legend Roger Federer, whom Marcolli supported as a performance psychologist during an important period early in his career, helping him strengthen the mental capabilities required to perform under intense competitive pressure.

In parallel, Marcolli developed an international career advising CEOs, senior executives, and leadership teams of major corporations.

These experiences gave him an unusually broad perspective: understanding exceptional performance from the inside, studying its psychological foundations, and helping leaders create the conditions for others to excel.

As Marcolli argues, even the most exceptional individuals do not achieve the extraordinary through talent and determination alone. The leadership around them can make a decisive difference.

Game Changers: Recognizing the Potential to Make a Disproportionate Difference

In WINNING MATCH, Marcolli distinguishes between individuals who perform very well and those with the potential to fundamentally change what is possible. He calls the latter Game Changers.

Game Changers can fundamentally elevate performance, challenge established assumptions, create new opportunities, and generate disproportionate value for their organizations.

What distinguishes them is not simply superior intelligence, expertise, or an impressive track record.

Marcolli identifies four defining characteristics:

- Passion for Excellence. A deep intrinsic drive to achieve outstanding results, continuously improve, and pursue ambitious standards.

- Desire for Input and Feedback. A genuine willingness to seek perspectives, welcome constructive challenge, and learn from others.

- Ability to Transform Input into Action. The capacity to quickly convert new insights, feedback, and learning into meaningful changes in behavior and performance.

- Mental Toughness. The psychological strength to remain determined, focused, and effective through adversity, setbacks, uncertainty, and demanding circumstances.

These characteristics create the foundation for extraordinary potential. But potential alone is not enough.

Even individuals with exceptional capabilities and ambition can stagnate, become frustrated, or fail to achieve the impact they are capable of delivering if they are not led in the specific way they need.

Marcolli argues that this is where organizations frequently make a costly mistake. They assume that their best people need less, or even no active leadership.

In reality, they often need a more sophisticated and individualized form of leadership.

Marcolli convincingly makes the case that the very best people do not need to be left alone. They need leaders who can make them even better.

Leadership Champions: Leaders Who Make Others Extraordinary

Marcolli calls the leaders who excel at this responsibility Leadership Champions.

They are distinguished not simply by their ability to deliver results, but by their ability to develop individuals who can achieve extraordinary results themselves.

Beyond what Marcolli calls “Game Changer Scouting Skills,” he identifies three essential competencies that define Leadership Champions.

First, collective ambition that supersedes personal ambition.

Leadership Champions place the success of their people, teams, and organizations above their own ego and personal recognition. They are willing to invest in individuals who may eventually outperform them, surpass their own capabilities, or receive greater recognition.

Second, unconditional generosity.

They invest time, attention, knowledge, energy, resources, and connections in their Game Changers without expecting an immediate return. They recognize that helping exceptional people grow is one of the most valuable investments a leader can make.

Third, the ability to engage in Strategic Leadership Sparring.

Leadership Champions create deliberate, high-impact interactions that challenge, support, and accelerate the development of their Game Changers.

These competencies distinguish leadership that merely manages performance from leadership that actively elevates it.

The defining question is no longer simply whether a leader is successful. It is whether the people they lead become capable of achieving something extraordinary.

Strategic Leadership Sparring: A New Standard for Leading the Best

At the heart of WINNING MATCH is Strategic Leadership Sparring — a pioneering, systematic leadership practice created by Marcolli to specifically lead the best people toward the extraordinary.

Developed for the relationship between a Leadership Champion and an individual with game-changing potential, the practice addresses a fundamental leadership challenge: exceptional people do not simply need greater autonomy, more ambitious targets, or occasional coaching. They need a trusted leadership partner who can consistently make them even better.

Strategic Leadership Sparring transforms this relationship into a deliberate, ongoing practice of constructive challenge, individualized support, and high-impact interactions.

Its purpose is clear: to elevate the Game Changer’s thinking, strengthen judgment, accelerate development, and enable extraordinary achievements and disproportionate

contributions.

These interactions can focus on what Marcolli calls high-impact activities — the most significant business challenges, complex decisions, or longer-term strategic opportunities.

They are not occasional coaching conversations added to a leader's calendar. They are an ongoing leadership practice, integrated into the professional relationship and adapted to the individual.

Marcolli has developed five principles that define how this leadership sparring works:

- Respectful: Offering options instead of instructions.
- Flexible: Inspiring individual growth rather than pressuring people to conform.
- Demanding: Creating productive discomfort instead of settling for harmony.
- Maximally Supportive: Clearing the path rather than delivering ready-made fixes.
- Playful: Bringing lightness, confidence, and perspective rather than unnecessary heaviness.

Together, these principles create an environment in which ambitious expectations coexist with trust, mutual respect, openness, and individualized support.

The goal is not for the leader to demonstrate superior knowledge or win an argument. It is to make the Game Changer's thinking stronger, decisions better, actions more effective, and contribution more significant.

This is what makes Strategic Leadership Sparring fundamentally different from traditional command-and-control leadership or simply giving high performers greater autonomy.

The leader is not the star of the performance. The leader actively supports the Game Changer in becoming extraordinary.

Making Sustainable Excellence Possible and the Extraordinary Achievable

For Marcolli, making the best even better must never come at the expense of their long-term ability to perform.

His work with Olympic Champions, world-class athletes, and senior executives has repeatedly demonstrated that extraordinary achievement requires more than relentless effort.

It requires the ability to sustain high performance through changing circumstances, pressure, setbacks, and new challenges.

This has become particularly relevant in modern organizations.

The strongest performers are frequently given the most demanding assignments, entrusted with the most complex problems, and expected to carry an increasing share of organizational responsibility.

Yet exceptional capability does not make someone immune to exhaustion, declining motivation, or the consequences of poor leadership.

Marcolli emphasizes that Leadership Champions must recognize the difference between stretching an individual toward new levels of excellence and continuously overloading them.

Strategic Leadership Sparring enables leaders to understand their Game Changers at a deeper level — their ambitions, strengths, vulnerabilities, sources of motivation, and specific support needs — and to continuously calibrate challenge and support as circumstances evolve.

The objective is not simply to extract extraordinary results from exceptional individuals. It is to systematically strengthen their capabilities, judgment, confidence, and resilience so that they can continue creating disproportionate value over time.

Marcolli’s WINNING MATCH approach provides leaders with a systematic practice to fulfill one of the defining responsibilities of exceptional leadership: making sustainable excellence possible and the extraordinary achievable.

Because true excellence is not demonstrated by one extraordinary achievement. It is demonstrated by the capacity to achieve the extraordinary again and again.

The Competitive Advantage of Investing in Your Best People

In a world where technology, information, and business models can be replicated with increasing speed, the ability to recognize, develop, and lead individuals with game-changing potential is becoming an increasingly important source of competitive advantage.

Organizations need people who do more than execute existing strategies. They need individuals capable of challenging conventional thinking, creating new possibilities, and generating disproportionate value.

But attracting exceptional individuals is only the beginning. The decisive advantage comes from having leaders who know how to make them even better.

This raises a fundamental question for CEOs and senior executives: Are you investing enough of your most valuable leadership resource — your personal attention — in the people who have the greatest potential to change the game?

Much of senior executives' attention is consumed by operational demands, solving problems, correcting underperformance, and managing immediate priorities. While these responsibilities remain essential, Marcolli challenges leaders to reconsider whether they are investing sufficient time and energy in developing their most exceptional people.

Strategic Leadership Sparring provides a specific, systematic practice for making that investment meaningful.

Through deliberate, high-impact interactions, Leadership Champions help their Game Changers sharpen strategic judgment, expand their capabilities, make better decisions, and deliver increasingly significant contributions.

The implications reach far beyond individual performance.

When Game Changers become even better, they can elevate entire teams, strengthen organizational capabilities, create new opportunities, and redefine what their organizations are capable of achieving.

The competitive advantage is not simply having exceptional people. It is having exceptional leaders who make those people even better.

Would a Game Changer Choose You as Their Leader?

The global success of WINNING MATCH since its publication reflects the growing interest in a leadership challenge that Marcolli considers fundamental to the future of executive leadership.

How can organizations move beyond simply managing talented people and specifically start developing the individuals who have the potential to change the game?

His answer is grounded in a distinctive partnership.

The Game Changer brings the exceptional potential, including passion for excellence, openness to feedback and desire for input, the ability to act on new insights, and mental toughness.

The Leadership Champion brings collective ambition, unconditional generosity, and the ability to engage in Strategic Leadership Sparring.

Together, they create the conditions for exceptional performance and maximum impact that neither could achieve in the same way alone.

For Marcolli, the ultimate measure of leadership is not simply what leaders achieve themselves. It is what they enable their most exceptional people to become capable of achieving.

With his pioneering work, Marcolli is redefining the future of executive leadership — driving a fundamental shift from managing exceptional talent to systematically making the best even better and leading them toward the extraordinary.

This raises a fundamental question for every CEO, senior executive, and business leader:

Are you simply managing your best people — or are you making them even better, leading them toward the extraordinary, and becoming the kind of leader Game Changers would choose?

Because exceptional talent may give an organization an advantage.

But exceptional leadership can turn that potential into extraordinary performance, sustainable excellence, and results that truly change the game.