

Wednesday 15 October 2025 5:49 am | Updated: Tuesday 14 October 2025 8:53 pm

Stop coddling your staff! Good bosses spar with their employees



Christian Marcolli

When bosses prioritise politeness over honest exchange, they sacrifice the development of their employees, writes Dr Christian Marcolli in today's [Notebook](#)

Bosses and staff should know how to spar

A [recent survey](#) by AI-platform Joi AI reveals that 58 per cent of ChatGPT users feel it's "too nice and polite" and many respondents said they would prefer the AI to "argue back occasionally", suggesting that users crave more authentic pushback rather than constant validation. The same truth applies in human leadership: when we constantly prioritise politeness over honest exchange, we sacrifice excellent performance and opportunities for growth for perceived comfort.

In today's corporate world, leaders often mistake stagnant harmony for health. Teams avoid conflict, conversations stay polite and difficult truths remain unspoken – which results in artificial cohesion. Yet, as I've seen throughout my career, from coaching Olympic champions to advising global CEOs, true excellence doesn't emerge from comfort. It's forged in challenge. That's why I believe one of the most powerful competencies for leaders today is leadership sparring.

Just as athletes spar to elevate their performance level without risk of injury, leaders can use sparring to stretch their teams' thinking in a safe

but demanding way. Sparring is not about confrontation for its own sake; it's a structured, respectful and constructive exchange that pushes ideas further, sharpens judgement and deepens trust.

Unlike traditional management, which often flows one way and focuses on evaluation, leadership sparring is collaborative and future-oriented. It treats people as equal partners in the pursuit of better solutions. For organisations that want to unleash their "game changers" – the outstanding individuals who have the potential to make the crucial difference – sparring provides the conditions for extraordinary performance.

In my new book, *Winning Match: Leadership for Game Changers*, I pinpointed five principles that I think define great leadership sparring. It must be respectful (options, not orders), flexible (inspiration, not adjustment), demanding (productive discomfort, not harmony), maximally supportive (clearing the path, not fixing) and playful (light-footed, not heavy-handed).

When leaders embrace sparring, they create teams that think more boldly, learn faster and feel psychologically safer because honesty becomes the norm, not the risk. In the ring of business, as in world-class sport, progress comes not from avoiding impact, but from learning to engage with it skilfully.

Quote of the week:

"Deep inside, I knew that I needed my own sparring partner, of course not on the court, but someone who I could exchange ideas with, who could challenge me, question me, inspire and motivate me, and provoke me with new ideas and perspectives."

Severin Lüthi, longtime coach of tennis legend Roger Federer

Charities have lost relevance

A recent event in London warned that many charities are struggling to keep up with rapid societal change, and are being challenged to think differently, be more adaptive and shift mindsets rather than relying on old modes of operation. While my work primarily focuses around how to help leaders succeed in their business context, wouldn't it be wonderful to see even more of our successful business leaders lend their skills to help reinvigorate this struggling sector? In my experience, the very best leaders balance commercial success with the ambition to make a lasting difference in others' lives. The future of leadership is generous, not ruthless. Trust, generosity and purpose – no matter the field – are becoming non-negotiable for sustainable leadership.

Aligning performance with purpose

Making a difference for others, often through others, has become one of my greatest personal sources of fulfilment. I work closely with the Swiss-based Live Your Dream Foundation, a non-profit deeply committed to inspiring and empowering the next generation of innovators and leaders by helping driven individuals turn their professional or personal dreams into meaningful reality. Through the Foundation, I have the privilege of working closely with exceptional talents – those with the courage, vision and determination to make a real difference. My role is to guide them in transforming bold ideas into lasting, sustainable impact. Because when people fully align their purpose, performance and passion, extraordinary things happen.

Don't forget about your star hires

Ambitious companies invest heavily in attracting exceptional talent – yet once they are on board, many are left to fend for themselves. Leadership attention often shifts to managing weaker colleagues, while the strongest receive little guidance or inspiration. “They can manage,” becomes the refrain, as top performers are burdened with a lot of routine work instead of empowered to pursue transformative ideas. This short-sighted approach erodes engagement, stifles innovation and threatens long-term success. True leadership means specifically investing in those who drive excellence – not assuming they’ll thrive without your support. Nurture your game-changers, and they’ll take your organisation further than you imagined.

What I’ve been writing

Winning Match: Leadership for Game Changers – Together Toward the Extraordinary,

I’ve just written a new book, because I’ve seen, time and again, that real leadership isn’t about standing out alone – it’s about creating the conditions for others to reach their very best. Over the years, working with world-class athletes and top business leaders, I’ve learned what truly makes teams and partnerships thrive. In this book, I wanted to share practical tools and insights for building trust, inspiring growth and achieving the extraordinary together. If you’re someone who wants to make a real difference, to lift others while raising the bar for yourself, I think you’ll find it both inspiring and empowering.” It’s out next Tuesday!

Dr Christian Marcolli is the founder and owner of Marcolli Executive Excellence, coaching executives, business leaders, brands and elite athletes globally