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How Finding The Winning Match Can Drive Extraordinary Results

By **Roger Trapp**, Contributor. © Roger Trapp reports and comments on management and leadership issues.

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Talented players can score goals at the top level, but it often takes game changer to strike at the crucial time.
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Anybody who has ever watched a professional sports game will be familiar with the phenomenon. A highly-rated player generally commanding a generous pay package fluffs chance after chance to score, only for a team-mate to seize upon a single half-chance to win the glory. If this happens just once or twice it could be fairly argued that the former player was having an off-day. But if it happens regularly — and any long-

suffering sports fan will tell you this is often the case — it could be down to one of the players being talented and the other having what it takes to really succeed personally and, more important, drive their team to success.

According to Dr Christian Marcolli, a renowned performance psychologist who has worked with world-class sports stars and top executives around the world, those in the latter group are “game changers.” As he writes in his recently published book *Winning Match*, these are “special talents that make you think: These are the Game Changers. If they quit, we’ve got a real problem!”

And yet companies and sports teams alike seem to devote most of their energies to helping less impressive individuals improve in the hope that it will raise the performance of the team. There is a lot of talk about the “War for Talent,” especially when organizations are recruiting. But, then, adds Marcolli, “the attention of leadership shifts. The more outstanding an employee, the less time is dedicated to them. Management spends its time focused on managing the weaker colleagues, leaving the strongest to fend for themselves.”

This being “left alone” can be seen as a reward for those who are regarded as self-motivated high achievers, but to someone like Marcolli, who as well as coaching many athletes was himself a professional footballer in his youth, it makes no sense. “Imagine an Olympic champion whose coach gave them the least time and focus, only so that they could help the lesser-ranked with modest potential climb a bit further,” he writes.

In an interview with me ahead of the book’s publication last month, Marcolli explained how organizations could spot potential game changers. Unlike the much-discussed “talent,” these are comparatively rare individuals — most likely in “the low single-digit percentage, probably even in the per-mill range” — and will combine the required technical skills with four key psychological traits:

1. A degree of passion that manifests itself in a desire to maximise or create something extraordinary

2. A desire for feedback and input, albeit with an understanding that not all advice comes from a good place
3. An ability to put what they have learned into action
4. The mental strength to apply their skills under pressure.

In practical terms, Marcolli believes that companies need to beware of loading their star performers with too much responsibility or giving them too many tasks (even though they are confident they will do them). While he stresses that he is not advocating that managers ignore lesser talents, he is convinced that the advantages to organizations of having the highest performers fulfil their true potential justify a particular approach.

At the heart of this is the concept of the “leadership champion.” Indeed, he feels it is so important that what he calls the “winning match” occurs when a game changer is paired with the right leadership champion, with the collaboration very likely to yield extraordinary results, not just for the team but for the company as a whole.

The key qualities that leadership champions require are the ability to spot game changers or those with game-changer potential, the ambition to achieve overarching success, generosity and a willingness to serve as a sparring partner with the chosen individuals. The last of these is especially important because it creates the sort of relationship that successful high-performing athletes and other sports players enjoy with their coaches.

In the book, Marcolli describes sparring as “a targeted, success-oriented form of intervention that addresses both immediate and long-term challenges.” Unlike traditional executive coaching, the idea is not mainly to support the other person to find a solution to a problem but to also have an open and possibly controversial debate to create long-term impact. This requires the leader to draw on their experience and expertise as well as their commitment to be personally involved in creating the decisions that drive “extraordinary outcomes.”

Marcolli pointed out in the interview that “not all game changers are super-confident individuals.” But a winning match can change that, by not just boosting the individual’s self-confidence but also — through the knowledge that they are fully supported — fuel their drive to succeed and so make a meaningful impact. He stresses that these individuals are rare, but have the ability to drive “disproportionate value, results, outcomes and success.” All of which has fed his conviction that “leadership is ultimately about inspiring, guiding and serving others, no matter the field.”