

The Hidden Superpower of Every Great Leader: Dr Christian Marcolli of Marcolli Executive Excellence On Uncovering the Traits That Separate Good Leaders from Exceptional Ones



Authority Magazine Editorial Staff ·

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Adaptability is vital in a leader for the simple reason that the world — not least the world of business — is constantly and rapidly changing. Exceptional leaders show a high degree of adaptability: they can engage with and process high quality information, bring it to bear effectively on their behaviors, and keep improving.

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What is it that makes certain leaders stand out and achieve extraordinary results? Beyond technical skills and strategic thinking, great leaders often possess hidden superpowers — those intangible traits that set them apart. These traits enable them to inspire others, foster trust, and drive innovation even in challenging environments. As part of this series, we are interviewing Dr Christian Marcolli.

Dr Christian Marcolli is a world-class expert on sustainable high performance. He has worked with corporate executives, business leaders, market-leading brands and top athletes all around the world, helping them achieve incomparable, long-term success. His work has been described as “an experience that will stay with you for life.”

As the founder and owner of Marcolli Executive Excellence, a specialized, boutique-style management consulting firm based in Switzerland, Christian

supports clients globally who are the market leaders of today — and tomorrow.

Since 1997, Christian has worked with an elite roster of clients, utilizing pioneering strategies and cutting-edge research aimed at helping individuals, teams and entire organizations around the globe accomplish peak performance. In parallel, he is a performance coach to some of the world's finest athletes and teams: tennis stars, Olympic gold medal winners and world champions.

Christian's passion for optimal performance is reflected in his consulting, speaking and writing. He is an award-winning author and an in-demand executive coach and public speaker. His business books include: Teach Me Patience — NOW!, Equip Yourself To Be a Business Champion, More Life, Please!, The Melting Point and Spotlight on Performance (Volumes 1 and 2)

Christian is an ex-professional soccer player who later earned his Ph.D in Applied Psychology at the University of Zurich. He lives in Switzerland with his wife and two sons.

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Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dive into our discussion, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you share with us the backstory about what brought you to your specific career path?

It all began from a young age — I had an immense passion for soccer, I was very determined and that led me to become a professional player. This gave me insight into achieving peak performance myself as an elite athlete. When injury cut short my soccer career, I wanted to learn

about what truly differentiates the very best from the rest. This fueled my passion for performance psychology. I invested all the money I made as a professional athlete into my education and second career. I got a PhD in Applied Psychology at the University of Zurich, studied at the University of Basel and at University of Ottawa and became a performance psychologist and coach. My company, Marcolli Executive Excellence, is a management consulting firm specializing in sustainable high performance, leadership development and team excellence. I work with a range of high-performing groups and individuals, from sporting superstars to senior business leaders.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career?

There are so many I could choose, here's just one from my work in the sports world. Two of my longstanding clients are Olympic ski champions — and sisters — Dominique Gisin and Michelle Gisin. Dominique, the older one, reached to me during a point early in her career when she was struggling with a series of injuries, and now I worked with both of them. It's a tremendous privilege.

At the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010, Dominique was on course to win a medal when she crashed on the very last jump before the finish line. That crash was devastating — one of the lowest points in her career. In fact, she had a disastrous succession of injuries that made it clear that she couldn't pursue a 'normal' skiing career. She missed out on three years of training at a crucial period in her development as an athlete: she couldn't compete in enough races to gain a place in the Swiss national team, so while other athletes were given coaches from their national sports association, she had to engage her own expert support team —

entirely on her own.

While she developed a bespoke physical training regime, we worked together to systematically build up her mental and emotional strength. Four years later, at the Sochi Winter Olympics, she won Gold in Downhill Alpine Skiing. Her victory was a highly emotional moment, the culmination of an extraordinary journey. With had no choice but to do things differently and forge her own path, she became a true champion. She made success happen against all the odds.

I then also supported Michelle to ensure she was mentally strong and emotionally resilient — and she became a two-time Olympic champion in 2018 and 2022. The sisters are now the most decorated siblings in individual winter sports in the history of the Olympic Games.

What do you think makes your company stand out?

I think you would need to ask this question to my clients to get their perspective. What I can say from my side is that one of the main differentiators is my varied experience and profound knowledge in both worlds — elite sports and business. I've been a professional athlete myself and I've worked with sporting icons, so I have first-hand experience of what it takes to get to the top, stay there, and become a champion. I also have a rigorous, science-based understanding of performance psychology. Then there's the cross-over into business. Since 1997, I've been working with executives, corporate leaders and leadership teams around the world, helping them to achieve sustainable high performance — often in challenging and adverse conditions, and highly competitive environments. The key point is that I understand the real challenges that leaders and champions face, in business and in sports, and I can offer

them structured, practical solutions that they can implement and which actually work.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

First, my passion. I have been determined about my career path from the beginning. I've already mentioned how passionate I was about soccer even as a young boy and long before I even considered it as a possible career path. I applied that same passion towards achieving academic success and building my own business. Today, I remain as passionate about helping my clients achieve and sustain top performance.

Second, my ability to listen and truly support my clients to get to the top and succeed in their own ways. Someone once said that people were given two ears but only one mouth — because we should do twice as much listening as talking. It is only by listening carefully to a client, whether a top athlete or a business executive, that it's possible to gain a real understanding of how *they* perceive their goals and challenges. Only then can we work effectively together on solutions.

Third, I tend to think of generosity. In a business context, that could mean making your own network available unconditionally, and passing on your know-how to make others better. You are paying it forward, without expecting to see an immediate effect or concrete results. Your own expertise and your acquired contacts are offered as 'free goods' from which others can benefit. I do this because a key goal of leadership — and one of your most important and satisfying achievements as a leader — is to make other people great and leave a legacy in them.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. What makes someone exceptional?

Personal leadership excellence stems from executives harmonizing their inner world of physical, mental and emotional health and their outer world, which is dominated by the demands of their business context, leadership roles and other relevant, even private demands. To achieve such harmonization, top performers must first look after themselves physically, mentally and emotionally in a very systematic way. Important factors include exercise, diet, strategic breaks and sleep, but there are others often overlooked by health and fitness experts, such as nurturing key relationships, developing strategic rituals for work/life integration, and connecting with a deeper purpose beyond making money.

Personal leadership excellence is what enables executives to make the transformation from overburdened, highly stressed victims of today's frenetic business world into business champions who don't merely survive, but flourish in this environment, finding success and fulfillment in it. Exceptional leaders can find the all-important harmonization between their inner and outer worlds, creating alignment in their own professional and private lives, as well as providing a structure that their wider teams and businesses can embrace.

How do exceptional leaders leverage emotional intelligence to inspire and influence their teams?

Exceptional leaders are aware of the pain points not only in themselves, but in their teams. As I explain in my book *The Melting Point*, pain points are the specific factors that increase pressure on individuals and have a significant impact, causing previously high-achieving corporate

achievers to no longer perform to their best ability. In some cases, one pain point can be so strong and inflamed that it can cause an executive to reach a melting point, maybe even stalling their career and adversely affecting their health.

Pain points can be many and varied — from a culture of long hours and overwork to always-on technology and office politics. Not only can they undermine an individual's professional effectiveness, but teams and organizations feel the adverse effects of the executive's impaired leadership.

Exceptional leaders have the necessary skills and the emotional intelligence to identify executives' pain points — along with the authority and the will to take action to address them. Often, that will also require them to recognize that they need support from external experts and executive coaches, such as my own consultancy.



What role does humility play in the success of great leaders, and how is it demonstrated in their behavior?

To my mind, humility in a leader requires them to put the success of the collective — be it an entire organization, or a team, or individual members of the team — first, ahead of their own short-term interests. Fortunately, this can often be a win-win, as leaders will also benefit in the long run.

Humility demonstrated by leaders is primarily seen when they are putting their people first, such as by:

- Proactively providing them with time, expertise, experience, network, and ideas.
- Celebrating their success and showing sincere interest in their

ngoing development.

- Backing them up if they suffer unjustified negative influence from others.
- Showing patience and perseverance in developing them, with no direct expectation of a tangible return on investment for their efforts.

How do exceptional leaders navigate difficult conversations and foster open communication in their organizations?

It's all about creating the right organizational and team culture. A strong culture revolves around softer, people-related issues, such as trust, motivation, engagement, teamwork and collaboration. They're harder to measure than financial performance, but they have a major impact on the bottom line. I am convinced that a winning culture with true teamwork is one of the biggest competitive advantages for organizations. To change the culture of an organization successfully, the right mindset must be adopted and the appropriate tone set, starting with energized and engaged executives at the top.

For the individual executive, this makes a huge difference. And for the organization, it is transformational. When you consider the aggregate effect of the positive impact on all these individuals — from the leader to the teams that they lead — the impact gets further amplified, and ultimately, affects the company's culture. It's a positive domino effect that results in aspects like trust and psychological safety, productive debates, open communication, maximized employee engagement, lower absenteeism and higher productivity.

What makes adaptability a superpower in leadership, and how do the

best leaders exemplify it?

Adaptability is vital in a leader for the simple reason that the world — not least the world of business — is constantly and rapidly changing.

Exceptional leaders show a high degree of adaptability: they can engage with and process high quality information, bring it to bear effectively on their behaviors, and keep improving. Then, there's the cool factor. When top achievers encounter difficult conditions, they keep their cool and maintain a very high level of performance. In fact, they may even get better: they excel in very highly charged, critical moments. They don't allow anxiety and nervousness to get in the way, and they don't lose their ability to focus, deliver and even enjoy themselves either. One of my books specifically focuses on this. Staying cool and completely focused is the one critical factor for sustainable world-class performance.

Ok super. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “Five Traits That Separate Good Leaders from Exceptional Ones”?

I have spent many years studying this question and have concluded that there are actually six key traits. My passion for understanding and achieving optimal performance led me to develop the P6PROP® model of Personal Leadership Excellence — a sophisticated business instrument that can help individuals achieve and maintain optimal performance at work, especially during times of uncertainty and change. Its six P's are an individual's critical success factors:

- Passion
- Precision
- Perception

- Peace
- Presence
- Persistence

Consider the six P's as six blades of a propeller on an airplane. The way each is angled determines whether it will have a positive, neutral or negative impact on performance. When angled optimally, each blade provides thrust and boosts performance. But if a blade is poorly adjusted, it will fail to add forward momentum and may even become a drag on performance.

To profoundly assess the executive's current standard of personal leadership, I developed a comprehensive and progressive diagnostic package. The methodology is scientifically rigorous, identifying the P-components that are boosting performance, as well as those that are acting as a drag on it. The model can then be used as the basis for a development program and to monitor ongoing progress, providing long-term personal guidance and direction.

How do great leaders balance confidence with vulnerability to create stronger connections with their teams?

I think the key is for leaders to recognize that they can't be experts in everything themselves, and they can't do everything themselves. That takes humility. It admits vulnerability on their part, but it also shows honesty and self-confidence. Most importantly, it leads to a solution — which is to constantly build a great team with outstanding individuals, and a network of support, both at work and at home. And it is the basis for focus. I always ask my clients: What is it that only *you* can do? Then,

depending on the context and the resources available, everything else should be delegated. I know this approach is a bit extreme, but it forces my clients to stay focused and make a difference where it is truly needed. At the same time, they need to have a systematic approach and develop the competencies to delegate, empower, coach, and hold people accountable. In a nutshell, they need to produce great results through other people.

It will be much easier to deliver high performance sustainably if you are inspired and backed up by a diverse range of people who believe in you, who accept your imperfections, who are fundamentally on your side, and who want you to succeed. It's far healthier and less exhausting to have people in your camp. The good news is that there are practical steps you can take to make sure you are not on your own by building high-functioning teams at work and investing in strong relationships at home.

And don't forget your extended professional network. The demands you face will only get greater as your career takes off, with increasing pressure to deliver. So it's vital to establish strong relationships with a number of people beyond your direct teams who can guide you with specific knowledge and insights, inspire and motivate you, embrace your vulnerabilities, and go the extra mile for you if needed. This network can include experts in your field, mentors and coaches. These are the people who will challenge you, in a supportive way, to think outside the box.

It's crucial to recognize that you need to invest time and effort to build up the extended professional support system and expand it as you move into new roles. My advice is to keep a list of people outside your workplace and home life who inspire you most. Make it part of your routine to look at the list every second week to plan one or two actions: going for lunch,

scheduling a call, keeping in touch. Deliberately take time out to interact with these people to gain fresh perspectives.

What strategies do exceptional leaders use to consistently recognize and nurture talent within their organizations?

Exceptional leaders commit to providing each team member with maximum support. This generates motivation, teamwork and, above all, trust from their people. This, in turn, maximizes the chances of them returning their support and loyalty to the leader, which is essential for them to lead successfully.

Furthermore, they commit to work with their key talents in their organization who are not yet in their direct leadership team. Having a systematic approach to identify key talents and to help them grow is critical for success.

Great leaders constantly nourish their talented people and never take them for granted. They keep investing in them — for example, through active participation in professional development initiatives — and regularly express gratitude to them. In return, they gain respect, commitment, and loyalty from their people.

Thank you for the time you spent sharing these fantastic insights. We wish you only continued success in your great work!