

Dr Christian Marcolli of Marcolli Executive Excellence On The New Portrait Of Leadership



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We are living in the Renaissance of Work. Just like great artists know that an empty canvas can become anything, great leaders know that an entire organization — and the people inside it — can become anything, too. *Master Artists and Mastering the Art of Leadership* draw from the same source: creation. In this series, we'll meet masters who are creating the future of work and painting a portrait of lasting leadership.

As a part of this series, we had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Christian Marcolli.

Dr. Christian Marcolli is a global thought leader and expert on sustainable high performance and executive leadership. As the pioneer of Strategic Leadership Sparring, he has spent more than two decades refining this methodology with Olympic champions, CEOs, founders and market leaders. He coaches executives, business leaders, elite athletes and organizations seeking transformational impact. His firm, Marcolli Executive Excellence, focuses on fostering leadership excellence, driving team effectiveness and creating organizational health. He is an in-demand speaker, award-winning author, University of Zurich-trained psychologist and former professional soccer player. His latest book is *WINNING MATCH: Leadership for Game Changers — Together Toward the Extraordinary*, where he further develops the principles of Leadership Sparring and Game Changer development. Learn more at www.marcolli.com.

Thank you for joining us. Our readers would enjoy discovering something interesting about you. What are you in the middle of right now that you're excited about personally or professionally?

It's been an exhilarating time. Two things that come to mind immediately are my book and my recent trip to the Milan Cortina 2026 Olympics. First, my new book **WINNING MATCH: Leadership for Game Changers — Together Toward the Extraordinary** has been out since last October. The book focuses on how to create the conditions — as a leader — for others to achieve the extraordinary. It's the culmination of my work with the elite performers in both sports and business, drawing from more than two decades of coaching top-tier executives as well as working with world-class athletes and sports icons. The book contains the real blueprint behind extraordinary performance and results. I was honored to have Severin Lüthi, the longtime coach of tennis legend Roger Federer — and who've I've worked closely with — write the foreword.

Second, I recently returned from an amazing time at the Milan Cortina 2026 Olympics. I was working with an athlete — over the years I've worked with various Olympic champions across several Olympic Games. As always, it was a profound experience. Once again, it reminded me of two fundamental facts too many leaders overlook: you can't leave your best talent alone, and there isn't that much of it. The reality is that only a small percentage of individuals possess truly game-changing potential, even in the highest echelons of world-class sport. Even among Olympic athletes, only a few truly stand out. And they got to where they were because they almost always had access to a specific level of — and approach to — leadership that includes the capabilities and skills to bring out their best when it matter the most.

I also participated in a wonderful event with one of my longtime clients, Olympic champion Alpine skier Dominique Gisin, at the Olympic Club: a presentation about her ability to overcome incredible adversity and win gold at the 2014 Winter Olympics.

We all get by with a little help from our friends. Who is the leader that has influenced you the most, and how?

Since I work with leaders from some of the world's most recognized companies, I am constantly inspired by them, so it's hard to choose just one. In WINNING MATCH I share examples of leaders I've worked with and coached who really walk the walk when it comes to being a Leadership Champion — someone who is truly able to bring out the best in their best people. It's such a privilege to work with them.

I'm also personally very inspired by those who take this approach beyond the confines of work and into the world. After hours, they volunteer in organizations and have an impact. They launch grassroots projects and use their entrepreneurial skills to build nonprofit organizations and foundations. They mentor start-up founders and advise others to try something new for the benefit of other people. They raise money for causes they believe in. Their KPIs shift from company profit margins to lasting impact — from product launches to lives changed. Their success isn't measured only by metrics, but by meaning and impact beyond corporate success.

It has inspired me — together with reflections on my own life path and career so far — to launch a limited special edition of WINNING MATCH. Over the past months, the book has grown into an award-winning international bestseller. More importantly, it has been shaping a new

space in leadership, focused on how to deliberately lead your Game Changers and elevate your best people even further through my concept of strategic leadership sparring.

Success, however, is never the final objective. Contribution is, especially when it creates impact for others.

For that reason, I created the limited Legacy Edition of WINNING MATCH. This edition has been crafted as a collector's piece. All profits from this edition will be donated to the Live Your Dream Foundation, supporting determined individuals in overcoming barriers and pursuing their personal and professional aspirations, along the dreams that inspire them.

Sometimes our biggest mistakes lead to our biggest discoveries. What's the biggest mistake you've made as a leader, and what did you discover as a result?

I see mistakes and failures as part of the natural process of growth that even the best leaders — and true game changers — experience. What matters most is how leaders respond. They need to own their mistakes, learn, course-correct, and move forward. That's a critical behavior to model for their Game Changers and for everyone on their teams. It's a fundamental element of resilience, growth, and ultimately sustained success.

One important discovery I've made over the years, working with everyone from top-level sport coaches to C-suite executives, is that you cannot assume leaders automatically understand the specific leadership behaviors required to truly bring out the very best in their best people.

It's not a lack of intention. Most leaders genuinely want to form powerful partnerships with their best talent. They want to create what I call a Winning Match. But creating that kind of partnership requires a deliberate leadership approach.

What many leaders need to develop are the specific leadership capabilities required to build powerful partnerships with their best people, and the appropriate leadership approach to make that happen consistently through strategic leadership sparring. Recognizing that gap became a major impetus for writing WINNING MATCH.

**How has your definition of leadership changed or evolved over time?
What does it mean to be a leader now?**

The traditional view of leadership is evolving, and much of my recent work — including my book WINNING MATCH — focuses on why that shift is necessary. In the past, many leaders recognized that there were extraordinary individuals within their organizations, but they often assumed those people would succeed largely on their own. The prevailing belief was that high performers were self-starters — independent, self-driven, and best left alone with plenty of room to operate. In other words, leaders often assumed their very best people didn't require deliberate leadership.

At the same time, the opposite mistake happened just as often: leaders intervening too much, constantly directing, correcting, and controlling their work. They micromanage. This undermines trust and autonomy.

In my experience, individuals with game-changing potential don't thrive at either extreme. Leaving them alone isn't leadership, and

micromanaging them isn't leadership either. Both approaches fail the people with the greatest potential to create breakthroughs. What they require instead is what I call a specific form of leadership: a partnership based on trust, honest challenge, and maximal support that helps them reach levels of performance they couldn't reach alone.

Success is as often as much about what we stop as what we start. What is one legacy leadership behavior you stopped because you discovered it was no longer valuable or relevant?

This is a great question. When I talk about a legacy leadership behavior I've stopped, it's something I've deliberately worked to change in the leaders I work with — because it is no longer valuable or relevant. That behavior is overloading your best people with work simply because they are capable.

Leaders often do this because they know their top people will rise to the challenge. They trust their competence and their ability to get things done. I've even had leaders argue that their best people are exactly the ones they can rely on most — and that's why they continue piling responsibilities onto them. I understand the instinct behind this approach. Leaders want to reduce risk by making sure the most competent person is handling the work that needs to be executed reliably and efficiently.

But Game Changers are capable of much more. They are the people who can deliver real breakthroughs. Therefore, it is far more effective to deliberately create space for them by assigning or delegating some of their standard responsibilities to others. That allows them to focus on the challenges that truly move the organization forward — the high-impact

activities that have far-reaching implications. When leaders make that shift, everyone benefits.

What is one lasting leadership behavior you started or are cultivating because you believe it is valuable or relevant?

I pioneered a leadership concept I call Strategic Leadership Sparring. I developed it specifically for the leadership and executive space, although the underlying idea has long existed in elite sports. In tennis for example, sparring partners train by simulating an intense match. The purpose is not to win, but to challenge the player in a safe environment so they improve faster and perform better under real pressure. I've applied that approach to leadership in business, and it's a fundamental part of being a Leadership Champion who is committed to developing your Game Changers.

Strategic Leadership Sparring isn't just an occasional conversation. Think of it as a high-level decision laboratory, where you can interrogate and investigate key decisions, explore ambiguities, and examine risk under pressure. It's rigorous — a form of structured discomfort. But the result is deeper cognitive insight, stronger emotional resilience, and strategic clarity.

It's designed to expose the gaps in thinking, weaknesses in a solution or strategy, or even reasons why a project may have failed. It can look forward or backward. It's intellectually rigorous and constructively confrontational — always respectful, and grounded in trust. It's not a heated argument. There's an emotional discipline to it. And no one is ever attacked.

These conversations are extremely effective at helping potential Game Changers grow, learn, develop, and achieve the exceptional. And like any skill, the more leaders practice Strategic Leadership Sparring, the better they become at it.

What advice would you offer to other leaders who are stuck in past playbooks and patterns and may be having a hard time letting go of what made them successful in the past?

I would encourage them to look at things from a different perspective. You're not going to get extraordinary results from everyone. But you can create disproportionate value from disproportionate talent, if you deliberately invest in those individuals with game-changing potential.

I've had conversations with leaders who reflected on the success their top talent had in the past, and realized that with a more modern leadership approach, those people might have stayed with the company longer. When you think about developing your best people over long term, the goal should be to become a true ally and partner for them.

Many of our readers can relate to the challenge of leading people for the first time. What advice would you offer to new and emerging leaders?

Being a better leader for others — learning how to be a Leadership Champion — doesn't just elevate the people around you, it strengthens you as well.

You'll find yourself becoming sharper, thinking more strategically, having more composure, and being able to operate more effectively under pressure. Your own leadership becomes stronger and more refined. And

through Strategic Leadership Sparring, you will learn a great deal from your people as well.

In turn, you become a better partner and leader for your Game Changers. It's a kind of alchemy that benefits you just as much as your people. I've seen it happen again and again.

Based on your experience or research, what are the top five traits effective leaders exemplify now? Please share a story or an example for each.

There are five key leadership sparring principles that I found to be most effective with Game Changers, especially when they are applied with ambition for the overall success and with unconditional generosity:

1. Respectful.

Leadership Champions provide options instead of instructions. Leaders need to approach their best people with an appreciation for their expertise, and of their ability to choose between different options. A good example is a leader who, when sparring with their Game Changer, avoids any kind of rhetorical tricks or personal attacks. They don't argue from a position of hierarchy or give instructions. The sparring partner is an equal partner — and leaving those hierarchical boundaries behind creates an atmosphere of positive exchange and real openness. When there's a decision to be made, you're letting the Game Changers take over the driver's seat. And always, you're committed to co-create their decisions and success.

2. Flexible.

Leadership Champions provide inspiration for growth instead of the pressure to adjust. Of course, most organizations also need standardized processes and requirements, and conventional performance reviews. But often, Game Changers deliver disproportionate value outside the status quo. They tend to have their own vision of breakthroughs and extraordinary success. Therefore, they need flexibility, particularly also in designing the development opportunities that allow them to shape their careers.

3. Demanding.

Leadership Champions know how to create a sense of productive discomfort. If you look back on your career you likely remember a particularly demanding phase that pushed you and fostered your growth. It's often painful when you're going through it. It can feel at times like the challenges are nearly overwhelming. But these are often the moments when our limits are pushed, and when we develop the most.

4. Maximally Supportive.

Leadership Champions clear the path instead of delivering fixes. This is where leadership sparring is truly an ideal instrument. The modern world of business is often so complex that decisions have to be made with incomplete information, under time pressure, in new contexts, and in constantly changing environments. Sparring provides a great forum for stress-testing various scenarios. For Game Changers to unleash their full potential, they need high demands and expectations set, combined with maximal support from their Leadership Champion. The support you provide can be practical and cognitive, but it can also be emotional. Do everything you can to maximally support them by clearing the path for

them to succeed.

5. Playful.

Leadership Champions interact light-footed instead of heavy-handed. If used in Leadership Sparring, playfulness becomes a powerful leadership behavior. Positive humor, composure, and deliberate mood management create psychological space. They signal confidence and emotional control — qualities that allow Game Changers to stay bold and inventive rather than becoming cautious and constrained.

American Basketball Coach John Wooden said, “Make each day your masterpiece.” How do you embody that quote? We welcome a story or example.

For me, a day becomes a masterpiece when I help someone else move closer to the extraordinary.

Throughout my career, I’ve had the privilege of working with remarkable people — from Fortune 500 CEOs to Olympic champions. My role is to help them push boundaries, see possibilities they might not yet see themselves, and unlock the next level of their potential.

When someone I work with breaks through a barrier, grows beyond what they thought was possible, or achieves something extraordinary — that’s when I know it’s been a masterpiece of a day.

What is the legacy you aspire to leave as a leader?

The legacy I aspire to leave is that I helped shift the understanding of

what truly makes Game Changers thrive. I helped move the conversation about performance away from static management formulas and toward a dynamic leadership relationship — one that enables people to reach their full potential and achieve the extraordinary.

At the heart of that shift is the idea of what I call Leadership Champions: leaders who are deeply committed to developing their Game Changers and creating the conditions in which they can achieve the extraordinary.

If my work helps more leaders become Leadership Champions for their Game Changers, I'll have achieved what I set out to do.

How can our readers connect with you to continue the conversation?

Feel free to connect with me via LinkedIn, and find more information on my website, www.marcolli.com.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to experience a leadership master at work. We wish you continued success and good health!