

GAME CHANGERS

How focusing on difference-makers could define the next decade of leadership. **by PATRICIA CULLEN**

At 18, Dr Christian Marcolli, founder and CEO of Marcolli Executive Excellence AG, thought talent was enough. “I used to be a professional footballer,” he says, remembering the harsh dressing room culture. “The team was dysfunctional, the environment toxic, and I lacked the mental toughness to thrive and show what I was capable of.” What followed was the kind of formative trauma that can either crush a career or become its engine. For Marcolli, it was both. “I over-trained and had severe knee injuries because of the over-training. My response was, ‘you have to work harder if you want to stand out.’ It didn’t work,” he says. “It led to a very brutal ending of my career as a professional footballer. I was probably one of the biggest talents in the country. And five years later, I was the guy who never really made it.” That collapse would eventually shape Marcolli’s life’s work:

→ **Dr Christian Marcolli**, founder and CEO of Marcolli Executive Excellence AG





he rose to become one of the world's leading performance psychologists and executive coaches, advising CEOs, Olympic champions, and, famously, Roger Federer in his early career. It also inspired his provocative new book, *Winning Match: Leadership for Game Changers*, which argues that many business leaders have it completely the wrong way round. Rather than pouring energy into low performers, Marcolli says, they should focus on identifying, nurturing, and "sparring" with the handful of true difference-makers - those with what he calls "game-changing potential."

From failure to focus

The lessons of Marcolli's early football career lingered long after the final whistle. He spent years reflecting on what that experience could teach others striving to realise their potential. First: "Build the mental toughness and emotional resilience to show what you're capable of in adverse environments." Second: "Help leaders build healthy, high-performance cultures where people don't have to struggle to show their true potential."

Shaped by the pressures of his years in professional sports, he now advises executives and leaders on how to develop and empower rising talent. "That's my mission: to help leaders become Leadership Champions, so that they enable true high performance and make their best people even better."

At its core

Marcolli has spent over two decades working with CEOs and major companies, and the patterns he has observed are unmistakable. "The big breakthrough stuff really comes from very few people." Yet the systems organisations build very often don't reflect this. "The performance management processes are often designed to manage lower performers more systematically than top talent." He emphasises that he's not advocating abandoning weaker team members; only that leaders must face a reality: "Even if you bring people up to speed, you're not getting the extraordinary out of that. The extraordinary you get from very few people with game-changing potential." The mistakes leaders

make, he argues, are twofold. First, believing that hiring the best people means that they can now completely step aside. "In my experience, people with game-changing potential need a strong sparring partner - someone who is consistently there to challenge, support and show they expect something great." Second, overloading these individuals. "Because some of these game changers are producing great results, they just get more and more on their plate. When they are overloaded with work that doesn't really move the business forward, they cannot produce the extraordinary." What he wants is a radical shift from business leaders: "Take a fresh look at how you lead your best people so that they can bring that potential and create that exceptional value, by making them even better." ▶▶

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organisations - rare, but immensely valuable.

The surprising power of 'sparring'

One of the most striking ideas in *Winning Match* is Marcolli's argument that leaders need to "spar" with their top talent. The metaphor comes from sport. "I still do a lot of work in elite sports. I was in Roger Federer's team for two years in his early career." In tennis, like in boxing, sparring is intense but contained - a practice arena where pressure shapes performance rather than destroys it. "It's a form of interaction, where the other person challenges you without hurting you. But the intensity of the interaction is there, almost like high-intense competition, but in a safe space." He has seen athletes grow the most in those intense moments. For competitors, "everything came together" during sparring, and

confidence that game changers need to create real value. After all, what could be more motivating than a leader saying, "I know you have it in you, I will support you so that you're going to make this happen for us"? In *Winning Match*, Marcolli presents five must-have sparring principles for leaders. But sparring is not a technique leaders can deploy in isolation. First, leaders must shift from self-focus to service. "You have to stay focused on creating value and success for everyone - not simply for yourself." Second, leaders must embrace what he calls 'maximum generosity'. "Everything you've learned as a leader, your expertise, your knowledge, but also your network, doesn't belong to you alone." He describes a kind of unconditional giving: "Don't expect a direct payback. Don't even expect to be named as the one who made it accessible." This runs counter to the subtle transactionality of corporate environments. But to unlock potential, especially in the rare few with game-changing ability, Marcolli insists generosity is non-negotiable.

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How to recognise a game changer

Every leader asks: "Who can change the game, and how do I find them?" According to Marcolli, the first marker is a strong, relentless drive to do things properly - a passion for excellence. The second is an insatiable hunger for input and feedback; they want to hear the unvarnished truth. The third trait is decisive action:

game changers often need just one conversation - once the input makes sense, they move immediately, saying, "Let's go. Let's do it." And fourth, they have the resilience to perform under pressure, with the mental toughness to stay composed and deliver when it truly matters. Marcolli stresses that these individuals "are within the one-digit percentage" in most

Marcolli brought that insight into leadership. Leaders, he says, should create similar situations with employees - interactions that are challenging but respectful, intense but safe, and built on trust. You signal to them, "I know you can do this, and I'm going to support you and challenge your thinking." When handled well, it builds the

The cost of getting it wrong

When leaders fail their top talent, he says, it usually comes down to three things. First, ego - the instinct to seek personal benefit from the interaction. Second, abandoning high performers under the guise of empowerment; the idea of 'hire the best people and get out of their way' is, he argues, a mistake, because

even the best individuals with game-changer potential need to be supported, challenged and reassured, 'I believe in you and I'm behind you.' And finally, there's the mismanagement of priorities: leaders overload them with everyday tasks that don't move the needle, leaving them with no time and space to create the extraordinary. The result is a kind of organisational tragedy: untapped potential.

The leadership shift
So what next? Marcolli

offers both hope and a warning. "Leadership conceptually has been explored a lot in the last couple of decades, but this angle, how to lead your best people, has not been developed enough." Most organisations don't access their true potential by overlooking this aspect of who and what really moves the needle. If leaders can learn to spot game-changing potential more clearly and steward it more intentionally, "it will disproportionately create value and an advantage compared to

the competitors." Marcolli is shaping the future of leadership by directing attention to the individuals who have the potential to drive outstanding results and create the extraordinary, and to what those individuals require to thrive.

At the heart of Marcolli's thinking is a transformation that began on the football pitch decades ago. The young man who crumbled under pressure now helps others withstand it. The player who lacked the right

leadership now teaches leaders how to provide it. His own story might be the best argument for his philosophy: talent is a seed, but leadership is the environment. Game changers bloom - or wither - depending on who is tending them. And ultimately, Marcolli says too many organisations fail to recognise the people and efforts that deliver real impact. Those who do so systematically, however, can unlock hidden potential and gain a clear advantage over the competition. ■

