

INSIGHTS/ADVISORY

# Pressure Practice: How Leadership Sparring Fosters Extraordinary Performance

Christian Marcolli argues for why it is a key leadership competency

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by Christian Marcolli, PhD

Founder and CEO at Marcolli Executive Excellence

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Imagine this: you're a promising new hire with a leader who actively challenges and supports you. Every other week, they engage you in rigorous conversations in which you're asked tough questions and encouraged to create excellent value for your customers, clients, shareholders and your company.

The discussions are challenging and constructive, covering everything from very important immediate tasks to the highly relevant big picture topics. The more such meetings you have, the more you're energized, inspired and growing your focus and confidence.

As you constantly develop wisdom and perspective, you achieve a new level of mutual trust. Best of all, your ability to handle high-value projects in an extraordinary manner is noticeably increasing.

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*This scenario isn't a hypothetical. It's a proven approach I call leadership sparring.*

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It's one of the key leadership competencies that I introduce in my book, **WINNING MATCH: Leadership for Game Changers—Together Toward the Extraordinary**. It is what I recommend to all leaders to apply, especially with their best people, the ones with game-changing potential.

In business, leadership sparring is prescribed and structured and it's *the most effective way for a leader to help their best people reach their true potential*.

## Communication Intelligence

### **The Five Principles of Sparring**

Knowing the five leadership sparring principles to effectively spar turns a leader into a Leadership Champion who can transform those with game-changing potential into true Game Changers. That's when *the partnership flourishes* as a Winning Match.

Here's how to get started:

#### **1. Get beyond the norm.**

What is not enough when leading high performers with game-changing potential: standard, semi-annual performance talks or one-on-ones that only cover the immediate projects and deliverables.

When these individuals don't see a way to connect with their leaders in a way where they feel appreciated and valued for their potential to achieve the extraordinary, they most likely disengage. When they feel overlooked and underestimated, they pull back.

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*I find that many companies have installed certain processes for the systematic handling of employees who fall short of their expected performance but not enough for those who exceed.*

*Time to shift gears.*

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## **2. Think outside the box.**

Leadership sparring has multiple functions and can go multiple ways. The overall objective is to open up the possibility to develop and use the full performance potential of those who can play in another league.

As a targeted, success-oriented form of intervention, sparring *addresses both immediate and long-term challenges* of high strategic relevance.

Sparring partners can work together to develop innovative ideas to drive growth and productivity; look at different angles to drive lasting change or transformation; and work through scenarios in preparation for a critical negotiation.

A spar can function as stress test or a way to interrogate important

decisions or examine root causes in the case of failure after the fact, as a true learning moment.

### **3. Adapt to the pace of the Game Changer.**

Unlike rigidly scheduled quarterly or semiannual reviews, sparring *can't always be planned* with a lengthy lead-up. As the leading sparring partner, it's important for you to go at the pace of your Game Changers, taking a clear position yourself and offering a clear source of guidance.

Unlike traditional coaching, the objective of sparring *is not* to primarily support the other person in finding their solution to fix a situation, but to also have an open, and if necessary, controversial debate to create long-term impact.



### **4. Be generous with your knowledge and resources.**

Offer your wealth of experience and expertise as the lead sparring partner, as well as your commitment to be personally involved in co-

creating the decisions that lead toward extraordinary outcomes.

Sparring partners put themselves exclusively at the service of the other. It is not about one's victory or success but about a targeted interaction to bring the Game Changer forward so that they can achieve the extraordinary in the real world.

## 5. Apply sparring's five critical leadership sparring principles.

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*I consider leadership sparring one of the most critical and comprehensive competencies you can acquire as a leader. To me, it encompasses five key principles, each of which entails concrete skills:*

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### 1. BE RESPECTFUL: Provide options instead of instructions.

- During the leadership sparring session, the leader has to suspend hierarchy and conduct the conversation on an **equal footing**.
- Leadership sparring thrives on **confrontation** and healthy tension. As the sparring partner, challenge your counterpart to help them get stronger.
- Demonstrate your **commitment**, even if you don't necessarily agree with an opinion or approach of your Game Changer. Stand behind them, fully back them up, and let them execute their decisions and ideas for the overarching success.

### 2. BE FLEXIBLE: Provide inspiration for growth instead of pressure to adjust.

- Give yourself room to operate on a case-by-case basis, **allowing exceptions**. Instead of Game Changers adapting to the organization

to truly unlock value, today's organizations have to adapt to the Game Changers or at least meet them halfway.

- **Giving free space** to Game Changers allows them time for deep thinking and creativity, and empowers them to use their own initiative. Use leadership sparring to help them break out of potentially limiting thinking patterns.
- As a Leadership Champion, work with your Game Changers beyond the achievement of excellent performances while **balancing team spirit**. Help them develop the ability to behave like real team players, to be socially intelligent, to stay humble, and to act modestly. Game Changers can have a hugely positive impact on the whole team if they remain grounded, humble, and connected to others.

### **3. BE DEMANDING: Create productive discomfort instead of harmony.**

- To truly engage with your Game Changers and specifically shape the course for their optimal development, set and articulate high **expectations**. They should be in their "stretch-zone," slightly higher than the Game Changer's actual capability, and specific to certain tasks and situations.
- Leave safe ground behind and consciously take controlled, **smart risks** to achieve the best possible outcomes. Evaluate carefully, take the broad view, and consider all the different dimensions of the risk for each challenge, staying close and re-evaluating them regularly.
- High-quality, **open feedback** is honest and no-frills, and in a relationship that is marked by trust, there is the necessary space to tell each other even unpleasant truths in a respectful manner. Make regular feedback moments a systematic part of your leadership sparring.

#### 4. BE MAXIMALLY SUPPORTIVE: Clear the path instead of delivering fixes.

- Provide **cognitive support** by assisting your Game Changers with rational insights, expertise, research, and recommendations, as well as discussing any problems and providing your very deep knowledge and experience.
- Provide **emotional support** — encouragement that makes it easier for the other person to successfully manage a difficult situation. Knowing that you back them up gives your Game Changer confidence, which can be highly relevant to their performance.
- Provide **practical support** to concretely unburden a Game Changer. Temporarily taking over some of their tasks, or providing additional resources or services, enables them to devote themselves entirely to a demanding task.

#### 5. BE PLAYFUL: Be light-footed instead of heavy-handed.

- Apply positive **humor** to offer some distance from events and reveal a lighter side of the matter. Humor helps people manage their ability to act even in intense circumstances. I find positive humor works best — unlike more aggressive forms of humor, like sarcasm, it lessens the pressure instead of increasing it.
- Maintain your **composure**. No question, tension is transferable. But so are positive feelings, vibes, and moods are similarly infectious. As a leader, radiating warm, calm composure creates the best foundation for an engaged, solution-oriented, and creative discussion with your Game Changers.
- Practice **mood management**. Especially when pressure has built up, be ready to take the heaviness out of a situation for your people, teams and especially your Game Changers. *When you can favorably*

*influence the mood and atmosphere at pivotal moments, upcoming challenges will seem far less difficult.* Use words and language to convey a soothing ease that helps your Game Changers tackle challenging tasks with determination and confidence.

## Communication Intelligence

### The Last Word

#### Sparring works for both of you

This form of regular intensive sparring enables both leaders and individuals with *game-changing potential* to make *critical shifts* in their thinking and their behavior, as it is inspiring and enriching for both.

Further, and probably most important, it's what your best people want.

My research has shown that individuals with game-changer potential *prefer* planned, regular, direct sparring with their leaders to get to the heart of things and to make progress on what really moves the needle now and in the future.

And as with top coaches and elite athletes in world-class sports, keep the dynamic going. A match or competition doesn't end with a match point, crossing the finish line or stepping up onto the podium to receive the winning trophy.

It continues with key learnings after deep reflection and debriefing, and with the setting of new, at times unprecedented goals.

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*By keeping track of your sparring discussions, you lay the foundation for*

*ongoing, detailed discussions. This allows you to reflect on what worked, why it worked, what didn't and why. The answers will keep contributing to the growth and development of your Game Changers and will keep strengthening your Winning Match.*

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As a leader, sparring requires a specific set of leadership sparring skills, a shift in mindset, a commitment of your time and energy and a clear investment in the outcome.

But as you begin to inspire extraordinary performance in your Game Changers, you'll see sparring's extraordinary success and rewards for all: you as a leader, the Game Changer and not least of all, your company.

***Dr. Christian Marcolli*** is a thought leader and expert on sustainable high performance who coaches executives, business leaders, market-leading brands and elite athletes to achieve outstanding results. His firm, Marcolli Executive Excellence, focuses on fostering leadership excellence, driving team effectiveness and creating organizational health.

He's a speaker, award-winning author, University of Zurich-trained psychologist and former pro soccer player. His latest book is **WINNING MATCH: Leadership for Game Changers—Together Toward the Extraordinary**.