

OPENERS

CORNER OFFICE: BILL CARTER

BY ADAM BRYANT

The Scoreboard Can't Tell You Everything

Q. Talk about early leadership lessons for you.

A. I grew up in Maryland, in an area where lacrosse was the dominant sport. And it happened to go to a high school that was the dominant program in the country, and it was run by a coach named Joe McFadden. I don't remember losing more than three games in all of high school. I was in this culture of winning, where all the coaches, the players, the kids in that school and the administrators expected us to win.

I was recruited to play lacrosse in college by a very sort of mediocre team at the time — Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. Then the lacrosse coach retired, and a new coach came in, named Hank Janczyk. He's still there, 20-something years later. And today, he's one of the top lacrosse coaches of all time.

Again, there was this culture of winning, this expectation that every practice was going to be unbelievably competitive. Every game was judged not only on whether we won or lost and what the score was, but on how we played.

I think about that a lot in the context of our business now, about when we go into a new business pitch. If we win, I still evaluate the pitch and whether it was the best portrayal of who we are, or whether we won for some other reason. And when we lose new business pitches or don't do an exceptionally good job for a client in the client's eyes, I can still evaluate it based on factors other than the final result.

Q. Did lacrosse influence you in other ways?

A. I spent summers in lacrosse camps coaching high school kids. I learned a lot about communicating with younger people, which has been directly useful in my business.

Q. How?

A. In terms of communication, I do my best to try to step away from my own belief system and my own priorities, which are the priorities of a 41-year-old man who's married and has a young daughter. Instead, I



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Bill Carter is partner and co-founder of Fuse, a youth marketing agency. In business as in sports, he says, the effort can be as meaningful as winning or losing.

try to evaluate decisions based on what the 25- to 32-year-olds in our office are trying to get out of their career, what they want in a workplace.

Q. And what do they want?

A. Their expectation is not necessarily like a junior lawyer who is satisfied to work their way up in a corporate law firm over many years. The expectation of the young people in our office is that they're professionals in their field right now, and that they're going to have input right now, they're going to communicate with clients right now, and they're going to be involved in decision-making across the company.

Q. And are they ready for that? Some of the

C.E.O.'s I've interviewed have talked about the expectations of many young employees getting ahead of their capabilities.

A. I say send those people my way. Because we probably want our staff, at the early stages, to be a little bit overconfident, a little too willing to be in the room with a brand manager who's our client, because it shows a level of independence that we need them to have.

I would rather somebody go make a mistake — and have myself or another senior person go back to the client over what's probably a relatively small error — than have to go through an enormous amount of teaching to make that person

“client ready.”

This question of confidence also probably speaks a little bit to the fact that, in our business, the idea of teamwork is probably overrated. I'll take one fantastic graphic designer and one fantastic brand strategy person over a roomful of mediocre people in those functions. The ideas are better, the execution is better, we can get more done. And a lot of this, I think, is about speed. It's not always sitting back having everything be buttoned-up and perfect.

Q. Describe your leadership style now.

A. I think that I'm fair, because I try to be honest and direct in a helpful way. If you want people to be at their best, and if you want the whole company to be on the same page, you need to be willing to communicate directly with people.

In our office, what we've achieved is that being direct is not a personal attack. When my coach was coming down on me or somebody else, I never thought he was doing it for any other reason than he wanted us, as a team, to be on the same page and to be the best that we could be.

Q. How has your leadership style evolved? What do you do more of, or less of?

A. One of the things I do more of now, and probably a better job of now than I did 10 years ago, is being really present in our office when I'm there. I think many senior people, C.E.O.'s and presidents of companies, both small and large, obviously spend a lot of time outside of the office.

What I used to tend to do with the 50 percent of the time that I was in the office would be to go into my office and shut the door, literally or figuratively, and delve back into the responsibilities of that day or that week. I might as well have not been in the office. I wasn't gauging anything that was going on in the staff, learning anything new or understanding the challenges that people were facing.

I've learned that when you're in your office and you're in that position, the best thing you can do is spend at least 50 percent of your time in the office communicating with as many staff as you have time to communicate with. Hoing yourself up is not the way to learn what's happening. The information doesn't flow up to you when you're in a closed-door situation.

I think if you look at your core responsibilities a little less literally, you'd probably want to spend more time with your staff, because what are most C.E.O.'s really in charge of? Well, they are in charge of setting strategy, of creating the best work environment, of finding the best talent. How can you possibly do that by isolating yourself and only communicating with people from accounting or your outside legal counsel? If you don't go down the hall and talk to people, you're not going to know the real challenges. □

This interview has been edited and condensed. A longer version is at nytimes.com/business. A collection of past interviews, searchable by topic, is at nytimes.com/corneroffice.

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luxury amenities, full kitchens and more.

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