

*Leadership Lessons from Life Series*

**LEADERSHIP  
LESSONS**  
*from*  
**Professional  
Football**

*Championship Wisdom from  
Super Bowl Champions*

**Peter R. Garber**

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## About the *Leadership Lessons from Life Series*

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The most important and significant things we learn about life are usually basic and fundamental lessons taught to us early on—lessons that we might have forgotten about, overlooked, or simply taken for granted. Even the most complicated leadership theory has as its source something we were taught when we were young. The *Leadership Lessons from Life* series is designed to remind us of this wisdom and help us apply it to our efforts to become better, more-effective leaders.

Each book in the series is devoted to exploring what we learn from significant people or events in our lives as it relates to our professional endeavors. Even the most challenging leadership and management situations can be changed for the better as a result of insights coming from unexpected sources. As you read each book, you will have a new appreciation for this simple wisdom and find new ways to apply the fundamental principles to your professional life and responsibilities.

Good luck in your never-ending learning journey. May this *Leadership Lessons from Life* series make the experience valuable and enjoyable.



# Introduction

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Each player on a championship professional football team knows what he is there to do and fully understands how he is expected to support the rest of the team. Each individual is an integral part of a well-designed, winning organization. Players step up when they are needed the most, and perform their jobs like champions.

This book will help you become a better leader as you think about what championship football teams can teach us about winning. Like the game of football, it is direct and to the point. You won't find anything very fancy here—just good sound advice that will help you and the members of your team become more successful.

Each player on  
a professional  
championship team  
knows what he is there  
to do and how he is  
expected to support  
the rest of the team.

## Keeping with Tradition

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The history of an organization is important, because what we learn from the past sets the stage for things to come. Our accomplishments and the reputation we have earned because of them are the foundation of our success. If that success is to be more than just fleeting, however, we have to learn what the past has to teach us. Help your employees and customers learn about the organization's history and traditions; this will help you and your leadership team better understand what you stand for and where you want to go.

Professional football teams are justifiably proud of their history and their great traditions. They honor their legendary performers and pass down stories of hard-won victories and narrow defeats, keeping their traditions alive as they prepare for new victories. But tradition alone won't make you successful today; you have to *build* on that tradition by giving your best every day, no matter what kind of organization you play for.

Help your employees  
and customers learn  
about the organization's  
history and traditions.



## Legendary Leadership

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Many owners and coaches of championship teams are considered legends in their own right. They contribute something just as important as the resources needed to build a professional football team: exceptional leadership.

There is no one formula for becoming a legendary leader. Just look at the many different ways owners interact with their teams: Some owners are directly involved with day-to-day operations, and are in on virtually every decision affecting the team. Others delegate all of the responsibility to the head coach and the general manager. Most owners fall somewhere in the middle.

No matter what role the owner chooses to play, he or she is pivotal to the team's success, as are the top leaders in business organizations. Leadership is a great responsibility in and of itself; you are expected to make extremely difficult decisions, many of which have a direct effect on the team or company's ability to reach the finals—not only in this season, but in seasons to come.

Ultimately, a team's success or failure rests on the owner's shoulders. It's the same in companies: Leaders have to take risks, and some of those risks have the potential to put the future of the organization in jeopardy—or carry it to the playoffs. Legendary leaders also inspire, create, enthuse, support, and build. This book will provide some insight into how they do it.

Great leadership  
produces great teams.

# Leadership Lesson #1

## **Work together as a team.**

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A football team can't function, much less win, without believing in the importance of teamwork. Imagine what would happen if eleven individuals went out onto the field and each played their own game. Suppose players stopped blocking for one another, stopped assisting in tackles, and refused to run downfield to try to catch a pass. What if quarterbacks like the Patriots' Tom Brady hogged the ball and tried to make all the plays themselves? It would be a free-for-all.

It takes teamwork to produce a championship team. Every member of the team has to make the *team's* goals their number-one goal. Working together on a shared goal is what gives meaning to our individual efforts.

Unfortunately, the team concept is not nearly as well defined or accepted in many business organizations. Some are just now beginning to realize the importance of the team concept. Those that do not use teams tend to have divisions with goals or objectives that are different from the rest of the organization, and operate as if they are organizations unto themselves. In this scenario, one department or division of an organization might actually have competitive or counter-productive goals—obviously not the formula for a winning team! Everyone in the organization must focus on the same goal: to beat the competition, not compete within their own organization.

Try to imagine what it would be like if no one helped anyone else in your organization and people refused to work together to solve problems or share ideas or experiences. Suppose that each person was just out for him- or herself and didn't care about what happened to anyone else in the organization. What future would you predict for your company? Don't expect to beat the competition if you can't work together as a team.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How well does your organization work together as a team?
- ◆ How can teamwork be improved in your organization?

The answers to these questions and many others are in this book. Please read on.

Everyone in the organization must focus on the same primary goal: to beat the competition— not compete with co-workers.

## *Leadership Lesson #2*

### **Learn from the players.**

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The players are the heart and soul of a team. Regardless of position or role, each individual player needs to share his or her experiences and knowledge to help the team be successful. At one time or another, most of us have had to sit on the sidelines and helplessly watch mistakes being made because we were not given the opportunity to prevent those problems from occurring in the first place.

The players on the field are usually in the best position to understand which changes need to be made on the next play. They are expected to warn their coaches if they see an opposing linebacker ready to crash through the line to sack the quarterback, or notice that an opposing receiver is not covered but is in a scoring position. Their input is critically important.

You must play your position as a leader to the best of your ability, no matter what kind of team you are on. Even more importantly, you must help other players perform their jobs. This is the true meaning of *teamwork*, and it is teamwork that separates winners from losers.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What opportunities are there for direct reports and employees at all levels to contribute and participate in the decision-making process in your organization?
- ◆ How can their input help you make better-informed decisions?

At one time or another, most of us have had to sit on the sidelines and helplessly watch mistakes being made because we were not given the opportunity to prevent those problems from happening in the first place.



## *Leadership Lesson #3*

### **Do not rely on superstars to get you through.**

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Superstars in pro football get a great deal of attention and publicity, as well as lucrative contracts and bonuses. They are truly exciting to watch, and can make a tremendous difference in the success of a team. Superstars are especially adept at what they do, and are usually the ones who make the key play that becomes the turning point in the game. They make a difference in the success of a team, but they can easily overshadow the accomplishments of less talented but equally deserving players.

Relying solely on the performance of the company superstar is a big mistake. What if that superstar gets hurt and can't play in the next big game? Or leaves for a better job somewhere else? It's a formula for disaster. Championship football teams prove over and over again how important it is to rely on the *entire* team roster—not just the superstars. If you aren't confident that they can do the job just as well, it's time you start preparing them for it.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Do you rely too much on a single employee, division, or department for your success?
- ◆ What contingency plans do you have if your “superstars” are no longer able to stay in the game?
- ◆ What should you do so that you have other employees prepared to step in when you need their help?

Relying totally on the  
performance of  
superstars is a formula  
for disaster.

## *Leadership Lesson #4*

### **Build bench strength.**

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If you are a football fan, you know how important it is to have players who can move into positions that open up because a starter has been injured. This bench strength or ability to replace a team's starting lineup—including its superstars—is one of the reasons why championship teams like the New England Patriots and the Philadelphia Eagles have been so successful. Having players who are prepared to move into key roles at a moment's notice is perhaps the greatest strength of any team. The managers and coaches make sure they have a few players on the bench who can be relied on to perform as well as the ones on the field should a starter have to leave the game.

Bench strength is also important in business. Employees in key positions need to be replaced from time to time, often with very little notice. Transfers, termination, and illness generally require immediate attention so as not to slow or interrupt the business of the organization. Businesses must anticipate such workforce realities and be sure they have capable and qualified employees ready to move into important roles. The time to prepare your bench is not when you hear that someone is leaving, but rather long before, when there is no crisis and no pressure to make a quick decision.

Succession plans and development strategies should also be reviewed on a regular basis. Leaders need to be sure that the

organization's bench strength reflects anticipated or potential changes in the industry and the competitive marketplace. If employees do not presently possess the skills needed to keep up with changes in the organization's business strategy, immediate steps need to be taken to prepare them.

Make bench strength a priority.

### *Leadership Question*

Think about the bench strength of your organization.

- ◆ How strong is your organization's bench?
- ◆ Have you trained your players for jobs they might have to fill in the future?

One of the reasons why Super Bowl champions are successful is that they have backup players ready to step into key positions when a starter is injured.

## *Leadership Lesson #5*

### **Recognize your unsung heroes.**

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Many people prefer to work with others on a common goal, rather than seek individual glory. To them, the success of a team, rather than personal achievement, is most important. Teams are usually able to take on larger challenges, but each player's contribution is going to be critical. The only way any member of the team can be a winner is if the entire team wins, so everyone has to give 100%. In sports and in business, the most notable of individual accomplishments loses its meaning if it is part of an overall team effort that fails to achieve their goal.

Many times, the most important contributions of individuals go unnoticed. For example, the efforts of offensive linemen who open holes for the running backs to run through for a long gain don't usually get written up in newspaper reports of the game. Other players who make big plays also tend to go unheralded. These are the unsung heroes! Leaders must take the time to publicly and privately recognize those team players who quietly make major accomplishments possible. These employees sacrifice individual glory to help their teams win. They don't ask for accolades, but one or two now and then wouldn't hurt!

## *Leadership Questions*

Think about the “unsung heroes” on your team.

- ◆ Who would you include on this list? Why?
- ◆ What can you do so that individuals get the recognition they deserve?

Each player's  
contribution is critical  
to the team's  
ultimate success.



## *Leadership Lesson #6*

### **Identify the real competition.**

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Fortune 500 companies and championship football teams have at least one thing in common: their competitors want to win as much as they do. It is always clear who the competition is in a football game: the competition is the team on the other side of the ball. It's not quite so clear in the business world. You probably won't ever meet the competition face-to-face. Instead, you'll both compete for a portion of the market share. The score won't be displayed on a huge scoreboard, but it will show up in sales, revenue, expenses, and ultimately profitability. In football, the competition sometimes becomes so tough that a clear winner only emerges during the play-offs. In business, the competition might knock other companies out of the game or market permanently.

It is often unclear who the *real* competition is. At times it seems like the competition is another department or division within your own organization. When this type of in-fighting occurs within a company, the real winner is the organization's *actual* competition—the other companies who want your share of the business. Just imagine if, during a football game, the offensive players begin tackling one another, rather than blocking the defense. They would obviously defeat themselves very quickly.

Make sure your teams have a clear understanding of who their competition is so they can work together to defeat their opposition.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Does your team know who its real competition is?
- ◆ Is there competition within your organization that takes away from your focus on defeating the *real* competition?
- ◆ How can this internal competition be decreased or eliminated?
- ◆ Will having a better understanding of who the competition really is help your team improve performance? How, specifically?

In business, it is not  
often clear just who the  
*real* competition is.

## *Leadership Lesson #7*

### **Earn the support of the community.**

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The support of the community is an essential ingredient in a pro football team's success. The community provides the team with its fans, revenue, practice facilities, and home field. These same critical elements are necessary for business success. Your team needs the support of the community in which it operates, because the entire organization shares in each victory or defeat just like fans of a football team.

The town or city in which your organization functions is its community, and it is an important part of your success. After all, it provides the land, the utilities, the suppliers, the services, the materials, the labor, and other resources essential for operation. In turn, your organization's successes help support the community's families, schools, government, public programs, and highways, as well as other businesses in the area. It is a symbiotic relationship; you need one another to achieve your goals.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How can your team and the community in which your organization is located better support each other?
- ◆ What are some of the things that you give back to the community where your organization operates?
- ◆ What are some of the things that the community contributes to your organization?
- ◆ How can your team help ensure that you keep the “home field” advantage in the community in which you live (not only today, but in the future)?

The support of the  
community is  
essential to a  
team's success.

## *Leadership Lesson #8*

### **Give your team emotional support and encouragement.**

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One field goal can make the difference between victory and defeat. Sometimes the field-goal kicker is called upon in the last seconds of a close game to score those precious three points under the most adverse conditions. This puts a lot of pressure on the kicker. Truly great ones meet this challenge, kicking last-minute field goals under intense pressure to win playoffs as well as Super Bowl championships.

The field-goal kicker might be the hero in one game and the most-disappointing player in another if he fails to kick the ball between the uprights during these critical moments. Great coaches know that they must provide encouragement and emotional support when their players need it the most. They know when to push a player to perform to his ability and when to give him space or reassurance during tough times.

A field-goal kicker once missed a critically important kick by just inches in the final seconds of a game's third quarter that would have put his team ahead. The kicker slowly walked back to the sidelines with his head down, ashamed and afraid to face his teammates (and most of all his coach) because he let them down when they needed him the most. At that moment, he looked like the loneliest person on earth.

Instead of ignoring him or telling him what he did wrong (or worse yet, yelling at him), the coach did something else. He stopped what he was doing and walked over to the kicker, placing his hands on each side of his helmet. Then he looked the young man in the eyes, and said, “You are a great place kicker, and don’t you forget it! You know as well as I do that you are not going to make every kick. The game is not over, and there will be other opportunities. You are not the only one responsible for where we are right now! We are a team, and everyone contributes to what happens to us, good or bad. I believe in you, or you wouldn’t be out here today. But most important, *don’t quit believing in yourself!*”

In the final seconds of the game, the place kicker was once again called upon to perform. He made one of the longest field goals of his career, and helped the team win a *very* important game.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How can you make sure that all of your employees stay in the game, even during discouraging and difficult times?
- ◆ During what kind of situations do those who report to you most need emotional support?



Great coaches understand the importance of providing encouragement and emotional support during those moments when their players need it the most.

## *Leadership Lesson # 9*

### **Scout the competition.**

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Professional football teams study game films over and over again to learn as much as they can about each of their opponents. They also send scouts to games their competitors are playing to bring back information on players' strengths and weaknesses, as well as their opponents' overall performance and strategy. Game films and scouting reports help a team develop its own specially designed game plan for a specific opponent. Without this kind of direct observation, a team would have little or no information about its competition and would not know what to expect. Without scouting reports, they might use the wrong strategy for a particular opponent, leading themselves to almost certain defeat.

Benchmarking is a popular business technique. Comparing your organization to others that are considered to be the best in the industry allows an organization to learn from the experience of others and set challenging new goals in order to remain competitive with the industry's leaders. Get out there and see what you can learn.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What is the business equivalent of game films and scouting reports? How can you acquire direct information about your competition? Internet searches, Web sites, published reports, and annual reports are good sources. Assign people to gather information on a regular basis and report back to you.
- ◆ How much do your employees know about the competition?
- ◆ How will it benefit the organization if your employees knew more about the competition?

Benchmarking will help your organization learn from the experience of others so you can set challenging goals and remain competitive with the industry's leaders.

# *Leadership Lesson #10*

## **Keep score.**

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If a team wants to measure its performance, it has to keep score. Imagine what sports competitions would be like if no one kept score. There would be no measurement of how one team is performing, compared to how the other team is performing. We would have no way of knowing who is playing better or worse and who the winners or losers are, or even whether or not our team is improving.

“How are we doing?” is a question employees often ask their managers, and they deserve an answer. Individuals must have a way to find out how well they are performing, how their team is doing, and how well the organization as a whole stacks up to the competition. Performance feedback helps people continue to improve and grow in their careers and as individuals. The country’s most respected companies make it a point to share performance and shareholder information with their employees. It instills faith and pride in the organization and keeps everyone focused on the goals.

## *Leadership Questions*

The scoreboard tells players and fans how each team is doing in a sports competition, but the organization also needs a way to communicate the “score” to employees.

- ◆ How do you keep score at work?
- ◆ What would be the equivalent of a scoreboard for your team?
- ◆ How can you use performance feedback to help employees improve their job performance?

Employees deserve to  
know how the  
organization is doing.

# *Leadership Lesson #11*

## **Teach the basics of the game.**

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Practice, practice, practice. As with anything in life, learning and practicing the basics of the game is essential to becoming a sports champion. Football champions master the basic skills of blocking, tackling, passing, catching, running, and learning the plays by practicing the correct techniques over and over again. Failure to perform them correctly during a game can result in costly mistakes that lead to penalties or even defeat.

Watch your favorite team play their next game and you will see players performing in textbook fashion. If they hadn't understood the importance of learning and performing the basics of the game early on, they never would have made it in professional football in the first place.

There's no doubt that the one thing organizations most need in today's rapidly changing business world is a workforce composed of individuals who are able to learn new jobs quickly—and *correctly*. Think about the basic skills your team players need to do their jobs today and in the future. Are you preparing them?

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Does each person you manage or supervise have the essential skills required to perform his or her job?
- ◆ Have they mastered these fundamentals to the performance level of championship football players?
- ◆ What training and practice might you provide so that you know for certain that everyone has perfected the skills needed to perform his or her job?
- ◆ How can you keep these skills current? What kinds of skills might be needed in the next five years?

If you want to become  
a champion in your  
professional life,  
perfect the way you  
do your job.



# *Leadership Lesson #12*

## **Develop a playbook.**

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Every football team needs a playbook that explains what each player's exact job assignment and responsibilities are for each play. A football team develops and practices a wide variety of plays so that it can flexibly deal with whatever its opponent throws at them. A well-executed offensive play can help defeat even the strongest defense.

Each player on the team understands the playbook and knows what he or she has to do. If these assignments are not clearly understood by each individual player, the play will not lead to the desired objective. The team places its trust in everyone involved in the organization not to leak anything in its playbook to the competition. It's that important.

Every business organization should have its own version of a playbook that consists of strategic business goals, project proposals, marketing strategies, and even job descriptions. This critical tool helps leaders and all other employees understand where the organization is trying to go and how it intends to get there in the short term. Based on the organization's present talent and current goals, a playbook should also include an outline of worker roles and responsibilities so that every employee understands where he or she fits into the big picture. It should be reviewed regularly and updated each year or two to reflect changes in the global or regulatory environment.

Company leaders must make certain that each and every employee knows and understands the playbook—if, that is, the company is serious about achieving its goals! They will need to develop a plan for communicating and implementing the playbook, and provide some guidelines regarding confidentiality.

No football team or business organization will be successful unless all its members have read the playbook.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Does your team have the business equivalent of a playbook that gives members of the team a clear understanding of each person's job assignment and responsibilities?
- ◆ If not, develop a playbook for everyone on the team. How can you make certain that yours stays in the hands of the right people at all times?

A well-executed  
offensive play can help  
counter even the  
strongest of defenses.

# *Leadership Lesson #13*

## **Create a game plan.**

---

Every team needs to have a game plan that can lead the team to victory—a plan that maximizes its strengths and minimizes its weaknesses. The team must modify and adapt the game plan to match the capabilities of its current competition. This plan must be flexible, so managers can make changes right up until game time if new information about the competition becomes available.

Game plans are used in the business world as well. They're often referred to as “business strategy” or “capital growth initiatives.” Sometimes the game plan consists of annual goals for a particular department or manager. They all serve the same essential purpose: To establish the path forward for everyone in the organization to follow.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Does your team have a game plan? What is it?
- ◆ If not, what could such a plan that maximizes your team's chances of success consist of?
- ◆ If your organization has a strategic plan, has it been communicated to everyone?
- ◆ If parts of it are confidential in nature, which individuals have a need to know this information? If not, then how can you better communicate this plan to everyone on your team?

Modify and adapt the organization's game plan to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the competition.

## *Leadership Lesson #14*

### **Make sure everyone on the team knows the game plan.**

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It's not enough to have a fantastic game plan. What good is it if not everyone knows about it? Each week, professional teams go over their plans for the upcoming game. The players have to fully understand the strategy, their assigned roles, and how they are expected to contribute. No matter how brilliant the game plan, it must be shared with the people who will execute it, or it's meaningless. A player who shows up on Sunday without knowing it backwards and forwards puts a team at a tremendous disadvantage because he wouldn't have a clue about the team's strategy for beating the competition and what he is expected to contribute.

Everyone on your team has to know your organization's game plan—the direction that the organization intends to take in the future, and any impending or needed changes in mission, organizational divisions, and policy. If employees are not let in on the game plan, they won't be sure they are doing the right things and won't know how to help their team reach its goals. A game plan can consist of any or all of these elements: the overall business strategy, the organization's objectives, information about new products or services, and new initiatives or directions that might be in the making.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How well have you communicated your organization's game plan? What channels have you used?
- ◆ Who knows what this plan is about? If others do not know, what is the best way to share it? And when?
- ◆ Most importantly, do your employees know your plan?
- ◆ Would it really be a problem if others knew your business plan?



Employees need to know the direction that the organization is planning to take in the future.

## *Leadership Lesson #15*

### **Practice your two-minute drill.**

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It is late in the fourth quarter, with only two minutes left to play. Your team is behind by just a few points. You just regained possession of the ball at mid-field. What can you do to score the winning touchdown? Great quarterbacks know exactly what needs to be done in these critical final moments of the game to be victorious, and they do it.

Football teams train constantly for this very scenario, developing two-minute practice drills that involve a variety of “hurry up” offensive strategies designed to move forward against the defense in the most efficient way possible. They practice a planned series of plays and can run without a huddle in order to save time and try to catch the other team off-guard. It is often a two-minute technique that wins the game.

Most organizations find themselves in occasional situations that require a quick response and only limited time to plan the next move. This is when it is especially important to have everyone understand what his or her role will be; if there is a safety emergency or a surprise visit by the head of the corporation, they’ll be prepared. Consider having your team at work develop and practice two-minute drills so the organization will work like a well-oiled machine when things become a bit chaotic.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What kind of work situation might call for development of a two-minute drill?
- ◆ How would you plan and develop this two-minute drill?

Practice two-minute drills so your team will be able to respond quickly during an emergency or a rapidly-changing situation.

## *Leadership Lesson #16*

### **Get everyone into the game.**

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Every player on a professional team wants to get in the game and contribute to the team's success, but the reality is that only eleven players at a time can be on the field. Sometimes getting in the game is just supporting others who are on the field and being ready in case you are needed, or providing encouragement to your teammates.

It's entirely natural to ask yourself why you should care about what happens in other parts of the organization or to the company you work for. After all, it's just a job, right?

There are good reasons why you should care. Each team member plays a critical role in helping the team be successful. As a leader, you must make sure each employee understands just how important his or her contributions are. There are constant "hand-offs" of work from one employee to another; if one individual drops the ball, it can affect the entire work process and even jeopardize a project.

If you are not particularly concerned about what happens outside the scope of your job, you might not have a job if your division is eliminated or transferred, because apathy eats away at productivity. An employee's indifference never goes unnoticed, and it always affects performance in some way. Why should the owner or manager care about keeping you on?

Each person who works for someone else must actively contribute as a member of the team *for the benefit of everyone on the team*. Everyone must get into the game and contribute to the team's success. This is what usually makes the difference between winning and losing.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ If employees in your organization understood the “big picture” as it relates to the company, would it make a difference in attitude and performance? How?
- ◆ What can you do to help employees better understand how their individual roles contribute to the success of the entire organization?
- ◆ What specifically can *you* do to get all of your employees in the game, contributing to the success of your organization?

Each person must get  
into the game and  
contribute to the  
team's success.

## *Leadership Lesson #17*

### **Make sure no one is sitting in the stands.**

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We've all sat in the stands or stood on the sidelines and watched others play the game. It's comfortable playing armchair quarterback, criticizing how the game is being played and who's screwing up. It's a different story when you're down on the field facing the competition, however. You have to personally experience what it's like to have a 300-lb. linebacker charging at you, intent on crushing you to the ground, to fully appreciate how the quarterback feels when a player fails to complete a blocking assignment.

Why are some employees content to sit in the bleachers and complain about how things are being managed by others? Because they don't feel a sense of team affinity, perhaps. Effective leaders find ways to get employees onto the playing field. Everyone needs to understand and appreciate what is involved in solving problems in the workplace. Problems are not as easy to solve as they seem to be when you look at them from a distance.

The more players in the game, the stronger the team. Imagine how much tougher even the weakest professional team would be if the rules of the game allowed everyone to be on the playing field at the same time. Fortunately, there is no limit to the number of active players who can help your organization and its teams work together to beat the competition. Whether you are a small business or a major

corporation, don't let anyone stand around the watercooler, criticizing how things are being managed. Do what you can to get them involved in helping things run smoothly.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Think about some of the spectators sitting in the organization's bleachers. How can you get them more actively involved in the game?
- ◆ What difference do you think it would make if these individuals got out of the bleachers and into the game?



It is easy to sit in the stands and criticize how the game is being played, but it's a different story when you're down on the field facing the competition nose-to-nose!

## *Leadership Lesson #18*

### **Remember that you're all on the same team.**

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There is one attitude that has been around as long as people have worked to earn a living. It's the old "us against them" mindset we first encountered in childhood. From the employees' standpoint, the "us" stands for the workers who do not have the power to make decisions and can't even get their opinions heard, whatever their organizational level. The "them" represents everyone else in the organization. Management, however, thinks that it is the "us" and the workers are the "them." If anything goes wrong, the "us" blames it on "them," and no one really wants to admit that they are part of the problem!

If all this sounds confusing—it is! A team is not supposed to have two sides. Everyone should be on the same side. On a football team, everyone's helmet has the same logo. In a business, everyone's paycheck bears the same company name.

Getting into an "us against them" contest is destructive to a team. One of the first telltale signs that a football team is in trouble is when you hear about individual players making negative or disparaging remarks about other members of the organization. We don't hear this type of talk from anyone in championship organizations, be they in the NFL or the Fortune 500. Support and respect for each person who is

working for the company, regardless of their position, is considered a top priority 365 days a year in the most respected companies. Is it a priority in yours?

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Is there an “us against them” attitude anywhere in your organization?
- ◆ How can you address this problem in a way that does not exacerbate it?

On a football team,  
everyone's helmet has  
the same logo. In  
business, everyone's  
paycheck bears the  
same company name.

# *Leadership Lesson #19*

## **Communicate.**

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Communication can be a liability or a strength. How well does your organization or team communicate? Football teams use huddles to gather the players together during a game so that each player knows exactly what play will be next and understands his particular assignment. If you and your co-workers formed a company football team, how well would you communicate with one another? Would your teammates be standing around in a huddle, arguing about what the next play should be or who ought to get the ball?

Most of us have tried to save time by giving employees a hurried set of instructions concerning a job task, only to realize later on that we should have taken more time to adequately explain the plan to them. Did we learn anything from those experiences? When was the last time you actually huddled with your team? Perhaps a team huddle to communicate the plan, roles, and responsibilities is a good idea for the workplace, as well as on the football field. Schedule regular meetings, conference calls, e-mail messages, and interactive forums so that everyone stays well informed.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How often do you take the time to meet with your team to communicate important information about a plan of action or a current project?
- ◆ Think about those times when you didn't huddle with your team and there were major consequences. How would a huddle have helped?
- ◆ Where and when can you quickly meet with your team to improve communication?

When was the last  
time you actually held  
a team “huddle”?

## *Leadership Lesson #20*

### **Prevent fumbles and turnovers.**

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Fumbles and turnovers are part of football. They are among the costliest mistakes that a football team can make, often making the difference between victory and defeat. The number of fumbles and turnovers a team makes is often the most telling statistic at the end of the game. Turnovers not only end a team's forward drive to the goal, but they also give the ball to the opposition. What's worse is that they can defeat a team emotionally when players see their advantage handed over to the other team.

Organizations suffer their share of fumbles and turnovers. A deadline is missed on an important project. The competition stole your best customer, right out from under you. The sales team played hardball and lost out on a big contract. How does a business or organization lose the ball to the competition? By failing to pay attention. One late shipment, one rude employee, one promise broken—most of these things will be forgiven once, but if the problem isn't addressed immediately, your customers will vote with their feet. How costly is a so-called fumble or turnover to your team? How can you help prevent them from happening?

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What fumbles or mistakes do you believe your organization is about to make or is likely to make if something isn't done?
- ◆ What might be done to prevent these things from happening?
- ◆ How can you get your team involved in preventing future fumbles and turnovers?

How costly would a  
fumble or a turnover be  
to your team?



## *Leadership Lesson #21*

### **Know what the penalties are.**

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Penalties are part of the game of football, and they're certainly part of the world of business. Sometimes a team can overcome these penalties and go on to victory. Other times, penalties imposed upon a team can make the difference between success or failure, winning or losing. Penalties in football can cost the offense valuable yards, wipe out any opportunity for first-down, or even cancel out touchdowns, extra points, or field goals. Defensive penalties give away hard-fought yards to the other team. One player's mistake can cancel out another player's great achievements. As every team playing a crucial game knows, a penalty can turn a great play into a fruitless effort, a sure victory into an easy defeat.

It's clear when a football player breaks a rule—an official throws a flag and stops the game to impose a penalty on the player or the team. What are the penalties for making mistakes in your organization? Are they always so clearly communicated? Think about all the things that can cause your business to lose customers or revenue. Are you failing to meet a requirement or expectation that might cause you to lose a customer? Are you ignoring state or federal regulations that put you in jeopardy of being cited and fined for non-compliance? Is everyone aware of the consequences of non-compliance? Are leaders aware of penalties already imposed on the organization? Are the same mistakes being made over and

over again? Being aware of every risk and every “penalty” is one way to prevent bad things from happening to good organizations.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ When a team is penalized, there is usually a ripple effect somewhere down the line. What are some likely consequences?
- ◆ How would a disadvantage or penalty from a violation hurt your team? Who would be responsible for assessing cause and effect? What violations would hurt your team the most or cause you to lose the “game”?
- ◆ What can you do to prevent a violation that has a penalty attached to it?

Think about the risks  
and the penalties to the  
organization before  
you act on behalf of  
the organization.

## *Leadership Lesson #22*

### **Develop resilience.**

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The best pro teams are able to deal with adversity. Once they overcome obstacles and setbacks, they bounce back stronger than ever. Tough calls during a big game, penalties, and tough playing conditions are all part of the game, but true adversity is more long-term: losing your top starter to an injury during the season, major problems with ownership or management, a threatened strike—these are the times when teams are really tested. Backup players have to be able to step into starting roles without the team missing a beat. In fact, they must play as well or better than the players they replace! Setbacks and adversity are what turn a bunch of individual players into a team. It doesn't matter who is playing a particular position—the job will still get done because there is a renewed commitment to achieving the goal.

Every professional football team suffers its share of setbacks and adversity during a playing season. The best teams are highly resilient, immediately looking for ways to recover and get back on track. Players on great teams learn how to turn adversity into opportunity, *and they do it*.

Businesses have to deal with adversity as well. They must be able to deal with changes in government regulation, a sudden shift in market demand, spiraling costs for raw material and energy, overseas competition—you name it. As seasoned leaders know all too well, the rules and circumstances in which a company operates can dramatically change with

little or no notice. Suddenly, you find yourself in unfamiliar territory, not sure whether you will be able to negotiate through the turbulence. Change is frightening, and so is adversity; each one forces us to adapt, think on our feet, be creative and daring, and have *faith* in ourselves. Do it enough, and you will develop a resilience that can be turned into one of your greatest strengths.

How resilient are you, as a leader? The organizations that are able to deal with change and adversity best are usually the ones that are more successful, and it is the leaders who set the pace.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How well does your organization deal with adversity? Think of a specific situation in which it was able to overcome the setback. How, exactly, was it done?
- ◆ How do you respond to unexpected changes and challenges to your success?
- ◆ What can you do today to better prepare for specific adversities that you will probably face in the future?

Players on great teams  
quickly learn how to  
turn a setback into  
an opportunity.

## Leadership Lesson #23

### **Be confident.**

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Confidence is a critical part of success in just about everything. In pro football, the level of talent on any one team is so high that if the team is going to win, it will be because of factors such as confidence. You can't be intimidated by the competition if you are going to play professional football! You need to believe in yourself and in your ability to get the job done, and demonstrate this confidence on the playing field. Professional football players have trained hard almost all of their lives, and develop a belief that they can prevail in any situation—they are *sure* that their offensive and defensive plays will work as designed whenever they are run.

Think of the most confident, talented colleague you know. What is it about this individual that makes them exude confidence? Is it something he or she does, or is it something about their overall attitude or presentation? Does he or she have something more than self-confidence, such as great faith in the products or services they provide or work on? Do his or her customers or clients “feel” this confidence? You did, didn't you? You need to have confidence in *your* business abilities, as well. Each and every time you do business with your customers, you have an opportunity to earn the *right* to be confident. If it is faked, it will easily be exposed, and if it isn't justified, you'll be ridiculed. Making promises that you can't deliver on, for example, will cause your customers to quickly

lose confidence in you. When you lose their confidence, you will most likely lose their business. Then how confident will you be?

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What can you do to instill confidence in your employees when it comes to their ability to perform their jobs and meet the requirements of your customers?
- ◆ What do you need to do or work on that will make you more confident about your ability to lead?



Making promises that  
you can't keep will  
cause your customers  
to quickly lose  
confidence in you.

## *Leadership Lesson #24*

### **Stay focused.**

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A championship football team takes one game at a time. Getting ahead of themselves causes players to lose focus on the current game, which can lead to devastating results. Not taking an opponent seriously can give the weaker team just enough edge to upset a heavily favored adversary. You might have heard of this football adage: “On any given Sunday, any pro team can beat another pro team.” You make it all the way to the Super Bowl ONLY by playing the season one game at a time. Past Super Bowl champions focused each week only on the opponent they would face next, and they never took winning for granted by assuming that they would beat their adversary. They prepared for each game as if the entire season depended on that one victory.

Looking too far ahead in business can cause problems as well. You might lose focus on the business at hand, for one thing. Try to satisfy each customer—one at a time. If you count your chickens before they’re hatched, you might not see them hatched at all! There is such a thing as being too strategic. Always look ahead, but don’t neglect to take care of the business that must be done *today*.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ Which employees in your business or organization need to be advised to stay focused on one thing at a time? When will you step in and remind them?
- ◆ How can you make sure that your organization stays focused on doing a good job at the tasks at hand?
- ◆ Which specific strategies have worked for others?

If you count your  
chickens before they're  
hatched, they might  
not hatch.

# *Leadership Lesson #25*

## **Keep one eye on the goal.**

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Professional football teams must be able to focus on one game at a time, but they can't lose track of the big picture for even a second. Every player on every team is always thinking about winning a Super Bowl. They do what they have to do each week, using the bigger goal of making it to the Super Bowl as a powerful incentive.

An organization must be able to manage two sets of strategies at the same time: short-term strategies and long-term strategies. A delicate balance exists between these two sometimes-contradictory objectives and goals. Focusing too much on one can present a problem in achieving the other. Somewhere, at least in the back of your mind, you need to be thinking of your overall objectives. This must be part of the organization's operational strategy.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How can you achieve your immediate objectives and still maintain your longer-term goals?
- ◆ Does one take away from the other?
- ◆ How do leaders in Fortune 500 companies do it?
- ◆ What can you do to better manage both kinds of goals?

An organization must be able to manage its short-term and its long-term strategies at the same time.

# *Leadership Lesson #26*

## **Respect your competition.**

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Respect the capabilities of the competition. Not taking them seriously enough is another way to turn an expected win into an unexpected defeat. Every Super Bowl championship team is made up of extraordinarily talented athletes who have trained hard for years just to play professional football. The same is probably true in your business: You must compete against other organizations that have talented employees, competitive products and services, and a commitment to succeed—not to mention a plan to take market share away from you! A football team steps out onto the field looking for just one win—this one. Don't expect success to come easy. It has to be earned every step of the way.

So what do champions do to achieve the impossible? They respect the competition. They take everyone seriously. And they practice hard and play hard against every team they face, regardless of reputation or prediction.

Respecting the competition in football means finding out who this team is they are about to play, and what it is capable of. Professional football teams spend enormous energy and resources trying to understand their opponents. They study game films, use computer models, and analyze their strengths and weaknesses.

Businesses operate in much the same manner. There are entire departments in some of this country's most successful

companies that study the industry and its major players. They search for ways to develop new markets that the competition might have overlooked. They test and compare their own products with what other companies are putting out. And they are constantly researching and developing prototypes and new things that force their competitors to play defense instead of offense.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What kind of information about your competition do you have *right now*? How much of it do you share with your employees?
- ◆ Do you provide your employees with enough information to really understand the competition? Do the employees think you do? Have you ever asked them?
- ◆ How can you help your employees respect the competition the way a pro football team does?

Respect the  
competition the way a  
pro team respects its  
next opponent: Find  
out everything you can  
about it.



# *Leadership Lesson #27*

## **Play defensively.**

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Every football team wants possession of the ball, but this obviously isn't going to happen 100% of the time. Exceptional defense usually wins football games. In fact, the most successful pro teams also have the best defensive records. It's no accident!

We learn from experience that sometimes the best defense is to take the offense. Some situations can only be navigated with a strategy that is largely defensive. There will be times when your business competition is in possession of the ball, and is advancing toward you, trying to push you back. Perhaps they have just introduced a product or service that has you fighting to keep customers, or a new technology has suddenly become available and you decide to change your business plan. While you work on developing a new business strategy, you know you have to pull out all the stops to hold on to the customers you already have. In these situations, all you can do is play defensively, try to stop their progress, and recover the ball.

Just being in a defensive mode is not always enough, however. There are a number of different levels of defense a football team must use to prevent the other team's offense from breaking through and scoring a touchdown, from their defensive line to their safety positions. Sometimes all these levels of defense work, stopping the other team's offensive

efforts. Other times, none of these systems work as designed, giving away valuable yards and points to the competition.

You need to have different levels of defense or backup systems to prevent problems from occurring that eventually could hand valuable business over to the competition. For example, there might be specific defensive measures you will have to take to keep your customers from moving over to the competition, regardless of their cost: honoring and even exceeding product guarantees, replacing products, re-negotiating contracts, lowering prices, or apologizing to customers and asking how you can make amends are all good defensive business strategies. They might not always help you achieve your profit goals this quarter, but might just keep you in the game until you implement your new strategy.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How does your work team play “defense”? In what kinds of specific situations is this necessary?
- ◆ How can you get back possession of the ball and take the offense?
- ◆ What is your team’s best defense against the competition?

Be sure you have  
different levels of  
backup or defensive  
systems to prevent  
problems from occurring  
that might give  
competition the edge.

## *Leadership Lesson #28*

### **Know who you are.**

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What are your organization's greatest strengths? Do your employees agree? You need to know who you are in order to be successful in any endeavor, and that means understanding your strengths as well as your weaknesses. If you want to be competitive, capitalize on what you are really good at and minimize where you are most vulnerable. For some teams, this means capitalizing on their passing game; for others, it will be to capitalize on their opponents' weaknesses. The best football teams in history are not afraid to admit their weaknesses. In fact, they turn them into strengths.

To be successful in the end, you have to figure out who you really are and what your core competencies are—those critical qualities that you need for the job. Building on them represents your greatest chance of moving ahead of the competition. Work on those things you are already good at, but look hard at what you're not so good at. Little by little, strengthen those weaker areas, and you will give your competition a run for its money.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What are the things that your organization does well that you might work on so you excel in these areas?
- ◆ As an organization, do you know who and what you really are—what your strengths and weakness are?
- ◆ Does your competition?

We seldom succeed at  
trying to be something  
we're not.

# *Leadership Lesson #29*

## **Control the clock.**

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In football, you have 60 minutes to get the job done. The way a team manages those 60 minutes is critical to its success on the gridiron. Poor clock management has cost more than one team a game! What good is it to be driving hard toward a winning or tying score, only to run out of time in the last few critical seconds of the game? Part of every championship team's game plan is to control the clock; the longer it is in possession of the ball, the less time opponents have to try to score.

You probably have a lot more than 60 minutes a week to compete against your business competitors. Just think of all the time you waste doing things that really don't move you forward. For example, do you tend to over-analyze? Fight the same fire over and over again, instead of prevent it from recurring? Perhaps your meetings run on and on because too much time is spent strategizing or socializing. We all waste a little time, but five minutes here and fifteen minutes there add up at the end of the day, the week, and the year. How efficiently you and your colleagues use your time can make a big difference in the long run.

Why not think about doing some "clock management"? Take a close look at all the work processes used in your organization. Can any of them be streamlined or redesigned? Consider bringing in an efficiency expert to analyze your daily operations and make recommendations. Perhaps an industry

consultant can help you identify areas where computerization or automation might help you become more cost- and time-efficient.

Remember: Every 60 minutes you are in business costs you money, but you control the clock.

### *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ How well do you manage your business day?
- ◆ How can you make better use of the time you have to operate each week?
- ◆ How much better is your competition than you in managing time and the “game clock”?

Every second you are  
in business costs  
money. Make the most  
of your time.



## *Leadership Lesson #30*

### **Treat every player like a champion.**

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Success is much more than a game win or a top score. Becoming the champion is the ultimate symbol of success for every pro team, but only one team can achieve this in any given year. There are other factors that define success, and they are perhaps just as important as a trophy, if not more so: effective teamwork; team pride; the support of their fans; a shared sense of accomplishment that comes from achieving what each member of the team worked so hard for, and so on. Perhaps these factors are what *really* constitute success for a team.

What does it take to be a champion? What motivates players to try to reach this ultimate goal? Support, recognition, respect, and appreciation are just a few of the motivators that drive people to want to do their very best—to strive to reach goals that they might otherwise have considered to be unattainable. Leaders must make sure each person in the organization has the opportunity to feel like a champion. One of your most important responsibilities is to treat your employees and teams like champions each day they come to work.

Everyone on your team has the potential to be a star or even a superstar. As a leader, it is up to you to give each individual the opportunity to shine.

## *Leadership Questions*

- ◆ What can you do to give each individual in your organization the opportunity to shine like a superstar?
- ◆ How can you make everyone who works for you feel like a champion?

Everyone on your  
team has the potential  
to be a star, and even  
a superstar.

It is up to you to give  
each individual the  
opportunity to shine.

## Post-Game Wrap-Up

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Football fans love to watch the post-game shows because they provide a review and analysis of the game they just watched. The television commentators put the game into perspective and show highlights of the other games played that day, including the most memorable plays and fumbles. The post-game wrap-up provides several takes on the plays that didn't go as planned and compares the game to the rest of the performances thus far in the season.

What would be the equivalent of a post-game wrap-up for your organization? Such a meeting might include a review of the major highlights of a recent project or accomplishment, as well as an analysis of what didn't go exactly as planned (and lessons learned). How might such a regular wrap-up help the organization as it moves ahead? Would it improve team effectiveness?

## Game Summary

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Okay, now that you have read the book *Leadership Lessons from Professional Football*, think about what you have learned and how you can apply some of the lessons in your job as a leader in your organization. Managing a professional football team and leading a small or large team in a business organization are not radically different endeavors, as we have said.

Think about the lessons that can be applied to your work, such as keeping people focused on the present tasks or providing direction and encouragement as employees try to help the organization meet its goals. As for your competition, do you really know as much about their strengths and weaknesses as you should? Shouldn't you be out there doing some scouting? Are you using strategic planning and skill development tools to move the organization ahead? And what about all those people who support the team with little fanfare—are you appreciating and recognizing them, as well as the superstars?

We end this little book with one request: On the following page, take a minute to note a few of the leadership lessons you know you can apply right away. Make them part of your game plan as you carry out your leadership responsibilities. Then, over the next few months, go back and read the book to make sure you are focusing on the right things.

Best of luck in your leadership role. Now go on out and win one for the Gipper!

## Leadership Lessons from Professional Football

Check the lessons in the book that you should probably be working on *now*.

- Lesson 1. Work together as a team.
- Lesson 2. Learn from the players.
- Lesson 3. Do not rely on superstars to get you through.
- Lesson 4. Build bench strength.
- Lesson 5. Recognize your unsung heroes.
- Lesson 6. Identify your real competition.
- Lesson 7. Earn the support of the community.
- Lesson 8. Give your team emotional support and encouragement.
- Lesson 9. Scout the competition.
- Lesson 10. Keep score.
- Lesson 11. Teach the basics of the game.
- Lesson 12. Develop a playbook.
- Lesson 13. Create a game plan.
- Lesson 14. Make sure everyone on the team knows the game plan.
- Lesson 15. Practice your two-minute drill.
- Lesson 16. Get everyone into the game.
- Lesson 17. Make sure no one is sitting in the stands.
- Lesson 18. Remember that you're all on the same team.
- Lesson 19. Communicate.
- Lesson 20. Prevent fumbles and turnovers.
- Lesson 21. Know what the penalties are.
- Lesson 22. Develop resilience.
- Lesson 23. Be confident.
- Lesson 24. Stay focused.
- Lesson 25. Keep one eye on the goal.
- Lesson 26. Respect your competition.
- Lesson 27. Play exceptional defense.
- Lesson 28. Know who you are.
- Lesson 29. Control the clock.
- Lesson 30. Treat every player like a champion.

# About the Author

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Peter Garber, author of the *Leadership Lessons from Life* series of books published by HRD Press, has worked in the management and HR field for more than twenty-five years. Currently manager of equal employment opportunity for Pittsburgh-based PPG Industries, a Fortune 500 company, he has served as manager of teamwork development, director of human resources, and manager of affirmative action, using his professional experience as the basis for more than 40 books, training aids, and journal contributions. He is the author of fourteen books on management, including the current best-sellers *Giving and Receiving Performance Feedback*, *Turbulent Change*, and *10 Natural Forces for Business Success*.

Peter Garber's interest is in sharing what he has learned about leadership and performance management with a wide audience of organizational professionals who are searching for ways to be more effective and useful to their organizations. Prior books such as *Managing by Remote Control* and *101 Stupid Things Supervisors Do to Sabotage Success* focused on what works in well-run organizations (and what doesn't). The *Leadership Lessons from Life* books show how 21<sup>st</sup>-century professionals can tap into common life experiences to model and develop leadership qualities and skills at all levels of the organization.

Peter Garber holds an undergraduate degree in English and a master of science in personnel and guidance from the University of Pittsburgh and St. Bonaventure University, respectively. He lives with his wife Nancy and daughters Lauren and Erin in the Pittsburgh area.

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## **Selected titles published by HRD Press:**

*Giving and Receiving Performance Feedback* (2004)

*Learning Points: 80 Activities and Actions for Call-Center Service Excellence* (2005)

*Learning Points: 100 Activities and Actions for E-Communication Excellence* (2005)

*Learning Points: 100 Activities and Actions for Customer Service Excellence* (2005)

*15 Reproducible Activities for Reinforcing Business Ethics and Values* (2005)

*25 Reproducible Activities for Customer Service Excellence* (2005)