

CREATING YOUR LEADERSHIP TREE

By Wyatt Bradbury

In Superbowl LIV, the San Francisco 49ers and Kansas City Chiefs squared up on the gridiron. During the week leading up to the big game, “coaching trees” that have produced head coaches competing in this game were discussed as much as the matchup itself.

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The 49ers' coach, Kyle Shanahan, is part of the Jon Gruden coaching tree (Kilgore, 2018). This tree is one of the newer ones to emerge, with the tenure being less than 5 years right now (Kilgore, 2018). Both Jon Gruden (coach of the Las Vegas Raiders) and Andy Reid (coach of the Kansas City Chiefs) are part of the Mike Holmgren coaching tree, which is a branch of the Bill Walsh tree (Associated Press, 2019; Kilgore, 2018). The Holmgren branch of the Walsh tree is one of the most successful in history (Associated Press, 2019).

What is the point of all of this? In football, the legacy or tree from which a head coach emerges helps to set the coach's reputation. Conversely, as the head of a tree, the leader's legacy is determined by how well those coaches who developed under that leader perform on their own. In fact, Holmgren and Walsh are relevant in the Superbowl LIV conversation largely because of the success of their coaching “offspring.” The coaching tree discussion has surrounded the combined records, playoff appearances and Superbowl wins across the various trees, and many articles rank their success against each other.

In *Guts and Genius*, Bob Glauber documents Walsh's dedication in helping those under him succeed. They learned that they needed to give back to other coaches and in turn help them succeed. Walsh in particular made it his mission to mentor those coaching under him (Associated Press, 2019).

In some ways, leading the safety function is similar to head coaching in football. The job is to support, advise and engage professionals from diverse backgrounds to be successful at achieving some sort of production goal, whether it be points or widgets. Often, there is an “assistant coach” advisor, specialist or professional dutifully working under the supervision of the “head coach” director, manager or vice president. Eventually, the assistant receives an opportunity to become the head coach. As the assistant becomes the leader, much of their approach, specializations and beliefs surrounding safety will probably carry over into their new leadership role from the work they performed as the subordinate.

What if the attitude toward this transition and the definition of legacy in safety leadership more closely mirrored what we see in football? All of

a sudden, perpetual leadership becomes the focus of mentoring, teaching and training safety professionals. Of course, they are still developing and fulfilling the fundamental functions of the role, but now doing so with purpose. There is now an intentionality about the development of emerging professionals just as for assistant coaches in football.

Legacies would be defined and carried forward by the impact of successors, not ending with the predecessors. The success of a person's leadership tree determines the resiliency and successfulness of the safety system. This approach to perpetual leadership also brings immense value to the safety profession.

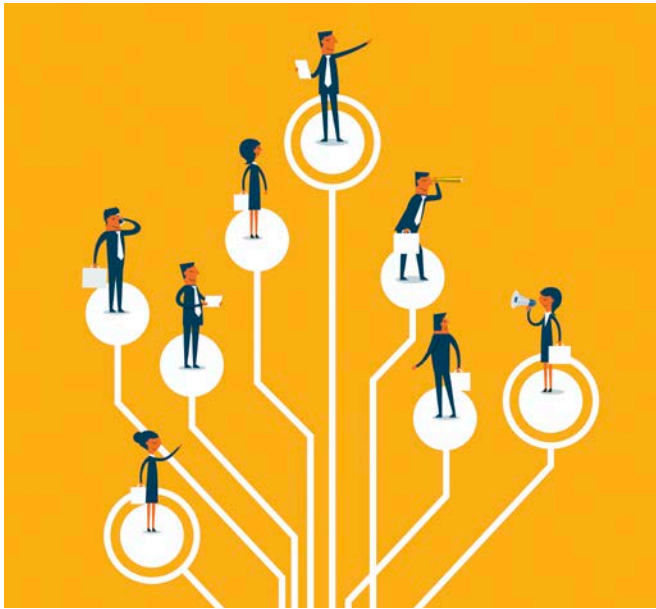
Two strategies can be used to start building one's leadership tree: provide context, and craft a personal and professional development plan.

Provide Context

One key complaint about emerging professionals is that they do not have enough experience. Experience is based on observations or participation in events that lead to knowledge or through the duration of such participation. Emerging professionals are often judged based on age or years of experience. Their cognitive abilities are not evaluated to create a baseline of knowledge-based experience, thus relegating experience to solely a time-oriented construct. Therefore, trying to help a professional gain experience is rarely a useful exercise, as there are too many biases preventing adequate evaluation.

Instead, work to provide context. Context is defined as the condition, environment or settings in which a particular situation occurs. Context is the soft-skill and knowledge component of experience. How someone interprets and navigates context can be evaluated without the same biases associated with experience.

Take emerging professionals into the boardroom. Take them to meetings with stakeholders at different organizational levels. Teach them how to communicate across the diverse methods and mediums used by safety professionals. Help them understand budgeting, how the company makes money and the key values of the organization. Does any of this help them in their current role? Professionals who understand the larger context of their organization and the values of the stakeholders may be in a better position to serve. How-



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ever, the goal is not simply to make people good at their current job; perpetual leadership through developing one's leadership tree is about preparing professionals for what comes next. It is about helping people be more valuable to the organization, transcending specific roles and responsibilities. It does not need to happen all at once, but it must be intentional.

Craft a Personal & Professional Development Plan

Early in my career, Jerry Riviera, a key mentor, helped me craft a personal and professional development plan. I was new to safety and had begun working full-time before graduating college. I was a product of the millennial generation, taught to strive for accomplishment, award and accolade to demonstrate success and move on. I was getting sucked into a black hole of certification and training.

Jerry helped me to outline where I wanted to go in my career. We mapped the specific professional steps that must be obtained and a reasonable timeline to achieve those steps, taking into account prerequisites, expense and capacity. We also discussed the value of each step, prioritizing accomplishments that provide the most value to the employee, an employer or me, as applicable. We also outlined the specific personal skills that I would need to develop. When we are young, we are all raw and rough in some way. Jerry helped me see where I needed to grow as a person so that I could become an effective leader. There have been many more influences on this plan from both the professional and personal sides along the way, but by and large this plan has stuck.

The key is that as emerging professionals work to develop, a specific plan must be in place to

support that growth. Growth will happen one way or another; eventually, these professionals will get the training from somewhere. And, I have heard of more professionals moving on from organizations because they lacked support for their development than those who left for a higher paycheck. Like Jerry did with me, start to craft a growth plan that sets employees up for success, considering whatever constraints and limitations exist in the organization. Where possible, sponsor them in any sense of the word so that they can overcome the barriers they will undoubtedly face. Helping these emerging professionals overcome barriers also drives the development of context. Remember, emerging professionals are hungry for growth, they simply need direction. This plan can help provide that direction as well as an accountability tool.

No matter what the industry, professionals do not want to work in vain. It is human nature to strive to leave some sort of legacy. Safety professionals should take a page out of the football playbook and work to create a leadership tree.

Bill Walsh never imagined how many Superbowl victories he would impact after he retired. So too, as professionals work intentionally to perpetually develop leaders from those who come after them, the profession's influence will become magnified in unimaginable ways. **PSJ**

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