

Casting the vision

*Refuting the sports world philosophy that intimidation and domination command championships, Tony Dungy believes leaders win victories by casting and communicating a vision. This past year, his “do what we do” vision spread contagiously among Indianapolis Colts players and assistant coaches, leading them to a National Football League Super Bowl title.*

*Soon after, Dungy met with Kiwanis International CEO Rob Parker to talk about leadership. KIWANIS magazine presents excerpts from their conversation; the full discussion, including audio outtakes, is offered online at [www.kiwanis.org/magazine/december07.asp](http://www.kiwanis.org/magazine/december07.asp).*

**Rob Parker (RP): Describe for me your idea of a servant leader.**

Tony Dungy (TD): To me, I go back to what my parents taught me and what my high school football coach taught me: that as a quarterback, you become the leader of the team. My high school coach ... always felt that leading people and getting them to go because they *want* to follow you and they *want* to do the things you want to do, that’s the best way—as opposed to getting behind people and driving them and pushing them and saying, “we’ve got to go *here*.” It’s saying, “I know where we’re going, I know how to get there, and I’m going to help us all get there.”

When people recognize that, they naturally want to follow you. That’s how I’ve always been trained and (those are) the kind of leaders I’ve always wanted to follow.

**RP: In your book (*Quiet Strength*), you talk about (former Minnesota Vikings head coach Dennis Green) and compare his kind of coaching to that of a CEO. ... We tend to picture a hard-charging CEO, (but) you've shown that differently. What are your thoughts on that?**

TD: I think of the person in charge as being someone who, number one, (is) very confident and knows what to do, and, number two, can instill that confidence in the people around (them). You develop the system so that it can function when you're not there. To me, that's the best kind of leader. You're training other people, you're developing people, you're instilling confidence in them, and yet everyone has confidence in *you*. They're looking at you to make a lot of the major decisions, but they're trusting that (everyone is) benefiting by this—that you've got the good of everyone in mind. ....

**RP: If you were describing how you choose assistant coaches and the people you surround yourself with, what are the things you look for?**

TD: I think an important part of leadership is selecting or getting the right people around you—and bringing out the right qualities in people; putting them in a position where they can have success by utilizing what they do best; maximizing their strengths; and minimizing their weaknesses.

That's another thing a good leader does. He draws on the expertise of everyone and tries to maximize. One thing I learned from (Pittsburg Steelers head coach Chuck Noll) was that you don't select everybody who is exactly like you personality-wise—but they've got to think like you do in terms of what's important in values.

**RP: Jim Collins wrote a book, *Good to Great*, and his premise is that the enemy of great is not evil; that the enemy of great is actually good. What would you see as the difference between a good team and a great team?**

TD: I think there's a lot to that in athletics, and I'm sure there's a lot to that in life. The difference between a good team and a great team is usually the details. It's little fine points; it's not great things. ... That's one of my lines from the book. Coach Noll said all the time that champions do the ordinary things better than everybody else. It's not that they do all these extraordinary things. It's the things you have to do day in and day out: They do them better than anyone else.

**RP: When you see that real skill and talent in somebody who's not living up to their potential and working harder, what's your reaction?**

TD: Those are the toughest ones. You're looking for motivated people. You're trying to teach them that it is hard work for the most part. It's not natural ability. It's not great giftedness usually, but it's hard work that pays off. If you don't have people who are willing to work hard, they're usually not going to play up to the standards you need, and you're going to have a tough time surviving. And I think when you send that message and you reward the guys who work hard, that really helps.

**RP: What about vision? What's the importance of that—of being able to look at what the future can be like?**

TD: To me that's probably the number-one quality of a leader: to be able to see into the future and see where you want to go and then being able to explain that vision, share that

vision, and get other people to catch that vision. Many people have great vision, but they can't take the next step and get other people to catch and get excited about their vision as well. So to me that's probably the most important thing: how to communicate it with enthusiasm and get other people excited about your vision.

**RP: What do you do to keep people focused? And how do you recast the vision?**

TD: Periodically you do have to reinforce, "Here's where we're going. This is the direction we're going. Let's look at an inventory to see where we are now. Hey, we've done some things that are taking us to that goal. Here are some things where we're not quite there yet. But remember: This is where we're going, and this is how we said we're going to get there."

Usually it's at times when things aren't going well—when there are doubts: "Maybe we have the wrong goal. Maybe we can't get there." That's when we have to say, "No, this is where we said we were going, and this is how we said we were going to get there."

**RP: How would you describe what it means to be successful, Tony?**

TD: To me, success is doing everything you can. Doing the very best with the assets that God gives you. And if you look at it that way, you can be a success when maybe the world doesn't view it that way. And there are other times when you can get accolades and people say good things, but *you* know you didn't do your best.

To me, it's more, "what am I doing with the resources God gives me at this particular time?" There are times when you can only do so much. But if you do everything you can, you can always look at yourself as being successful.

Rob concluded the conversation by recalling quotes from Dungy's book and asking the coach to elaborate.

**RP: From your mother, "If excellence feels like it has to be proclaimed. ..."**

TD: "Then that's the doubt of its existence."

It really means: Show what you can do; you don't really have to talk about it. If you have to talk about it, you probably haven't shown enough. That carries over with my team today. We don't want to be all talk; we want to let our actions speak for themselves.

**RP: "It's *all* important."**

TD: The little things—the seemingly not important things—are the ones that really separate the champions from the nonchampions, and so you've got to grasp everything.

**RP: "Success is uncommon—not to be enjoyed by the common man, but uncommon people can be successful."**

TD: Most people are OK with being OK. And to be champions, it can't just be OK. You've got to want to be great. You've got to want to do those things that most people *could* do but choose not to. It is not common to be successful. It's much more common to be ordinary, to be just a little bit subpar, to be just OK. Trying to be the best is something that sometimes is frowned upon. There's nothing wrong with trying to be the best. Doing it the right way and trying to keep things in perspective is important, but there's nothing wrong with trying to be the best.

**RP: “Do what we do, whatever it takes, no excuses, no explanations.”**

TD: “Do what we do” is that refocusing on where we’re going and how we’re going to do it. The easiest thing to do is change when things aren’t going well. The hardest thing to do sometimes is persevere.

“No excuses, no explanations” (means) to not go for the quick fix. To not change either a goal or means but just stay the course. That’s harder to do, but usually that produces the champion results.

*Tony Dungy is in his sixth season as head coach of the National Football League’s Indianapolis Colts. Under his leadership, the Colts won this past February’s Super Bowl in Miami, Florida, claiming the franchise’s fourth World Championship. Six months later, his memoir, Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices, and Priorities of a Winning Life, topped the New York Times’ bestsellers list for hardcover nonfiction.*

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