The Overweight Football Coach

– and the assistant coach's role

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We all know him: The portly football coach who stands on the touchline every weekend shouting at the kids on the pitch. He knows everything about what the others ought to do – but he can hardly kick a ball himself any more.

Many leaders end up in the same place. Once they have landed in the manager's chair, they stop training themselves. And the higher they climb, the fewer people dare to contradict them.

This article is about complacency in leadership – and about the assistant coach who dares to challenge before it is too late.

Complacency is the root of all evil

The overweight football coach may once have been a star himself. But time passed, and he grew complacent with his star status. Training was skipped at times, and he went soft. Now he can shout loudly and be very clever and experienced to listen to – but he no longer plays himself.

The same happens to many leaders. They have become world champions, after all, so why train? But very few stars have ever won a championship several times in a row after they stopped training. Complacency means we no longer challenge ourselves – and that we slowly lose what made us good.

The dangerous thing is that it happens imperceptibly. Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to become complacent. It creeps in through routines, successes and a growing number of people around you who say yes.

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Fear and organisational gold mines

There is an unfortunate law of nature that explains why changing behaviour is an uphill struggle. When the zebra sees the lion, it runs immediately. But it does not run at the same speed towards the juicy grass. Fear motivates more than being a little hungry.

In his book "The Gold Mine Effect", performance anthropologist Rasmus Ankersen examined what characterises the environments where the world's greatest talents are created. The answer was surprising: Talent development often happens under quite harsh conditions, and it is not always the one at the top of the list who is the born winner. When I was writing my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (in Danish), I talked with Rasmus about how to create overall organisational success – because that is an entirely different task from creating individual stars.

In the last 40 years – eleven World Cup finals tournaments from 1986 to 2026 – the winner of the World Cup top scorer award, the adidas Golden Boot, has only once also been on the winning team (Ronaldo, Brazil, 2002). That is less than 10%. The star does not win the match alone. The team does – and that requires a coach who is in shape himself and who has people around him who dare to tell the truth.

The assistant coach is not an assistant

In the best football clubs, the assistant coach is not someone who carries balls and cones. He is an equal sparring partner who sees the match from another angle, asks the hard questions at half-time and dares to tell the head coach: "That tactic isn't working."

An assistant coach in leadership is not just a deputy. He or she is a deliberately chosen teammate and opponent who challenges your assumptions, keeps an eye on what you cannot see yourself – data, culture and moods – speaks up when something seems wrong, and shares responsibility, also in headwinds.

It might be a fellow executive, an HR partner, a chair of the board, the leadership team, a key employee or an external adviser. The point is not the title. The point is the function.

Does the assistant coach dare to say it?

There is no point in having an assistant coach if he does not dare to speak. Investigations of air accidents in the 1970s showed that the first officer had often seen the problem – but not dared to say it clearly to the captain. Authority can paralyse. The same happens in leadership teams where everyone can see that something is going wrong, but nobody says it out loud.

A strong partnership rests on three things: Equality in the dialogue – even if you are not equal in the hierarchy. The right to challenge – without personal consequences. And a shared mission, where the team's result comes before the ego.

It also requires clear agreements on how you talk to each other when it matters. Not "it might be that we should perhaps consider …", but a clear: "Stop. This is a bad decision."

What you cannot see yourself

No coach can see the whole pitch from the touchline. As a leader, you also have blind spots: Your preferences, your biases, your temperament patterns and your position of power. A genuine assistant coach dares to say: “You’re not really listening right now.” “You’re reacting faster than the situation requires.” “You’re underestimating the risk.” That is not criticism. It is calibration.

That is why we work with tools for self-insight when we train leaders – so they get to know their own preferences and know what happens when they are backed into a corner. And that is why more and more top executives use an executive business coach as their personal assistant coach: Someone who has nothing to lose by telling the truth.

The coach must also train

At Christiansen & Essenbæk, the leaders were given homework assignments with grades and written feedback. Even the CEO. It was not to humiliate anyone, but to signal that nobody is too experienced to train. When top management leads the way and accepts feedback itself, it becomes legitimate for everyone else.

The same applies to the division of roles in the leadership team. Perhaps you are head coach in strategy, but assistant coach in culture. Perhaps you are strong in analysis, but less strong in relationships. Who wears the captain’s armband in this phase – and who watches and challenges? That creates clarity and reduces the battle for positions.

And as in football: After the match comes the analysis. What worked? What did we overlook? What did we learn? Debriefing after major decisions is one of the most underrated leadership disciplines.

How to find your assistant coach

Five levers for the leader:

- **Keep training:** The manager’s chair is not a finish line – it is a new division.
- **Choose your assistant coach deliberately:** Someone who sees the match from another angle and dares to say so.
- **Give a mandate to challenge:** Agree on how you talk to each other when it matters.
- **Get to know your blind spots:** Use tools for self-insight and honest feedback.
- **Analyse after the match:** Debrief major decisions – what worked, and what did we overlook?

Three questions for you as a leader

Ask yourself:

- Who is my real assistant coach today – and do they have a mandate to challenge me openly?
- When did I last change course based on someone else's input?
- Am I still training myself – or do I mostly stand on the touchline shouting?

Conclusion – the team before the star

The overweight football coach is an image of what happens when leaders stop training and surround themselves with people who say yes. The antidote is to keep challenging yourself – and to choose an assistant coach who dares to tell the truth.

The strongest leaders of the future are not the most charismatic stars, but those who deliberately build a team around them and keep training themselves. The mission before the ego. The team before the star.

The article builds on, among others, my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (The Leader's Inspiration Guide, 2012, in Danish) and my LinkedIn article "Hvem er din co-pilot?" (Who Is Your Co-Pilot?, 2026).

Do you have an assistant coach who dares to challenge you?

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