

# Trillion Dollar Coach: The Leadership Playbook of Silicon Valley's Bill Campbell

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Chapter 1: The Caddie and the CEO

## **The Trillion Dollar Coach**

There is another, equally critical, factor for success in companies: teams that act as *communities*, integrating interests and putting aside differences to be individually and collectively obsessed with what's good for the company. Research shows that when people feel like they are part of a supportive community at work, they are more engaged with their jobs and more productive. Conversely, a lack of community is a leading factor in job burnout.

Chapter 2: Your Title Makes You a Manager. Your People Make You a Leader.

So when we met Bill in our weekly coaching sessions, what we discussed first and foremost was management: operations and tactics. Bill rarely weighed in on strategic issues, and if he did, it was usually to make sure that there was a strong operating plan to accompany the strategy. What were the current crises? How quickly were we going to manage our way out of them? How was hiring going? How were we developing our teams? How were our staff meetings going? Were we getting input from everyone? What was being said, what wasn't being said? He cared that the company was well run, and that we were improving as managers.

## **It's The People**

\_\_\_\_ People are the foundation of any company's success. The primary job of each manager is to help people be more effective in their job and to grow and develop. We have great people who want to do well, are capable of doing great things, and come to work fired up to do them. Great people flourish in an environment that liberates and amplifies that energy. Managers create this environment through support, respect, and trust.

Support means giving people the tools, information, training, and coaching they need to succeed. It means continuous effort to develop people's skills. Great managers help people excel and grow.

Respect means understanding people's unique career goals and being sensitive to their life choices. It means helping people achieve these career goals in a way that's consistent with the needs of the company.

Trust means freeing people to do their jobs and to make decisions. It means knowing people want to do well and believing that they will.

## **Start With Trip Reports**

Bill and Eric understood that there's a direct correlation between fun work environments and higher performance, with conversation about family and fun (what academics might call "socioemotional communication") being an easy way to achieve the former.

Bill believed that communications were critical to a company's success. He frequently coached us to make sure that others in the company understood what we understood. Even when you have clearly communicated something, it may take a few times to sink in. Repetition doesn't spoil the prayer.

Research confirms that team meetings are a terrific opportunity to engage people, with one 2013 study concluding that the relevance of the meeting, giving everyone a voice, and managing the clock well are key factors to achieving that engagement. This doesn't always happen; another study, from 2015, notes that more than 50 percent of study participants do not think that their meetings are an effective use of their time. This study covered all meetings, not just staff meetings, but still, it demonstrates that being thoughtful about preparing for staff meetings is an important management practice.

## **Five Words on a Whiteboard**

In teaching his management seminar at Google, Bill advocated that each person should put his or her list on the board - a simultaneous reveal. That way everyone could see where there was overlap and make sure to cover those topics. He felt that the process of merging the two agendas could serve as a lesson in prioritization.

Regardless of what five topics go on the whiteboard first, what's important is that each side has a set of topics to cover and is ready to cover them. Bill took great care in preparing for one-on-one meetings. Remember, he believed the most important thing a manager does is to help people be more effective and to grow and develop, and the 1:1 is the best opportunity to accomplish that.

## **5 Words On A Whiteboard**

Have a structure for 1:1s, and take the time to prepare for them, as they are the best way to help people be more effective and to grow.

## **Bill's Framework for 1:1s and Reviews**

### ***Performance On Job Requirements***

- Could be sales figures
- Could be product delivery or product milestones
- Could be customer feedback or product quality
- Could be budget numbers

### ***Relationship With Peer Groups***

- Product and Engineering
- Marketing and Product
- Sales and Engineering

### ***Management/Leadership***

- Are you guiding/coaching your people?
- Are you weeding out the bad ones?
- Are you working hard at hiring?
- Are you able to get your people to do heroic things?

### ***Innovation (Best Practices)***

- Are you constantly moving ahead... thinking about how to continually get better?
- Are you constantly evaluating new technologies, new products, new practices?
- Do you measure yourself against the best in the industry/world?

## **The Throne Behind The Round Table**

One day Bill gave her a new rule: when she was discussing a decision with her team, she always had to be the last person to speak. You may know the answer and you may be right, he said, but when you just blurt it out, you have robbed the team of the chance to come together. Getting to the right answer is important, but having *the whole team* get there is just as important.

The manager's job is to run a decision-making process that ensures all perspectives get heard and considered, and, if necessary, to break the ties and make the decision.

## **Lead Based on First Principles**

Define the "First Principles" for the situation, immutable truths that are the foundation for the company or product, and help guide the decision from those principles.

## **Money's Not About Money**

\_\_\_ But it's also about something else. Compensation isn't just about the economic value of the money; it's about the emotional value. It's a signaling device for recognition, respect, and status, and it ties people strongly to the goals of the company. Bill knew that everyone is human and needs to be appreciated, including people who are already financially secure. This is why the superstar athlete who is worth tens or hundreds of millions pushes for that next huge contract. It's not for the money; it's for the love.

Compensating people well demonstrates love and respect and ties them strongly to the goals of the company.

### **Innovation is Where the Crazy People Have Stature**

These executives wouldn't be thinking about the needs of the engineers and weren't focused on product first. Bill was a business guy, but he believed that nothing was more important than an empowered engineer. His constant point: product teams are the heart of the company. They are the ones who create new features and new products.

This means that finance, sales, or marketing shouldn't tell the product teams what to do. Instead, these groups can supply intelligence on what customer problems need solving, and what opportunities they see.

### **Bill On Boards**

\_\_\_\_The first order of business always needs to be a frank, open, succinct discussion about how the company is performing.

And he did it through practicing the points covered in this chapter: operational excellence, putting people first, being decisive, communicating well, knowing how to get the most out of even the most challenging people, focusing on product excellence, and treating people well when they are let go.

#### **Chapter 3: Build an Envelope of Trust**

This particular moment was shaping up as an unusual disagreement between a forgiving board and a disciplined former football coach turned CEO. As the conversation moved around the room, most of the board members wanted to spend their way through the crisis, to invest in the future. They disagreed with their CEO. Finally, it was John Doerr's turn to weigh in. "You know," he said, "I think we should back the coach." John says that was the moment when he earned Bill Campbell's trust. "The board may have been correct," he says. "But isn't the real right answer to back your CEO?" It almost didn't matter what the debate was about; it was something that Bill felt passionate about, and John decided to bet on Bill. He trusted him.

Most business people, when they meet, get right to the task at hand. There's stuff to do! This is especially true in technology, technologists not being noted for their high EQs or social skills. In our world, the attitude is often first prove to me how smart you are, then maybe I'll trust you, or at least your intellect. Bill took a different, more patient approach. He started relationships by getting to know the person, beyond their resume and skill set. Shishir Mehrotra notes that Bill "walked among a set of driven technologists, but he saw the world in a completely different way... He saw it as a network of people, learning each other's strengths and weaknesses, and learning to trust each other as a primary mechanism of achieving goals."

### **Only Coach the Coachable**

\_\_\_\_"Smart alecks are *not* coachable," Bill snapped. He stood up to leave, interview over, as it dawned on Jonathan that he had heard Eric Schmidt was getting coaching from someone and, oh my God, this must be the guy. Jonathan switched from smart-aleck mode to groveling mode, backing away from his quip (which wasn't exactly a quip), and asked Bill to continue the conversation. After another moment that felt like minutes, Bill sat back down and talked about how he chose the people he was going to work with based on humility. Leadership is not about you, it's about service to something bigger: the company, the team. Bill believed that good leaders to grow over time, that leadership accrues to them from their teams. He thought people who were curious and wanted to learn new things were best suited for this. There was no room in this formula for smart alecks and their hubris.

The traits that make a person coachable include honesty and humility, the willingness to persevere and work hard, and a constant openness to learning.

### **Practice Free-Form Listening**

When you listen to people, they feel valued. A 2003 study from Lund University in Sweden finds that "mundane, almost trivial" things like listening and chatting with employees are important aspects of successful leadership, because "people feel more respected, visible, and less anonymous, and included in teamwork." And a 2016 paper finds that this form of "respectful inquiry," where the leader asks open questions and listens attentively to the response, is effective because it heightens the "follower's" feelings of competence (feeling challenged and experiencing mastery), relatedness (feeling of belonging), and autonomy (feeling in control and having options). Those three factors are sort of the holy trinity of the self-determination theory of human

motivation, originally developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan.

### **Don't Stick It In Their Ear**

And when he was finished asking questions and listening, and busting your butt, he usually would *not* tell you what to do. He believed that managers should not walk in with an idea and “stick it in their ear.” Don't tell people what to do, tell them stories about why they are doing it.

Scholars would describe Bill's approach - listening, providing honest feedback, demanding candor - as “relational transparency,” which is a core characteristic of “authentic leadership.” Wharton professor Adam Grant has another term for it: “disagreeable givers.” He notes in an email to us that “we often feel torn between supporting and challenging others. Social scientists reach the same conclusion for leadership as they do for parenting: it's a false dichotomy. You want to be supportive *and* demanding, holding high standards and expectations but giving the encouragement necessary to reach them. Basically, it's tough love. Disagreeable givers are gruff and tough on the surface, but underneath they have others' best interests at heart. They give the critical feedback no one wants to hear but everyone needs to hear.”

### **Be The Evangelist For Courage**

Bill's perspective was that it's a manager's job to push the team to be more courageous. Courage is hard. People are naturally afraid of taking risks for fear of failure. It's the manager's job to push them past their reticence.

“That's one thing I learned from Bill: be the person who gives energy, not one who takes it away.” This quality of constant encouragement, of being the person to give energy, has been shown to be one of the most important aspects of effective coaching.

#### Chapter 4: Team First

Bill Campbell was a coach of teams. He built them, shaped them, put the right players in the right positions (and removed the wrong players from the wrong positions), cheered them on, and kicked them in their collective butt when they were underperforming. He knew, as he often said, that “you can't get anything done without a team.” This is an obvious point in the realm of sports, but it's often underappreciated in business. “You can only really succeed and accomplish things through the collective, the common purpose,” Lee C. Bollinger says.

So as a coach of teams, what would Bill do? His first instinct was always to work the team, not the problem. In other words, he focused on the team's dynamics, not on trying to solve the team's particular challenges. That was their job.

### **Work The Team, Then The Problem**

At a Google meeting a few years ago, the group was discussing an issue related to costs in some of the developing businesses. Ram Shiram raised concerns: the numbers were getting big! Shouldn't we get more details on how we are working on this? There was some back-and-forth, then Bill spoke up. Don't worry, he said, we have the right team in place. They are working the problem.”

“I learned something from that,” Ram says. “Bill didn't work the problem first, he worked the team. We didn't talk about the problem analytically. We talked about the people on the team and if they could get it done.”

When faced with a problem or opportunity, the first step is to ensure the right team is in place and working on it.

### **Pick The Right Players**

Bill suggested that Jonathan take more time to consider his decision, and he continued to meet with him on a regular basis. With Bill's help, Jonathan later found his way back into the Google fold by taking on other roles. Bill didn't give up on him, but he also never let him forget how he had let the team down. This was a vivid and personal lesson: when change happens, the priority has to be what is best for the team.

The most effective coaches tolerate and even encourage some level of eccentricity and “prickliness” among their team members. Outstanding performers, from athletes to founders to business executives, are often “difficult.” You want them on your team.

This time, she replied with ideas of what she thought she might do. Bill wasn't satisfied: but what do you do here? Sheryl finally copped to the truth: so far, she didn't do anything. “I learned an incredibly important lesson,” she says. “It's not what you used to do, it's not what you think, it's what you do every day.” This is perhaps the

most important characteristic Bill looked for in his players: people who show up, work hard, and have an impact every day. *Doers*.

This isn't always easy in a large company, but Bill would look for those same characteristics he looked for in candidates: smarts, hard work, integrity, grit. And then he would figure out ways to formally or informally bring those people together to talk and make stuff happen, around a particular project or problem.

"People would look forward to the meeting with Bill," Eric recounts, "because when Campbell ran a meeting or brought a group together, the environment was results oriented, everyone participated and contributed, and they actually enjoyed the meeting. It was positive and fun to be a part of a team."

### **Pair People**

\*A 1995 study by Daniel McAllister of Georgetown University shows that trust increases with the frequency of interaction between a manager and a peer.

Don't just be a dictator assigning tasks, pair people up! So from that point forward, for projects such as preparing material for public events like earnings calls, producing team off-sites, working on compensation and promotion ladders, and developing internal tools, Jonathan stopped dictating and started pairing people up. The results: better decisions, stronger team.

Bill would coach Jonathan to do this himself. When Patrick Pichette joined Google as CFO, Bill asked Jonathan to seek him out and mentor him on the ways of the company. This was helpful to Patrick, but it also helped create a new trusted pair relationship on Eric's management team, which was the actual objective. The deliverable matters, but what matters just as much is the opportunity for the pair of teammates to work together on something and get to know and trust each other. That is invaluable to the team's success.

### **Permission To Be Empathetic**

The problem was, many of the engineers and product managers who had worked on Google+, including many senior people, had left the team and in many cases the company. Many of those who remained on the team had never led a project of this scope before. Bradley and the team knew there was a great product market fit - it was the right product for mobile users who loved photos (just about everyone!) at the right time. But was it the right team to deliver and were they set up to succeed?

Bradley put Bill's approach, the permission to be empathetic, to work. He prioritized his time to focus not on tactical and technical issues, but on team ones. He got to know and care about team members as people, pumped them up, pushed and implored them, then helped build momentum as they started to achieve important milestones. He focused on the team and not the problem, and the team responded.

Chapter 5: The Power of Love

### **The Lovely Reset**

In our own lives, we don't try to match the way in which Bill loved people. We don't hug; we don't go quite as deep into people's family lives. We don't call their fathers! If you don't naturally have as big a heart as Bill's, faking it won't work. Repeat: don't fake it! But most of us like our coworkers. We care about them, but we check all but the most sanitized feelings at the door when we walk into the office. Bill taught us to do the opposite. Bring it in! Ask the questions about the family, learn people's names, then ask more questions, then look at the pictures, and, above all, care.

### **Always Build Communities**

Build communities inside and outside of work. A place is much stronger when people are connected.

