

Leadership Lessons from the Chicago Cubs



Facing unmatched pressure, 108 years without a championship and a city of nearly three million people on edge, Cubs manager Joe Maddon didn't blink. The culture he created throughout the 162 game regular season empowered his players to overcome adversity and ride an emotional rollercoaster to victory.

What can the business world learn from his approach to leadership? Communicate culture clearly and often.

PLAY THE LONG GAME

ESPN analysts describe Maddon as “earning his keep at the season-management level.” He spends all season long getting his team where he wants them to be. So, as the Cubs faced a 3-2 deficit in the best of seven series and headed to Cleveland, Maddon didn't change his style. He didn't require extra practice hours or more time watching film. He encouraged his team to have a little fun and spend time with their families. He even posted a big sign in the clubhouse asking players to dress up for the Halloween journey to Ohio, according to Sports Illustrated.

CLEARLY COMMUNICATE CULTURE

Maddon didn't just ask them to dress up. He actively encouraged it. He clearly communicated his team values by modeling the behavior himself and delivering costumes directly to his players. NBC Chicago reported first baseman Anthony Rizzo wore a superman costume. Maddon was in a top hat and patterned suit. And, Dexter Fowler took advantage of some family time, trick-or-treating with his kids before heading to Ohio. Notably, Fowler kicked off game seven in Cleveland with a solo home run.

The Cubs, of course, went on to win game six in Cleveland and force what would become a historic 10-inning, back-and-forth battle in game seven for the World Series Championship.

TRUST AND EMPOWER

Despite watching a four-run lead shrink, the Cubs were still up 6-3 heading into the eighth inning. Six outs away from erasing a 108-year championship drought. But, Cleveland wasn't done. The Indians came back with a two-run homer to tie the game. Tens of millions of people watching from their living rooms could feel the momentum shift in Cleveland's direction.

The Cubs held steady through the ninth to head into extra innings. And, then came the rain delay. This respite allowed the Cubs to regroup, rejuvenate and reenergize. But, Joe Maddon wasn't the catalyst. He had already laid the groundwork for what was about to happen all season long. In that pivotal moment, he trusted his team to do the rest.

Maddon told ESPN after the game, as he headed indoors during the delay, he saw his team gathering to meet. But, he went upstairs to check the weather map, empowering them to carry out the culture he'd supported all season. Maddon had previously been quoted as saying, "I'd much rather the peers carry my message."

Veteran Jason Heyward was the messenger in game seven. "Just needed to let these guys know they're awesome. Don't get down," Heyward told ESPN about what he said to his team.

"I think it was needed at the time... We could have easily just given up. Things weren't going the way we wanted them to," young star Kris Bryant said in an interview with ESPN about the meeting. "It was a supportive meeting for everybody. Knowing that we love each other. We were not just going to give up... We made it this far and we're going to go out there and win this thing. And, sure enough, we did."

Shortstop Addison Russell echoed Bryant's comments. He said Heyward wanted to remind everyone that "we've been picking each other up since day one."

HOW DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION COMMUNICATE CULTURE?

Empowerment, trust, teamwork – Joe Maddon managed to communicate all of these cultural values throughout the lengthy baseball season. And, when the obstacles began piling up, his team put the organization's desired values into play.

At Steelcase, our CEO Jim Keane happens to be from the South Side of Chicago and despite growing up in White Sox territory, he's a pretty big Cubs fan. He knows statistics can help baseball teams and organizations create a powerful playbook. Afterall, data will arm pitchers and batters with a wealth of information about what's likely to happen at the plate.

But, he also knows a playbook is just one part of success. You need to create a culture that allows your team to put that playbook into action whether you are in the room or not. As leader of a global organization, Jim has a desire for a more open and interconnected workplace. He worked with Steelcase's Global Design Team to create a new Leadership Community prototype that uses space as a tool to help communicate the organization's culture.

This prototype has resulted in radically reimagined ways of working and leading. Read [“The New Leader”](#) in 360 Magazine to explore Steelcase research identifying how physical space can help leaders reshape their organization’s culture and performance overall.

**Photo courtesy: Erik Schrader*

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Rebecca, an Emmy-winning journalist, reports on global research impacting the places where people work, learn and heal. Over her career, Rebecca spent 17 years covering local and national news events on television and a variety of digital platforms. She directed a digital news group in Kansas City for three years before becoming news director in Grand Rapids, Michigan for more than five years. Prior to Steelcase, Rebecca worked with one of the four largest media groups in the United States to coordinate news coverage among 48 newsrooms from the east to west coast.