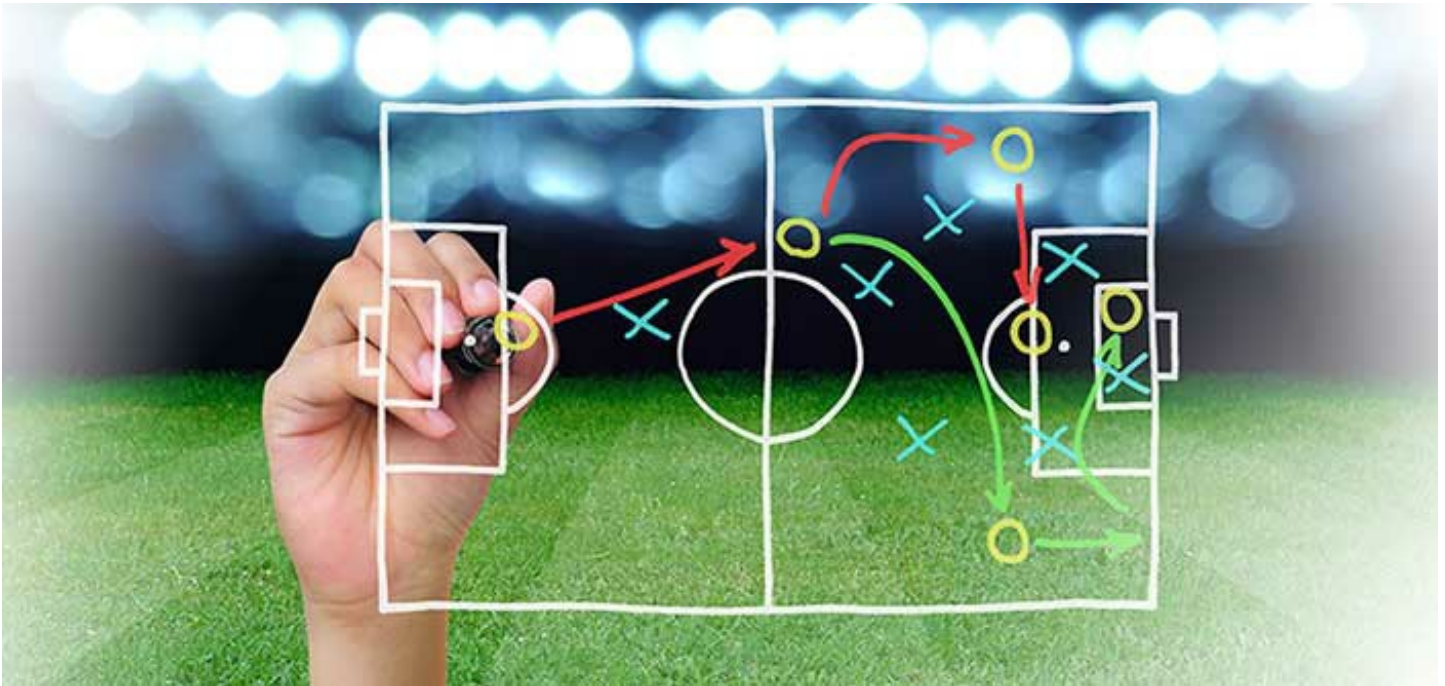


# What the World's Greatest Athletes Can Teach Us

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What do Hank Haney, Miller Huggins, Phil Jackson, and Bill Walsh all have in common? All of them had the opportunity to coach athletes who many believe to be the best of all time in their respective sports. Hank Haney coached Tiger Woods during his most successful years. Miller Huggins was Babe Ruth's manager for the first decade of his career with the Yankees. Phil Jackson (Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant) and Bill Walsh (Joe Montana and Jerry Rice) each had the privilege of coaching two athletes who could throw their hats in the ring as the best of all time.

I ran track in high school. My role on the team was as a sprinter/hurdler, but I also ran some middle distance relays. When I got to college, my coach thought I could find some success as a decathlete, but that would mean I would have to learn some field events. One of these events was the high jump. I had never done this before, and my natural inclination was to try to clear the bar with either a superman leap or with what is called the Western Roll. Both of these techniques keep your belly facing the ground so you can see the bar. As I mentioned, this feels much more natural. However, in 1965 Dick Fosbury tried something new – he turned his back to the bar just before he jumped, arching his back over the bar, and kicking his legs up at the last moment to avoid knocking the bar off. He was ridiculed at the time, but his technique has shown to be much more successful than any of the others and is virtually the only one being used today among high jumpers. I knew that if I wanted to get better at this event, I had to learn the Fosbury flop. However, I also knew that I couldn't do it alone. I needed a coach to help me overcome my natural impulses and learn the finer points of the technique.

I was an amateur athlete, so how does my story connect with some of the best athletes of all time? I understood that I had natural tendencies that would keep me from achieving my highest potential. I understood that I couldn't see everything about myself while I was 'in the moment' of my athletic performance. I knew that I needed an objective third party to keep pushing me to get better. Even though Michael Jordan was at the pinnacle of his profession, he knew these same things. The other athletes I mentioned understood this as well, and all of them managed these issues through a coach. We intuitively understand this – athletes need coaches. Anything else would be perceived as arrogant and would likely be a set up for sub-optimal performance.

Ironically, we don't seem to believe this in organizations. Even the most successful businessperson has natural

tendencies that can limit success and will be limited in their perspective, but it never occurs to many people to get a coach. In fact, some may feel threatened at the thought of it. This shouldn't be the case, and, in fact, many of the most successful CEOs receive regular coaching from trusted advisors. Here are some tips to consider regarding coaching in organizations:

1. **Recognize that success is not an individual effort:** Don't fall for the trap that you can do it on your own. Two heads are better than one, and you will find that your professional development will accelerate if you allow yourself to learn from others.
2. **Feedback is essential:** Remember that coaching is about feedback. Without feedback, we are adrift and don't know how or when to make course corrections to bring our teams and ourselves to the highest potential. Find someone you trust to regularly give you honest feedback.
3. **Create a culture of coaching:** Sadly, some organizations attach a stigma to being coached. It is seen as an institutional 'scarlet letter' for those who are on their last straw before they get fired. Healthier organizations see coaching as a badge of honor, where the highest potential individuals receive coaching to prepare them for a high-success career.

Although I've spoken mostly about coaching, mentoring can be valuable as well. The important point is that we need support from other people to become our best. If the greatest athletes in the world recognize that they need a coach, why should it be any different in business? What are you doing in your organization to encourage coaching? Please let us know on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), and share this post with others who might find it helpful.