

# Why Athletes Make Effective Leaders



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A surprising number of CEOs and senior leaders played sports in their formative years. Former IBM president, CEO, and chair Samuel Palmisano [played football](#) in high school and at Johns Hopkins University. And former Whole Foods co-CEO Walter Robb was the [captain of the soccer team](#) at Stanford University.

A [recent study](#) of more than 400,000 Ivy League graduates over the past half century suggests that these sporting anecdotes may be the rule rather than the exception. Compared to non-athletes, athletes earn higher wages over their careers and attain more senior organizational positions.

So, why do athletes make effective leaders?

We outline four ways that early experiences in sport can help shape more effective, impactful senior leaders.

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## 01 Athletes learn resilience—fast

Sport is inherently linked to pressure—whether performing in training, competing on game days, or receiving feedback from coaches and peers. Through successive and successful attempts at overcoming adversity, athletes develop the belief that they can handle difficult situations. At elite levels, this is often deliberate. Top performers don't just react to pressure; [they actively seek out high-stakes, anxiety-inducing environments to stretch their capabilities](#). This repeated exposure builds resilience and strengthens [emotional regulation](#)—skills closely linked to [formal leadership responsibilities in early adulthood](#).

In our [Redefiners podcast](#), [Troy Vincent, Executive Vice President of Football Operations at the NFL](#), described sport as a vehicle for developing resilience amidst adversity: "American football is a sport that develops a lot of different personality traits. It assists in the development of who you are, your level of resilience, hard work, and determination."

The most effective leaders are those who choose to approach rather than avoid complex or unprecedented situations, knowing that they will bounce back from setbacks with tenacity and vigor. Resilient leaders are able to rally their people and inspire confidence that the organization has what it takes to push through hard times and come out stronger on the other side.

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## 02 Athletes develop discipline

Research tracking adolescents over several years found that those who regularly participated in sport developed a stronger ability to persevere through challenges than those who did not. This matters because perseverance—not short bursts of motivation—is the difference between starting strong and staying the course.

Motivation is the momentary, feel-good spark that inspires action, but it is fleeting. Discipline, however, is the persistent effort applied over time — regardless of how we feel—and is what ultimately turns ambition into achievement.

[Leaders today are operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous \(VUCA\) conditions with no established playbook](#), making perseverance even more essential. Organizational success depends on leaders' ability to make sound, timely decisions without perfect information, while continuing to move, learn, and adapt as events unfold.

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## 03 Athletes work toward something bigger than themselves

Accountability is a core part of any team sport. Athletes learn early that their actions have direct consequences—not just for themselves, but for the team as a whole. Missing a training session, making an error in a game, or failing to prepare properly affects collective performance. High-performing athletes don't deflect blame; they reflect on what they could have done differently and focus on improving.

Just as importantly, sport teaches athletes how to hold others accountable in a constructive way. Teammates rely on one another, and maintaining standards requires honest, often direct conversations. Done well, this builds trust rather than undermines it. And trust is a critical component of any effective C-suite team, yet [our research found it's lacking only 22% of C-suite members say that their top team displays a high level of trust that's visible across the organization.](#)

In leadership, accountability plays a similar role. Leaders set the tone for performance and culture. Those who take responsibility for decisions—especially difficult ones—create clarity and credibility within their organizations. They also foster environments where others feel responsible for their contributions, rather than waiting for direction or avoiding ownership.

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## 04 Athletes are receptive to feedback

While adversity builds resilience, it is often shaped by guidance—and in sport, that comes from consistent coaching. Athletes who develop [strong relationships with their coaches](#) tend to have a healthier sense of self and respond more effectively to feedback. Good coaching goes beyond technical instruction. It reinforces effort, persistence, and continuous improvement. It also helps athletes find meaning in routine and understand how small habits contribute to larger outcomes.

This mindset carries into leadership. The most effective leaders are those who remain open to feedback and are committed to ongoing development. They don't see themselves as having 'arrived', but as continually evolving. [They are fallible and are mindful of where others are better equipped than them](#). And our [research shows that 90% of C-suite leaders globally believe that taking time to reflect on their personal capabilities was helpful in preparing for their current leadership role](#). Self-awareness and input are critical to that process. This ongoing commitment to reflection and development is central to sustained leadership effectiveness.

While not every athlete becomes a leader, and not every leader has been an athlete, the lessons learned through sport leave a lasting imprint on how leaders think, act, and perform—and often positively impact their effectiveness.

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## Authors

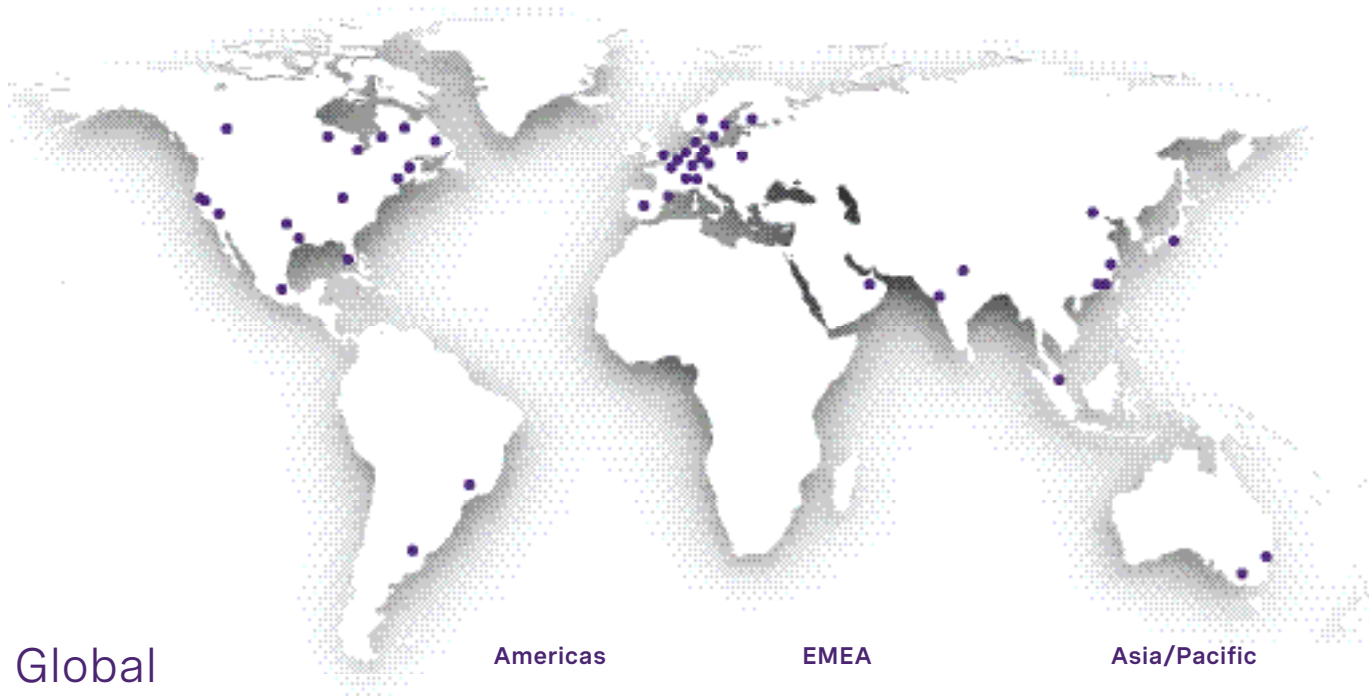
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