What “The Last Dance” Documentary Can Teach Us About Group Dynamics and Leadership

Earlier this past April ESPN released its docuseries, "The Last Dance." In this article, we highlight how managers in the workplace should handle its "star employees."

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Professional sports have a funny way of telling a compelling story. Being an avid sports fan who grew up in the '90s, I was immediately drawn into the 10-part ESPN television documentary series called "The Last Dance." The documentary highlights the legendary career of NBA superstar Michael Jordan, who was the best player on a Chicago Bulls franchise that won a staggering six NBA championships during an eight-year timespan. Despite all the success on the basketball court, the Chicago Bulls were still not immune to organizational conflict. They had the greatest player in the world in Michael Jordan – who often demanded too much from his teammates; the underappreciated sidekick Scottie Pippen – who constantly felt he was underpaid and always looked for greener pastures elsewhere; the "Zen Master" head coach Phil Jackson – who was hired the second time around after being dismissed from

the first interview for showing up in a t-shirt and jeans; and then – to top it all off – Dennis Rodman, the best defensive player in basketball – who was also a notorious party animal and often skipped practice. In this spoiler-free article, I will compare the different challenges Jordan and the Bulls faced to personal difficulties we experience every day in our professional lives as well as provide some insight on what lessons can be learned and how they can be applied.

The "Superstar Effect" on Group Dynamics

Whether you're a sports fan or not, chances are you've heard of Michael Jordan, arguably the most celebrated professional athlete of all time. You might not know that he had an incredible, competitive desire to win – not only in basketball but with EVERYTHING. Sometimes, a superstar can create tension on a team. The documentary interviews a few of Jordan's former teammates, who admitted point-blank on camera how demanding he was and detailed a few instances when he made practices miserable for everyone on the team. The intensity of Jordan's actions even led to physical altercations between him and some of his teammates. This brings up an interesting question: How do leaders manage talented, yet difficult, employees? A recent article in the Harvard Business Review, titled "How to Manage Your Star Employee," focuses on how to effectively manage "star performers" within a team, particularly on the dynamics of the top performer expecting equal effort and performance from every other member. Frequently, this leads to team conflict because it's not realistic to think that everyone has the talent to perform up to the "star's" level. This concept was mainly brought to light within the documentary when Jordan was asked by the interviewer if he thought he was too harsh on his teammates. He responded very emotionally, "It is who I am, that's how I play the game, that was my mentality. If you don't want to play that way, don't play that way." Jordan went on to say, "Winning has a price, and leadership has a price. I challenged people when they didn't want to be challenged."

The Role of the Leader Managing the Superstar

Soft-spoken Phil Jackson was head coach during the Chicago Bulls' dynasty and was no stranger to winning NBA championships himself, having won two as a player for the New York Knicks. And after his run with the Chicago Bulls, Phil Jackson became head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, leading them to five championships. Jackson has admitted he's had great fortune having coached some of the greatest players to have ever played basketball. But, like in business, coaching the most exceptional talent in professional sports doesn't always translate into team success. By the time Phil Jackson arrived in Chicago, Michael Jordan was already a worldwide phenomenon. Yet, for all his greatness, Jordan did not win his first NBA championship until Phil Jackson became his head coach. One man's talent alone cannot win an NBA championship. Jackson knew what he had in Jordan, and it was his job as the leader to teach Jordan how to understand the concept of playing better team basketball. In his autobiography, Eleven Rings: The Soul of Success, Phil Jackson had this simple statement as it relates to teamwork: "The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team." In his desire to make Jordan a better team-oriented player, one of the first things Jackson

did was something all managers should attempt when leading a "star" employee: encourage them to build better relationships. Often, high-performing employees tend not to seek out others' help, mostly because they feel they don't need to enlist their assistance. Managers in the workplace must stress the power of collaboration. As mentioned above, Jordan was notoriously difficult on his teammates in practices, but clips in the documentary also show he did an excellent job of getting to know all his teammates off the court, thanks to Phil Jackson's guidance. Jordan dispelled the notion that he was too hard on his teammates when he stated, "I wanted to win, but I wanted them to win and be part of that as well." Managing a star performer may seem like a dream come true for any leader. They consistently deliver exceeding results and help you look good as a manager. Just leave them alone and let them continue to perform at a high level, right? If there is anything that "The Last Dance" and Michael Jordan's professional career can teach us, it's that this isn't always true.

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