Leadership Lessons We Can Learn from Don Shula

Description

Legendary NFL Coach Don Shula died on Monday at the age of 90. It was a sad day for sports fans everywhere, perhaps especially those of us in Florida. He was an incredible coach and, even more importantly, an incredible leader and human being.

Best known for his role as the longtime head coach of the Miami Dolphins, Shula was the winningest coach in NFL history. He won 347 games, including playoff games. In 1972 he led the Dolphins to the NFLâ??s only undefeated season. He coached in six Super Bowls and coached three Hall of Fame quarterbacks: Johnny Unitas, Bob Griese, and Dan Marino. He retired in 1995 and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1997.

But Don Shula wasnâ??t just a great coach. He was a great leader. When I look back over his career and life, I see certain themes all leaders can learn from. Here are just a few examples.

Talent is part of the equation, but work ethic counts for more. Shula conditioned and trained his team harder than anyone else. His team would not be outworked. He was famous for working players hard during training camp, holding four workouts a day in 90-degree weather. He was once quoted as saying, â??One thing I never want to be accused of is not working.â?•

Do all that you do with a winning mindset. All the hard work and preparation Shula insisted on led to a lot of confidence in his players. Over the years, many have reported they always went into the game thinking they were better than their opponent.

Hire great people and trust them to do their job. Shula was known for hiring great coaches who shared his work ethic and drive and letting them do their job. Players trusted them implicitly.

Be open to change and adjust accordingly. Shula was able to win with all kinds of teams and players. He analyzed playersâ?? talents and knew how to use them. For example, he adjusted the Dolphinsâ?? offense to complement Dan Marinoâ??s strengths in passing. Shula was quoted as saying, â??Thatâ??s what I think coaching is all about, is analyzing the talent that you have to work with and then putting them in a position where they get the most out of their talent.â?•

Constantly strive for improvement. Players recall that Shula made extensive notes after every game. He was a detail guy. He never gave up trying to get better and to make those around him better.

In teams, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Shula was famous for his â??No Nameâ?• defense back in the â??70s. There were no big superstars or â??hot dogsâ?• on his team, but collectively they were a force that could not be beaten. Each team member had strengths and weaknesses that complemented each other.

Integrity is important. How you win matters. It was very important for Shula and his players to play within the rules. Despite all the victories and accolades, he was proudest of how his teams won. They were consistently among the least penalized in the league, which he considered a sign of his playersâ?? discipline and preparation.

A leaderâ??s job is to transmit information. Consider this quote from the Pro Football Hall of Fame website: â??The important thing is not what Don Shula knows or what any of my assistant coaches know. The important thing is what we can transmit to the people weâ??re responsible for. Thatâ??s what coaching is: the ability to transmit information.â?•

We have a human responsibility to give back. Given my background in healthcare, Iâ??ve always appreciated Shulaâ??s support for breast cancer research, which began after his first wife, Dorothy, died from the disease in 1991. His Don Shula Breast Cancer Research Fund supports Floridaâ??s top cancer hospital, Moffitt Cancer Center.

He and his wife, Mary Anne, were also active in charities including the American Cancer Society, March of Dimes, American Red Cross, United Way, etc. He was known for bringing the same level of heart to his philanthropy work as he did to his coaching career.

I read somewhere that Coach Shula changed the game of football forever. He made it better. Thatâ??s what all leaders are called to do: to bring the full force of their talents, passion, and work ethic to their chosen fields. If we can do this half as well as Don Shula did, when we reach the end of our lives, we can count ourselves as winners.

Date Created
May 9, 2020
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