

RYP Quarterly

You Cannot Have Winning Without Being Challenged.

Turning Lemons into Lemonade:
How Leaders Build Winning Through Adversity

By David Stewart



In leadership, there is a simple but often uncomfortable truth: you cannot have winning without being challenged. Yet in many organisations, teams, and even communities, there remains a quiet desire to achieve success without discomfort—to win without the grind, the setbacks, or the uncertainty. That desire, while human, is fundamentally at odds with how progress actually occurs.

WINNING IS NOT BORN IN EASE. IT IS FORGED IN CHALLENGE.

To fully understand this, we must first redefine what we mean by “winning.” Too often, winning is framed as an outcome (hitting a target, achieving a milestone, or outperforming a competitor). While these are important markers, they are incomplete. In life winning must have context. It is not just about where you are, but how far you have come. Winning is about being better than you were last week. It is about progress, not perfection. It is about movement, not moments.

“We develop our character muscles by overcoming challenges and adversity.”

– Stephen Covey

When leaders shift their mindset from outcome-only thinking to progress-based thinking, something powerful happens. Winning becomes accessible every day. It becomes something that can be built, reinforced, and sustained, even in the most challenging of environments.

“I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life and that is why I succeed.”

– Michael Jordan

WINNING COMES IN WAVES, NOT STRAIGHT LINES

One of the most important realities leaders must accept (and communicate) is that winning does not occur in a straight, predictable line. It comes in waves. There are periods of momentum, where results seem to flow and confidence builds quickly. Then there are periods of resistance, where progress feels slow, setbacks occur, and doubt begins to creep in. The mistake many leaders make is judging performance solely on isolated results. A bad week, a missed target, or a failed initiative is often interpreted as failure. But this is short-sighted. What matters far more than any single result is the trend. Are we improving? Are we learning? Are we moving in the right direction?

“Winning doesn’t always mean being first. Winning means you’re doing better than you’ve done before.”

– Bonnie Blair

Trends tell a deeper story than results ever can. Especially in tough times, when conditions are not favourable, trends become the most important indicator of future success. A team that is trending positively (improving processes, building capability, strengthening relationships) is a team that is on the path to winning, even if the scoreboard has not yet caught up. This is where leadership becomes critical. Leaders must help their teams see the trend, not just the result. They must highlight progress, however small, and connect it to a bigger picture. Because trends in the right direction create something invaluable: **hope**.

THE MOMENTUM CHAIN: FROM HOPE TO PERFORMANCE:

Hope – Belief – Commitment – Confidence – Performance

Hope is an important leadership concept. Whilst hope is not a strategy, it is a strategic asset. When people can see that progress is being made, even in small increments, it fuels belief. They begin to believe that their efforts matter, that improvement is possible, and that success is achievable.

Belief, in turn, drives commitment. People lean in. They show up with greater intent. They are willing to do the hard work because they trust that it will lead somewhere meaningful.

Commitment builds confidence. As individuals and teams experience small wins and continued progress, their confidence grows. They become more willing to take on challenges, make decisions, and push boundaries. And confidence ultimately leads to improved performance.

This sequence (trend to hope, hope to belief, belief to commitment, commitment to confidence, and performance confidence) is the engine of winning. It is not accidental. It is built deliberately by leaders who understand that progress, not perfection, is the foundation of success.

WINNING IS A MINDSET, A DISCIPLINE, AND A FORMATION PROCESS

Winning is often described as a mindset, and rightly so. It requires a way of thinking that embraces challenge, values growth, and focuses on improvement. But mindset alone is not enough. Winning is also a discipline. It requires consistent behaviours, repeated over time. It is about showing up when it is hard, doing the work when motivation is low, and maintaining standards even when no one is watching.

Discipline is what sustains progress when initial enthusiasm fades.

Beyond mindset and discipline, winning is also formative by nature. It shapes people. It builds character. It develops resilience, adaptability, and perspective. The process of striving, failing, learning, and improving transforms individuals and teams into stronger, more capable versions of themselves. This is why challenge is so essential. Without it, there is no formation. Without formation, there is no lasting winning.

TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE: THE POWER OF SETBACKS

Setbacks are inevitable. Every leader, team, and organisation will face moments where things do not go to plan. Targets are missed. Strategies fall short. External pressures mount. The question is not whether setbacks will occur, rather it is how leaders respond when they do. This is where the concept of “turning lemons into lemonade” becomes more than a cliché. It becomes a leadership capability. Setbacks, when handled well, can become the very moments that anchor future winning. They provide clarity, insight, and motivation that success alone cannot deliver. Here are practical ways leaders can turn setbacks into powerful catalysts for growth:

1. **Reframe the Narrative:** The first step is to control the story. Instead of labelling a setback as failure, position it as feedback. Ask: What is this teaching us? What can we learn that we did not know before? This simple shift moves the team from blame to growth.
2. **Focus on What Is Within Control:** Setbacks often come with a mix of internal and external factors. Leaders must help their teams focus on what they can influence. This restores a sense of agency and prevents the paralysis that comes from feeling overwhelmed.
3. **Conduct Honest, Constructive Reflection.** Reflection is critical, but it must be done well. Create space for open, blame-free discussion. What worked? What didn't? What would we do differently next time? The goal is not to assign fault, but to extract learning.
4. **Identify the Progress Hidden in the Setback.** Even in difficult situations, there is always some form of progress—new skills developed, insights gained, or relationships strengthened. Highlighting these reinforces the idea that the team is still moving forward.
5. **Reset with Clarity and Focus.** After a setback, teams need direction. Leaders must clarify priorities, simplify the path forward, and ensure everyone understands the next steps. Clarity reduces anxiety and rebuilds momentum.
6. **Celebrate Small Wins Early.** Following a setback, confidence is often fragile. Identifying and celebrating small wins helps rebuild belief and reinforces positive behaviours.
7. **Model Resilience.** Perhaps most importantly, leaders must model the response they expect. Calm, composed, and forward-focused leadership sends a powerful signal. If the leader remains steady, the team is far more likely to do the same.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP: CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR WINNING

Winning does not happen by chance. It happens by design. And leaders are the architects. Leaders create the climate in which their teams operate. They set the standards, shape the culture, and influence how challenges are perceived and approached. A leader who avoids challenge, fears failure, or focuses solely on short-term results will create a risk-averse, fragile environment. In contrast, a leader who embraces challenge, values learning, and focuses on trends will create a resilient, growth-oriented culture.

To build a climate for winning, leaders must:

- **Define Winning Clearly:** Make it about progress and improvement, not just outcomes.
- **Encourage Challenge:** Position it as an opportunity, not a threat.
- **Reinforce Effort and Learning:** Recognise behaviours that drive growth, not just results.
- **Maintain Perspective:** Help teams see the bigger picture, especially during tough times.
- **Build Consistency:** Ensure that values, behaviours, and expectations are applied consistently.

When leaders do this well, they create environments where people are willing to stretch, take risks, and grow. And in doing so, they unlock levels of performance that would otherwise remain out of reach.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER

In today's environment (marked by uncertainty, complexity, and constant change) the ability to navigate challenge is not just an advantage; it is a necessity. Leaders across all sectors are being tested. Economic pressures, workforce dynamics, technological disruption, and shifting expectations are creating conditions where easy wins are rare. In this context, the leaders who will succeed understand that winning is not about avoiding difficulty, but about engaging with it effectively. They will focus on trends, not just results. Who build hope in the face of adversity. Who turn setbacks into stepping stones. Who treat winning as a mindset, a discipline, and a formative journey.

"Success is the doing, not the getting; in the trying, not the triumph."

– Zig Ziglar

FINAL THOUGHT

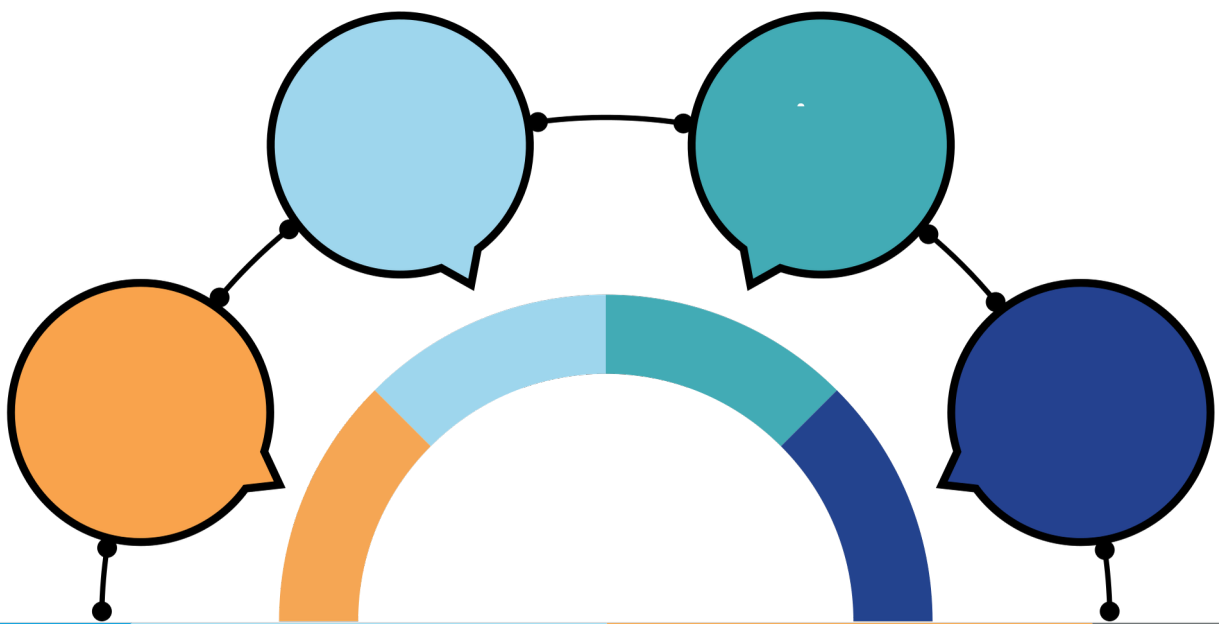
Ultimately, you cannot separate winning from challenge. They are intrinsically linked. Challenge is the proving ground where growth occurs, where resilience is built, and where progress is made. Winning is not the absence of difficulty; it is the result of embracing it. For leaders, the message is clear. Define winning in terms of improvement. Encourage challenge. Model the behaviours you want to see. Build the belief, commitment, confidence, reflection, and curiosity within your teams. Create an environment where people are not afraid to stretch themselves.

For leaders, the responsibility is clear. Do not shield your teams from challenge. Prepare them for it. Support them through it. And most importantly, help them learn from it. Because when you do, you are not just creating better results; you are building stronger, more capable people. And that is the ultimate definition of winning

Leadership Lesson:

Winning is not about being the best in the world. It is about being better than you were yesterday and helping others do the same.

Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words



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