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Lou Holtz on the Secret to Leadership

Former Notre Dame football coach stresses vision, core values and trust

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Few people would seem qualified to give a pep talk to a roomful of chief executives. Lou Holtz, one of the most successful college football coaches in history, owned the room at the CEO Council conference as he talked about success, failure and leadership with Wall Street Journal Bureau Chief Gerald Seib. Edited excerpts follow.

MR. SEIB: *This is a room full of CEOs. They do 1,000 things in any given week. But the one thing they do every day is they lead people. It's what you did for all those years coaching football. What's the secret to leadership that you learned over those years?*

MR. HOLTZ: What Father Hesburgh said to me before the press conference at Notre Dame. He said, "I'm going to announce to the world that Lou Holtz is head coach at Notre Dame." And he said, "What I cannot do is, I cannot name you the leader. The players will determine if you're a leader."

JOURNAL REPORT

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We talked about leadership, and this is what I believe: You have to have a vision where you want to go. Without a vision you have nothing. You have to have a plan of how you're going to get there. And you have to lead by example.

What holds a country together, what holds a family together, what holds a business together are core values. And core values are something you would not compromise.

We had three core values, and I had three rules. Do the right thing, because if everybody would do the right thing, you'd generate trust among the team. Two, we're going to do everything to the very best of our ability with the time allotted. Not because somebody's looking. It's just the way we lived. And doing the best we can means you do little things. I see more people overlook little things, and little things make the difference. And the third thing, we're going to care about one another. We're going to be able to trust one another, be committed to excellence, and care about one another. That's what makes a team, and that's what provides leadership.

MR. SEIB: *What mistakes have you seen people make in trying to lead?*

MR. HOLTZ: The biggest mistake I see: You have so much success, the expectations get so great that winning is a relief. Losing is a disaster. And so, because of that, they fail to raise the standards.

I went to Notre Dame. I took a program on the bottom, we took it to the very top. For nine straight years we went to a Jan. 1 bowl, the Sugar, the Cotton, the Orange, or the Fiesta. We took it on top and we maintained it.

There's a rule of life that says you're either growing or you're dying. Doesn't have a thing to do with age. But you get on top, you say, "This is pretty good. Let's not risk it. Let's not jeopardize it, let's not change anything. Let's maintain." We finished second in the country. You know what they called me? An idiot. You know what they call a guy who finishes last at medical school? Doctor. That doesn't seem real fair. But you're on top and you say let's not risk anything. Any time you're not trying to get somewhere, you're not trying to improve, you never have a reason to celebrate, you never come up with any new ideas.

When I left Notre Dame I never thought I'd coach again. Then I went to live in a town where the average age was deceased. And what I found out, I wasn't tired of coaching, I was tired of maintaining.



LOU HOLTZ | 'There's a rule of life that says you're either growing or you're dying.' PHOTO: PAUL MORSE/DOW JONES

I don't care whether you're talking about your marriage, your business, or you as an individual. You need four things in your life or you have a tremendous void. Everybody needs something to do. Everybody needs someone to love. Everybody needs someone to believe in. But everybody needs something to hope for. And the more successful you are, you try to protect what you have instead of looking at how can we keep getting better? How can we grow?

When you set goals and dreams, you've got to answer some questions honestly. What sacrifices am I willing to make to do that? What skills and talents do I have to acquire in order to do that? Who do I have to work with in order to get that done? And whoever you have to work with, they have to understand how they're going to benefit when you reach your goal. Lastly, identify the problems you have to overcome to get there. Leadership is being able to solve problems, but also anticipate problems. Eliminate mistakes before they happen.

Your job is to make people the very best they can be. And that is when you get them out of their comfort zone. 'Because most people don't know how good they can be.

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