

## **Nine Leaders And their Lasting Legacies**

A lasting legacy isn't easily created. It takes time, dedication and a clear vision and mission.

If the sky is the limit, these nine leaders shoot for the stars. From athletes and authors to presidents and CEOs, learn about these difference makers' journeys as they achieve their dreams and inspire others along the way.

**Kara Demirjian-Huss** President of DCC Marketing and University of Illinois Alumnus

**Q: How did you move from fashion marketing to founding your own marketing firm?**

A: I started my career in retail marketing—the fashion industry still inspires me and fuels my creativity. I took a leap of faith and left the industry in 1994 to pursue a career with our family business to market and distribute manufacturing products in the U.S. and Europe. A few years later, I took over our real estate business. As I looked for marketing agencies to be an extension to my team, I couldn't find what I needed—an agency that understood business objectives and developed initiatives to drive results. So, I started my own.

**Q: You lead a team of creative and innovative individuals. Can you explain your leadership style and how you foster innovation?**

A: Leadership is about using your own talents and experience, while leveraging the individual strengths of your team to accomplish goals. It's about rolling your sleeves up and working side by side, developing rapport and setting an example. I believe in fostering talent and innovation—developing future leaders. Being the problem solver is also

important—stay optimistic, foresee obstacles and face challenges head-on.

**Q: As a female role model to countless community members, what advice would you give women to achieve their dreams?**

A: Go for it! Be ambitious and determined. Inspire and influence others. Stay strong and be honest. Stay positive and give back. I say these things quite often. They will go far in your life, both personally and professionally. It's so important to be a role model for young girls—building confidence, courage and developing skills to be the leaders of tomorrow.

**Q: What is your personal mantra?**

A: The difference between who you are and who you want to be is what you do. Dream big, set goals, work hard. Listen before you lead. Have fun and do.

**Ken Dilger** Chief Operating Officer for USA Business Lending, Former Tight End for Indianapolis Colts and Tampa Bay Buccaneers and University of Illinois Alumnus

**Q: What can football, or sports in general, teach us about leadership?**

A: In the NFL, leadership comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes the most vocal player is not the best leader; sometimes the player who says the least leads best. Every leader has their own style. I have been around both vocal and quiet leaders in the NFL—and both can be very effective. One thing for sure is your personality type has to match your leadership style. If people know you to be a quiet leader, your message becomes more powerful when you do say something.

**Q: Since early childhood, you were defined an athlete. After your retirement from professional football, how did you redefine yourself?**

A: Once you're known as an athlete, you will always have that label—even after your career. My biggest challenge was to redefine myself as a business person—to really succeed you have to prove yourself to everyone and act like no one knows your past. It's like being a rookie again in the NFL.

If you're going into business, find a mentor and become an expert at what you do. You have to be fully committed to your career—there are no part-timers in business. You need to prepare for every day like it's game day.

**Q: What is the most important lesson you've learned through the years and how do you continually grow and develop?**

A: I am honored to have my degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. You really don't understand how great the university is until you leave and reflect back on your time.

Over the years I have learned you have to keep up with your industry, especially in banking and real estate. They're ever-changing and keeping up is challenging. I try to spend a couple of hours each week reading and I rely on others for help.

**Q: How do you balance your priorities at home and in the workplace? What advice would you give other professionals?**

A: The best advice is to set a monthly calendar and communicate with your partner or spouse about who is responsible for which family activity. Whether work, family time, kids' activities or personal activities—like golf or working out—a monthly calendar lets me find time for them all. My kids' activities are my first priority, then work and then my own.

**Jean Driscoll** Wheelchair Athlete, Four-Time Olympian and University of Illinois Alumnus

**Q: What attributes pushed you to overcome the odds and become a household name in wheelchair racing?**

A: I had a persistent coach who saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I trusted him and committed to doing the training—never missing a workout. I appreciated the bonds I developed with my University of Illinois teammates. As my performances improved, so did my desire to get stronger. The Champaign-Urbana community shared the excitement of those big victories and it's something for which I've been grateful for since 1990, the year I first won Boston.

**Q: Do you think mental strength is just as important as physical strength? If so, why?**

A: Mental strength and physical strength go hand-in-hand. When the two work well together, reaching and exceeding goals can seem effortless, like riding a bike with a tailwind. When there is a breakdown in mental or physical strength, it is more difficult to move forward, but not impossible. It's like riding a bike with a crosswind or headwind—it requires discipline, but it can feel exhilarating when you overcome the challenging conditions.

**Q: As a female role model across the globe, what advice would you give women to achieve their dreams?**

A: When I sign autographs, I write, "Dream BIG and work hard!" Some people have life-changing dreams and others have world-changing dreams. Both are important and require vision and direction. Whether you want to be the first person in your family to attend college or serve as the first female president, research what it will take to achieve your mission, honor the commitments you make —don't cut

corners—seek out a mentor and find joy in your one-of-a-kind experiences. Dreams DO come true!

**Q: What is your secret to success and how can others emulate it?**

A: I have experienced winning and losing both in sport and life. If I have done my best, it doesn't eliminate the pain of losing, but it provides a solid foundation from which to continue building and growing. I learn lessons every day from people of all ages and experiences. One key to success is having love in life. Receiving it and giving it affects everyone around you. We don't go through life alone. Faith, commitment, respect, diligence, focus and doing the work required are all important to achieving your goals.

**Van Dukeman** President & Chief Executive Officer of First Busey Corporation and University of Illinois Alumnus

**Q: While a student at the University of Illinois, you worked nights at the computer center of Busey. Today, you're the CEO. What's the secret to your success?**

A: I am fortunate for and deeply humbled by the opportunities to lead throughout my career. For me, it was all about timing, opportunities and preparation—working hard and taking on additional and unexpected responsibilities. My mentor Greg Lykins, who is Chairman of the Board for First Busey Corporation, was also instrumental. Our personal and business partnership stretches 30 years.

**Q: How would you describe your leadership style, and how would you attribute it to your influence over Busey?**

A: My leadership style starts with transparency—articulating where we're headed and why through openness and honesty. There's no gray area. I have high expectations for our organization and our team. Our job is never finished. We always strive to improve by setting goals and



taking action—furthering our commitment to **service excellence in everything we do.**

**Q: You have invested tremendously in attracting and retaining top talent. Why is this important and what advice would you share?**

A: You can't just expect a great employee experience; it takes a tremendous commitment. The associate experience is critical to success, so we invest in it and provide the opportunities, resources and training necessary for team members to thrive. Busey's most valuable asset is truly associates. We are seeing great dividends in hiring, retaining and training by creating a positive culture and experience.

**How do you begin and end your day?**

A: I get up early, get my coffee and talk with my wife. I enjoy reading—so I begin my day reading, observing and thinking. I always tell our executive team to find time to think, so I spend much of my morning doing that. I never turn on the TV in the mornings. In the evenings, I listen to music, and again, basically read, think and talk with my wife.

**Jon Gordon** Best-Selling Author and Keynote Speaker

**Q: When it comes to leadership, what single piece of advice would you give readers?**

A: Influence people around you by loving, serving and caring; it's a message from my book *The Carpenter*. If you act this way toward the people you work and interact with, you will make a greater difference. People often ask me how to be a leader. I tell them to just love, serve and care. Start there and you are a leader.

**Q: How do you deal with “energy vampires” and overcome negativity?**

A: Energy vampires are so negative they suck the energy out of the room and the life out of you. No one wants to be an energy vampire. Identify it and then confront the person or people. Help them see how their negativity impacts the team. Do this in a positive way, of course—you don't want to be negative about negativity. Then, work to transform it. Help energy vampires become positive contributors. This is where good leadership and coaching are needed. Many are willing to change and will improve.

**Q: You've worked with numerous organizations in varied industries. What's the most common issue you've seen through the years?**

A: One of the biggest obstacles and challenges I see is negativity. Individual negativity and organizational negativity. It sabotages organizations, teams and performance. It comes in many forms and that's why positive leadership, communication, teamwork and culture are so important.

**Q: What is your vision and mission in life—and why is it important to have one?**

A: To inspire and empower as many people as possible—*one person at a time*. I strive to make time for that one person who needs help.

It's important to have a vision and mission because life can be chaotic and stressful; we don't get burned out because of what we do, we get burned out because we forget why we do it. It's easy to lose our way, but your vision and mission are your core—helping you stay strong through the storms and create success inside-out.

**Jan Seeley** Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon Race Co-Director and University of Illinois Alumnus



**Q: After your husband passed away from leukemia in 2012, explain the strength it took to continue your career as Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon Race Co-Director. What advice would you give to others?**

A: Life goes on. Although you never get over it, I faced my grief and I learned to manage it. The work it takes to get through this difficult time ultimately helps. My husband Joe was a huge part of the Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon—and continuing my work after his death is part of his legacy.

Although it's painful to face your grief, support and counseling provide the tools to cope and to share with others. People look at me and say, "You're four years down the line and you're smiling and laughing? I didn't think I would ever do that." I didn't either. I'm just farther through the grief process. I am most helpful when I'm open and honest—sharing my experience with others.

**Q: Tell us about your experience as an athlete. What can sports teach us about leadership?**

A: For four years, I played field hockey at Yale—and was on the national team for three. When I graduated, I had to decide whether I wanted to try to make the Olympic team. Since I would have had to put my life on hold for two years, I decided not to train. Instead, I taught and moved to Champaign five years later. If you want to get to the top, you have to work your way there. Teamwork is incredibly important and one of the most important things for me. Being an athlete is still a huge part of my life.

**Q: What is the secret to your successful career?**

A: I'm just passionate about the things I do. At the Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon, our goal is to make the experience special for every single person—whether it's a special race number, a special name on a



race bib or another way to personalize the experience. Although it is challenging, the marathon team can make an incredible impact in the lives of others. It is an absolute gift, privilege and honor to be the guardians of the Illinois Marathon.

**Q: We understand you're an early morning runner. What is your routine?**

A: I have been running for 42 years and I run three days a week. A highlight of my week is running with Mike Lindermann, Co-Director of the Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon, on Wednesday mornings. We basically have a race meeting on the run. Running in the mornings is a great way to start the day, usually at 5 or 6 a.m. There's just something about being out on the road with the moon and stars. It's a really peaceful time.

**Justin Spring** University of Illinois Men's Gymnastics Coach, 2008 Olympian and University of Illinois Alumnus

**Q: What was your biggest personal challenge in the early days of your gymnastics career?**

A: Lack of vision or what some may call "immaturity." I was told I "wasn't willing to make sacrifices to get where I wanted to go," but my problem was I hadn't decided where I wanted to go yet! My talent and competitiveness got me a scholarship to the University of Illinois, but only late sophomore year did I decide I wanted to be among the best gymnasts in the country and make the Olympic team. The more I defined my mission, the easier it was to bring purpose and passion to it. What were once huge sacrifices were just my lifestyle by senior year. I've learned the best way a coach can motivate their team is to help them define—and then focus on—their own vision of success.

**Q: As a former Illini standout, how would you equate gymnastics to leadership in business?**



A: I tell my athletes all the time, “it never gets any easier than right now.” What I mean is as a member of our gymnastics team, their role and expectations will never be more clearly defined—unlike some organizations. Oftentimes, businesses struggle when their mission is not clear and concise. Leaders should think of it as much more than a statement. The mission should compel employees to achieve more—creating a winning culture.

**Q: As the youngest coach in NCAA history to earn National Coach of the Year at age 28, what obstacles have you overcome as a young leader? What advice would you give other young leaders?**

A: One of the most important lessons learned early in my career is you cannot be the “golden standard.” It separates you from those you lead and may cause resentment. THEY are not YOU—no matter how similar the situation. When I appreciate my athletes for who they are, I can understand what they really need. Individualize your approach if you want to maximize everyone on your team. We have standards and core values binding for everyone, but outside of those, adjustments should be made to maximize everyone’s contribution.

**Q: Why is it important to not only push others, but push yourself? How does it inspire others to move forward?**

A: People follow the man before his message. You can say all the right things and tell them what to do—but if your “team” doesn’t trust and respect you, they won’t follow your direction. Leading by example is important, but showing empathy and developing a personal connection with your team members is a huge motivator. Strong team culture drives strong results—a group that feels like they are working on something important, together, will give you their best.

**Colton Underwood** Oakland Raiders Tight End, Founder of Colton Underwood Legacy Foundation and Illinois State University Alumnus



**Q: At just 24 years old, you have a long list of accomplishments—graduating from college, playing professional football, opening a restaurant and establishing a charitable organization. Do you agree age is just a number?**

A: I'm a firm believer in trying everything once. You never know what you will enjoy or appreciate in life. I was born and raised in Central Illinois. At just 22 years old, I moved to California to pursue my dreams of playing professional football—a move that would be scary for most young people. It's all about taking risks in life to achieve your goals. Without the game of football, my accomplishments would not have been possible. The sport has instilled in me lasting values and a strong work ethic.

**Q: You opened a restaurant, 4<sup>th</sup> & Goal Grill, in your hometown of Washington, Illinois. What spurred the idea? Why is it important to continually innovate yourself?**

A: Football is not forever—and the restaurant gives me that experience while connecting me to my community. I may not be in Washington right now, but I have a business my family and friends appreciate and visit. It's important to always keep tweaking my strategy. My athletic career won't last me the rest of my life, so I have to plan with that in mind.

**Q: You're successful both on and off the field—establishing the Colton Underwood Legacy Foundation in support of children with cystic fibrosis. Why is it important to serve the community, and how would you encourage others to get involved?**

A: I idolized professional athletes as a kid, so it has always been important for me to spend time with the children we serve. One day, a little girl named Ashley was scheduled to have steroid injections, so I surprised her at school. We went out to recess and threw around the

football. I found out later she was really dreading that day, confident it would be “the worst day ever,” but by the end of the day Ashleigh told her mom it was “one of the best days ever”—even after her shots. Just being available for kids, like Ashley, can make a big impact.

My community has supported me throughout my career, and giving back is an impactful way to say “thank you”. Anyone can leave a lasting legacy in their communities, and The Colton Underwood Legacy Foundation is an example of that.

**Q: Do you have a vision for the future of the Colton Underwood Foundation?**

I don’t have a long-term vision—things change so quickly. My name is in the title of the foundation, but it’s there to show that everyone can leave a legacy. Growing the foundation will help us in the next 5 to 10 years—so I don’t want to trap myself in a goal. I had a goal to raise \$25,000 my first year and we raised \$50,000. I don’t want to set the ceiling too low, but I always have benchmarks, structure and strategy to get to the next level.

**Rick Willis** Senior Vice President of Leadership for Eagle’s Flight and Facilitator for Busey’s *Transform* Leadership Development Program

**Q: What, in your opinion, is the key to remaining an innovative, responsive organization?**

A: Listen carefully to everyone in your organization—especially the front line employees. I have found that the instincts of inexperienced professionals are often packed with seeds of great insight. Regardless of how great your success has been, you’ll never own all of the good ideas.

**Q: What advice would you give young people about leadership?**



A: You've got to want to be a leader—not just the title, the promotion, the paycheck or the perceived power. A leader's success will no longer depend on what they know or what they do, but through the people they lead. Their new profession is leadership, and that is an art. There are no guaranteed outcomes, no perfect procedures or plug-and-play formulas. It might be scary, but if you truly want to be a leader, and you genuinely gain joy from helping others succeed, you will enjoy the journey and excel.

**Q: What is your secret to successful leadership in any industry and how can others emulate it?**

If you like and respect people—treating them in a way they feel respected and needed—they will follow you anywhere. That is the definition of a leader. An old expression says, “If you think you're leading and nobody is following, you are just going for a walk.” Great leadership comes from unleashing the potential in others. You just can't do it alone. To really tap into the power of my organization of 5,000, I shared information, listened to and understood their perspectives, delegated power and above all, trusted. The vast majority delivered results far beyond my wildest hopes. Extraordinary results came from ordinary people, myself included.

**Q: After undergoing several mergers and acquisitions as a business owner—what allowed you to successfully grow forward with so many organizations?**

An acquisition is like a marriage. Both parties see clearly how the union will make each other stronger in the courting phase, but difficult decisions must be made when the honeymoon ends. So just like a marriage, both parties need to remember what attracted them to each other in the first place and change together as they build their new relationship. We made sure to preserve the good in the company we bought. They were chosen for a reason. Change only what needs to be changed for the good of the whole.

Busey thanks nine leaders for sharing the experiences that shaped their lives and their leadership.