Leadership lessons from the Ryder Cup's 'Miracle of Medinah'

By Paul Stone

Europe's dramatic comeback at the Ryder Cup has been lauded as the greatest turnaround in golfing history. Here are five leadership lessons that business leaders can take from Medinah.

At the 2012 Ryder Cup, 10-4 down on Saturday afternoon, Europe rallied to take the final two afternoon fourballs to make the scoreline USA 10-6 Europe overnight. Still, the Europeans were 33/1 outsiders in a two horse race to win. What followed was arguably the greatest sporting comeback of all time. As Martin Kaymer rolled his putt in on the 18th green to ensure Europe retained the Ryder Cup, the ‘Miracle of Medinah’ was complete.

Here are the lessons you can learn from how they did it.

Put together the right team for the job
For the 2012 Ryder Cup, Team Europe had 10 players who qualified automatically due to their performance in European Tour Events, and their world ranking. Two other players would be picked as ‘wildcards’, allowing the Captain to pick whomever he saw fit.

Captain Jose Maria Olazabal picked Ian Poulter as one of his two wildcards. He was a natural choice: 11th in the world points list. Poulter went on to win all four of the matches that he competed in, and is widely credited with starting the European fight back on Saturday afternoon with five birdies on the last five holes in the final fourballs match. US captain Davis Love III on the other hand picked players such as Steve Stricker and Jim Furyk, at 10th and 11th on the world points list respectively, who managed only one point between them over the three days. With such slender margins between success and failure, perhaps Love would have been better served choosing someone like Hunter Mahan, ranked 9th in the world, rather than trying to beat the numbers?

Unite your team behind one banner
The saying goes that you wear your heart on your sleeve. On the left sleeve of the European shirt was a silhouette of Seve Ballesteros, who died in May 2011. Seve was a former world number one, winning five major tournaments, competing in eight Ryder cups and captaining the European team to victory in 1997. He was an icon to many in the European team including his friend and 2012 European captain Olazabal who presented him with the lifetime award at the BBC Sports Personality of the Year in 2009.

Any time the Europeans needed inspiration, they just looked down upon their left sleeve. As Olazabal himself remarked ‘Our team played in the spirit of Seve without ever giving up.’

Learn lessons from past skirmishes
The ‘Battle of Brookline’ in 1999 was a similar situation to the ‘Miracle of Medinah’ in 2012, simply with the roles reversed. The European team lead 10-6 over the Americans going into the final days play. The USA would end up triumphing, however, by a score line of 14 ó - 13 ó - very much as the Europeans did this past Sunday. Europe drew inspiration from this comeback, knowing that it had been done before and could be done again. For Captain Olazabal it was particularly poignant. When Justin Leonard holed his putt on the 18th against Olazabal in a decisive match in 1999, the American team stormed the course believing they had won, however Olazabal still had a putt for victory. This was a massive breach in golfing etiquette: broadcaster Alistair Cooke (sadly now deceased) described it as a ‘date that will live in infamy’. Even Love said ‘I thought about Brookline on Saturday night when we put our pairings together. I thought about it when I woke up about 6.15 the next morning – the morning we were supposed to sleep in’.
Use the PR machine
And not for the first time this year, Paddy Power managed to grab headlines with their own cheeky and innovative take on a major sports event. The BMAC-shortlisted betting company took to the skies to deliver a series of cheeky messages that had been tweeted to them by their followers as a way to inspire the European team. The messages could be seen by up to 20 miles away and allegedly drew the ire of the American captain.


A leader should be an inspiration to his team
And what a leader the European team had. A former world number two with two major wins, Olazabal competed in seven Ryder cups before taking the captaincy in 2012.

It was fitting that a man who had competed alongside Seve so many times at past Ryder Cups led the team that paid tribute to him. On Saturday night, facing a 10-6 deficit, Captain Olazabal gathered his troops together for the usual team meeting. As European talisman Ian Poulter remarked: ‘There was something in that team room that ignited everybody, and it was inspirational.’

Olazabal himself said, ‘All I did was tell the boys that I still believed that we could turn things around. And I think the players believed.’ It was Olazabal who showed continued faith in his players, even in the face of adversity, and reminded them what they were playing for. Something every leader can emulate.

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