

VIDEO SERIES

Leadership in the Field: Interviews with Global Leaders

By Russell Reynolds Associates
with Roger O. Crockett

Val Ackerman discusses women in leadership, how to succeed in a male-dominated industry and the leadership development benefits of sports. Former President of the Women's National Basketball Association, Val Ackerman talks about leadership in sports and beyond.

AN EDITED TRANSCRIPT

CHAPTER 1: Not everybody wins.

Roger Crockett: Val, I think you and I both agree that organized sports lays a foundation for success later in life. What is it about team sports that translates into leadership skills in the professional arena?

Val Ackerman: You know I can personally attest that if you play sports early on, whether it's at a youth level, at a high school level, or at a collegiate level, there are things that you take away from that, things that come back and help you in a positive way later on in life—in any number of professions. I had the privilege of playing intercollegiate sports at the University of Virginia at a time when women's sports at the college level were really just getting off the ground. For me, to be on the women's basketball team was like taking a class because of the things I learned. But, also, the fact that my team didn't do so well early on forced me to have to deal with failure and adversity and picking up and moving on the next day. I think that lesson, the lesson of how to respond to defeat is really one of the most powerful lessons that sports can teach because not everybody wins. You have winners, of course, but you also have losers, and the losers have to sort of figure things out for the next go around.

CHAPTER 2: College sports is one of the best leadership training grounds.

Roger Crockett: You also serve on the Board of the Knight Commission, an organization that's focused on academic performance and policy at the collegiate level. What do you feel it is about the necessity for a good education that translates into leadership skills?

Val Ackerman: College sports in our country are kind of at an interesting time because in the cases of certain sports, in particular Division 1 football and Division 1 men's basketball, they've become very much commercial enterprises. The overwhelming majority of intercollegiate athletes make their livings in something else. So for them it's really, really critical that college sports be in perspective and so the Knight Commission is one of several groups out there that I would say are really pushing the balance perspective. Trying to make sure, through their advocacy of the values of intercollegiate athletics, that things be kept in perspective, that schools don't spend too much, that athletes aren't asked to do too much and that, in the end, it's the educational mission that comes first. For me, having been a student athlete myself, I couldn't believe more strongly in that mission.

Roger Crockett: Do you feel like the schools are doing a good enough job in managing that balance, that they're producing leaders outside of sports the way that they should be?

Val Ackerman: I think the leaders in college sports now are more challenged than ever before—whether they be university presidents, or whether they be athletic directors or whether they be coaches—because in certain conferences and at certain schools, the pressures to win are extraordinary. These are people who have to respond to these pressures, but at the same time because they're in the higher education business they have to keep in the forefront of their minds what they're doing to keep the educational mission upfront and not let it be completely subsumed by the athletic temptations. Because the student athletes that come out of these programs, for the most part, tend to be very, very well-equipped. Many are great jugglers. If you're playing lacrosse at the University of Notre Dame and you go through the experience of being an athlete there and going through classes there. If you've got a great GPA and you've accomplished whatever you can accomplish on the playing field, you're going to be in pretty good shape just because of what you've learned and the kinds of experiences you've had, and what it means for your resume to have had that experience. So I think college sports remains one of the best training grounds for leaders that we have in this country.

CHAPTER 3: A female pioneer: Succeeding in a male-dominated industry.

Roger Crockett: Val, your leadership extends well beyond just women's basketball. You've worked in the front office of the men's pro league—the National Basketball Association [NBA]—and you're President of USA Basketball. These are male-dominated arenas. Do you feel as if you've been somewhat of a pioneer in the industry?

Val Ackerman: I've probably been a bit of a pioneer in the sports business world. When I started at the NBA, my first job in sports was as a staff lawyer for the National Basketball Association. There were really very few women who were working at a senior level in sports. When I came in my mentors were, for the most part, men in the business: people that I came to know came to respect greatly for their leadership skills, their experience, their smarts. There were very few women to look up to, and that made at times for a lonely experience, particularly when I had children because there weren't any women I could talk to, to say, "Hey, how does this work?" "How can I come back and work full time and have a small child at home?" [I lacked] the moral support that you often get from other women in the workplace who are experiencing the same thing. So I would say that was probably the hardest part for me—figuring out the work-life balance. But, I will say that it's changing. There are more women than ever working in sports. It's a very desirable profession for men and women alike. I have met some of the most talented people I know who happen to be women who work in the sports business now. They are smart, they're energetic they're leaders and I think some will go on to do really big things. I have found that to be successful as a woman in the sports business takes a certain thickness of skin. You have to be really good at what you do. You have to roll with things at times, and have a sense of humor. You have to know at times when to pick your spots. I think the women who are really good care deeply about sports. They have that passion that people have when they talk about sports, and so there's an authenticity about the reasons why they're doing it.

Roger Crockett: Were you, or do you think that women are today, held to a different standard so

that you had to perform differently or that, perhaps, you were judged differently?

Val Ackerman: It's hard for me to really say whether there's a double standard for women or not. I never really kind of looked at it that way or thought because I was a woman I had to do something different. I always just thought that I do things differently. I tend to be someone who prepares thoroughly. I don't always think I'm the smartest person in the room because I've dealt with some very, very smart minds both when I worked on Wall Street and then when I went into the sports business. So I tried to compensate for that by coming in feeling very prepared. So, that, for me, has been an advantage. I've always been a reasonably hard worker. That really comes in handy in the sports business because for all the glamour that it's perceived to have, the reality is it's a very hard business to work in. It's very, very demanding. The hours are rough, people work very hard in the business. If you don't work hard, you can bet that there's somebody who wants your job who's going to work twice as hard as you to get that job. It's a travel-intensive business. You can't call into the Super Bowl—you have to show up.

CHAPTER 4: The slow process of elevating women to executive ranks.

Roger Crockett: Can you talk a little bit about where women are in the international scene when it comes to leadership positions?

Val Ackerman: The good news I think in global sports is that women are really showing up and performing. If you look at the Olympics in London this past summer, there were record numbers of women competing across the board. Team USA had more women than men making up their total roster. You saw women from Middle Eastern countries, which had never before been allowed to compete in the Olympics, now being allowed to compete for the first time by their home countries. So women are becoming more of a force on the playing surfaces. That's the good news. What needs to happen in a bigger way is for women to be represented in the executive ranks of national Olympic committees, in the U.S. national governing bodies, in the ranks of international sports organizations that facilitate the opportunities for women at all levels to play in sports. That's frankly been a slow process. The United States has been a leader in this. We really are a beacon in terms of representation of women in sports, whether as athletes, whether as administrators, whether as coaches, you name it, the United States is really out front. I give Title IX a lot of the credit for that. That has opened up so many doors and created so many ripple effects. Other countries tend not to have a Title IX. So for them they have to counter the lack of opportunities not with legislation like we did, but they have to break through cultural barriers. They have to get the funding. And there have to be sympathetic men who open the doors for them, and that tends to be a much slower process.

Roger Crockett: You're something of what I'm going to call an entrepreneur, having launched successfully the WNBA [Women's National Basketball Association] league. What skill set, Val, do you feel is necessary for launch leadership, regardless of gender?

Val Ackerman: I was very fortunate. I feel like I was in the right place at the right time to help lead the launch of the WNBA. At that time, the early '90s, women's basketball was really getting off the ground in the United States. It was being televised widely, there were great rivalries building. The launch was unique in that we weren't a mom and pop trying to do this—we were a launch within a larger organization because we had the NBA behind us in every imaginable way. We were looking at what had worked and didn't work in the NBA and other sports and adjusting accordingly in terms of the model that we used to launch the league: the way we marketed it, things that we required of the players. Our motto was: "If the NBA could start all over again from scratch based on everything that it's learned in the last 30 or 40 years, what would it do differently?" It was the answers to those questions that became the foundation of the WNBA.

CHAPTER 5: Good leaders excel under incredible pressure.

Roger Crockett: Well, it sounds like your experience is similar to a lot of leadership or CEO positions in other industries. How do you feel leadership is different in professional sports than it is business or academics?

Val Ackerman: I think the leadership skills in professional sports in many respects mirror the kinds of traits that are needed for success in other professions: The ability for good leaders, great leaders, to communicate well; to inspire; and to link action to ideas—because many great ideas die on the vine. You need good leaders to bring them into being. The ability to make good decisions is a leadership skill that cuts across any profession. What I think makes professional sports different is the visibility of the field. If you make a mistake and you're a leader in a prominent sports organization, it's going to be in the newspaper the next day. So there's incredible pressure to get things right and to minimize damage if you don't get things right. So there's a public relations element to big time sports in our country that dictates what kinds of skills leaders need to be successful. As any sports leader knows, if fans go away, everything changes. All bets are off. It's all about can the market support this? And that really comes down to a sports organization's relationship with its fans. Good leaders recognize what that means and they recognize why that's important. As such, they work very hard to preserve that connection.

Valerie (Val) Ackerman served as the founding President of the Women's National Basketball Association from 1996 to 2005. From 2005 to 2008, she served as the first female President of USA Basketball, which oversees both the U.S. men's and women's Olympic basketball programs. During her tenure, the programs notched a record of 222-23, including gold medal performances by the U.S. men's and women's basketball teams at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. She currently is the U.S. representative to the International Basketball Federation, an adjunct professor of sports management at Columbia University and a sports consultant.

Roger O. Crockett is a veteran business writer, thought leader and speaker. He is the former Chicago Deputy Bureau Chief for *BusinessWeek* magazine and a contributor to *Harvard Business Review*. His perspectives on business, leadership and diversity are trusted by many of the world's top executives and entrepreneurs.