
Celebrating Careers Matters

Even if I didn't bleed black and gold (which I confess I do), I still would have been moved to tears watching Monday Night Football this week. Technically, with a win this weekend and some fairy dust elsewhere, an inconsistent Pittsburgh Steelers team could possibly make it to the playoffs. But that's not what mattered on Monday night.

Monday night was about a city, teammates, and the Steeler Nation, honoring the 18-year career of Ben Roethlisberger, a man who signaled he was planning to retire from his current role as quarterback following what is likely to be his statistically worst year in eighteen years with the team. The stadium was full of signs . . . different versions of "Thank you Ben" or "See you in Canton, OH" reflecting every imaginable way of saying "we appreciate you" and acknowledging his success will be honored at the highest level when he is formalized as a Hall of Fame Quarterback.

Yes—I was moved because this is my city, my team, and my flawed quarterback whom we have watched grow up from a privileged, often unlikable, gifted athlete to a husband, father, and man who acknowledged and sought forgiveness for his transgressions, and learned to be a humble, grateful team leader and mentor of others. I was equally moved because I saw perspective in honoring a person for what he has done over many years—versus criticism of how he or the team performed in the current year.

I was struck by the power of Ben declaring, "It's time to retire," and the gift it was to others, to have

the opportunity to say, "Thank you, we appreciate you." I wish I could create that one-two punch for every transitioning executive I help in my work with MyNextSeason.

I recall a conversation with a departing CFO who shared that, in her final days, she never heard from her boss nor the head of HR—both members of the executive team she had been a part of for years at a company she had served for decades. No "thank you," no "good luck." She was being exited while the new CEO brought in his team. Despite the fact that she was immediately hired as a CFO for another company, I don't think she'll forget the humiliation of those final days at the company she both grew up in and loved. Her team lavished her with appreciation and expressed sadness over her dismissal; yet it was just crickets from the new boss and CHRO whose job it is to care for the people. It was all so avoidable; it always is. Showing gratitude is an investment in future leaders who are observing a transition. Upholding the dignity of a person who left it all on the field for their team is so important, yet so often forgotten.

I felt similarly watching the documentary "All Madden." What a brilliant, sensitive, comprehensive, authentic, appropriate honoring of an 85-year-old man who impacted the game of football—and the people with whom he came in contact—in ways that were important and noteworthy. Directors Tom Rinaldi and Joel Santos describe the documentary as a "love letter" to Hall-of-Famer John Madden's life and legacy—and that's exactly how I felt watching it.

We see John on screen at age 42 saying, “I gave it everything I had and it’s basically that simple. I don’t have it anymore.” We feel his sense of defeat and sadness. He walked away from what he thought would be his lifelong career of coaching after just ten years, during which he led his team to a Super Bowl championship, and an impressive regular season record of 103-32-7.

After leaving coaching, Madden took a pause. He walked the beach both figuratively and literally. He soon realized: “I can’t do this anymore. I need more . . . I am ready for something else.” Following that recognition, he reinvented himself and became one of the most iconic football broadcasters in history. With no prior formal training, nor prior desire to do that type of work, but with the encouragement of others who knew him well, he tried it. It felt awkward at first—but he grew to love it—and became great at it. He went on to broadcast football for three decades in his next season, transforming the way sports would be commentated.

I appreciated how most of those interviewed for the documentary, including his two sons, noted they had already shared their feelings (about John) and appreciation (for John) with John directly. I had the distinct impression, as Madden sat in a chair, just three days before he died, watching the documentary and enjoying the accolades and reflections from people he cared about; it was not new information to him. He was well-loved on the journey and well-loved at the end.

Doesn’t every transitioning executive deserve that?

If I could sprinkle my fairy dust, it would be over companies taking very simple, yet incredibly important steps—to help their leaders transition well—with dignity and appreciation—so they may discover and live into purposeful next seasons. It would be putting a process in place to enable

executives to start the process of contemplation early, under positive conditions, so the (eventual) conversation of transition is anticipated, if not welcomed . . . because the executive (now) has a plan for what’s next. This is not a new idea—it is a proven way of refreshing and aligning leadership for the future of a company while caring as much about leaders at the end of their careers—as companies do when they hire them—and ensuring both prepare well for what will be the biggest life-change of an executive who has left it all on the field.

How career transitions go impacts executives for the rest of their lives. And while they may no longer be scoring points for your team after they leave, their transition experience and life thereafter affects the company’s reputation, recruitment, and retention of others who are watching closely, holding virtual signs of appreciation for what their leader has meant to them, both on and off the field.

Transitioning well matters. Ensure your company doesn’t leave this incredibly important process to chance.

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Dr. Leslie Braksick—executive, entrepreneur, CEO coach, board member, and author—co-leads MyNextSeason to support companies and individuals during important transitions across the career continuum—and ensure they happen well.

MyNextSeason provides companies and individuals with support in navigating strategic career transitions such as succession, retirements, and development of high-potential leaders. Transitions need to happen exceedingly well for individuals to realize their purpose and potential, and to ensure company cultures and reputations are enhanced through strategic talent management.