I

CHARACTER

Waiho mā te tangata e mihi.
Let someone else praise your virtues.

SWEEP THE SHEDS
Never be too big to do
the small things that
need to be done

New Zealand v Wales, Carisbrook, Dunedin, 19 June 2010

'It's a cold place, Carisbrook,' says All Blacks centre Conrad Smith. 'The wind whips off Antarctica and heads straight for your balls.' The posters for the match say 'Welcome to the House of Pain'.

Head coach Graham Henry takes a walk with Raewyn, his wife – a pre-match ritual. His assistants, Wayne Smith and Steve Hansen, chat with manager Darren Shand in the breakfast room of the hotel. Gilbert Enoka, the mental skills coach, moves through the players, chatting. Their barefoot guru.

Upstairs, Errol Collins, aka 'Possum', the baggage man, begins laying out the jerseys.

Every team has its Poss. Ostensibly his role is to take care of the kit. From goal pads to practise balls, warm-up jackets to chewing gum, training socks to sensible, wry, homespun advice, Poss is your man. He's there to take care of the players. On test day, he lays out the black jersey.

Māori have a word, *taonga*, which means treasure. The black jersey is *taonga*, a sacred object.

This black jersey with its silver fern.

Since 1905, when the 'Originals' arrived and took Europe by storm, the black jersey has captured the essence and hopes of this small island nation. Over the last 100 years or so it has transformed from a makeshift garment with laces at the neck to the modern, sweat-wicking, tight-fitting gladiatorial armour of today, but at heart it remains the same; a symbol of excellence, hard work and a New Zealander's ability to become, with effort, sacrifice and skill, the best in the world.

> Successful leaders balance pride with humility: absolute pride in performance; total humility before the magnitude of the task.

After an early lunch – chicken, baked potatoes – the players head upstairs in twos and threes: the captain, Richie McCaw, Kieran Read, Tony Woodcock, Brad Thorn, Joe Rokocoko . . . The Chosen.

They collect their prize: black shorts, black socks with three white stripes, the black jersey with the silver fern. As the jerseys go on, so do the 'game faces'. The players become All Blacks.

'I can still remember Richie McCaw's first jersey,' Gilbert Enoka says. 'He spent about forty-five seconds to a minute with his head just buried in the jersey.'

Today is McCaw's ninety-first test.

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'A win today against the Welsh is not enough,' says a pundit. 'It has to be a big win.'

In the stadium, beer cans rattle against the hoardings. A helicopter thumps overhead. Someone sells T-shirts.

McCaw steps off the bus. There is a cry, a *pōwhiri*, the traditional Māori welcome. A lone Māori male with a *taiaha*, a thrusting spear. There is an explosion of camera flashes.

McCaw accepts the challenge on behalf of the team.

Women swoon. Men too.

The All Blacks head for the sheds.

Under the stadium there are trestle tables loaded with lineaments, bandages, and cups of carbohydrates. The New Zealand flag is on the wall; the Union Jack and the Southern Cross.

There are no histrionics. The team prepares silently, many in headphones. Above, 35,000 voices chant, 'Black! Black! Black!'

The coaches hang back as the players prepare. There is no rousing rhetoric. A word here, a backslap there. Now it is all

about the players. About 'the being of team'.

The talking is done. It's time to play rugby.

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It turns out to be Dan Carter's day, one of his finest. The New Zealand playmaker runs in two tries, the second of which will be replayed for as long as the game is loved. He scores 27 points, the Perfect Ten. Later, the papers will say 'the Welsh have no answers'.

The All Blacks win, 42–7.

Carter has proved himself, once again, indispensible. But, really, it's Richie McCaw's time. Today he becomes statistically the most successful All Blacks captain ever.

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In the sheds, the drink flows.

The room fills with journalists, politicians, sponsors, their sons, their sons' best friends. Dr Deb administers stitches. Richie McCaw drags himself out for the media. A few forwards shiver in large, ice-filled rubbish bins, a state-of-the-art recovery technique. Pacifica Rap plays, then some reggae.

After a while, Darren Shand, the manager, gently clears the room.

It is just the team. The inner sanctum. McCaw, Read, Thorn, Smith, Carter, Dagg, Muliaina. All household names. Squashed together on the benches, they look like huge schoolboys.

They debrief.

The session is chaired by Mils Muliaina. Injured, he is today's off-field captain. The etiquette is like a *whare*, a Māori meeting-house, where everyone is given the opportunity to speak, to say their truth, to tell their story.

Muliaina hands over to Steve Hansen, 'Shag', the assistant coach, whose assessment is direct and unsparing. It was good, he says, but not good enough. Plenty of work to do in the lineout.

Got to get that right. Other teams won't go so easy on us. Let's not get carried away. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Some big games coming.

He hands on to Wayne Smith, the other assistant coach. Smithy is a taut, lean man with a shrewd, lined expression. He's a man who knows men, how they think, how they work, how to get the best from them; the guts of this team. He makes a few incisive points and hands on to 'Gilly', Nic Gill PhD, the conditioning coach, who hands on in turn to Graham Henry – 'Ted', the headmaster of the team, the head coach. A witty man, Henry's dry humour doesn't always carry on television. He is the boss here, the Svengali, the ringmaster for this roadshow.

The challenge is to always improve, to always get better, even when you are the best. Especially when you are the best.

Henry congratulates McCaw on becoming the most successful captain in All Blacks history. Then he tells the team there's work to be done. A lot of work to be done.

Muliaina reminds the players to remember the sacrifices they have made to be in this room. Finally, he proposes a toast to McCaw.

'To Skip!' he says.

'To Skip,' the room replies.

'Well done, guys,' he says. 'Let's go.'

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This is when something happens that you might not expect.

Two of the senior players – one an international player of the year, twice – each pick up a long-handled broom and begin to sweep the sheds. They brush the mud and the gauze into small piles in the corner.

While the country is still watching replays and schoolkids lie in bed dreaming of All Blacks' glory, the All Blacks themselves are tidying up after themselves.

Sweeping the sheds.

Doing it properly.

So no one else has to.

Because no one looks after the All Blacks.

The All Blacks look after themselves.

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It's an 'example of personal discipline' says Andrew Mehrtens, former All Blacks fly-half (what New Zealanders call a first five eight) and the second highest All Blacks points scorer of all time.

'It's not expecting somebody else to do your job for you. It teaches you not to expect things to be handed to you.'

'If you have personal discipline in your life,' he says, 'then you are going to be more disciplined on the field. If you're wanting guys to pull together as a team, you've got to have that. You don't want a group of individuals.'

'It's not going to make you win all the time,' he says, 'but it's certainly going to make you better as a team over the long run.'

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Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers American football team, inherited an outfit that was down on its luck. It had foundered at the bottom of the NFL for years and even the fans saw no way back. Lombardi took over the team in 1959. Two years later they won the NFL, and again in 1962 and 1965, followed by the Super Bowl in 1966 and 1967.

A collection of talented individuals without personal discipline will ultimately and inevitably fail. Character triumphs over talent.

His success, he said, was based on what he called the 'Lombardi Model', which began with a simple statement:

> *Only by knowing yourself can you become an effective leader.*

For him, it all begins with self-knowledge, with the great 'I Am'; a fundamental understanding and appreciation of our own personal values. It was on this foundation that he built his teams and his success.

From self-knowledge, Lombardi believed, we develop character and integrity. And from character and integrity comes leadership.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (*In Wherever You Go, There You Are*) tells a story about Buckminster Fuller, the visionary architect and thinker.

Depressed and considering suicide, Fuller asked himself some questions that revolutionized his life:

> *'What is my job on the planet? What is it that needs doing, that I know something about, that probably won't happen unless I take responsibility for it?'*

These questions, in turn inspired Lombardi, and might in turn inspire us. This might mean taking responsibility for a team, for a company or for the lives of thousands; or it might be something as simple as sweeping the sheds. Either way, it begins with character, and character begins with humility. At the start of each season, Lombardi would hold up the pigskin and say, 'Gentlemen, this is a football.'

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Under coach John Wooden, the UCLA Bruins basketball team won the US national collegiate championship for seven straight years, starting in 1967. At the start of each season, writer Claudia Luther reports, he would sit his team down in their locker room and, for a long time – for a very long time – they would learn how to put on their socks:

> *Check the heel area. We don't want any sign of a wrinkle about it . . . The wrinkle will be sure you get blisters, and those blisters are going to make you lose playing time, and if you're good enough, your loss of playing time might get the coach fired.*

The lesson wasn't really about blisters, or playing time, or whether the coach got fired. It was about doing the basics right, taking care of the details, looking after yourself and the team. It was about humility.

'Winning takes talent,' John Wooden would say. 'To repeat it takes character.'

Like the All Blacks head coach Graham Henry, John Wooden was a teacher. Which is no coincidence.

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Another remarkable man was American football coach Bill Walsh, who also considered himself a teacher first, a leader second.

Between 1979 and 1989, Walsh coached the San Francisco 49ers from an underperforming bunch of also-rans into one of the great sporting dynasties in gridiron history by employing a similar philosophy. He believed that, 'You get nowhere without character. Character is essential to individuals, and their cumulative character is the backbone of your winning team.'

Create the highest possible operating standards, develop the character of your players, develop the culture of your team and, as the title of Walsh's book proclaims, *The Score Takes Care of Itself*.

'Walsh knew,' Stuart Lancaster, the current England rugby coach, told rugby writer Mark Reason, 'that if you established a culture higher than that of your opposition, you would win. So rather than obsessing about the results, you focus on the team.'

'The challenge of every team is to build a feeling of oneness, of dependence on one another,' said Vince Lombardi. 'Because the question is usually not how well each person performs, but how well they work together.'

Collective character is vital to success. Focus on getting the culture right; the results will follow.

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Owen Eastwood is a man of many talents. A lawyer for clients including the All Blacks, he has also worked as a consultant for the South African Proteas, NATO Command and other organizations on culture creation programs. Eastwood uses the equation:

Performance = Capability + Behaviour

The way you behave, he argues, will either bring out the best or worst of your capability, and this applies to businesses and teams as well as to individuals. 'Leaders create the right environment for the right behaviours to occur,' says Eastwood. 'That's their primary role.'

Behaviour exists in two domains, he continues: Public and Private.

'The Public Domain' means those areas of a player's life when he is under team protocol – whether at training, during

a game, travelling or on promotional duty. Professionalism, physical application and proficiency are demanded here.

'The Private Domain' is the one in which we spend time with ourselves and where our mind-game plays out. This is the biggest game of all, as daily we confront our habits, limitations, temptations and fears.

'Leaders design and create an environment,' says Eastwood, 'which drives the high performance behaviours needed for success. The really clever teams build a culture that drives the behaviours they need.'

'I think all of those environments,' says Graham Henry, 'whether it's a business environment or sporting environment, are about developing people. So, if you develop your people, your business is going to be more successful. It's just a matter of creating an environment where that becomes a happening every day.'

Every day? In organizations all around the world, leaders sally forth with inspiring messages of change. Everyone congratulates them on a presentation well delivered, admires the slogan, tucks the brand book into their briefcase, and then goes back to their desks and does nothing.

Alternatively, the leaders feverishly develop and distribute an action plan, calibrated to the finest detail, with no real understanding of the vision, purpose or principles behind it.

This is how Will Hogg describes what he calls the 'Vision into Action' paradox. Hogg, who runs Kinetic, a Geneva-based management consultancy that works with the leaders of large organizations to deliver culture change and engagement, likes to use the Japanese proverb:

——— *Vision without action is a dream.*

Action without vision is a nightmare.

'The paradox,' he says, 'is that, though every organization thinks they have unique problems, many change issues are centred on one thing. The ability – or inability – to convert vision into action. Sometimes it is through a lack of a vision itself. More often through the inability to translate vision into simple, ordinary, everyday actions.'

Actions like senior leaders who sweep the floor.

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'Talent was irrelevant,' says Wayne Smith. He is not talking about the All Blacks now, but the Chiefs, the team he went on to after leaving the All Blacks fold, but the principles are the same. 'We carefully picked the players. We used matrices to back intuition, because there are certain stats in rugby that determine the player's character and that's what we were after. So we picked high work rate, strong body movers, guys that were unselfish and had a sacrificial mindset.'

They selected on character.

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Ethos is the Greek word for character. Descended from the same root as the word ethics, it is used to describe the beliefs, principles, values, codes and culture of an organization. It is the 'way we do things around here', the unwritten (and sometimes written) rules, the moral character of a particular group of people. It is the place we live, our certitude and rectitude, our base.

Our values decide
our character.
Our character decides
our value.

Values provide the bedrock of belief. Any lasting organization – from churches to states, companies to causes – has

enshrined at their heart a fundamental set of principles: 'Faith, Hope and Charity'; 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité'.

A values-based, purpose-driven culture is a foundation of the All Blacks' approach and sustained success. But, as any business leader knows, value-words like integrity, sacrifice, determination, imagination, innovation, collaboration, persistence, responsibility, and so on, seem powerful in the abstract, but can be flat and generic on the page. The challenge is always to bring them to life, and into the lives of those you lead. As we shall see, the All Blacks are a world class case study in how to do this. Their management are past-masters at turning vision into everyday action, purpose into practice.

In fact, in answer to the question, 'What is the All Blacks' competitive advantage?', key is the ability to manage their culture and central narrative by attaching the players' personal meaning to a higher purpose. It is the identity of the team that matters – not so much what the All Blacks do, but who they are, what they stand for, and why they exist.

After all, the All Blacks' competitive advantage does not come from player numbers: England have more rugby players than the rest of the world combined. Despite the misconception in the UK's popular press, it's also not about race: the first Polynesian to play for the All Blacks, Bryan Williams, only did so in 1970 and the All Blacks had already led the world for most of that century. Diversity helps, yes, but it's not the whole story.

> 'What is my job on the planet? What is it that needs doing, that I know something about, that probably won't happen unless I take responsibility for it?'
>
> Buckminster Fuller

It's not just infrastructure – the 'rugby stairway' – though

this technical framework, combined with the relentless desire to 'be an All Black', certainly helps propel talent through the lower grades and on towards sporting immortality.

The All Blacks' remarkable success on the field begins with a very particular culture off the field and it is this culture – the glue that holds it all together – that has delivered extrordinary competitive advantage for more than a century.

To become an All Black means becoming a steward of a cultural legacy. Your role is to *leave the jersey in a better place*. The humility, expectation and responsibility that this brings lifts their game. It makes them the best in the world.

What this means for leaders in other fields is the story of this book.

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The revitalization of the All Blacks culture between 2004 and 2011 began with some fundamental questions: What is the meaning of being an All Black? What does it mean to be a New Zealander? These questions, and an ongoing interrogative process, were central in the re-establishment of a values-driven, purpose-driven culture.

This management technique – which begins with questions – is of the 'Socratic Method', so called because Socrates used a type of interrogation to separate his pupils from their prejudices. The goal? To help them find self-knowledge, even if the truth turns out to be uncomfortable.

It is a key technique within the All Blacks leadership and captured in a Māori proverb:

> *Waiho kia pātai ana, he kaha ui te kaha.*
> Let the questioning continue; the ability of the person is in asking questions.

Rather than just instruct outwards, the coaches began to ask questions; first of themselves – how can we do this better? – and then of their players – what do you think? This interrogative culture, in which the individual makes their own judgements, and sets their own internal benchmarks, became increasingly important. The questions the leaders asked of themselves, and of the team, was the beginning of a rugby revolution.

A culture of asking and re-asking fundamental questions cuts away unhelpful beliefs in order to achieve clarity of execution. Humility allows us to ask a simple question: how can we do this better?

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The word decide comes from 'to cut away'. The All Blacks' interrogative culture cuts away unhelpful beliefs in order to achieve clarity.

It is a facilitated style of interpersonal leadership in a learning environment concerned with adaptive problem solving and continuous improvement and in which humility – not knowing all the answers – delivers strength.

'You can guide,' says Wayne Smith, 'but I'm a great believer in that we don't instruct a lot. If you believe that attitude you've got to ask questions – and we try and get descriptive answers so you get self-awareness.'

——— *'What might happen if...?'*
'In this situation what would you do...?'
'How might you...?'
'What about...?'

This questioning is as applicable to business as it is to rugby. No one person has all the answers, but asking questions challenges the status quo, helps connect with core values and beliefs, and is a catalyst for individual improvement.

After all, the better the questions we ask, the better the answers we get.

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Clearly the All Blacks are an exceptional environment. Their elite status, constant scrutiny and the resources at their disposal set them apart from, say, a sales team in Wolverhampton or a marketing business in Duluth. There are different pressures, different rewards, different measures. However, it is possible to extract some useful lessons from this, the world's most successful team, based on simple shared humanity and the application of common sense. So, although a study of what makes the All Blacks tick might not have all the answers, it does enable us to begin to address some important questions of leadership.

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The Māori carvings with which tourists to New Zealand soon become familiar are called *whakairo*. These represent the tribal *tīpuna*, the Ancestors, and have been carved in commemoration of their deeds. They tell stories of love and death and great bravery. Though they are a gallery of heroes there is no vanity in their depiction – deliberately grotesque, their tongues protrude, their features are distorted.

Humility is deeply ingrained in Māori and broader Polynesian culture and, indeed, the word Māori implies 'normal' or 'natural' to distinguish the people of the land from the gods above. To 'get above yourself' is deeply frowned upon in this culture, and more broadly in New Zealand society.

It should be our acts that remain after us, the *whakairo* remind us, not our vainglory. Humility is seen as a vital part of a well-adjusted character. It is essential to *mana*, the Māori and Polynesian word that captures so many qualities; authority, status, personal power, bearing, charisma and, according to *The New Zealand Dictionary*, 'great personal prestige and character'.

Humility does not mean weakness, but its opposite. Leaders with *mana* understand the strength of humility. It allows them to connect with their deepest values and the wider world.

For Māori, and within the All Blacks, *mana* is perhaps the ultimate accolade, the underlying spiritual goal of human existence. Linguists have recognized the relationship between the word and the 'powerful forces of nature such as thunder and storm winds that were conceived as the expression of an unseen supernatural agency' *(Coddington)*. Others have argued that it is the universal life force that is the very origin of our ideas of God. Certainly, it describes a person of rare quality; a natural leader possessing strength, leadership, great personal power, gentleness – and humility.

When asked about Chris Ashton, the English winger, and his habit of swan-diving for a try, former All Blacks captain and hooker Anton Oliver says, 'We'd just die.'

For leaders of all stripes, reconnecting with our values – with our truest, deepest instincts – is an essential building block of character, which is the essence of leadership. And it begins with humility. St Augustine said it best: 'Lay first the foundation of humility . . . The higher your structure is to be, the deeper must be its foundation.'

So, as these sporting superstars clean up their locker room,

looking after themselves so that no one else has to, we might ask ourselves if excellence – true excellence – begins with humility; with a humble willingness to 'sweep the sheds'.

After all, what else is a legacy if not that which you leave behind after you have gone?

Sweep the Sheds

The great sports coaches of the past such as John Wooden and Vince Lombardi put humility at the core of their teaching. The All Blacks place a similar emphasis on their fundamental and foundational values, going so far as to select on character over talent. The players are taught never to get too big to do the small things that need to be done. 'Exceptional results demand exceptional circumstances,' says Wayne Smith. These conditions help shape the culture and therefore the ethos – the character – of the team. Humility begins at the level of interpersonal communication, enabling an interrogative, highly facilitated learning environment in which no one has all the answers. Each individual is invited to contribute solutions to the challenges being posed. This is a key component of building sustainable competitive advantage through cultural cohesion. It leads to innovation, increased self knowledge, and greater character. It leads towards *mana*.