



# Visionary Leadership

Rex W. Tillerson's focus on leadership, motivation, discipline and achievement earn him the 2013 AFCA CEO Coach of the Year® Award.

By Paul Markgraff

Nearly every football coach dreams of leading and motivating individuals at the highest levels of the game. But, it takes a special sort of leader to exemplify the type of discipline required to become a champion.

In business, as in football, these same character traits are necessary to lead a diverse group of individuals to achieve their corporate goals.

Rex W. Tillerson, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Exxon Mobil Corporation, is just such a leader. That's why the American Football Coaches Foundation® (AFCA) named Tillerson the 2013 recipient of its CEO Coach Of The Year® Award. Tillerson will be honored at The Foundation's CEO Coach of the Year Dinner, held at The Waldorf Astoria® in New York, N.Y., on December 16, 2013.

"Leadership and motivation are essential to those who work with young people across America," says Grant Teaff, AFCA Executive Director. "Rex Tillerson leads one of the largest corporations in the world, and he cares deeply about education. He supports the American Football Coaches Association and the AFCA in their efforts toward educating coaches, so that those coaches may be better tomorrow, and in turn make the students with whom they work better in the same way."

"It is a great honor to be selected for this award," says Tillerson. "Coaches and CEOs have been given a unique leadership opportunity to bring out the best in their respective teams or companies. Through leadership and hard work, we strive for success to make a positive difference for individuals and for the communities where we work and play."

## Setting Standards

Tillerson currently leads about 80,000 employees for ExxonMobil. These employees have diverse backgrounds, interests and goals, not unlike the wide variety of players on a football team.

Much like a football team, Tillerson seeks to unite his

extremely large workforce under the vision of a single corporate culture, thereby providing a foundation to support his organization when tested.

"ExxonMobil achieves operational excellence around the world because this common culture is rooted in a set of expectations of behavior and performance that we all share," he says. "Foremost among these expectations, at the very heart of all our operations and relationships, is a commitment to integrity and high ethical standards."

Tillerson says ExxonMobil sets these high standards, and employees hold each other accountable to them.

"My job as a leader – as a coach, if you will – is to communicate and deepen that culture," he says. "It is a sense of responsibility that is shared by everyone. Strong companies and winning football teams have that in common."

A great company culture is about more than leadership, though. It is about having strong, willing followers that do their best to achieve the vision set by the leadership.

Among his many leadership positions, Tillerson is also immediate past national president of the Boy Scouts of America and an Eagle Scout. He sees Scouting as a method for developing great followership and leadership among young men.

"My father worked for the Boy Scouts of America, and was an Eagle Scout, so Scouting was at the center of my formative years," says Tillerson. "You learn good followership in Scouting. You see leaders whom you admire, who motivate you, and those who don't. So all the lessons you learn about being a good leader are things you experienced as a follower. Along the way, I learned principles I didn't know I was learning – principles that I didn't appreciate until I started to see how they worked as I began to see some success."

## Clear Goals

Primary to the success of any organization is the ability to set ambitious goals and find a way to achieve them. In football, as in business, individuals and teams cannot long succeed without strategic planning and setting goals.

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In the oil and gas industry, leaders must take the long view when setting goals for their organizations.

“Our season – or the time it takes to make a return on investment – can be decades long,” says Tillerson. “And we have to develop plays – or strategies – that will work without necessarily knowing all the rules of the game: whether the oil and gas can be found in commercial quantities, how to design and install equipment in often harsh environments, what price we’ll receive, and whether contracts and laws with resource owners will be honored.”

In his 38 years with ExxonMobil, there is one particular project Tillerson saw from the proposal stage all the way through to production. It was an offshore oil and gas project off the coast of Sakhalin Island, in the Russian Far East.

“When we first approached the Russian government about partnering in Sakhalin, there was a widespread belief that this project just couldn’t be done,” says Tillerson. “The conditions in that corner of Russia are harsh, with frequent earthquakes, severe ocean conditions, and pack-ice up to 5 feet thick over much of the year. The technology didn’t exist then to develop this area.”

If that wasn’t enough of a challenge, in post-Soviet-era Russia, there was little regulation in place to allow this sort of international partnership, says Tillerson. Even so, the goal was to develop Sakhalin. The goal had to be long-term, and every challenge had to be met one at a time.

“We assisted the Russians in putting together the legal and policy framework for partnership,” says Tillerson. “Then we set out to develop the technology to enable us to extend our drilling from land to access those offshore fields with wells that set world records. Today, our workforce at Sakhalin is 98 percent Russian. They manage the operational risks in a superb way, with enviable safety performance in that challenging environment.”

### Overcoming Adversity

Developing Sakhalin by winning one battle at a time is how many coaches teach their players to win championships: winning one play at a time. This ability to achieve success in the face of daunting obstacles can define an athlete’s – and a citizen’s – character and life.

Many athletes face enormous adversity not only on the football field, but in the home as well.

This fact has not escaped Tillerson, much like coaches across the nation see the challenges faced by their student-athletes on a daily basis.

“My greatest concern is that these aspects of teamwork and mentoring – so integral to the performance of a Scout troop, football team, or a corporation – are increasingly absent from the daily lives of most American schoolchildren,” he says. “You can see this in our nation’s educational performance. Mounting evidence shows that American students are slipping in international academic rankings. This challenges us to do more as a society to prepare our youth for the jobs of the 21st century.”

Tillerson says the students who most need help are often the students who face a great deal of adversity to start with, and improving educational opportunity and outcomes for every child is the place to start.

“To help address these needs, ExxonMobil led the founding of the National Math and Science Initiative,” says Tillerson. “This initiative is built on the conviction that improving education in science, technology, engineering and math means supporting teacher training and preparing students to succeed. Our goal is to find programs that work, and then scale them up in schools and universities around the nation.

“Our efforts are already showing some impressive results,” he says. “But we have a long way to go to get to where we need to be. The good news is that there is widespread recognition of the problem, and broad support for change and improvement.”

“Improving education is a call to action for business, government and society,” says Tillerson. “Everyone must get involved.

“For many kids in football and other sports and activities, coaches and teachers are their only hope for mentoring and educational achievement,” he says. “We need coaches and teachers to set the kind of high expectations and show the benefits of hard work not just on the competitive field, but also show what high expectations and hard work can do for them in the classroom. I believe America can improve educational outcomes, but we can only do it by working together.” 

