

# TORONTO LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

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2008

THE TORONTO LEADERSHIP SUMMIT DINNER for 2008 treated attendees to an insightful dialogue on leadership informed by examples from the sports world. Jim Citrin, founder of Spencer Stuart's Technology, Communications & Media Practice, kicked off the evening by discussing what he learned while writing his most recent book, *The Dynamic Path*. The book focuses on how the secrets of champion athletes can help others become great leaders. After dinner, Johann Koss, four-time Olympic Gold Medalist in speed skating and now CEO of the international organization Right to Play, shared the insights he gained while reinventing himself from champion athlete to organizational leader.

## DISCOVERING THE DYNAMIC PATH

Citrin mentioned that his original book concept for *The Dynamic Path* was to get into the mind of a champion. But, after speaking with recently retired all-time NFL leading rusher Emmitt Smith, Citrin realized there was something greater that people could relate to. "Emmitt wasn't interested in telling me about his athletic exploits," said Citrin. "What he really wanted to do was figure out what to do with his life. The story, for me, was realizing that whether you're Emmitt Smith or any one of us or anyone we work with, everyone has the same challenge of deciding what to do next."

Athletes, who grow up in a self-centered universe, run a big risk of crashing and burning after achieving success, said Citrin. He compared those who failed to those who really accomplished something once their playing days were over. And that became the focus of his book, which describes the concept of what he calls the Dynamic Path.

“Wherever you are from an individual standpoint, there is a series of traits you can cultivate to be the best you can be in work, in sports, in any aspect of your life. That’s going from individual to champion, and those characteristics are natural talent, hard work and mental toughness.”

But, as Citrin points out, after athletes become champions, at some point their natural talents wane. Some of them react in a way that enables them to make an even greater impact on society — a process that can be instructive for those in the business world.

“The people who break through and go to a next level — from champion to leader — go outside of themselves and change their focus to think about how they can do something for the benefit of others,” said Citrin. “And that transition is a very difficult one.”

## BUILDING A LEGACY

The highest level on the path, according to Citrin, is becoming a legacy builder. He listed Billie Jean King as an example for her work to promote equal rights for women. People know about her famous match against Bobby Riggs, Citrin said, but her real legacy came from being a leader of the legislative movement to create what became Title IX in the U.S.

“Title IX dictated equal funding for boys and girls in sports and other educational programs,” he said. “If you go back to 1972, 270,000 American girls were playing high school sports; 2.5 million American boys were playing high school sports. Today, 3 million boys play high school sports in the U.S. and 3 million girls play high school sports. The social ramifications of that, much less the leadership ramifications, are just astounding.”

Citrin also related the story of a 25-year-old man he’d met. The young man, an American student living in Belfast, had described his efforts to create a travel basketball team of high school students made up of five Catholic and five Protestant players to promote healing between the two groups. He had the two groups practice separately and, after he’d earned their trust, told them his plans for the team. At that point, none of the students were willing to continue.

“This young man, just a college student, sought out Eddie Copeland, the head of the IRA, one of the most wanted men on the planet. Through intermediaries and secret cell phones and blindfolds and being passed from car to car, he got an audience with Eddie and told him his story. Eddie said, ‘You know what? The time is right. I support this.’ And literally a couple of days later it got known through the network that Eddie said it was okay and his equivalent on the UDF (Protestant) side said it was okay. And over the next year, they built this team.”

Citrin used the story to remind the audience of their ability as individuals to get things done. “All of us in this room are very, very privileged in the positions we find ourselves in, in our companies, in our organizations, in society. So if we keep reminding ourselves what we can do to help others, I think we can have a huge impact.”

## FROM CHAMPION TO LEADER: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

*“I think of what we have to do to be good — about the decisions we need to make and the focus we need to have, instead of thinking about where the organization should be. That goal can be in the back of your mind. You don’t need to think about it anymore. It will always come through and drive your motivation.”*

— Johann Koss, president and CEO, Right to Play

After dinner, Johann Koss was introduced. His impressive background as an Olympic speed skater was discussed, including his gold medal win in the 1992 Winter Olympics five days after having emergency surgery on his pancreas. Koss then went on to win three golds in Lillehammer, Norway, in the 1994 Winter Olympics, setting new world records in all three of his events.

At Lillehammer, Koss donated the prize money from his victory to what is now Right to Play, an international humanitarian organization that uses sport and play as a tool for the development of children in the most disadvantaged areas of the world. And he encouraged other athletes to do the same. Today, he’s the president and CEO of the organization, which has grown to have a \$30 million operating budget; field operations across Africa, the Middle East and Asia; and national offices in the U.S., Canada and the United Arab Emirates.

Koss reflected on his years as an athlete and how he was able to summon record-breaking performances. He said that focusing on the process, not the outcome, was the key. “Thinking less about myself and more about what I needed to do to get there is what created results,” Koss said. He took this lesson with him to Right to Play.

“I think of what we have to do to be good — about the decisions we need to make and the focus we need to have, instead of thinking about where the organization should be. That goal can be in the back of your mind. You don’t need to think about it anymore. It will always come through and drive your motivation.”

Koss said that it was an experience in Africa with impoverished youth that both laid the groundwork for his future occupation and motivated him for Lillehammer. “I met this group of 12-year-old boys and noticed one who was very popular. I asked him why, and he said, ‘Can’t you see? I have long sleeves.’ Then he rolled his shirt up and tied the sleeves into a knot. And they used it as a soccer ball. They had never had a ball, a coach or an opportunity to play. Before the Olympic Games, I was told that I was the most self-centered, complaining athlete in the world. I felt the pressure of my country to perform well, because everybody expected me to win. I had an enormous team. And I was thinking about quitting because I couldn’t handle it anymore. Then I saw children who had nothing, and they were striving with whatever they could to play. And I was going to waste my talent, not appreciating what I had, not encouraging my team and the people around me. Those kids motivated me more than anything I could ever do to motivate myself.”

Today, no one would confuse Koss with the self-centered athlete he was once accused of being. In fact, he now views motivating others as his primary focus. As CEO, he said, his role “is mostly to mobilize and structure and try to create the inspiration and belief that things are possible.”

## A BEST PRACTICE FROM THE SPORTS WORLD

In making the transition from success in the sports world to executive success, Koss found it helpful to seek out the same kind of guidance he benefited from every day when preparing for the Olympics.

“I have a personal coach,” Koss said. “I always have a coach and I believe the role of a coach is very important. In sports it’s fantastic, because you have a coach who helps you to be better. And you can find ways to improve. My coach at school focused on what I was good at and helped me to see sometimes what I was really good at, particularly when I was down.”

*“I realized if I wanted to follow my purpose in my heart, I had to build this organization. And I believe if you can find that purpose for what drives you, you will find it exceptionally easy to reinvent yourself. It will just happen.”*

*— Johann Koss, president and CEO, Right to Play*

## THE MOST DIFFICULT TRANSITION — AND ITS PROFOUND IMPACT

Despite his coach’s inspiration, Koss struggled with shifting from being a “doer” to one who does things through others. “When you’re a success at doing, you get recognition from your peers. You get recognition from the media. You get recognition from what you’ve done. And I believe that all of you have come to where you are because you’ve succeeded by doing. But then you have to start empowering others, and I guarantee that the same recognition will not happen to you. The more you make them succeed, the less recognition you will get. And that’s the dynamic that’s exceptionally difficult to handle.”

The result of overcoming this difficulty is greater success for the organization as a whole. As Citrin remarked, “I think most everyone in this room has the opportunity to mentor others. And if you focus on the success of others, that simple message can create a dynamic of leadership and success in an organization. So I believe that can be perpetuated.”

Following their speeches, Citrin and Koss took questions from the audience. Citrin fielded a question about how organizations can most effectively take a unique talent like Koss and put him into a conventional corporate structure.

“No one, whether it’s in a not-for-profit or a for-profit, can do it alone. One of the things that boards can do and that we, as advisors, can do is diagnose the core strengths and limitations of any individual in a leadership capacity. Rather than try and create the leader as hero, we can understand where the gaps are that need to be filled.”

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PURPOSE

Koss then answered a question about how he was able to reinvent himself. “I had to make a choice between building this organization, Right to Play, or becoming a doctor. That was a very different and difficult choice. I realized if I wanted to follow my purpose in my heart, I had to build this organization. And I believe if you can find that purpose for what drives you, you will find it exceptionally easy to reinvent yourself. It will just happen.”

The statement hearkened back to something that Koss had said earlier in the evening — that purpose is a common trait among the best companies. “I got my M.B.A. from Rotman, and Roger Martin is one of my heroes. He had an excellent lecture in which he said that the best companies, the ones that last the longest, are the ones with purpose. They’ve done a lot of studies on this. When you see a company like Johnson & Johnson, they have a purpose other than the bottom line. They serve people with health care products and create a better world.”

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