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*no limitations*

Executive Search & Board Advisory

## 14 LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP FROM MUHAMMAD ALI – THE GREATEST



*"When you are as great as I am, it is hard to be humble."* Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali born Cassius Marcellus Clay transcended the sport of boxing, not only to be arguably one of the finest boxers who ever lived, but one of the most celebrated figures of the twentieth century.

He began boxing when he was twelve years old, at eighteen he won a gold medal in the light heavyweight division at the 1960 Olympics in Rome and at age twenty-two won the world heavyweight title from Sonny Liston to be the youngest heavyweight in history at the time. Cassius Clay changed his name shortly afterwards from what he called a slave name to Muhammad Ali.

In 1966 two years after winning the heavyweight title he refused to be drafted into the United States military on the grounds of his religious beliefs, in opposition to the involvement in the Vietnam War. He was arrested, found guilty of draft evasion and stripped of his boxing titles. The decision was overturned in 1971 costing him his most precious years as a sportsman.

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Muhammad Ali is the only heavyweight to win the title three times and was ranked as the greatest athlete of the twentieth century by Sports Illustrated and the Sports Personality of the Century by the BBC. During his time when unable to box he performed in films and a Broadway musical. After retiring from boxing, Muhammad Ali devoted his life to religious and charitable work.

After beginning training as an amateur boxer at twelve years old and dedicating his energies and making the sacrifices to become world heavyweight champion, he was prepared to walk away from the money, fame and trappings for his beliefs. He had already thrown his gold medal into the Ohio River after he and a friend were refused service at a white only restaurant following his return from the Olympics. His resolve to stand true to his convictions made him an icon of his generation.

Every athlete today lives in his shadow. Leaders, war resisters, public speakers and people who believe in social justice and equality have revered his great courage and preparedness to stand up for what he believed in during times of great adversity

The lessons we learn from Muhammad Ali include:

1. Be true to your values.

When Ali declined to be inducted into the Army to go to Vietnam he was barred from the sport of boxing, as World Champion. He lost some of the most important of his prime years (age 25-29) of his life from the boxing ring. He believed in his core values and was not prepared to compromise them. He had the courage to stand true to his ideals when everyone condemned him and his reputation at the time was tarnished. **"My principles are more important than the money or my title."**

2. Believe in your ability.

**"I know where I'm going and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want to be."** He didn't need others to validate his cause, his focus or his ambition. He had the character, courage and determination to follow through. He was comfortable in his own skin.

3. Have a vision, have a meaning, have a purpose.

**"Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them – a desire, a dream, a vision. They have to have last-minute stamina, they have to be a little faster, they have to have the skill and the will but the will must be stronger than the skill."**  
Muhammad Ali used boxing as a vehicle to help others, to highlight injustice, to play a role in civil rights and to show others that anything can be achieved. **"I wanted to use my fame and this face that everyone knows so well to help uplift and inspire people around the world."** **"Service to others is the rent we pay for our room in heaven."**

4. Don't put limitations on yourself, don't listen to others limitations and be convinced.

**"I am the greatest, I said that before I knew I was."** To do outstanding things to achieve above expectations you have to believe that greatness is within you. Then you need to execute on it. Many have potential. The world is full of people with great potential. Ali delivered on his potential. He made the sacrifice. **"I hated every minute of training, but I said don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion."** **"It's not bragging if you can back it up."**

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5. Set yourself the challenge.

**"The man who has no imagination, has no wings." "It isn't the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it's the pebble in your shoe." "If they can make penicillin out of mouldy bread, they can sure make something out of you."**

6. Deliver with high standards.

**"I am the astronaut of boxing. Joe Louis and Dempsey were just pilots. I'm in a world of my own." "My only fault is that I don't realise how great I really am." "The fight is won or lost far from witnesses – behind the lines, in the gym and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights." "You could be the world's best garbage man, the world's best model; it doesn't matter what you do if you're the best."**

7. You will meet setbacks.

**"Only a man who knows what it is like to be defeated can reach down to the bottom of his soul and come up with the extra ounce of power it takes to win when the match is even."** Learn from your mistakes, understand failure is a part of growing. Fail quick and learn fast.

8. Stay true as doubt comes.

**"It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen."** Don't let others sow the seeds of doubt, if you don't believe in yourself and your abilities, why should others. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

9. Take risks.

**"He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life." "I don't have to be what you want me to be." "My trainer don't tell me nothing between rounds. I don't allow him to. I fight the fight. All I want to know is did I win the round. It's too late for advice." "I shook up the world, I shook up the world."**

10. Keep educating yourself, have the thirst for knowledge.

**"A man who views the world the same at fifty as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of life."** Keep challenging yourself to learn.

11. Be a good friend that people can rely on and trust.

**"Friendship...is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything."** A friend is the one that is there for you when it counts.

12. Perception is reality.

**"To be a great champion you must believe you are the best. If you're not, pretend you are."** No one is born with every skill or attribute but acting that you are the best will create new habits that will force you to get there. **"If you even dream of beating me you'd better wake up and apologise."**

## 13. Inspire others.

**"It's lack of faith that makes people afraid of meeting challenges, and I believed in myself." "To be able to give away riches is mandatory if you wish to possess them. This is the only way that you will be truly rich." "I had to prove you could be a new kind of black man. I had to show the world." "I didn't want to submit to the army and then, on the day of the judgement, have God say to me 'Why did you do that?' This life is a trial, and you realise that what you do is going to be written down for Judgement Day."**

## 14. Maximise your time.

**"Live everyday as if it were your last because someday you're going to be right."**

Gregory Robinson, Managing Partner "Muhammad Ali was not only one of the greatest athletes that ever lived; he is admired by the greatest sportsmen and women who have ever lived. He inspired and still inspires those in and outside the ring. He is one of those rare people whose life had an impact on world events. He broke every boxing rule and as he said he knew where he was going and he was free to be who he wanted to be."

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## BACKGROUND

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  - External Succession Planning; and
  - Executive Re-Engagement / Transition.
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