What Panthers' Coach Ron Rivera Shows Us About Leadership

Even though I am from Denver and, of course, had to cheer for the Broncos in Sunday's Super Bowl 50, a part of my heart belonged to Panthers' Coach Ron Rivera. Even though Rivera lost, just getting to the Super Bowl was an epic accomplishment and following his career provides great lessons in leadership.

How can you not love a guy who was the first Latino coach in the NFL - his mother was of Mexican descent and his father Puerto Rican - and never gave up on his dream to be a head coach? Thirty years ago, Rivera played in Super Bowl XX as a backup Bears linebacker and special-teamer and then was promptly sacked.

He went on to a career as a local TV reporter in Chicago but realized that he missed football and decided to try to get back into the game as a coach. Rivera worked and talked his way into the absolute bottom of the coaching pyramid in 1997 as a defensive quality control assistant with the Bears. Before he won the position, he had to volunteer at a mini-camp and then worked on organized team workouts. When he still wanted to coach, Head Bears Coach Wannstedt asked him to put together a detailed proposal with a job description. Wannstedt then had to convince team president Michael McCaskey to increase his coaching staff to include the untested Rivera. He worked his way up to coach the Bears for Super Bowl XLI - where they lost to Peyton Manning and the Colts - and then was fired. The Panther's took a chance on him and the rest is history.

Panthers' general manager, Dave Gettleman, says that Rivera “doesn't get too high and he doesn't get too low.”

Rivera has a reputation for urging his players to bring their own unique personality to the game. He also moved his office to be right next to the locker room so that he could interact more with the team.
What does all this tell us about leadership?

1) Persistence wins out. Getting sacked, starting at the bottom, being fired, none of it slowed him down.

2) Keep calm and carry on. In a sport where coaches routinely throw epic temper tantrums on the sidelines, Rivera keeps his cool.

3) Stay close to your people. Rivera works right next to the locker room.

Could you use a dose of these three leadership lessons in working with your team?

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