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Can You Keep Up?

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If you think running a business is like running a marathon, you're right. It's not just the physical stamina or the training required, it's the changing rules and competition.

The term "marathon" comes from the 25-mile run in 490 B.C. Allegedly, Pheidippides, a Greek soldier, ran at high speed from the battle at Marathon to the Greek capital of Athens. On arrival, he announced the badly outnumbered Greeks had beaten the larger Persian army and then promptly died from exhaustion.

Today, more than 500 marathons are run annually around the world, including one at the North Pole. Originally, the marathon distance was about 25 miles. However, in the 1908 London Olympics, it was decided,

in homage to King Edward VII, the race had to start at Windsor Castle and end at the Royal Box in White City Stadium. That distance is approximately 26.2 miles. Because of this "respect for the sovereign," marathon runners have been required to run the extra distance ever since.

In 1896, Spyridon Louis, a Greek runner, set the Olympic marathon record of 2:58:10 over the 25-mile course. The current marathon record held by Dennis Mietté of Kenya is 2:02:57 over the longer 26.2-mile route. That means today's winner has to move 31% faster. In fact, all competition—especially business—is running faster and further. If you're still "racing" against your competition like grandpa did, you'll be left in the dust.

Am I trying to say that leadership means getting ahead of the pack and winning the race with speed? Not at all! In fact, NBA star James Harden is an interesting case that has direct implications in running a garden center or any other company. Harden, after being traded from the Oklahoma City Thunder to the Houston Rockets, became a dynamo. He was already recognized as one of the best shooting guards in the NBA. However, an NBA general manager looking at Harden's personal abilities wouldn't be impressed. He's not the fastest runner or the highest jumper. He doesn't have the longest arms or the widest reach. What he can do is stop.

Prior to James Harden, nobody paid any attention to the stopping speed of a basketball player. Harden stops

instantly. While an opponent's momentum carries him away, Harden takes his jump shot to historic success. Harden didn't invent the idea of avoiding your competition either on the basketball court or in the marketplace. What he's done was take his inherent skill and practice it until he was in a world all his own. Allow the other guy to write the rules of the game you're playing and he'll tilt it toward his strengths, not yours. Harden rewrote the rules by stopping so quickly his opponents couldn't keep up with him.

How does all this sports information tie into leadership in your garden center? Well, ask yourself these questions and see what you think: Who on my team has unique strengths I haven't recognized and nurtured? Who could be taking me ahead of my competition if I gave them a chance? (At Oklahoma City, Harden was seen as a "good, but not great," player.) Which of my team members has special knowledge or skills I'm not utilizing to its full potential?

What characteristics can my organization capitalize on—characteristics not currently understood by my competition? What special niche? What product offerings? What service offerings? Do I really understand my customers' needs for optimum outdoor living? How can I help them win their marathon to reach maximum enjoyment from their yards and gardens?

The correct answers to these questions will change your leadership style and results. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.