

7 Staying a Student

One of the most reliable early signals that a leader's effectiveness is beginning to erode is that they have stopped genuinely changing their mind. Not updating processes or responding tactically to new information but actually revising their understanding of how something works. The habit of sustained learning, maintained as genuine curiosity rather than performance, turns out to be one of the clearest differentiators between those who sustain high performance and those whose performance peaks and gradually declines.

The forces that work against this habit in successful leaders are not hard to identify. Success creates a legitimate case for trusting what has worked before. A full diary leaves little room for the reflective practices through which genuine learning happens. And the social dynamics of seniority tend to reduce the frequency with which anyone offers a serious challenge to the leader's existing understanding. The result, in many organisations, is a slow drift towards consolidation: leaders who are highly competent within a model of the world that is gradually becoming less accurate, and who are receiving less and less information that would prompt them to revise it.

Michael Phelps, one of the most decorated athletes in Olympic history, offers an instructive illustration of what the alternative looks like from the inside, and why it matters long after the obvious case for continued learning has apparently been closed.

Phelps, Frame by Frame

Michael Phelps won twenty-three Olympic gold medals across four Games. The statistics are so large that they begin to feel abstract: the most decorated Olympian in the history of the Games, by a margin that makes the comparison feel almost unfair. What tends to receive less attention is what the training looked like when no one was counting medals, and what the review sessions looked like after the races that produced them.