

8 Boris Becker: From Champion to Prison Survivor

Professional identity is one of the most powerful and least examined forces in organisational life. Most leaders define themselves substantially through their role, their title, their reputation and their network. When those external markers are stable, this creates coherence and confidence. When they are disrupted, through redundancy, role transition, organisational change or public failure, the question of what remains can be genuinely destabilising.

This is not a marginal experience. The majority of senior leaders will face at least one significant disruption to the external markers of their professional identity across a career: a role that ends unexpectedly, a business that does not survive, a reputation that takes a serious hit. What determines how well they navigate that disruption is not primarily skill or experience. It is the degree to which their sense of professional self is grounded in something more stable than the markers that have been removed. Boris Becker's story is worth examining precisely because it represents an extreme version of a pressure that most leaders encounter in some form. What it reveals about the difference between reputation and character is directly applicable far beyond the sporting context.

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Boris Becker won Wimbledon in 1985 at the age of 17. He was unseeded, largely unknown outside Germany, and he won the most prestigious tennis tournament in the world with a combination of power, instinct and a ferocious competitiveness that seemed to belong to someone considerably older. The final against Kevin Curren was not a close match. Becker served with a kind of controlled aggression that the sport had not quite seen before, and he won in straight sets. He was 17 years old. He was also, from that moment forward, one of the most recognisable people in the world.

He went on to win five more Grand Slam titles, to reach the world number one ranking, and to become one of the most compelling and complicated