



Observations

Observations

Fit to lead: is fitness the key to effective executive leadership?

Christopher P. Neck

Pamplin College of Business, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

T.L. Mitchell

Cooper Wellness Center, The Cooper Clinic, Dallas, Texas, USA

Charles C. Manz

University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA

Kenneth H. Cooper

Founder and Chief Executive Officer, The Cooper Aerobics Center, Dallas, Texas, USA, and

Emmet C. Thompson

Alpha Fitness Center, Dallas, Texas, USA

833

Keywords *Fitness, Exercise, Leadership*

Abstract *This article describes the importance of fitness (chiefly exercise) for top ranking executive leaders and for their respective organizations. The authors discuss how fitness can contribute to stamina, mental clarity, ability to cope with stress and a variety of other factors that can affect an executive's ability to lead. The authors support this premise by drawing on key research studies and actual accounts of top executives from a variety of business organizations. The authors feature information obtained from direct interviews with the year 2000 USA presidential candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush. The authors view them as high profile models of how fitness can be given high priority for maintaining personal effectiveness for even the busiest executive leaders.*

Imagine a senior executive of a Fortune 100 company (perhaps it's you). She has just returned from 14 days of international travel. After only five hours of sleep, she arrived at her office very early to prepare for her first meeting of the morning. After numerous meetings and endless phone calls, the executive realizes that it's already 2.00 p.m. and she has not eaten anything at all since an early breakfast of coffee and donuts. She heads out of the door to grab some lunch and decides to walk to the nearby fast food outlet about a quarter of a mile from her office. She feels physically drained but figures the walk would be nice given that it winds around a local park. As she walks she recalls her days as a runner a few years back and how good it felt to be in shape. Now, given her busy schedule, she is rarely able to exercise at all. "I'd be wheezing quickly if I tried to

The authors would like to thank David W. Manz for his helpful suggestions in the developmental stage of this article. Unless otherwise indicated, the source of the information about George W. Bush and Al Gore and other top executives appearing in this article are from personal interviews conducted by the author team with these leaders.

jog now” she laments to herself. Half-way to the restaurant, she notices a group of runners approaching at a brisk pace. She looks on curiously as she thinks she recognizes a fit looking, middle aged man running in the middle of the pack. “Who is he – he looks so familiar, and how does he find the time to fit in exercise in his day? He must be unemployed!” Then as they reach each other he notices her stare and smiles at her. Her jaw drops as she finally realizes who he is.

Now it’s time to play “Who wants to be a millionaire”. The middle aged man in the scenario above is:

- (a) a past Olympic runner,
- (b) a professional triathlete,
- (c) a fitness trainer,
- (d) a presidential candidate.

What is your answer? Is it “a”, “b”, “c”, or “d”? You have used all of your lifelines so you have to answer this on your own. Are you ready? Is this your final answer? If you answered “a”, “b”, or “c” you are incorrect. Surprised? The correct answer is “d”, “a presidential candidate.” Let us explain. Unbelievably, at a time when most Americans find a plethora of reasons not to exercise, two of the busiest people in the country, two people with the most frenetic and grueling schedules of anyone in the world – Al Gore and George W. Bush – make it a top priority in their lives. In fact, they run almost every day whether they are traveling or at their home bases. So if you decide during your lunch break to walk to a nearby restaurant, and you see a middle aged man jogging, this runner could indeed be the next top ranking executive of the United States of America.

Currently, only 20-30 per cent of Americans engage in regular physical activity despite the fact that an enormous body of research shows that physically fit people perform better on the job, live longer, and enjoy a better quality of life. On the other hand, Mr Gore and Mr Bush – the two top presidential candidates for Election year 2000 – realize the importance of being fit.

The importance of a fit leader

Besides Gore and Bush, the list of top level executives who make fitness a priority in their lives reads like a *Who’s Who* and includes names like Tom Monaghan (founder of Domino’s Pizza,) Julian C. Day (CFO for Sears), Charles O. Rossotti (Comissioner of the IRS), and Dr Thomas Frist Jr (Chairman and CEO of Columbia/HCA Healthcare).

Consider these specific examples:

Each day, Tom Monaghan, now the Chairman of The Mater Christi Foundation, runs about four miles a day or uses the Stairmaster, uses the Nautilus for 30 minutes (alternating upper and lower body every other day), and when traveling does push-ups and crunches along with running. He consumes about 2,000 calories a day, does not eat any desserts or sweets, and fasts on bread and water for half a day twice a week.

James Harris, Director of Pro Personnel for the NFL's Baltimore Ravens exercises three to four days per week. His regime consists of 20 to 30 minutes on the treadmill or a brisk walk, some weight work, stretching, and bike riding. He avoids fried foods, red meat, and eating late.

Michael Mangum, President of The Mangum Group, performs aerobic exercises two hours per week and lifts weights two-three times a week. He also tries to minimize fat and cholesterol while maximizing fruit intake.

Why is fitness so important for these executives and many others including the leading candidates for President of the United States of America? Dr Christopher Neck and Dr Kenneth Cooper discuss in detail the answer to this question in their recent article in the *Academy of Management Executive* (Neck and Cooper, 2000). In brief, fitness has serious implications for both individual executives and the companies they represent. In terms of the individual executive, leaders who are fit are better able to handle the enormous demands and pressures that confront them – endless meetings, grueling travel schedules, high pressure and stress. Further, leaders who exercise regularly can enhance their job performance. In fact, various studies show that fitness does indeed promote job performance especially in high stress jobs. For example, commercial real estate stock brokers who participated in an aerobics training program (walking and/or running once a day, three times a week, for 12 weeks) experienced greater sales commissions during and subsequent to the training program than brokers who did not participate in the exercise program. Also, the findings from a study of workers in a very stressful environment (the postal service) aging from 18 to 62 years of age suggested that older (43-62 years of age), less fit individuals, consistently underperformed older, fitter people and younger individuals (18-30 years old) on mental tasks involving information processing.

Leaders who are fit also enjoy a superabundance of other benefits. They are less likely to become obese, possess higher levels of energy, and enjoy enhanced feelings of well-being. Further studies have shown that fit individuals (those who participate in aerobic activity) tend to enjoy various psychological outcomes as well, including a reduction in anxiety, depression, tension, and stress. In fact, Ken Resse, former executive Vice-president at Tenneco Inc., relied on exercise to help him cope with the pressures of being a top executive:

[There's] no question my exercise program has helped me cope with stress. If it starts to build up, I just go out and run like hell. I'm a morning runner, and that sets the tone for the whole day. By the time I get to the office, I'm relaxed (Rippe, 1989).

Physiological benefits of individuals engaged in fitness programs have also been documented. The findings in one study revealed improvements in cardiovascular function and strength, as well as reductions in body fat and weight for 66 men engaged in a two-year exercise program located within a corporate headquarters. A study led by Dr Dean Ornish showed that lifestyle changes that include diet and exercise can reverse the atherosclerotic changes of coronary heart disease and unblock arteries enough to avoid surgery. Finally, it has been estimated that 35 per cent of cancers, the second leading

cause of death in the USA, are related to diet. In fact, there is a growing body of epidemiological evidence correlating diet with the incidence of cancer, particularly cancers of the esophagus, breast, prostate, and colon.

Perhaps most striking of all, there is solid evidence that physically fit people live longer. A recent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* of over one million adults during a 14-year period confirmed that being overweight shortened a person's life. Additionally, several landmark studies at The Cooper Institute For Aerobics Research in Dallas have investigated the association between fitness and death. One of these studies investigated the relationship between fitness levels and risk of dying in more than 10,000 men and 3,000 women. The results revealed that men and women with low levels of physical fitness had more than twice the mortality rate of persons with even a moderate level of physical fitness. Fitness in this case helped overcome all causes of mortality, including diabetes, cancer, and heart disease.

The major conclusion from this line of research – that physical fitness can prolong one's life – has tremendous significance for organizations and executives. The fitness level of key executives can be a crucial factor in determining the success of the company. An illness or death of a top executive could have far reaching consequences for an organization. Dr Jerrold Post, co-author of *When Illness Strikes The Leader*, states:

In a company where you have a . . . leader who is so identified with the company, that kind of event [death or serious illness of a key executive] will strike at the core of its corporate identity (Romano, 1994).

Executive fitness is not only personally important to leaders themselves, but also to all the constituents of the leader's organization. This is particularly true when you are talking about a chief executive, such as the President of the United States and his/her constituents – you and us!

Are George W. Bush and Al Gore fit? (see Table I). Consider what the experts say. "He is in superb health", said Dr Tony Casolaro, team doctor for the Washington Redskins who reviewed Al Gore's records at the request of his campaign. "From a cardiovascular standpoint, he is in the top 1 per cent of all ages." Dr Kenneth Cooper of the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas Texas who is Bush's personal physician said that Bush is "in outstanding physical condition . . . and is at a low risk for heart disease." What are these two presidential candidates doing to achieve such excellent levels of fitness?

Al Gore

Given the fact that he is the country's second-highest officeholder, Al Gore has the good fortune of being his own boss and thus has some degree of control over his ability to exercise each day. It also doesn't hurt that his boss (President Clinton) is a devoted runner as well. As you can imagine, Gore's life right now as a Vice-president of the USA and as a presidential candidate, requires considerable travel, which means jet lag, eating hurriedly, and not getting enough sleep. According to Gore, these demands make exercise an even more important element of his day:

	George Bush	Al Gore
Running highlight	Completing the 1993 Houston marathon	Completing the 1997 Marine Corps Marathon in Washington DC
Personal records	20 minutes, 20 seconds for the 5K, 42 minutes for the 10k and 3 hours 44 minutes for the marathon	Finished the Marine Corps Marathon in 4 hours, 58 minutes, 25 seconds
Training routine	Three miles, four days a week at a pace of about 7:10 to 7:45 per mile. Likes to run on the Town Lake Trail in downtown Austin	Runs 20 miles or more a week if he can, preferably early each morning. Uses the treadmill when he can't run outdoors
Cross-training	Uses the treadmill and elliptical trainer two days a week. Also lifts weights one or two days a week	Uses free weights
Favorite race	Capitol 10K in Austin	No specific favorite, but says he enjoys longer races. "I've done 10Ks ... the Army 10-miler ... 15Ks, a bunch of 5Ks".
Shoes	Asics size 11 ½	New Balance 10 ½ wide
Injuries	Complete recovery from arthroscopic surgery in 1997 to repair cartilage damage to his left knee, a running injury	Wore a leg cast – but not for long – after tearing his Achilles' tendon playing basketball in 1994
Quote	"Running is good for the body and the mind"	"I find it relaxing" (Hillman and Slater, 2000)

Table I.
Executive fitness behaviors at a glance: a look at the exercise habits of Al Gore and George W. Bush

Running helps me stay in good health; I feel better, and I'm more productive . . . It burns off stress and it's easier to stay relaxed when I run regularly (Higdon, 1998).

Gore “walks the talk” regarding prioritizing exercise despite his busy schedule. Consider the day before he completed the 1997 Marine Corps Marathon in Washington DC:

The night before I gave a speech in Des Moines, and a huge snowstorm closed the airport. We had to drive to Waterloo. We got back to Washington late Saturday night before the marathon. It was 3 a.m. before my head hit the pillow (Cimons, 1998).

Six hours later, Gore was lined up at the start of the marathon . . . with less than six hours sleep that night, he ran 26.2 miles. How many of us would have just gone back to bed after the alarm clock rang? Furthermore, while traveling, Gore travels with a set of dumbbells that are so heavy that an advance man has troubling lugging them around. And, Gore makes sure that the hotel rooms that he stays in

are equipped with a treadmill. Finally, Gore places such importance on exercise, despite his busy schedule, that during long flights in Air Force II, he will often head to his cabin for sets of push-ups, sit-ups and dumbbell curls (Davis, 2000).

While he has been running for approximately 20 years, a routine week for Al Gore includes running 20 miles or more, combined with some strength work. He remarks:

I like to jog and I typically do that five or six times per week and sometimes on occasion I'll intersperse that with the Stairmaster. I also have some weight training exercises that I do.

The time of the day in which Gore exercises is very important to him. He prefers to exercise first thing in the morning. Why?

My daily schedule varies a substantial amount just from one day to the next. But what I do is I always try to make sure that whoever is doing the schedule for the day knows that I need the first part of the day to do my exercise . . . I always try to exercise in the morning even if that means that I have to get up that much earlier to do it, cause I found that if I wait until the afternoon or into the evening the day takes over and sometimes my days go on very late into the evening so I never get a chance to do it.

Exercise is clearly important to Al Gore, but what about his eating habits? Does he place as much importance on what he eats? While Mr Gore generally tries to make healthy eating choices, his temporary departures from a healthy diet may be one reason that he prioritizes exercise so much. Consider the following account:

After attending two fund-raising dinners in Detroit last month, he still asked for a piece of chocolate cake during a 10 p.m. visit with two teachers in Macomb, Michigan. Visiting the cafeteria of L'Anse Creuse Middle School North the next day, he wolfed down two slices of pepperoni pizza, cookies and fruit salad (Davis, 2000).

George W. Bush

George W. Bush played team sports when he was young. His parents were always physically active, and this encouraged the Bush children to adopt physically active lifestyles as well. George W. Bush began running in 1972, at a time when the jogging craze was just getting up a full head of steam, and he has never stopped since. In fact, he credits running with helping him stop drinking when he turned 40:

I am a very disciplined person. I think one of the reasons I was able to stop drinking literally overnight was because of that discipline. Running is also part of being a disciplined person, because it takes discipline to get out and run every day.

Disciplined he certainly is. Like the schedule of his opponent Al Gore, Bush's presidential campaigning duties and duties as Governor of Texas are extremely demanding. Yet, he disciplines himself to run three miles, four days a week. He also uses the treadmill and elliptical trainer two days a week, and lifts weights one or two days a week. A recent week in the life of Mr Bush illustrates his discipline toward exercise:

This week, I ran on Saturday, I ran on Sunday. I missed on Monday. It was Colonel O'Connors's funeral, we flew out first thing in the morning, went to the funeral, ended up in Pittsburgh. And then I exercised Tuesday and today. I got back from the campaign trip, we

landed about 3 and I ran before dinner and then yesterday I exercised at noon. And then tomorrow I've got a speech and then I'll come back and exercise and then Sunday I'll exercise. I will have six days.

Bush's discipline for maintaining fitness, like Gore, is reflected in the fact that he schedules exercise into his work day. As Bush remarked:

A reporter who had looked at my calendar noticed that I had about an hour and a half off per day. I said, that is because I exercise every day. They asked if this was an indication that I do not work very hard. I said, no, it is an indication that I prioritize exercise.

George W. Bush exercises for many of the same reasons that Al Gore does – to enhance performance and to reduce stress:

I told them [reporters] that I have given some of the greatest speeches of my life while running . . . running is therapy, running is a chance to be alone, a chance to think . . . Running is an opportunity to be outdoors in fresh air. Running is a wholesome and important experience for me.

How the presidential candidates lead . . . themselves: the practice of self-leadership

We all know how tough it is to motivate ourselves to exercise. Given our jobs, families, and other obligations, it is not difficult to talk ourselves out of going for that run, or heading to the gym. And it's so much easier to grab that fast food than plan a healthy meal. So the question is, how do two of the busiest people in our country motivate themselves to stay fit, to exercise most days of the week, and to watch what they eat? The answer to this question lies in the concept of self-leadership. Charles Manz and Christopher Neck (1999) in their book, *Mastering Self-Leadership*, define self-leadership as “the process of influencing yourself to achieve your personal goals”. They point out that the concept of self-leadership involves both behavioral and mental strategies. It is clear through our study of and conversations with Al Gore and George W. Bush that they use self-leadership strategies to help them lead themselves toward their fitness goals.

For example, one self-leadership strategy called “increasing positive cues” involves using physical objects to remind us of, or to focus our attention on, things we need to do. Al Gore relies on this self-leadership strategy when he travels by making sure there is exercise equipment in his hotel room. Having the equipment in his room can serve as a reminder and focus his attention on his need to exercise when he travels.

Another self-leadership strategy is “self-goal setting.” One way to help you lead yourself to perform challenging behaviors (e.g. exercising) is to set personal goals. Both Bush and Gore set personal goals for their fitness. For example they both set a goal of running a marathon and they both achieved this goal. And such longer term goals help create the context for setting shorter term goals that can help us maintain fitness on a daily basis. In fact, Bush commented on this self-leadership technique specifically:

Running is a chance to set a momentary goal. A daily goal and achievement.

“Finding natural rewards” in the tasks that we do is yet another self-leadership tactic used by Gore and Bush to motivate themselves to exercise and eat properly. An important part of self-leadership is based on relying on the natural motivation derived from activities that are naturally rewarding to do because they make us feel more competent and self-controlling. During our interviews both presidential candidates pointed out that the fitness activities they have chosen are ones that they like to do and are pretty good at doing.

Finally, in order to motivate yourself to exercise daily you have to decide if it's really important to you. If it is, then you need to make exercise a priority in your life. Al Gore and George W. Bush practice this self-leadership strategy of “purpose development” by insisting that time for exercise be set aside each day at the best time for their busy schedules, mornings for Gore and mid day for Bush.

Now, let's revisit the senior executive from the opening scenario.

Later that evening while struggling to maintain her stamina and concentration as she answers the plethora of e-mails that had piled up during the day, she started thinking about the middle aged runner whom she had encountered during her lunch break. She reflected on how she first concluded that he probably only had the time to run because he was unemployed only to realize he was one of the busiest people in the country and may well be the next President of the United States. She thought about how the man seemed to be running at a brisk pace without too much effort, indicating that he runs regularly. “I wonder how he finds the time?” she puzzled. It dawned on her that she once possessed such a level of fitness too. She had made fitness a priority despite her busy schedule and her endurance and concentration seemed so much better. In fact, she recalled running at least four miles a day and that she did it specifically to give her energy and clear her mind, and it seemed to help her feel really good about herself. She wished that she still had that same level of fitness today. “That middle aged runner sure had a lot of energy,” she thought to herself. “Perhaps an exercise program would do the same for me?”

People who say they can't find the time to become fit should realize that a fitness program actually produces time (author, and cardiologist, Dr George Sheehan).

References

- Cimons, M. (1998), “All in the family: Al Gore's marathon run”, *Runners' World*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 52-4.
- Davis, B. (2000), “Gore's exercising slims down the candidate, but will it buff up his image with voters?”, *Wall Street Journal*, A20, 14 April.
- Higdon, H. (1998), “The time to run: how some busy runners make time for their sport”, *Runners' World*, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 54-8.
- Hillman, G.R. and Slater, W. (2000), “In the running: how they run: when it comes to exercise, the presidential pacesetters tread a common path”, *The Dallas Morning News*, 25A, 2 July.
- Manz, C. and Neck, C. (1999), *Mastering Self-Leadership*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Neck, C.P. and Cooper, K.H. (2000), “The fit executive: exercise and diet guidelines for enhanced performance”, *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 72-83.
- Rippe, J.M. (1989), “CEO fitness: the performance plus”, *Psychology Today*, Vol. 23 No. 5, pp. 50-4.
- Romano, C. (1994), “In sickness and in health”, *Management Review*, Vol. 83 No. 5, pp. 40-6.