

## **Furlong's Games stint taught us much about leadership at the top** **Rosie Steeves**

As we bid farewell to the Olympic and Paralympic Games, I'd like to bring something to your attention. Not only has John Furlong led us from beginning to end of this huge undertaking, he has done so with the unequivocal support of virtually everyone.

Consider this. Despite whatever bumps in the road that were encountered, confidence in Furlong's leadership has grown. Not even the media have called for his head. It's an outstanding accomplishment and one that many senior leaders would be wise to reflect on.

I often get asked who I think best epitomizes effective executive leadership. It's a difficult question to answer because I know of no one who has the whole package. As many of you who regularly read this column know, I believe the quality of leadership at the top of organizations is, in more cases than not, falling short of what is required. So much so that I have recently formed my own company (Executive Works) specifically to work with those at the top.

But today I feel compelled to write about the man who has led us through the Olympics. I have nothing but respect for the way that Furlong has led VANOC and before that the 2010 Winter Olympic Bid Committee.

I first interviewed Furlong in 2003, when the focus was on the bid. Even then his focus on leadership was clear, and since that time, he has stayed the course. Perhaps more than anything, I am struck by his powerful combination of humility and resolve. Furlong is one of the least egocentric leaders I know. He clearly is ambitious – not for himself but for a successful Games. He is not larger than life but just a decent hard-working guy.

Perhaps it was this real element, this willingness to be vulnerable while still fiercely holding the vision that made others want to follow him. Inspiration came from a passionate and genuine articulation of the dream, not stage-managed pep talks. I was not on the inside, so I'm not privy to VANOC's inner workings. However, what I saw was a united and loyal team at the top. While Furlong was the leader, he let other members of the team step up when the time was right.

Things did not go perfectly; they never do. But Furlong built a team around him that was willing to adapt and change. As we know, the true test of a leader is when things go wrong. Furlong's integrity, humility and commitment to the vision proved to be essential traits when the team encountered those bumps in the road.

Many senior executives find themselves torn between external and internal demands, and in this regard Furlong was no different. Yet, he managed to find a balance between these sometime competing interests. He was clearly the leader of VANOC employees while at the same time the external face of the organization. It was not one or the other, but a carefully adjusted integration.

I can only imagine what he learned along the way. And it was his willingness to learn that assured effective leadership.

Ironically, the fact he did not have the requisite experience prior to taking on this mammoth task was a real asset. He knew he could not do it alone and so had to listen closely to those around him. By all accounts he did. Pay attention fellow executives.

Was he perfect? No, of course not. In particular, there is one area that senior executives must not emulate: the hours of work. Furlong worked himself almost to exhaustion. Fortunately, there was a finite time to this project. Putting the organization above everything else (including one's health) is not a sustainable strategy.

Whatever one thought of the Games, few (including the media) questioned Furlong's leadership capacity. My hope is that this is one of the lasting impacts of the Games: a legacy of excellence in executive leadership.

In the meantime, Mr. Furlong, I have two things to say to you. Thank you, and now please go home and hug your grandkids.

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