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## Chasing the Triple Crown

*An interview with authors Bob and Gregg Vanourek*

Bob and Gregg Vanourek, father and son, are co-authors of [Triple Crown Leadership: Building Excellent, Ethical, and Enduring Organizations](#).

The duo — both with careers as senior executives and experience teaching at the university level — had developed the idea of "three Es" of leadership. When their book agent made the connection to the Triple Crown of Thoroughbred Horseracing, the metaphor took hold.

With good memories of watching horse races, the Vanoureks researched horseracing for the book — and learned the compelling stories of Man o' War, War Admiral, Seabiscuit, Citation, Secretariat, Ruffian and other horses, plus owners and stables like Penny Chenery and Meadow Farm. They were inspired by the drama, intrigue, challenge and complexity of the sport — and the quest for three big wins in a row: The Kentucky Derby, the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes.

The authors recently introduced CCL to "triple crown leadership" in an e-mail interview:

**CCL: Describe the three elements of triple crown leadership. Why it is a challenge to succeed in all three?**

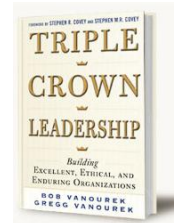
**Vanoureks:** Each of the three elements of triple crown leadership — excellence, ethical, and enduring — is challenging in its own right. Many organizations strike out on all three counts. "Excellent" can mean many things but for our purposes here, it means exceptional performance. "Ethical" means doing the right thing, even when it is costly and hard. "Enduring" means standing the test of time by operating sustainably. In some cases, there are tradeoffs between them. In dirty industries or bribe-infested countries, organizations pay a price by refusing to play ball. In many cases, setting the organization up for long-term success and impact has short-term costs that make it hard for leaders to "make their numbers" today.

Triple crown leadership entails finding a better way, in some cases by creating new alternatives. We write about five practices that make triple crown leadership possible: head and heart, colors, steel and velvet, stewards and alignment.

**CCL: Where should someone start if they are motivated by your book? What are good first steps?**

**Vanoureks:** Start by developing your own triple crown leadership. Focus on the three Es — excellent, ethical, and enduring — and role-model the five practices of triple crown leadership. Build triple crown leadership into

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the September, 2012 issue were authors Bob and Gregg Vanourek.



your organization's processes, discussions and incentives. Identify key influencers in the organization and work with them to identify initiatives that can build momentum for results, integrity and sustainability (such as changing the hiring process, piloting leadership development programs and forming skunk-works teams).

**CCL: What might triple crown leadership look like from various levels or different perspectives in an organization?**

**Vanoureks:** At the board level, triple crown leadership makes the aim of building an excellent, ethical, and enduring organization the highest priority. The board must go well beyond a check-box, compliance mentality to being active stewards for a high-performance culture of character. They must set a tone from the top for the whole organization, not just at the top and for the top. They must ensure that the CEO and officers are leaders with character who work assiduously to create a triple crown organization—with compensation plans that are appropriate and that incentivize enduring high performance with integrity.

The CEO and officers must embrace this priority of building an excellent, ethical, and enduring organization. They should employ all five practices of triple crown leadership. They must role-model triple crown leadership, protecting the mavericks who abide by the organization's values and terminating the toxic people who undermine the culture of character, even if they are star performers. The CEO must recognize that triple crown leadership is a group performance, not a solo act and be strong enough to lead courageously at times and follow the leadership of colleagues at others.

People without formal positions of authority must recognize that leadership is a choice they can make. They can and should lead, influencing others through their character-based performance, acting as stewards to help define, nurture and protect the character of culture. They should be unafraid to address questionable practices, acting as a "voice of one" when their conscience tells them something isn't right.

**CCL: As you worked on the book, what did you learn that was most surprising or unexpected?**

**Vanoureks:** The importance of "finding another way." Corey Booker, the mayor of Newark, NJ, said, "You can't surrender to the options before you. There's always another way." Triple crown leaders find another way. Bob saw this often in the crucible of turnarounds, where men and women of character found new solutions to challenging problems and created incredible value with new product launches, amazing quality increases and breathtaking improvements in cash flow after a crisis.

We encountered similar stories in Greensburg, KS, a town devastated by a Category 5 tornado and rebuilt as the "greenest town in America" only two years later. And at Rocky Flats where a toxic plutonium site was cleaned up in record time, far under budget, and at levels exceeding the environmental standards by large amounts. Committed people found another way in India, a country plagued with rampant corruption, to build a world-class tech company in Infosys, known worldwide for its integrity.

**CCL: Was there a moment in your personal journey where you felt the tug of excellence vs. ethics vs. endurance? How did that shape your views?**

**Vanoureks:** In his late 20s, Bob was working at a hot company that had gone public with a high-flying stock and was acquiring companies quickly, integrating them, and then gobbling up other firms. Integration meant firing the former management, moving plants and laying off people, hyping sales with deals at the end of quarters in ways that were unsustainable, and burning people out with red-eye flights every week and 80+-hour workweeks. He said, "There must be a better way." He quit and set out on a decades-long odyssey to find that better way to lead. The search led him to meet Robert Greenleaf, author of *Servant Leadership*, a few

wise mentors, great resources offered by the Young Presidents' Organization, and lots of inspiring books. Slowly, painfully, he began to discover a better way to lead. The most important insights came from trusted colleagues, who patiently showed him a better way.

Gregg came of age professionally under smart and well-intentioned leaders, some of whom were blind to their weak spots, caught up in ego trips or stuck in the "great leader" model. Those experiences taught him the importance of leading from below — of speaking up and taking a stand, even at a high personal cost, and of overcoming fear and complacency.

**CCL: What else do you want to say about triple crown leadership?**

**Vanourek:** Many of the problems our leaders wrestle with today are self-inflicted. They are also solvable. But today's brand of leadership is not adequate for the depth and scope of our current challenges. It is time to set our sights on a more noble quest. No organization can be perfect, but the quest for the triple crown can transform the people involved and the entire enterprise. It's time to raise our game. We must do better.

*Keep up with the Vanoureks via Twitter: [@TripleCrownLead](#) or visit [TripleCrownLeadership.com](http://TripleCrownLeadership.com).*

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