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BUSINESS

'It's been humbling': former Adidas Canada president Michael Rossi on why he quit to become a leadership coach

After 18 years with Adidas, Michael Rossi speaks out about why he left the corporate rat race to embrace a new career in mid-life as a personal coach.

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Michael Rossi, former president of Adidas Canada, now works as a leadership coach, speaker and consultant. He left after 18 years with Adidas when he realized that a bigger title, more control or more money would not get him out of bed anymore.

Robert Caruso photo

By Joanna Pachner Special to the Star

Earlier this year, after seven years as president and GM of Adidas Canada, Michael Rossi stepped down — not to take a bigger job elsewhere but to go out on his own as a leadership coach. While the pandemic has led many people to re-examine their lives and careers, for Rossi the decision stemmed from a growing desire for change. We caught up with him to find out what it's like to leave the corporate rat race and start over in mid-career.

Was the pandemic a factor in your decision to go out on your own?

No, to be honest. This was in my mind prior to COVID. I've been lucky to have 18 years with Adidas but I started to get the itch to move on to something new. Then, about 18 months ago, I discovered coaching and realized it aligned with what I loved most about being a leader, which was helping people grow. To me, a bigger title or a bigger span of control or more money would not get me out of bed anymore.

What kind of coaching have you received in your career?

Ironically, I've had little personal experience with coaching. What I experienced was more mentorship, which is a very different discipline. A mentee is paired with someone who has experience in a specific field and gives advice. It's one-sided in that respect. Coaching is almost the opposite and something I've had to adjust to. As a senior leader in business, you're expected to offer opinions and make decisions. As a coach, you're not there to share your life experiences but to draw out what the client is dreaming of and what's holding them back, and find ways to reframe their perspective.

The term “coach” brings to mind sports. How does athletic coaching differ from or resemble leadership coaching?

They're very different. People think of a coach as someone who teaches you a functional skill. The coaching discipline I've been trained in is quite the opposite. The coach is not there to tell the client what to do but help them see things for themselves. Having said that, good coaches in sports see the potential in their players and try to bring that out, and that's a parallel because a good coach fundamentally believes the client is capable but may simply be stuck.

What kind of issues do you help clients with?

Topics could be anything from career-related things like how to find what truly makes you passionate or get ready for that next job, or it could be personal things: you want to be more present in your child's life or in your marriage. Career issues may start with a conversation around a specific job but when you dig into that, the client may realize that job is not right for them.

Unfortunately, some companies look at coaching as a way to deal with problematic employees. It's the last thing in a performance plan: get them a coach and see if that fixes them. That's totally backwards. If you have talented employees, they move up quickly. I was appointed president before I turned 40 and it was lonely. You get into a high-pressure position and you have no peers to talk to. That's where coaching can be really helpful.

Are there particular questions that you find elicit the most revealing answers?

When a client is holding onto something — a belief, an assumption, a behaviour — having them articulate the cost of that in their life, what they are giving up or not getting as a result, often creates a beautiful moment of reflection and acknowledgment. There may be emotions the client is not dealing with. I had this experience myself last year. As part of being certified as a coach, I had my own coach. At the beginning of COVID, I was feeling burnt out and stressed. The coach asked what my fears are and how I physically felt when I relived those situations, and it made me realize the immense pressure I was putting on myself.

You decided to retrain in mid-career for an entirely new profession. Do you find there is a stigma to starting over in mid-life?

Yeah. It was interesting to see how people responded to my news. Some think I'm crazy. And it's been humbling, because working my way up to the most senior role in the Canadian division, I rarely had to learn something completely new. What was cool about the intense, three-day workshops I did was that there were no titles in that room. It was a great equalizer. And I was humbled to realize that what made me successful as a business person were not necessarily the skills I needed as a coach.

What aspects of corporate life do you miss or are glad to leave behind?

What I don't miss is the meeting culture. I realize now how programmed my days were. I would start in the eastern time zone and finish on West Coast time, having back-to-back-to-back meetings. Now that I only do coaching calls, I see how much PowerPoint had become our language: you would hardly ever present without a deck. I'm grateful to go back to one-to-one conversations that create spontaneous connections. What I do miss is the camaraderie and passion for sport at Adidas.

What changes did you witness in your industry during your time there?

The sneaker culture and the scarcity model — the idea of limited-edition products — have become huge. Anyone with kids knows the lingo, “A new Yeezy is dropping,” and people speculate by buying the shoes to resell for a higher price. There has also been an overwhelming shift toward sustainability. Are you using recycled materials? Can your shoes be recycled or upcycled? It’s a fashion industry and that leaves a footprint, no pun intended. These two trends run counter to each other: sustainability versus constantly releasing new products.

Have you seen any changes in the sports or athletes that athletic brands sponsor?

One interesting spinoff from COVID is a focus on the outdoors, which was once a niche sector. In terms of athletes, there will always be a desire to have the big North American sports athletes on your roster, but many brands are looking for authenticity in their influencers and ambassadors, which means balancing those global stars with local athletes who are known only in specific communities.

Do you consider esports part of the athletic landscape? One could argue they are the biggest influencers now with many of your people.

There are varying opinions on whether they’re true athletes. Adidas worked with some esports gamers in the past and brands attach themselves to those competitors because it’s such a captive audience. We’ve long worked with musicians and other style and cultural influencer, and I see esports stars having similar clout. But for brands, esports is still a bit of a mystery and that awareness needs to evolve.

**Joanna Pachner**

Joanna Pachner is a business writer, editor and freelance contributor for the Star's Business section.

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