

SPORT

Know Who You Are

Mike Singletary, NFL Hall of Fame, Chicago Bears

Interviewed by: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind sharing a little bit about your journey, and maybe some thoughts about what you've learned about leadership along the way. Certainly faith is a big aspect of who you are. We talk about that with respect to character, who you are. So anything you'd be willing to share along the ideas of leadership and character would be great.

Singletary: I think first of all, we're living at a time in our society where leadership is not a trait that is regarded as very valuable. I think what's happening right now in our world is more and more leaders are quiet. I think leaders today are paralyzed by the fear of someone calling them prideful, not team players, and arrogant. I think that it's really, in our country right now, a time more so than any other for leaders to rise, not be afraid, and not be paralyzed. To make sure that if you feel that you're a leader, and we're all leaders in some respect, but if we feel that we are a leader, then one of the first things that we must acquire is courage. As a leader, there will be times that you will be afraid. There will be a time to stand alone. There'll be times that you are in a room, and everybody's saying the same thing on one side of the room, and you're the only one that's standing for what you believe is right. I've been in that situation where they say, "All you have to do is come over here, then we don't have to argue." But when you believe something and you know what to be right, I don't care if the whole world is against you. For leaders, it is so important that they know who they are. Because if I know who I am in God, then I know that I always have someone with me. For me, that is my faith. I believe that if God is with you, you're the majority. If I have that perspective in life, I'm going to be someone very, very difficult, or safe to handle. So I think that's one of the main things.

Mike Singletary is a retired professional football player. He spent 12 years as a linebacker with the Chicago Bears, is a 10-time Pro Bowl selectee, a three-time NFL Defensive Player of the year, Super Bowl Champion, a team captain for 10 years, and culminated his career with selection into the Professional Football Hall of Fame (1998). Following football, he spent 10 years as a consultant supporting businesses elevate their strategies. In 2003, he started a coaching career with the Baltimore Ravens as a linebackers coach, moved to the San Francisco 49ers to be a linebackers coach and became the head coach for two years, and followed that up with three years with the Minnesota Vikings, and a year with the Los Angeles Rams.

The first thing is identity, knowing who they are, and they can't be swayed, they can't be bought, they will not compromise. They will not give in. They will not quit. They will do the right thing, they will be above reproach at all cost. I think that's number one.

Lindsay: I think that idea of identity is really important because I think oftentimes we tend to see our identity as things we do, not necessarily who we are, right? We might be successful in one domain, for example, my identity as a football player and I tend to see myself and my success in that light. But it's much greater than that. Who we are, as much more than just what we do. It's so much more than that.

Singletary: If who we are becomes what we do, we are vulnerable. We're vulnerable because what we do can always be taken. Because it's something that someone gave me, allowed me to do, whatever. That's why my identity must be from the inside out, and not from the outside in, external or something that is attached to me. It must be something that is in me and not detachable, not tangible, but something that is interwoven into the thread of my soul.

Lindsay: When was it for you that reality hit? You came from a tough home life where you were called to be the man early on in your life. You had success in football, which allowed you some opportunities. When was it in your life that reality of, my identity of who I choose to be, was going to be the way that you are going to live your life for the rest of your life?

Singletary: It's really interesting, because all leaders grow, and we grow in stages. We grow in levels. There was a time as a young man, my leadership was by force, and you were either with me or you against me. You were either on my side, or you were not. If you didn't say what I'm saying, you're wrong. If you were not going

to walk with me then oh, you're wrong. If you like this person that I don't like, you're wrong. And so, as a young man that was my form of leadership, if I could look back on it and just be honest.

My dad, I did not like him. And because I didn't like him, I wanted to be better than him. I wanted to redo the things that I felt that he had messed up with the Singletary name. I wanted to restore pride, that I felt that he had tarnished it, so that was my driving force to begin with. Then the Lord took me through a point of forgiving my dad, and it allowed me to have to get my strength and my drive from somewhere else. It could no longer be from hate. It had to go from hate to freedom. I was released from the hate. Now, I'm beginning to find that source in me of strength. As I began to understand the freedom that I had, I could play the game of football, live my life, be who I was, and be free from the pain of my past and realized that I could be forgiven, now I can move to love. And joy. But love is the hardest one. No, I should say love is difficult. Joy is the hardest one. And it's joy is the road to peace because at some point in time, none of that other stuff matters. When you have a leader who is free, he loves who he is, even though he doesn't have what Joe has, he doesn't have with Jim has, he's free. You go from that to loving unconditionally because of the work that has already been done, and I just have to receive it. It's already been done, we make life too hard, and to be a leader, I just need to be who I am. I just need to be, and move away from doing, and being brings about the joy.

Lindsay: And it really just unburdens us from all that past, all that guilt, all that other stuff, right? It also brings in that idea of just being to really kind of an aspect of service, and wanting to serve others as a leader. Being able to not be about me, but being about the business of being in the service of others. As we are called to be. Is that part of why you wanted to move

into coaching, and be in that aspect so that you can serve others, to be in that role, to be that example, and pass that on?

Singletary: You know, the biggest reason that I believe that I was in coaching for the time that I was, was to be a head coach. You know, people go, "Well, why do you want to be a head coach?" Because I didn't trust those that were leading it. I always knew that whoever I'm leading, it's going to be about them. I am going to make decision based on their behalf. I'm not going to be a selfish leader, I'm not going to make them stay there until two in the morning knowing that they have a newborn baby, and knowing that they have responsibilities as a father. If I'm not helping my coaches be better men so that they can be better husbands, so that they can be better fathers, if I'm not helping them, and if they're not seeing what I want to see in them, what I'm trying to teach them, if they're not seeing it in me, and I'm just talking about it— I'm sending the wrong message. So, I knew that I could be trusted, to be the example. And that's the thing about a leader when a leader is trying to be who he should be, he's a leader.

Lindsay: That's powerful because now you're changing lives. Now you're making a difference. Now, you're leading from your position of strength because of who you are, right?

Singletary: Yes, and I don't have to second guess myself. I don't have to worry about it. What is Jim going to think about me if I make this decision? What if I get fired? What if I get criticized? I don't have to worry about it because I'm free, right? Freedom is power.

Lindsay: So, with that in mind advice would you have for young leaders in terms of what they need to focus on early on in their careers? Is it that idea of finding

yourself, finding your identity, understanding what you stand for?

Singletary: I think the best advice that I can give young leaders, is to seek out other leaders who you know are great leaders, and ask to spend time with them, ask them how much time can they spend with you, and seek to be in their presence.

Lindsay: I think that's important because we're all influenced by different people. We're influenced by those who we put in our lives, right? We're influenced by the books we read, the people we hang around. That's important because oftentimes we allow ourselves to be influenced by whoever's loudest, whoever's in front of us, and/or whoever has what we want. I think it's easy to get sidetracked.

Singletary: Absolutely.

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