‘We Need a Whole Bunch of Niceness in the World’: Shaq Shares What Four Decades of High-Pressure Situations Has Taught Him About Leadership

Shaquille O’Neal is supersized in every way. His resume is longer than his body and he’s over seven feet tall. He earned four NBA championship rings. He’s a cohost of *Inside the NBA,* a show that’s won 21 Emmys. He’s a judge on *The Grind*, a pitch show for entrepreneurial students. He owns about a gazillion franchises and does a whole bunch of other stuff, too.

I was thrilled to have him on a recent episode of How Success Happens, which you can listen to right here or read an abbreviated transcript below. Shaq is funny, inspiring and extremely generous — but make no mistake, if he’s happy with your attitude, he will put hands on you.

Dan Bova: Shaq, you’re a busy guy. You don’t just sit back and relax.
Shaquille O’Neal: Growing up under the tutelage of a military drill sergeant, you’re always taught to just stay focused and just keep working and on to the next. I’ve never been one to rest on my laurels or, you know, be impressed with my accolades. I work hard, I receive accolades and then just, you know, continue to the next thing.

On the pitch show “The Grind,” you gave a lot of contestants the same piece of advice: Don’t get nervous when you talk about money. It’s easy to say “Don’t get nervous” but hard to

do.

Whenever I try to use OPM (other people's money) to build other companies — especially in the tech space — I speak to the tech experts so I know what I'm talking about. If you know the ins and outs of it, you're not nervous. I try to do my due diligence and really understand what I'm asking for. You don't want to go to a meeting with Jeff Bezos and just ask for $100 million. You want Jeff to know and understand exactly what you're doing, and then he can say, "Okay, Shaq, I believe in what you believe in. I like to be an investor in your company."

I've read that growing up, you weren't so excited to be much taller than everyone around you. Any advice you could give about getting comfortable in your own skin?

I am a product of my environment. I wasn't comfortable until I saw another tall NBA player by the name of Magic Johnson. I mean, he smiled and he's dribbling and everybody loves him. I saw the perks that he had, and I was like, "You know what? I like being tall now." At first, when you're the tallest kid in school and everybody's looking at you, it's uncomfortable. But around the age of 14, when I started coming into my basketball body, then I just forgot about it. One of the positives for me is that I got treated like an adult early on. I was 17 and they thought I was 23, that was the best. I can't say that now, but I do look good for 50.

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You've been a part of new business launches like Campus, but you're also really big on franchising. What drew you to that as opposed to starting your own thing from scratch?

I call it OP — ownership and partnership. You know, of course, I'm not running the franchise, but you partner up with people who are smarter than you. It is about owning and being team members with brands that are very, very successful. And as for Campus, education is so important to me. I'm getting a

master’s in liberal arts, but I want to be a sports psychologist.

Sports psychology, I imagine a lot of young players in the NBA ask you for advice. Is that what led you to pursue this?
I kind of find it hard to believe a guy who’s never been in pressure situations can tell me how to handle pressure. Athletes know that I understand. And once I come with the academic credentials, combined with the sports background? When you put those two together, I think it’s a very powerful component. I haven’t seen any sports psychologists that have won championships. I’ve had a lot of pressure, so I wanna be the first and only.

You’ve been a great leader on the court. You’ve played for six teams. What’s Shaq’s day one in the locker room like?
It’s like watching any penitentiary movie. On day one you have to let them know who the badass is. The only time I didn’t do that was when I went to play with LeBron because he already had everything under control. For every other locker room that I go into, you know that I’m in charge. And if you don’t listen to my ways verbally, I will have to put these hands on you. And I’ve put hands on a lot of players. I’m not going to say who, but it’s my way or the highway. And if you If you don’t like it, then you will get dealt with properly. You have to let them know in front of everybody, “Hey man, shoot the ball one more time and I’m going to punch you right in your face.” And then if they come down and shoot it? You got to punch him in the face. Once they know you’re serious, you gain control.

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Years ago I interviewed you in person, walking around a mall in Florida. And it was amazing to see how people react to you and how much time you give to people.
I love to go out to some of my favorite spots, like Best Buy or Wal-Mart, and ear hustle. You know what that means? Ear

hustle means listening to people's conversations. So I was in Walmart and I saw this little girl and her mom. So the girl was going, "Mom, I want this, I want this," and I could see that the mom was trying to do her best to get what she could afford. So everything that the little girl looked at, I just waited behind and then I just grabbed it. So then when mom goes to pay for her stuff, I give her this cart full of stuff. I was like "Here you go. You guys left this. This is free." She's like, "No, I can't take it." I was like, "Sorry it's paid for it, you have to." Then I told the little girl, I said, "Little baby, don't ever take stuff from strangers."

Not everyone who has the means does stuff like that.

My mother gave me the greatest piece of advice ever. And it's so simple. It costs you nothing to be nice. I am who I am. You know who I am, but I don't have to always throw it in your face, right? Just be nice. If you're nice, I'm nice. We live in a crazy world where we need a whole bunch of niceness.

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