

Why Lakers' Luka Dončić Is a "Positive Instigator"

Dončić overcame adversity to be a catalyst for transformation.

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Key points

- **Fan favorite Luka Dončić has laced up with force for his second season with the Los Angeles Lakers.**
 - **It's worth looking back at his dramatic and painful evolution as a leader and the lessons he offers off court.**
 - **In early February, Dončić and his fans were shocked when the Dallas Mavericks traded him to the Lakers.**
 - **Dončić rose above it and became a positive instigator with effective communication and elite performance.**
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With the NBA season in full stride, superstar Luka Dončić has laced up for his second season with the Los Angeles Lakers. It's worth looking back at his dramatic and painful evolution as a leader and examining the important lessons he offers leaders off the court.

In early February, when the Dallas Mavericks abruptly traded him to the Los Angeles Lakers, it shattered the basketball player's world. Before Dončić's first game as a Laker, the team's star, LeBron James, shared some sage words for the devastated athlete.

"Luka, be your f---ing self," James said, in a pre-game huddle. "Don't fit in. Fit the f--- out."



And that’s exactly what Dončić has done. Months later, in his sophomore season in Los Angeles, his transformation from shaken newcomer to team cornerstone has become the most dramatic storyline in basketball — a hero’s journey of a displaced star finding new ground.

As a journalist, executive coach, and former strategic advisor at tech giant Palantir, I have closely watched the star athlete’s response to adversity. Like Dončić, born in Slovenia, I am an immigrant, arriving in the U.S. as a graduate student and I know the challenge of parachuting as an outsider into a new subculture and rising to the top. I often examine athletes as case studies in leadership, because they reveal the best potential for leaders under pressure.

Take, for example, another athlete: U.S. Olympic pommel horse champion Stephen Nedoroscik, who made headlines last summer for his unique personality, playing Rubik’s Cube during breaks as he brought his team to an Olympic medal. His teammates described him as a “positive instigator.”

As a leadership coach, the term struck me as the perfect way to describe people who act as catalysts for meaningful transformation, leading me to create a new coaching

program called the Positive Instigation Coaching Program. As the U.S. and the world confronts a national and global crisis in leadership, it's an aspiration all of us can try to achieve.

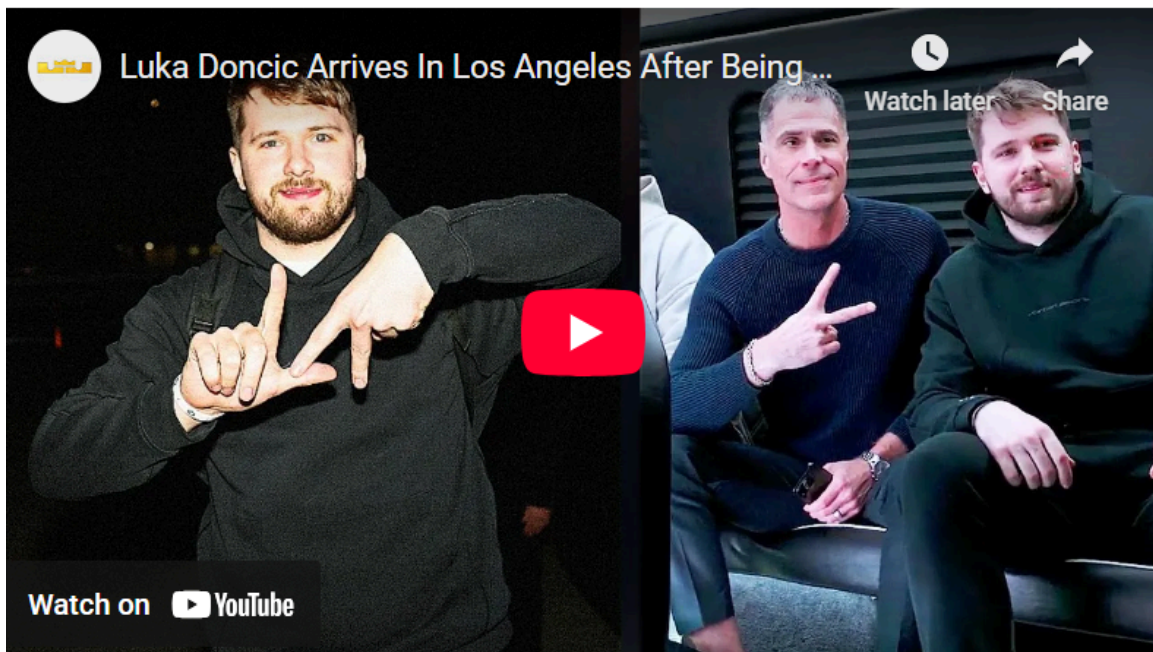
Positive Leadership

Dončić and Nedoroscik exemplify so many of the traits that psychologists Marcel Meyer, Dulce M Redín, and Arménio Rego have identified as part of a "Positive Leadership Action Framework." I see the traits in my tech founder clients, who invariably go through a "valley of death" when they don't have funding or product-market fit and are just a hair's breadth away from failure, often, like Dončić, for reasons beyond their control. The ones who survive and thrive exhibit the strength to rise above the crisis, pivot on a dime and, above all, be humble enough to learn from the adversity. They also understand who they are and what they do will only matter if they can build community and look beyond their own commercial interests.

Psychologists have found a similar phenomenon in childhood: the "positive peer influencer." While peer pressure often carries a negative connotation, research shows it can be a powerful force for good. As Brett Laursen and René Veenstra wrote in *Child Development Perspectives* (2022), "Peer influence is an instrument of change, with outcomes that are not preordained: The same processes that make influence a source of harm also make it a valuable interpersonal resource."

Studies confirm that children surrounded by peers with strong interpersonal or social skills often improve their own. One study in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* found "value-added effects of peer abilities" on gains in cognitive, pre-reading, and expressive language skills in preschool settings. Positive peer environments also nurture emotional well-being. A 2024 review in *Frontiers in Psychology* concluded that "peer acceptance," or being liked and having friends, are "crucial to the individual's adjustment and overall wellbeing."

Give Back to the Community



Earlier this year, Dončić admitted to ESPN that he threw his iPhone upon hearing the news of his trade, cracking the screen. But over many months, amid reports that he was traded for being undisciplined about his work ethic, Dončić proved that he could work hard to overcome some of his failings, navigating adversity with grit and giving back to his new community. In one of his first responses to the trade, he donated \$500,000 for recovery efforts in Los Angeles, which was putting out its own fires, literally.

In an interview, Dončić explained why he gave the donation: "Because, everywhere I play, I give back to the community, like the community gives back to me."

By thinking of others amid his own turmoil, Dončić showed a trait of positive instigators and cemented his legacy resumé, rather than burnishing his career resumé.

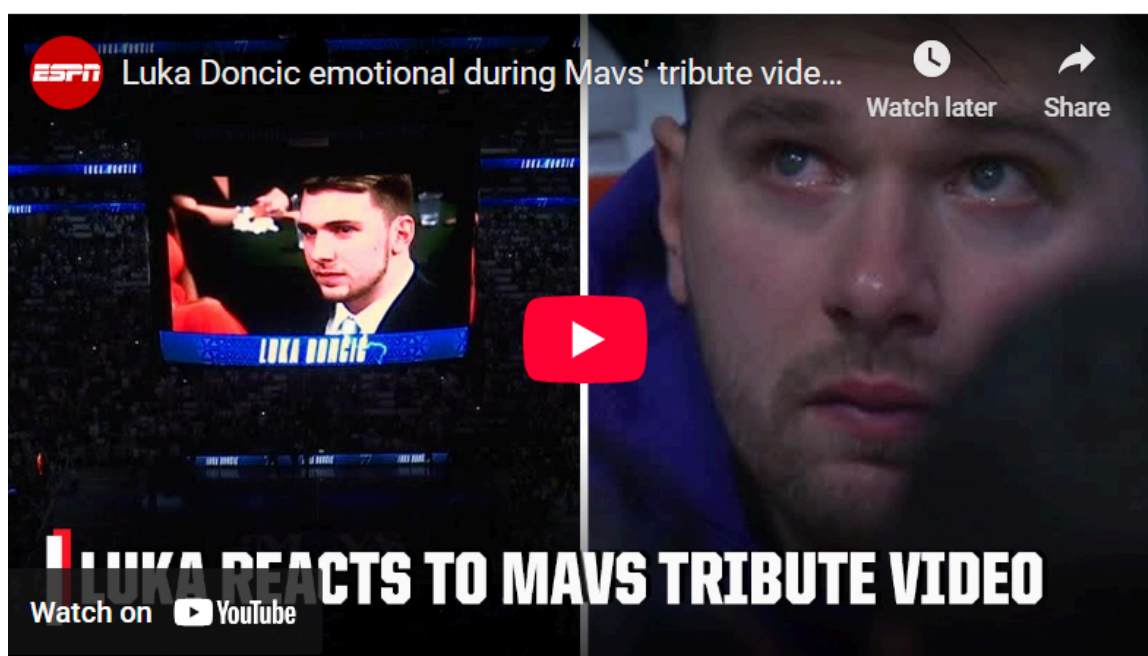
Dončić stayed classy, even as Mavericks sources justified the trade with reported unhappiness by then-general manager Nico Harrison and majority owners Miriam Adelson and her son-in-law, Patrick Dumont, about Dončić's weight, fitness and poor habits. What the Mavericks head honchos didn't acknowledge – but fans recognized – is

that positive instigators don't have to be perfect.

With the lopsided popularity dynamics, it was inevitable that Dumont succumbed to the “Fire Nico” chants and fired him last month.

True to the profile of a positive instigator, Dončić kept his response to Harrison's firing professional, forward-looking and heartfelt. "The city of Dallas, the fans, the players, they'll always have a special place in my heart," Doncic said. "...But right now, I'm focused on the Lakers and trying to move on.”.

‘Thanks for Everything’



Last season when Dončić played in Dallas, his former team made the unusual effort to lay out jerseys on stadium chairs that said “Thanks for everything” in Slovenian. The Mavericks even created a two-minute video tribute that underscored how a positive instigator transcends usual rivalries, leaving Dončić's lips quivering, his head bent as he sobbed into a towel and the crowd roared.

Like Dončić, pommel horse Olympian Nedoroscik's teammates and fans respect him for his humility, grace, and elite performance. Challenged with an eye condition requiring

him to wear thick glasses, Nedoroscik counterintuitively takes them off, figuratively competing with his eyes closed.

In Dončić's case, he often passes the ball, rather than hogging the limelight, giving teammates a chance to make critical plays.

Going Local



As a Laker, Dončić just did a sit-down interview with die-hard fan, Snoop Dogg, winning him over with jokes and smiles. "You make us better," Snoop Dogg said.

Dončić has shown that the most powerful leaders can leverage outsider status, unique story and worldview to connect with their core audience, becoming solid teammates and positive instigators for good. Dončić and teammate Austin Reaves recently became the first Los Angeles Lakers duo in over 50 years to each score more than 30 points in three consecutive games.

And that's one reason why the best leadership lesson from the NBA is Luka Dončić's emergence as a positive instigator.