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Evaluating 'The Apprentice'

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It was with some reluctance that Loren Carlson of North Andover tuned in to "The Apprentice," the reality television show that began with 15 ambitious businesspeople competing for a job running one of real estate tycoon Donald Trump's companies.

Still, Carlson said, he tunes in each week and regularly finds himself nodding along as decisions are made in Trump's made-for-TV boardroom.

"I can't say I agree with the show 100 percent of the time, but I can certainly understand the rationale for all the decisions," he said. "I always try to catch the end."

"The Apprentice" is the guilty pleasure of this television season. Each week competitors, split into two teams or corporations, set out with the same mission. At the end of the show, in the boardroom, Trump rewards the winning team, then talks about what went wrong with the team that came up short.

Cameras that follow the teams, even into the suite they share in Trump Tower, record the behind-the-scenes planning, plotting and sniping among competitors.

Each show ends with Trump dismissing one person, with a flip of his hand and the words, "You're fired."

The remaining team members return to the suite they share in the Trump Towers. The odd person out departs in a cab.

The Thursday night prime-time show has taken the country by storm. People know the characters by their first names: Amy, Erika, Kwame, Troy, Omarosa -- and Friday morning workplace chatter often focuses on who blew it, who got fired and most importantly, why. Nine contestants remain.

We asked Carlson and six others with diverse perspectives of the business world what they think of the show, which runs until the winner is announced on April 15. We'll check in with each periodically as the show progresses.

Here's a short summary of what each thinks so far:

Loren B. Carlson, North Andover

Chairman of the CEO Roundtable, an executive peer group, and former manager at AT&T and Digital Equipment Company

The biggest lesson Carlson pulls from "The Apprentice" is the importance of accountability. It's an issue he sees members of his round-table groups grapple with constantly.

Leadership styles differ, but no leader will be successful without accountability.

"Accountability doesn't mean you get fired for a failure, but that you understand very clearly that a past move was a failure and as a leader you might be accountable," he said.

The show also spotlights the importance of firing people who aren't working out. People can be ideally suited to one task or one team of co-workers and abysmally suited for another, he said. Leaders must recognize that and recognize when a person is not working out.

"Nobody that I know of has ever felt that they have made a mistake when they fired someone, but almost all of them can look back on a situation where they made the decision of keeping someone on too long," he said. "That's a very strong lesson."

Ruth Sheets

Principal, Ducks in a Row Consulting in Newburyport

Sheets said the show is reminding her that people don't take responsibility for their actions.

"People get mad when they get fired, and it's hard for them to see what really happened," Sheets said. "They need to take from it what role they played in their failure or success ... and then go off and be better businesspeople."

Emotions were the big lesson in last week's firing of Ereka, who as project manager became frazzled under the mounting pressure.

Sheets said she agreed with Trump's decision because businesspeople should not be swayed by emotion on major decisions. She added, though, that emotional control is especially important under Trump because his likes and dislikes are the rules of the game.

"The Apprentice' is a game that's only tangentially related to reality. I think that if you're going to play a game, you have to know all the rules, you have to have the skills to play the game, and you have to have a fair amount of luck.

"It's so obvious what (Trump) likes. That's what I'm saying when I talk about knowing the rules. He likes loyalty, and he doesn't like whining and back-biting."

William S. Starner, Windham, N.H.

Owner, Windham Partners, a corporate human resources and executive search firm; teaches business at Bentley College in Waltham

"The Apprentice" has become a hot topic among Bentley College students taking Starner's classes. He teaches interpersonal relations in management, negotiations and leadership to undergraduate and graduate students.

The class deals with recognizing and controlling cues in your communications with others, and is a difficult one to teach, Starner said. "The Apprentice" helps.

"That program is to our class sort of what espresso is to coffee. It's highly condensed, high-octane, emotionally tough interactions," he said.

The show helps students realize the importance of body language. Sitting forward, listening attentively, slouching, all can have tremendous, though unrecognized influence on your communication with others, Starner said.

The show's final boardroom scenes are a gold mine of body-language lessons, he notes, and Starner tries to get his students to recognize how the apprentices' behavior affects their relationship with Trump and the others on their team.

The show also points to the importance of being able to express yourself articulately.

"The ones that I see being successful are people who can articulate why they did the things they did and understand what impact it had on the group," he said.

Tricia Dubrow, Andover

Former marketer, owner of home-based fashion-jewelry business called StylishShe

Dubrow says she is addicted to "The Apprentice."

"I don't watch it for business purposes. I find it truly entertaining."

While not a fan of reality TV, she said, she relates to the show because she can identify with the contestants and their experiences. "They are intelligent people. It's entertaining. It's comical, but it's also a little thought-provoking."

Having worked in a marketing agency and on an in-house marketing staff, she knows what it's like to work on a team under pressure. "When I was in an agency, if you didn't make your clients happy, you got fired. I always wanted to work with the best people at the agency."

So Dubrow sympathizes with the project managers when they call their team members on poor performance in the boardroom with Trump. Seattle stockbroker Tammy Lee, who was notorious for butting in with outrageous requests and going against her team, was fired the week before last. Her project manager, real estate agent Katrina Campins, told Trump that Tammy was an obstacle to the team's success.

Dubrow said that as an account manager she once went to her boss to have an art director taken off her team. "I got the team switched. The work ended up much better reflecting the client's needs."

Chris Manni

Business management major, senior class president at Merrimack College

Manni thinks the message Trump is sending with his decisions is that character counts just as much as performance.

"Reputation's a huge thing, and I think it's a huge thing on this show as well. Everyone has respect for (real estate and insurance salesman Troy McClain) right now because the last two or three episodes, he's dominated."

But Manni's pick for the top finalist is Amy Henry of Austin, Texas. The manager with a high-tech startup is a strong performer who "keeps her nose clean," he said.

Manni said that in addition to reinforcing what his father told him about office politics and gossip -- steer clear -- the show does impart some basic business lessons. Know your customer. Choose the right location to do business.

And the show is giving him a peek at what it's like to do business in New York. Manni wants to be a financial adviser when he graduates. "I don't know if I would want to do business in New York. It's just in your face. Everyone's always vying for position, status."

Joseph D. Tagliente

CEO, Tage Inns and Suites

The most striking thing about "The Apprentice," said Tagliente, is the way it humanizes Trump. The tycoon comes off as even-keeled, grounded and even humble.

On a recent episode, Heidi Bresler, an account executive with Quest communications, learned that her mother had cancer. Trump met with her individually, asked how she was doing and whether she wanted to leave the show.

"I thought that was a good thing for him to do," Tagliente said. "And I know it's something I would have done if I were in his shoes."

Tagliente said the scenario of cast members living, working and competing against each other is a bit far-fetched, and he wouldn't do it.

"If I were one of the contestants, it would be too close for comfort for me," he said.

Robert Pomerleau, Methuen

Former PC support worker at Lucent Technologies, now self-employed as "PC Veterinarian"

Pomerleau said it's nice to see a television show that makes the job the story instead of bringing the story to the workplace.

"That is one of the few shows I've seen in recent years that shows the business environment where it isn't a situation comedy," he said. "The business place is rarely a venue for a serious drama."

Trump doesn't always decide what Pomerleau expects.

In one recent episode, the teams each renovated a New York City apartment, then had to rent it. Pomerleau said he would have fired the team member who, in the end, negotiated a lease for less money than the team needed to turn a profit on the property.

Trump fired another team member, Seattle stock broker Tammy, for publicly criticizing her team.

"I was impressed that he chose Tammy for her disloyalty," he said. "If she was being disloyal to the team, she was going to be disloyal to the company."

Staff writers Ethan Forman, Kathleen McLaughlin and Andy Murray contributed to this story, which was compiled by Molly Manchenton.

Ruth Sheets of Ducks in a Row Consulting provides strategic business consulting to start ups, fix ups, and build ups to turn business pains into business gains. With an operational and marketing focus Ruth works with companies in various stages of transition to launch new products and services, target new markets, eliminate barriers to business viability, and establish and achieve business goals. To obtain more information about **Ruth Sheets** and **Ducks in a Row Consulting** please visit www.ducksinarowconsulting.com or call **978-463-2264**.

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