

## Careers + Leadership: Your Team Can Win Every Season

While the NFL is not a perfect role model, the high-profile, 90-year-old organization does provide some important lessons for businesses in the areas of leadership, teamwork, and management.

With Super Bowl XLVI coming right up, we thought it was an ideal time to examine some of these lessons. Applying them to your organization in a consistent fashion will help to ensure not just one winning season, but many. After all, practice makes perfect.

### 1. Work as a team for consistent wins

So you have a great head coach and talented players, but that's not enough to win season after season. Unless teamwork and communication are cultivated at every level, you will inevitably be stopped short.

- Lead a productive team. One sign of a strong leader is the value of his team. Are the right players in place? Do they know their roles? How deep is the bench? Do they reliably work together to achieve success? The Indianapolis Colts, a storied football franchise, ended the season with a 2-14 record because quarterback Peyton Manning was unable to play. That should never have happened. A winning organization doesn't rise or fall based on the strength of one individual (this also speaks to the importance of succession planning).
- Consider the huddle concept. Every player is in on the play, involved in the tactics of moving ahead. Create opportunities for executives to function as part of a team, to collectively develop strategy and methodology. This approach will go a long way toward fostering relationships and a cross-fertilization of ideas, which invariably leads to better solutions and service.
- Be aware of how the team works together. In his first year as an NFL coach, 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh, achieved significant results. (Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, we are admittedly biased, however, his successful approach is hard to ignore.) Harbaugh's intense focus on team dynamics is just as applicable to the board room as the football field. Said of Coach Harbaugh, "He knows everyone has to do their jobs to get a win. It's not just the quarterback."

### 2. Recruit like a professional team so you are always at your best

Football franchises are constantly thinking about recruitment because they are constantly thinking about success. Your organization needs to be aware of what talent, expertise, and personalities will make it stronger.

- Identify your needs by observing your staff and asking questions. Do you need a strong arm or a fast runner or both? Recruit for specific positions, while considering how particular skills and personalities will strengthen the team.
- In the real world of business and philanthropy, you do not get the advantage of the football draft (that is, the first pick of the season if your team has fared poorly). It's much more competitive, especially at the senior level. Be prepared to hire great talent in every season in order to remain strong and responsive. Involve your team in identifying good people.
- While business does not have the luxury of training camp (the opportunity to see a player in action and interacting with the team before making an offer), there are several ways to ensure you are adding the best individuals to your roster. Business and non-profit organizations are looking beyond technical capabilities and are investing time and energy in assessing candidates' cultural and team fit. This includes asking questions such as:
  1. Tell us about a time when you had to step on toes to produce necessary results.
  2. Describe a time when you were part of a project or planning team that could not agree.
  3. What was your most painful lesson?
  4. Tell us about a time when a person deeply challenged your behavior.

Additionally, as team fit is a critical focus, cluster interviews are vital in the mid- to later-stages of the process. Two, three or more team members will "visit" with the applicant, all asking questions and participating in the conversation.

### **3. Provide training and deliver meaningful feedback to ensure employees know what a winning standard looks like**

Football coaches constantly evaluate performance, providing feedback and making necessary adjustments. This work makes the team stronger player by player and commits each individual to achieving the team's collective goal of winning. Within most companies and nonprofit organizations, new hires are offered neither consistent training/mentorship, nor feedback.

- Professionals must be taught how to succeed. Consider how each football practice and each game offers players an opportunity to witness and experience where the standard for excellence lies. Professionals are often left to fend for themselves upon hiring. This does not foster a culture of learning, advancement, or success. Try pairing new hires with mentors, offering peer learning partnerships, or providing the opportunity to "practice" or stage dry-run presentations to work out delivery or content issues. Additionally, there are a myriad of training consultants, institutes, and associations that can provide materials and expertise. You've identified this new hire as valuable—now nurture the value.
- Give your executive rank the benefit of persistent, meaningful performance reviews. Too often reviews are haphazard, which leaves the individual without a standard and the reviewer without the opportunity to offer guidance. Among many other criteria,

these reviews must include evaluations of how the individual contributes to the overall team, and they must be scheduled frequently, so that real change can be effected.

#### **4. Focus on retention so your veteran employees feel encouraged to achieve high-quality results**

While it is important to add fresh thinking to an organization, it's equally important to have seasoned players on the team, individuals who know the playbook. Leaders need to focus on retention, particularly as the job market is heating up in key sectors such as technology and among senior-level executives.

Financial compensation and other perks are certainly important—that levels the playing field. However, in order to keep their players engaged, organizations must do more. In the National Football League, the team captain designation is a team-appointed position that distinguishes certain players as leaders on and off the field. In fact, many team uniforms feature captain patches on their jerseys as a way for these individuals to be publically recognized for their contributions.

- First make sure your professionals are in a position to make a meaningful contribution, one that supports and moves the organization forward. Then recognize individuals for those contributions in ways above and beyond purely financial; this could involve having a seat at the decision-making table or identifying additional areas of responsibility that complement the individual's interests and goals.

#### **5. Build personal relationships to engender allegiance and commitment**

One of the reasons cited for the 49ers success is that Coach Harbaugh is a player's coach. He'll give up his First Class airline seat to someone on the team and sit in Coach with the players so they can talk. Star linebacker Patrick Willis said of Harbaugh, "I saw him once walk up to a table where all the seats were taken and he just found a way to squeeze right into a space between a couple of guys." Harbaugh understands the value of building trust and relationships with his team. And they work hard for him and one another as a result.

- Consider how well you know your team. Through personal relationships, team members establish trust, generate new ideas, and gain confidence in themselves and others. There is the tendency to rely too heavily on electronic communications, which may make your work environment appear more efficient, but possibly at the expense of a better understanding of real intentions. Same with allowing employees to work remotely—it may seem to improve the bottom line, but it is absolutely key to spend real face time with your executives to engender true success.

You can find applicable lessons for your organization anywhere you look, but the football model offers a timely, highly publicized example. Every franchise's success is at stake every week. You should think about your business, nonprofit, or foundation no differently. Using these tips, run your executive team as though your winning is at stake every week, as though you have fans rooting for you to succeed.

We'd love to hear and share your comments, experiences, and advice on how to develop a team that wins every season. Please email us [here](#).

Kindest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'CP', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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