

Drawing the Parallels to Leadership and Sports

By Stacey Berk, Expand HR Consulting

With football season in full swing and the World Series right around the corner, there are relevant parallels between your professional role and the sports world. Successful sports teams employ the same principals as successful organizations: strong recruiting, leadership and management. Transitioning to evidence-based practices backed by strong data is proving to drive success.

Skills utilized by head coaches, team managers and front office staff are the same skills utilized by business leaders and managers at all levels. While sports professionals may rely on playbooks and watching tape of their game day opponent, managers are utilizing their own playbook and competitor knowledge to maximize the efficacy of their department and team members. Both industries can suffer from subjective “gut” feelings when it comes to finding new talent, and this can be an incredibly flawed process. Organizations in the past may have relied on these techniques but modern, evidence-based approaches are moving toward data and research to facilitate the recruitment of the best candidates. One can see this in the professional world as leaders adapt their recruitment and retention process to include more sophisticated and nontraditional techniques. For example, practices such as eye-catching job descriptions, creative sourcing, custom interview forms, behavioral questions (fewer opinion-based questions) and a reliance on deeper reference checks all assist in building a strong bench.

Organizations like the New York Yankees are known for investing heavily to recruit and retain the “best” talent in the game. While they may have won the most world championships in their storied history, other teams have shown success utilizing talent that is often overlooked. This was the case with the Oakland Athletics in 2002, popularized in the 2011 film *Moneyball* featuring Brad Pitt. The general manager of the Athletics, Billy Beane, focused on sabermetrics to build his team into one of the best collections of talent in baseball. The team was composed of veterans and young players alike who were often unnoticed by the rest of the league. This roster went on to win 20 games in a row, a winning streak that went unrivaled until the 2017 Cleveland Indians, another team built similarly to the 2002 Athletics model. So, how did the Athletics achieve this success without having the “best” players?

Simply put, Beane wanted to build a team whose skills complemented each other. Working with a budget that was nearly a third of the New York Yankees, Beane was able to identify players (i.e. staff) who were undervalued by the league. These players may have not met the traditional statistical benchmarks of success, but they had other qualities which made them arguably more valuable. Beane shifted his focus away from these traditional metrics and focused building his team with more modern data. One way he accomplished this task was by using research data analytics to find which skills and abilities truly translate into success. For example, for decades baseball scouts relied on subjective speed and power to determine who was the “best” hitter. Instead, Beane focused on modern statistics which better predicted success. Switching this approach proved to be successful as the Athletics went on to make the playoffs in 2002 and 2003.

As a leader in your organization, you can look to the world of sports and see parallels. How do coaches like Bill Belichick achieve success every season? It may be easy to point to an all-time great like Tom Brady. However, Belichick has succeeded without Tom Brady. Sports pundits refer to Belichick and the New England Patriots as being a team built around a system and not star players. They will say you can plug anyone into their system and as long as they are competent and capable, they will have the same success. For example, in 2008 season when Brady suffered a season-ending injury in the first game, his replacement, Matt Cassel, went on to lead the team to respectable 11-5 season, when many believed they would fail miserably without Brady.

Belichick isn't the only manager who has been referred to as a "systems coach", Phil Jackson from the NBA is another great example. While he coached many of the greats, Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant to say the least, he was more known for his coaching style. Often referred to as the "Zen Master," Jackson utilized a holistic approach to coaching. This mentality that the whole of the team is greater than the sum of its parts should directly influence the way office managers lead their teams.

Many leaders and managers have employees on their team who excel at some aspects of their job and others who struggle with those same responsibilities. To maximize the potential of your team, a manager should utilize effective team building strategies to optimize workflow while focusing on the strengths of individual team members. This should not be confused with dumping all the hard work on a handful of staff but rather having those individuals share their insight and help their colleagues grow. Communication, collaboration, and compromise can go a long way to building a healthy team. Pay attention to the tasks that your staff are doing well and where they are struggling. Is there consistency? If everyone is struggling with certain aspects of the role? Figuring out the reason and addressing it directly could help you close that gap.

Personality assessments can be excellent tools in building healthy and effective teams, and they can be a great place to begin a data driven approach to management. Personality assessments are self-report questionnaires designed to highlight which aspects of your personality relate directly to key functions of the business. These assessments can help identify which team members will work well together as well as indicate which training methods can be most effective for your staff. These assessments can be a great tool in building your team and providing your team members insight into their behavior.

Your team is one step closer to achieving success if your team is well formed, communicating, collaborating and compromising with one another. As a leader and manager, work to foster these skills in your staff and to model their efficacy. Many professionals may resist this new way of thinking and even dismiss it as being "too modern," but I would challenge leaders and ask is being "too modern" a bad thing? Clearly, visionaries like Phil Jackson and Billy Beane can embrace modern approaches and data-driven metrics to achieve success, and it's hard to refute their success.

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