



Perennial winners are healthy

(and it has nothing to do with injuries)

by Pat Richie and Pat Lencioni

Talent. Coaching. Destiny. Any and all will be considered when evaluating a team's success at the end of a season. The teams that lose – and even those who win - will look for things they could have or should have done better.

Some teams will decide to make changes and hire a new head coach or general manager, someone with a “plan”. Usually the plan is a way to make the organization “smarter”. Advanced offensive and defensive strategies. Better assistant coaches. More focused scouting. A new draft strategy. Improved training methods. Those kinds of things, all of which are important. But they're not enough.

Teams that have enjoyed long-term success almost always have something that goes far deeper than on-field tactics and strategies, and allows them to continue winning even when they change coaches, players or offensive schemes. The leaders in the front offices of those teams do something that doesn't show up in any box score. They build a healthy organization.

What exactly does that mean? Well, it has nothing to do with injuries. Healthy organizations are the ones that minimize politics within its ranks, starting at the top. They eliminate the kind of confusion that causes well-intentioned people to pull in different directions. As a result they retain their best people and create an environment that attracts top talent from other organizations, people who want to be part of something special.

So how does an organization go about becoming healthy? They do four things well.

The Team at the Top

They start by building and maintaining a cohesive executive team, because the team on the field cannot be better than the one at the top, not for more than a season anyway.

The membership of the team at the top will vary from organization to organization, depending on the involvement of the owner and the titles that he uses for his people. In most cases, however, it will include the team president, the GM and the head coach, in addition to a few other key executives. Whatever the case, the members of the senior team need to trust one another, engage in healthy conflict, know how to

disagree and still commit, hold one another accountable for delivering, and focus maniacally on results.

John McVay, who teamed with Bill Walsh and Ed DeBartolo to form the heart of the management team that won five SuperBowls for the 49ers, describes the teamwork that existed in San Francisco from the beginning of the 'Walsh Era.' "Cohesiveness was there right away in '79. We never worried about who got what parking place or if a coach was in a bad mood on Monday after a loss on Sunday. There was NO question as to what we were about - winning and the Superbowl."

The draft, one of the hallmarks of the team's legendary success during its dynasty years, was nothing if not a testament to healthy conflict and commitment. According to McVay, "We would have hot-blooded discussions and differences of opinion. In the end Bill would make the final decision, but we never had trouble committing to a decision because we had all voiced our opinions and given our input."

McVay said that the front office set the tone for what went on down on the field too. "The coaches would also have tough discussions with each other - but in the end they would always be pulling on the same end of the rope."

John Schuerholz, the GM for the Atlanta Braves during each of their unprecedented 13 consecutive division titles, says that the strength of his relationships with other leaders within the organization has been "*the* key to the team's success." Whether it was with former President, Stan Kasten, current president Terry McGuirk, or Bobby Cox on the field, "I've always preached cohesiveness." And that is as much about trust as anything else. "Even if we disagree, they trust me to make the right decision in the end, and they support that decision. And I trust Bobby to do the same on the field."

For all the talk, time and attention given to improving teamwork on the field, it would benefit many teams if they were to focus more of that attention to the people who must lead the organization.

Clarity

But beyond becoming a cohesive team, the leaders must also establish a simple but critical degree of clarity throughout the organization. That means there should be no ambiguity about the answers to the following questions: what does this organization stand for? What kind of people fit and don't fit? How will we differentiate ourselves from the competition to succeed? What are the short and long term goals for getting there?

For those who understandably might wonder "isn't the goal of any sports organization to win games and ultimately championships?", the answer is "sort of". Winning is the outcome of doing the right things. It is the proof point of success. The questions above are more profound and important because they provide the context within which a team goes about winning. They provide the kind of clarity

that players, coaches and staff are looking for, and which ultimately creates a competitive advantage that is difficult to overcome.

Consider the Utah Jazz, an organization that has consistently produced profitable, winning teams over the last decade, and somehow has continued to remain competitive even after the departures of legends John Stockton and Karl Malone. Their secret is a clearly understood approach to how they run their organization, which is based on simple adherence to the Utah system.

Kevin O'Connor, the team's VP of basketball operations for the past 5 seasons, explains the system without hesitation. "Yeah, everyone here understands what we're about. We look for players who will compete every night, and who will work hard in practice to get better. They don't pay attention to individual goals, they focus on how to help the team win."

That may sound like motherhood and apple pie, but for the Jazz it has always been a real competitive advantage. "We can get players who aren't necessarily the most talented in the league, but they fit into our system and it works." In an era of insubordination and individuality, it is no accident that Utah players have a reputation for listening to their coach, Jerry Sloan, and for focusing on the good of the team.

Another team with extreme clarity is the Oakland A's. GM Billy Beane's approach has been well chronicled in Michael Lewis' bestseller "Money Ball". What's remarkable about Beane's system is not just that it is innovative and that it works, but that it provides clarity to everyone in the organization. It informs the way they draft, how they hit, how they negotiate contracts, even how they run the bases.

How many teams in professional sports have a clear, differentiable strategy or personality like the A's or the Jazz? Many of them seem to be in a constant search for a short-term solution, with no apparent or specific context for long-term success.

Over-Communication

Once the leadership team is united and clarity has been achieved, then the leaders have to over-communicate that clarity. That's right. Over-communicate. They have to crystallize their message and repeat it again and again throughout the organization.

Ultimately, everyone from the trainer to the head of ticket sales to the special teams coach are rowing in the same direction because they know exactly how their job contributes to building a world class team within the context of that organization's personality.

The San Francisco 49ers were fanatical in the way they communicated and reinforced their culture and approach to winning. All employees within the organization had something called "the red book", which outlined job descriptions and performance standards for everyone.

And clarity went beyond the walls of the team's headquarters in Santa Clara. On flights to away games, even the team's guests were given instructions for how they were to behave during the trip in a way that reflected the professionalism and class of the organization.

In Utah, like so many organizations, the communication has to start at the top. O'Connor explains: "(Owner) Larry Miller lets players know right away that the organization is more important than the player. We treat them well, and pay them plenty of money, but everyone knows that Jerry is coaching the team, and their job is to win, not pay attention to their individual stats."

Human Systems

And finally, the team has to establish a few basic but critical systems to ensure that the organization's culture and strategy are reinforced every time an action is taken. These include non-bureaucratic but consistent systems for hiring, drafting, firing, rewarding, and managing people. What makes a person - whether they're a running back, an administrative assistant, a general manager or a relief pitcher - a good fit for the organization? How does the organization recruit those kind of people, and provide them with the training and incentives to move the organization forward?

All of this - creating a cohesive executive team, establishing clarity, communication and human systems - may look simple on the surface. And in theory, it is simple. Which is good. It doesn't take a roomful of rocket scientists to figure it out. The hard part is putting it into practice and getting it right. It isn't expensive. More than anything, it requires persistence and discipline.

Is it impossible to win without building a healthy organization? No. Occasionally a dysfunctional team will catch lightning in a bottle and win a stand-alone championship, and then return to chronic mediocrity for another ten to fifteen years. But the ones who perennially win and maintain high expectations for success year in and year out are the ones who understand the connection between a healthy organization and a winning team.

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