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Business leadership book wins fans in NFL

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By Del Jones, USA TODAY

When the Arizona Cardinals NFL team signed two-time most-valuable-player Kurt Warner in the offseason, Josh McCown was relegated to second-string quarterback.



Cleveland Browns coach Romeo Crennel has used the book to coordinate efforts of his talent scouts.

By Tom Stratman, AP

McCown isn't the kind of person to throw a hissy fit, but he could have moped, or worse, been outwardly genial while doing little things to undermine Warner's success and get his job back. That's the passive-aggressive approach that often tempts people who feel snubbed. While there hasn't been much research done on such gridiron behavior, surveys show it to be rampant in offices worldwide.

Corporate leaders have traditionally borrowed from successful sports strategies to run their companies. But lately McCown and others in the NFL are learning a thing or two from a business book about winning tactics in the workplace. Months before being demoted, McCown came across the leadership parable *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* at an airport bookstore, which, among other things, stresses the importance of sacrificing personal ambition for the larger goal. (**Excerpt:** ['The Five Dysfunctions of a Team'](#))

"What I had to do was be the best No. 2," says McCown, who became the starting quarterback throughout October and led the Cardinals to two of their three wins so far this 3-8 season while Warner recovered from a groin injury. This month, Warner has been back on the field and McCown back on the bench.

Five Dysfunctions was written for business

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Dino Vournas, AP
Oakland Raiders coach Norv Turner
uses the book *The Five
Dysfunctions of a Team*.

executives and managers. A football audience was so far from the mind of author Patrick Lencioni that the parable's heroine is a 57-year-old, female CEO named Kathryn who talks about such sappy things as fear of conflict.

Lencioni says he is stunned his book is becoming a must-read for NFL head coaches. But its enthusiasts include:

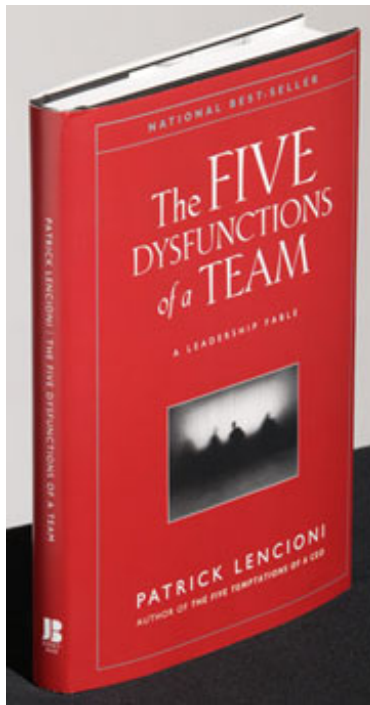
- San Francisco 49ers coach Mike Nolan, whose wife, Kathy, read it first and gave it to him.
- Oakland Raiders coach Norv Turner, who thinks his copy came by way of his brother-in-law, but he's not sure.
- San Diego Chargers coach Marty Schottenheimer, who was given the book by Rolf Benirschke, the third-most-accurate kicker in NFL history. Benirschke, now retired, has passed out about 60 copies around the league.
- Miami Dolphins rookie coach Nick Saban, who read the book in preparation for his transition from the college game at Louisiana State.
- Cleveland Browns coach Romeo Crennel, who has used it to coordinate his talent scouts, loners who must come together as a team to somehow narrow the 300 best college players down to a handful of draftees.
- Cincinnati Bengals coach Marvin Lewis, who has distributed 20-plus copies to assistant coaches and players and keeps a four-color printout of the book's pyramid on his desk to remind him of the five dysfunctions that can cripple a team.

Why is a business book catching on in the NFL? Partly because these are times when head coaches and CEOs are similarly struggling to maximize teamwork in a world of A-players, rainmakers and would-be hall-of-famers. But it may also be because coaches are closet fans of business leadership/management books, just as executives have long been fans of leadership books written by successful athletes and coaches, such as *Wooden on Leadership* by former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden.

In 2001, when the Baltimore Ravens won the Super Bowl, then-defensive coordinator Lewis had his players reading *Who Moved My Cheese?*, a best-selling parable about the inevitability of change that has spun into an industry of workplace workshops. Dolphins coach Saban, who wrote his own book, *How Good Do You Want to Be? A Champion's Tips on How to Lead and Succeed at Work and in Life*, consumes leadership books that date back to *The Art of War* by the ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu.

A locker-room chord

But *Five Dysfunctions*, more than any other leadership book written for the business market, seems to have struck a locker-room chord. Published in 2002, it has not risen to the level of best seller. But demand has grown, and over the past two years it has outsold almost all leadership/management books with a few exceptions, such as *Cheese*, *Good to Great*, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The 8th Habit* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, according to USA TODAY book



The Five Dysfunctions of a Team is catching fire among NFL head coaches.

sales data.

Potential demand looms large in the football world. Positive Coaching Alliance estimates there are 4 million youth-sports coaches at the high-school level on down, a market that could position *Five Dysfunctions* to be like a cross-over country song that gets play time on pop radio. So Lencioni, who is busy consulting with corporate clients such as Southwest Airlines and Sam's Club, has licensed materials and methodology for an athletic practice to Pat Richie, the former chaplain of the San Francisco 49ers turned team-building consultant.

NFL coaches are using the book in different ways, some to build cohesion among athletes, others to improve relations among assistant coaches, and some in specialized situations such as when a trade is being considered that will help the offensive line at the expense of the defensive secondary. Trades almost always mean one assistant coach must absorb a sacrifice for the overall team.

"We have people in personnel, coaching, the front office. Everybody should be working toward the

same goal," Saban says.

Where it begins

The *Five Dysfunctions* tale begins as Kathryn comes out of retirement to become CEO at an underperforming Silicon Valley technology company. She soon encounters a talented executive team that goes along to get along even as the company is being beaten by the competition. Kathryn does not back down from difficult decisions, but she first insists on honest and heated debate. Such debate is possible only when trust is established.

Absence of trust is the first and foremost dysfunction of a team. Without trust, team members fear conflict, lack commitment, avoid accountability and do not attend to results, the four other dysfunctions.

Kathryn also teaches that progress comes only when everyone is pulling for team goals, not individual goals. That makes *Five Dysfunctions* even more NFL-timely following the exit this month of Terrell Owens. The gifted wide receiver made an art of criticizing teammates and causing disruption, and the Philadelphia Eagles decided that team unity was worth booting Owens even if it meant losing a game-breaking talent.

There is a character in *Five Dysfunctions* named Mikey, who is described as a "brand-building genius" but who has little respect for other executives and rolls her eyes when they make suggestions. Kathryn fires Mikey.

"To be clear, Owens is one of the most talented athletes to come along in a long time," says Lencioni. But he expects that other coaches around the league will be rooting for the Eagles to play better with the wide receiver gone.

Bengals coach Lewis says he has always been willing to let talent go for the sake of the team. "I call it addition by subtraction," he says.

Young football players will follow someone, so selfish players must be removed to get the "impressionable guys to follow a real leader," says Benirschke, the former kicker.

Of course, top-notch players such as Owens are a hot commodity with or without a disruptive track record. That's the kink in the NFL's armor, Cardinals second-string quarterback McCown says: Disruptive players know that some team of the 32 will likely sign them.

Not just football

The popularity of *Five Dysfunctions* isn't exclusive to NFL coaches. Teams playing everything from cricket in New Zealand to tennis at Northwestern University have employed its lessons. And at the top of former 49ers chaplain Richie's wish list as he looks to target the sporting world: a consulting assignment with the U.S. Olympic basketball team as it prepares to avenge the bronze medal disappointment of 2004.

"It's one of the best books I've ever read," said Gail Goestenkers, coach of the second-ranked Duke University women's basketball team. Her problem is not prima-donna players, she says, but rather unselfish players who would rather not hurt their teammates' feelings even at the expense of the team.

"They avoid conflict as long as possible," Goestenkers says. "Then they explode in stressful situations like when it's a tie game, when you need a cohesive unit." Conflict can be temporarily sidestepped, but then players will decide at the most inopportune time to criticize a teammate for never passing the ball, she says.

Inside the NFL, the Chargers may have embraced *Five Dysfunctions* more than any other team. Schottenheimer declined to be interviewed, but friend Benirschke says Schottenheimer has undergone a "transformation." Schottenheimer used to have a slacker rule that forbid any player from competing on Sunday if he had not practiced by Friday. But the veteran coach has established trust in an executive committee of players, who are free to approach him to air player concerns. That committee convinced Schottenheimer that it is sometimes in the interest of the team to give a player the full week off to recover from an injury if it gets him healthy to play on Sunday, Benirschke says.

Measuring effectiveness

As with other leadership tools, the trouble with *Five Dysfunctions* is that it's difficult to measure its effectiveness and know if the NFL coaches who have read the book are winning more games. The Bengals, who Sunday beat the Baltimore Ravens, 42-29, are 8-3 after consecutive 8-8 seasons in Lewis' first two years. The Chargers went 12-4 last year after a 4-12 record in 2003 nearly got Schottenheimer fired. They are 7-4 so far this year.

The Panthers are 8-3 after going 7-9 last year, but three of the seven *Five Dysfunctions* NFL teams have losing records, including the 2-9 49ers and the Raiders and Browns, both 4-7. Lencioni and others cite the 6-5 New England Patriots as the selfless team that best exemplifies the lessons from the book, but Lencioni says there is no indication that Coach Bill Belichick has read it, nor Philadelphia Eagles Coach Andy Reid, who cut Owens.

Coaches agree that there is a lot that goes into a winning team, and no book will ever play more than a tiny role. But in the NFL, as in business, a slight edge can make the difference.

"We all know at this level you're evaluated by wins and losses, says Turner, coach of the Raiders. "But a big part of coaching is getting people to develop and ultimately perform to the highest level of their potential."

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