

CHAPTER 18

Always Remember Why You Won or Lost

MOST COACHES STUDY THE FILMS when they lose. I study them when we win—to see if I can figure out what I did right.

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THE COACH'S LESSON

I always took time after the games to talk with the Rockies. After they changed out of their uniforms and settled down, I called for silence and launched into a post-game discussion. Win, loss, or tie, they got the same analysis. I reviewed the team's play by comparing it to the techniques we used in practice. If we strayed from our game plan, or tried to play a style of hockey that was not our own, I emphasized that. I wanted to mold the thoughts that would accompany them on their ride home.

Normally, after a game, players are caught up in their own thoughts. As a player, I knew that. You sit there, rewinding plays in your head, mentally bemoaning missed opportunities or celebrating successful plays. It's a moment

of individual reckoning for the player. I would never dissuade that. I assumed it would happen, and I encouraged it with one-on-one comments to players regarding their game. But I also wanted the team to reflect on the larger group's success or failure in executing the game plan. I wanted the smaller groups to reflect on their play as a unit. I found that constantly referring to group play in the post-game locker room emphasized the team aspect of our game at a time when players were normally reflecting on their own personal play.

While keeping my comments brief, I always talked of the players' performances in the context of the game plan and our preparation. The good, well-executed performances were easy to speak to. For example, "Damon and Garreth, your work in front of our net was exactly what we said we needed and wanted to do. It was just as we practiced it."

Discussing the poor performances required a little more tact. I found that if I avoided any personal comments and kept my message grounded in the game plan and our preparation, my words sounded more objective. Such as, "You guys on the penalty-killing line need to work on the positioning in our zone. Remember the formations we were practicing. We talked about how we needed to avoid bunching up in the middle of the ice if we started to panic, and tonight we panicked a lot."

I applied the same strategy with individual members of the team. Many times in these post-game reviews I mentioned particular plays made by single players. I always felt it was important to touch on the play of some individuals so that the remaining players could relate the contribution that an individual made to the team's effort. This also reinforced the importance of each role on the team.

Finally, before we all headed home, I left them with a single thought. I highlighted one aspect of our overall play that directly contributed to the game's result. I might, for example, point out how well we covered the opposing players while we were defending the front of our own net on defense. I would ask them to think about how they contributed, good or bad, to that aspect. Knowing how a player's mind works, I knew that they would rehash many of the game's moments over the next few hours. It was always my hope that at some point during that period of time, they would reflect on how their individual efforts contributed to the success or failure of the team and alter their approach to the next game accordingly.

In the next practice following a game, I would gather them all together for a talk. Here I would again interpret our play in the previous game, with

particular emphasis on what we didn't do well. That would then lead into my explanation of what plays or strategies we would be working on during practice. My thinking was that the more parallels I could draw between what we needed to improve on during game time and what we were actually practicing between games, the more effort I might get out of them. It was important for them to understand how the lessons applied to the games.

Learn How to Lose

Games provide sports teams with a unique learning opportunity. For this reason, no game should ever be allowed to fade into memory without first gaining some lessons from it. Any team that is intent on improving will use each game as a chance to critique, reinforce, and reward itself. This should be a must for every team, regardless of the outcome of the game.

Many teams spend a good portion of the next day reviewing the previous day's game films. They may also find themselves reliving certain details during the following practices. Or they may simply spend a useful period of time in the locker room, immediately following the game, rehashing what happened in the game and learning from it.

The purpose of this exercise should never be lost on the team. Many coaches through the years have agreed that "In order to win, a team must first learn how to lose." That's a thought that doesn't make sense when you first think or hear it. How do you "learn how to lose"? Well, think about what's involved with losing. Mistakes are made. Opportunities are squandered. Players fail to execute assignments properly. Most importantly though, lessons are learned. The players have to dig into the details of their own play, as well as that of the team's. They must be able to identify what they did well and what they did poorly in order to improve from that point forward. They must be able to associate aspects of their own individual play to the results of the game. Losing naturally creates the conditions for an introspective analysis.

Analyze the Wins, Too

Winning also teaches valuable lessons—although many teams fail to stop and consider them amidst the rump slapping, high-fiving, and "good games." It's too easy for coaches to say, "Good effort. That's the way to do it, now hit the showers." In a losing situation, that same coach would probably go into great detail about what went wrong in an effort to drive home the lessons

learned. What might be the response if a coach spent the same amount of time, in the same amount of detail, analyzing a win? There will always be aspects of a team's play in a winning effort that can be used to reinforce what a coach has been trying to teach. It's a perfect opportunity to use an "I told you so," with a positive spin: if the players carried out the game plan and used the plays and skills learned in practice, then a win is proof that the coach's strategy is valid.

Since this is an important exercise for a team, it is up to the coach to make time for this reflection after games. Better yet, if a coach can make it a regular activity, then the learning response of the team can become more natural and reflexive. They might even subconsciously expect it. A coach should try to make this discussion a regular part of the post-game talk. It should also make its way into the next practice or team meeting.

Lesson from a Legend: Bill Walsh



Known as one of the best motivators of the modern-day NFL, Bill Walsh enjoyed tremendous success with the San Francisco 49ers. Through the years, he built solid game plans and encouraged players, even drove some of them, to reach their highest potential. What is amazing, however, is that the organization that Walsh helped to create and mold continued to succeed after Walsh retired, including winning one more Super Bowl. It was a testament to the skills, environment, motivation, and team spirit that Walsh established, all interwoven with the confident, professional, and classy style that defined the 49ers.

To maintain that winning form over a period of many years, Walsh took the post-game reflection to a new level. He, like most coaches, was devoted to analyzing the game afterwards. His strict game-week schedule began with regular review of film from the previous game and dissecting the overall execution. This activity would first involve assistant coaches, then later, the players themselves. Each player's execution was graded, and scores were compiled in an effort to quantify and compare performances. Players would gather in their functional groups—offense, defense, special teams, etc.—and join in the analysis.

Win or lose, Walsh held to the same guidelines in his

treatment of the team. He made sure that all team standards were upheld, even during a losing streak. The staff kept the game plan's execution as the primary focus. Losses were not personalized. Victories were celebrated, but only for the moment. Walsh's own personal emphasis was on the details—of preparation as well as execution. And everything always returned to the game plan.

Proving the worthiness of his Hall of Fame stature, Walsh took winning to a new level and was able to sustain it throughout the decade of the '80s. He took his approach to reflecting and learning after each game and expanded it to an unprecedented activity performed after each season had ended. Regardless of the 49ers' end result, Walsh led them through the same type of exercises. He, of course, already had the assistant coaches working through their analysis of the previous season, using many of the same post-game methods to grade performance and to assess strengths and weaknesses. Walsh would then hold team meetings throughout the off-season, gathering the players, sometimes in groups, sometimes individually, for sessions that would revolve around past performance and future expectations. Players would watch videotapes of footage that showed both outstanding and poor performances. Throughout this off-season period, Walsh would always attach every lesson, every performance critique, and all future expectations to the team game plan. While this effort by a coach may be easy to understand after a losing season, consider that Walsh's 49ers went through this after each of their Super Bowl victories, as well.

The Coach as Manager: Emotions Sideline Useful Analysis

While it seems a natural and sensible activity, reflecting on our “wins and losses” in business is not all that common. Furthermore, talking about our successes and failures is such a lopsided concept in the workplace. We spend plenty of time talking about why we “lost,” but never enough time reflecting on why we “won.” Here again, it is way too easy for a manager to shrug off a good effort as “that’s what I pay you for.”

Think about how much time we spend talking about things that went

wrong at work. Worse yet, think about the tone in which we discuss it. We yell at people who have failed. We chastise those that have erred, saying, “You should have known better.” Too often, we give feedback that is more emotional than analytical. And, the feedback rarely relates back to specific tasks and assignments as they relate to the overall game plan.

How often do we turn these reflective opportunities into lessons learned? How often do we allow the education and training process to overpower our frustration and anger? The truth is, not often. We sit through useless meetings, perform redundant tasks, use burdensome systems, or continue to do things because “that’s the way it’s always been done.” And we rarely reflect on how we are “executing at game time.” We don’t take the time to assess our own performance as a team, or as individuals, in the context of our overall game plan.

If individual assignments and executable tasks are detailed out, communicated, understood, and practiced, then the expectations are no secret. Performance evaluations can easily be founded on the comparison between these expectations and the actual execution of the work. For the coach concerned with keeping the work group motivated, the game plan will be the basis for objective critiques of performance. The more detail in the plan, the easier it will be to review people’s performances. However, without the presence of an overall plan or thorough preparation to refer to, most constructive criticism comes across as subjective. As a result, people take it personally, thinking, “I can never do anything right in her eyes. She hates me.” When an employee reacts in that manner, the chances of the manager’s comments having the desired effect become slim.

Many managers fail to realize that evaluating performances can be done quickly, more often, and much more effectively, if an overall game plan exists and is talked about regularly, practiced frequently, and referred to often. Remember that a good game plan will detail roles, assignments, and executable tasks. And if you’re talking about it regularly as a group or one-on-one, then the expectations are constantly being reinforced. So when a positive or negative result occurs that warrants equal reinforcement, it can happen on a real-time basis in a manner that can be informal and quick. There will be no need to dig up the personnel file to retrieve previous performance reviews or signed documents that pledge, “I promise to work harder, faster, stronger...” Instead, it can be a comment at the coffee machine or a statement in a meeting.

Success Is Not a Silent Game

When was the last time you spent a significant amount of time discussing an effort that went well with your team members? In fact, try to remember an opportunity that any manager took to discuss, in any amount of detail, the positive efforts of a group after a successful accomplishment. We're not talking about a pat on the back or some formal recognition. We're looking for "post-game analysis." We're talking about any time where the focus of the reflection was to learn and to reinforce an overall plan. Unfortunately, managers are much less likely to reinforce lessons after successes than after failures.

Talking about successes and reinforcing desired performance is a tool that absolutely *should* be part of a manager's repertoire. It's the stuff that a learning, improving organization must feed on to thrive and grow. And you'll find that when the work group gets excited and begins to feed off of the energy generated by their own improvements, they will begin to look forward to these opportunities to critique both the good and bad results of their efforts.

PUTTING THE LESSON IN ACTION

I remember the first time I employed this tactic at work. We had been on a rocky road of improvement. We could see that we were on the right track and destined for success, but a successful day's worth of production was always just barely out of our reach. Then one day it happened. We burst past all of our goals and delivered a world-class production run, with throughput and quality numbers that were close to perfect.

I walked up to the engineers and supervisors of the engine assembly line after the shift and joined in the congratulations. However, after a few moments of backslapping, I moved the group into a conference room. There I asked them all one question: "What did you do differently in order to have such a great run today?" They looked at me strangely, since this was the one day they would not have expected to answer any questions after the shift ended. Of course, their immediate answers were "Nothing, everything just ran well today."

After further questioning, they started to relive the details of the day. We drew comparisons to the behavior on previous days. Eventually, we began to identify actions that had been performed that day, as well as in the recent past few days, that all had contributed to our success. In the end, we compiled a list of actions that all had some positive impact on our performance. The

smiles and nods of some of the supervisors were even larger, since now they realized that they had indeed played a role in their success. I appealed to them to “remember why you won.”

The next day, I met them at the beginning of the shift for a pep talk. I reminded them of each of the actions that they had identified the day before. I asked them to pledge that they would perform those same actions that day. This review of our daily progress went on for a number of weeks. Eventually, it became a habit for us to always “remember why we won or lost.”

Over that period, I saw the greatest improvement in the performance of the production management team. Since they were recording successful production runs on a more frequent basis, and they were relating it to their own actions, a sense of pride began to develop. Soon, they were running on all eight cylinders as their own level of performance had ratcheted up.

I transferred this same approach to the engineering groups, which I also managed. Their goals were not as easy to measure, since they are really a support group by nature. However, by pointing to the increased performance of the line, the successful implementation of equipment improvements, and the timely installation of new equipment, they were able to identify their contributions to the success of the operation. Eventually, they reacted just as positively. Within a few weeks, they were referring to past actions that had a positive impact, reminding each other to continue them. They were reinforcing their own positive behavior.

Over time, all the groups began to think proactively in this manner. I would get answers before asking the questions. *They* would begin discussing what they did differently that day that they believed helped. Even more constructive, they would willingly offer the same information to each other without anyone walking away with hurt feelings.

I had always wanted to be part of a “learning” organization. However, to create one, the people on the team had to drop their guard, open their minds, and challenge themselves to learn. They had to openly discuss their performance as a group. First, they had to realize that there is no need for personal defenses among peers who share the same goals and desires. Then they needed to adopt an open-minded approach to performance discussions so that constructive criticism could have a positive effect. Finally, they needed to challenge themselves to learn and treat that activity as an important individual contribution to the entire team’s development.

I began to use the game plan as the foundation for all my comments. The Rockies responded well when I focused on our game plan, maintained an objective and impersonal tone, and balanced the positive and negative critiques—so why not try it on my work team?

My team members at work reacted predictably well as I changed my approach. My remarks on individuals' behaviors or performances were always based on "What we said we wanted/needed to do to execute the plan properly." By making a point to balance positive and negative comments, I was able to maintain people's focus without deflating anyone. In fact, it was amazing how many people were "starving" to hear positive feedback. Since my team members knew that I was noticing and appreciating their good work, my comments on their less-than-good work seemed easier to accept.

As the team's capacity to accept and internalize regular, objective feedback increased, I introduced this activity in the group setting. I began to look for opportunities to discuss our performances as a team. When I sensed enough of their collective guards being dropped, I solicited comments on my own performance by critiquing myself in front of them. This normally was enough to open the floor to the kind of introspective discussion the group needed.

By transferring my coaching skills to the workplace, I had helped create an organization that truly learned from both failure and success. They challenged themselves daily to become better, no matter how well they had done the day before.