The Business of Winning

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A MANAGER'S GUIDE
TO BUILDING
A CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM
AT WORK

What Will It Take to Win at Work?

OUR BEST EFFORTS, combined with those of our teammates, grow into something far greater and far more satisfying than anything we could have achieved on our own. Teams make us a part of something that matters. They are the fountain from which all our rewards will ultimately flow.

— PAT RILEY, NBA COACH, MIAMI HEAT

For some of us, management gets pretty frustrating at times. Take a look for a moment at the management approach of your own organization. You may believe what I did at first: that we as managers are doing the right things. We put a lot of effort into defining our goals for the entire organization. Our mission statements are crafted, and our goals are identified and quantified. Then, we communicate to everyone what those objectives are and that they must help to meet them. New projects come along, new accounts are created, and targets are quantified. We make sure that everyone understands their expectations. We send them to training to give them the skills. And then we concentrate on monitoring people's

performance, sales levels, project funding, deadlines, etc. After the customer is served, we share feedback with our employees regarding customer satisfaction, company results, or their own performance. And we strive to continuously improve every aspect of our task.

And yet some of us still are unsuccessful. Why?

Simply put, we have forgotten that business is a team game, not an individual one. While there may be many individual tasks or functions within the business, such as those associated with sales, consulting, or programming, the sum of the parts is not always greater than the whole. Somewhere along the way, all of the individuals must come together to become one complete organization, unified in their focus, their preparation, and their execution. The organization as a whole has to actually accomplish something. Too much emphasis on managing the performance of individuals can cloud a manager's vision. While improving individual performance is critical to building a winning team, that strategy will not result in success on its own.

Think about it in the context of team sports. If a football coach only concentrated on the individual players, then what would result? Might the physical capability of the individual players improve? Perhaps. Would the team's ability to execute their plays as one unified group be any better? I doubt it. Additionally, think about the coach's job. Think about how much more difficult it is to have to teach every individual, one at a time. Put yourself in the coach's shoes. Would you be able to spend enough time with each member of your team so that each player not only fully comprehends the team philosophy, the overall strategies of the game plan, and the purpose of their individual roles in the playing unit, but can also excel at it? Better call home because you'll be working late!

It becomes obvious that a manager of a group of people, regardless of size, must comprehend how to lead the complete group. Total success will only come if everyone is contributing. Therefore, the manager's challenge is similar to that of the coach: how to motivate people to do their part to the best of their ability in a way that contributes to the team's ultimate goal.

When many of us are first promoted into management roles, we receive little preparation on how to develop, motivate, and improve individual performance. We get even fewer clues on how to do that for the whole group. MBA programs may teach us to deal with quantitative aspects of business, but they don't teach us how to focus, develop, motivate, and drive a team of

employees. Look around and you'll see the same trends. New managers are promoted all the time by higher managers who have the best intentions to train, develop, and nurture their leadership neophytes. However, the needs of the business often subordinate these intentions, and pretty soon, we're all holding the fire hose trying to put out fires. So businesses end up introducing new managers into their positions without really preparing them to manage.

Similar to the novice, many of us who have been at this game for years still struggle because of inadequate people management skills. Our methods are derived from imitating the actions of managers who we've worked for, along with plenty of trial and error. The tactics we need aren't taught in too many places. Sure, we get better at it as we go along; however, the needs of our customers and shareholders usually determine our personal improvement rates to be inadequately slow.

There are, of course, other avenues for managers to get advice. Many management books deal with the difficult task of managing employees. Unfortunately, few of them give any insight into how managing individual performance fits into managing the overall performance of the organization. In fact, as a coach, I am insulted by the number of management books that talk about "coaching" but only with respect to individual performance. There is this mistaken belief that "coaching," as it pertains to management, only applies to the teaching and development of one employee at a time.

But, you might wonder, what if I have a group of people who aren't working together as a team, but are all doing their jobs as defined? An organization comprised of individuals, acting, thinking and executing only what *they* believe they need to do cannot succeed easily. People *only* doing their job is not enough. In fact, the only way for an organization of narrowly focused, individualistic employees to easily succeed as a group is for them to be led by one incredibly omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient manager. It will be up to this "super" manager to coordinate all of their efforts and focus every activity. Additionally, it will be up to the manager to steer the organization, since he or she will be the only one who truly knows where and how it must go forward. I'm sure that many of you, like me, don't want to work *that* hard.

Consider this: What kind of organization do you ultimately want to create? Do you want an organization filled with individuals who can achieve predefined targets and then step back and wait for new marching orders? Or

do you want an organization that operates independent of constant direction, focuses on goals, and executes its defined roles in a team environment according to an overall plan?

That's the difference! And that's our greatest challenge. Creating a team that can run by itself. Developing inside every individual the comprehension of an overall plan. Generating the intensity inside each individual to accomplish his or her own tasks *in support* of a larger effort. Having employees so focused and understanding of their roles that they seem to operate as if they're on autopilot. That's what every manager dreams of. That's the Management Holy Grail. And to get it, you must build a winning team!

This is where many of us managers "hit the wall." Once employees are performing their tasks and accomplishing an overall purpose, how do you get to this higher level of performance? While this seems like an imposing question with no simple answer, I have to admit that I learned the answer to that challenge pretty quickly. In fact, it was taught to me by a bunch of teenaged boys.

The Detroit Rockies: The Coaching Experience

I remember the day that a coworker first approached me to talk about hockey. Being a Canadian recently relocated to Michigan, word had spread through the factory that if you wanted to talk hockey, this new manager was the guy. My coworker, Alex Gaston, was coaching a team that consisted of the best teenaged players drawn from the house leagues that played in the Detroit Hockey Association, and he was looking for advice on coaching the team. His son played on the team, and he had coached this same group of kids as they progressed over the years. Prior to that point, Alex had known nothing about hockey. As he had explained it, he and two other fathers were "coaches by default." His concern was that his boys needed some advanced coaching if they were going to compete at a higher level. He invited me to attend one of their games and check out the Rockies.

I can still remember how amazed I was sitting in the stands watching the team for the first time. The boys had terrific speed and agility. They loved to play physical, and they all shared the same fire. What was particularly odd for me was that every member of the Detroit Rockies was black.

Coming from Canada, I had not been exposed to many black hockey players, so I was particularly astonished. My reaction had nothing to do with stereotypes or prejudices; it was simply a function of the relatively small

number of blacks playing this sport throughout the world. Most hockey fans would have the same response. That night, while witnessing (and listening to) some of the additional "challenges" that the kids faced from less open-minded opponents, officials, and opposing fans, I was energized. After watching the Rockies lose to a team that was *only* more organized than they were, I decided to help Alex out.

This team was playing in the highly competitive Little Caesar's Travel Hockey League in Southeast Michigan. The league consisted of teams that were made up of the best hockey players in their cities or hockey associations. If history is an indicator, some of these players would be future professional stars. I was thrilled to get the chance to coach at that high level of youth hockey. At this age group, this was as good as it got.

The Detroit Rockies had some challenges however. The Rockies were the only team to skate within the city limits of Detroit. The arena was small, old, and dilapidated. The boards were crooked and had holes in them. Chain fence rose above the boards where normal arenas had glass. The locker rooms were small and cramped, making it difficult for all fourteen boys to sit down at the same time while getting dressed.

These challenges become significant when you consider that the Southeast Michigan area is comprised of many large cities and suburbs that enjoy family incomes that, on average, are much higher than the nation's average. The hockey associations based in these suburbs were mostly located in newer, updated arenas and had the luxury of having a large talent pool of hockey players from which to choose their best. That was not the case for us. While the Rockies had official tryouts at the beginning of each season, we never actually had enough kids show up to ever have to cut players. So I began my three-year coaching tenure with a group of kids who had plenty of experience on the ice, but had never really learned how to play a team game.

The Rockies' Players

Anyone who has tried to coach a group of teenaged boys in this day and age knows that it's a challenge. In the case of the Rockies, the boys were cocky and full of energy. They talked back, rebelled, and resisted control. They each wanted to be stars. They all wanted to score. And, of course, they wanted to do it their way. They hated practice. They abhorred drills, favoring instead the full-contact scrimmage games at the end of practice sessions.

Away from the arena, they lived in a world that some of us could not relate to. Single mothers, grandparents, or aunts raised many of them. They

resisted joining gangs. They said "no" to drugs every day. They had known people who were killed or jailed. They all wanted a future, but could not always see it. Fortunately for them, they had parents, relatives, or guardians that were committed to them. They had someone behind them, scraping together money for team fees and equipment costs, wanting to keep them playing hockey.

They had some other things in common, too. They loved to play hockey. They wanted desperately to win. They all had dreams of being on top some-day. They loved the camaraderie and fed off of it. And they all had big hearts. In the end, that was all that I required as a coach.

Three Years to the Top

I had committed myself to remain with the team until the boys were too old to play. That meant that I would have them from ages fourteen to seventeen. Not exactly the easiest years to handle.

Alex, the original coach, and George Adams, who also had a son playing on the team, were our assistant coaches. The team manager, Gloria Myers, the mother of one of the players, rounded out our leadership team. She handled all the financial and administrative duties and supported us. We all seemed to talk the same language and took the same approach to our tasks. We all shared the belief that winning or losing was not the ultimate goal. Rather the goal was to help these boys mature into solid, young men with values. (Of course, we wanted to win, too!)

We started off aggressively pursuing those goals. We began applying an approach that is common in team sports coaching: create a solid foundation of fundamental skills and comprehension, and then build complexity upon that base. Our game plan would be basic, but it could always have many options diverging from it. We never wanted to stray from our basic approach. Our players needed to have one style of play completely ingrained in their minds—our style. Their team play needed to be so familiar to them that, in the most frenzied times on the ice, they would reflexively return to where they were supposed to be.

Over the years, they settled into it all. The team practiced the same drills, formations, and plays over and over again. In games, we approached different opponents consistently, with a few "personalized" adjustments. The guys eventually began to play together as a team, with their instincts and knowledge synchronized. We started winning games—finally. And the losses, while becoming fewer in number, contributed to our growth purposefully.

Hockey became a fun game for us to play. I left the arena many nights feeling fulfilled and satisfied to be a part of such terrific improvement.

In the final year, knowing that it was our last year together, we had planned on attending a major hockey tournament in Lake Placid, New York. It was one of the biggest, most popular tournaments in the United States. We were playing good hockey for most of the year, but we were plagued with injuries for much of it. We lost in our attempts to vie for the state championships at a time when four of our best players were sidelined with injuries. However, we were completely healthy for the Lake Placid tournament, which was held a month after our season ended.

At that tournament, something magical happened for all of us. Everything that we had worked for seemed to come together at once. A healthy team of fast, aggressive Rockies put on a show. We overpowered opponents with a combination of speed, aggressiveness, and an opportunistic transitional game. Within two days, our games were attracting locals from the town who were coming to see the "black team from Detroit." By the end of the tournament, we had gone 6-0 and outscored our opponents 35-6 to win the gold medal. To do this in the same arena that witnessed the 1980 Olympic "Miracle on Ice" made it even more special. The boys played their best hockey ever. We defeated teams from New York, California, Minnesota, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Canada.

We raised some eyebrows in Lake Placid. Of course, the fact that ours was a team of young black kids from Detroit only added to the attention we received. Following that tournament, our team and our association were featured in both local and national press. We were mentioned on national TV and cable shows. We even had a movie screenplay written about us that is still circulating in Hollywood.

The Managing Experience

From the emotional highs that defined our Lake Placid experience, I dropped and landed in my troubled office at work. I was a manager struggling to get results out of people who I couldn't seem to focus or motivate. I labored for some time while I adopted management styles that I had learned from my "teachers" throughout the years. Without intending to test their effectiveness, I quickly learned that the modern-day employee does not respond well to some of the old tactics. It became apparent to me that as people change, so must management styles and techniques.

The worker of the seventies and eighties is different from that of today. I began to notice that many older managers were having difficulty inspiring and motivating younger workers. Employees of this modern day are certainly bolder and more inquisitive. They require much more information. It is not enough to be told what to do; they also require the understanding of why they have to do it. And if they don't believe it should be done a certain way, or at all, then they will challenge it. Workers of this era also are looking for a greater sense of self-worth and contribution. They want to feel important. And if the job that they're doing doesn't make them feel important, then they want another one.

Does this attitude make them difficult employees? Or disrespectful? Not necessarily. They're simply members of a dynamic species. They're today's real people. And they're our employees.

While I was coaching, I couldn't help but notice that my kids on the team were similar to many employees at work. They asked "why?" They challenged direction if they didn't understand it. They questioned assignments that they didn't think were glamorous, whining, "Why do I have to be the one to play defense, Coach?" Both at work and at the arena, I found myself having to explain to everyone "why."

Sports players have changed, just like modern employees. In fact, I was impressed by a remark made by Mike Keenan, a coach for many years in the National Hockey League. Talking about the old days of hockey, he said, "In those days, they coached through fear sometimes. You played out of fear for your job. Those days are gone. You could see it changing, even in the late sixties and seventies: more and more, coaches had to have an answer for your questions. It wasn't, 'Do this because I'm your boss,' or 'You're doing this because I told you to do it.' The big difference today is that when a coach asks a player to do something, he has to have an answer, because if he doesn't, why should [the player] have to do it that way?"

For me personally, there was one striking observation that I made when I compared my work team to my team at the arena: I was actually "getting through" to my hockey team. That led to my question, "What was I doing at the arena that helped me motivate my players that I wasn't doing at work with my employees?"

Trying to Coach at Work

"How could I become a coach at work?" I wondered. While at the arena, I began to pay more attention to *how* I was doing what I was doing. I listened to myself talk. I paid attention to how I treated the team. I noticed the emphasis I placed on players' roles and their context in the team. I realized that everything I did with the team was always founded on our overall plan. I surprised myself with all the differences between "Coach Rob" and "Mr. Evangelista."

Conversely, at work, I noticed how there was a definite lack of focus for my team members, as well as for me as their leader. I was not giving them the game plan to achieve success. Nor was I coaching them on how to execute that game plan. My behavior did not seem to be based on any overall plan at all and, therefore, at times was non-contributory. I couldn't point to many instances where I was teaching them their roles and how to play them as a team. In fact, I did little to encourage team play. Instead, I relied on a few major contributors to carry the load, and chastised the ones who weren't contributing.

And because I had done their jobs earlier in my career, I spent too much time giving directions that contained no support. I contributed often to task interference. I micromanaged situations that didn't need me. It was a typical collection of mistakes that come too easily to many managers. At least they came easily to me.

When it all came down to my own personal day of reckoning, I realized that I was trying to turn my employees into *me*. I was trying to create autonomy and independent thinking, when in fact I was eliminating it. I wasn't respecting their own identities, their own specialties, their own uniqueness. I didn't recognize the roles they could have played. I wanted every individual to work the same way, with the same intensity, attention to detail, and proactive thinking.

More importantly though, I realized that I wasn't teaching my people. I wasn't coaching my team! Instead, I *told* them to go out and win the game. I *told* them that they had to score touchdowns and sink baskets in order to win. I told them to keep their eye on the ball and to avoid making errors and taking costly penalties. I told them to bear down and concentrate. I told them it was life or death, that the championship was all that mattered. I pleaded with them to care. And to work harder. And when they lost, I told them they hadn't worked hard enough. Then I would wonder why they never won.

I think back now and I remember the old saying:

> *"Give a man a fish, he will eat for a day.*
> *Teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime."*

Standing in front of my hockey team, I was teaching my boys to "fish." At work, I was telling them they had to go out and fish in order to survive and then giving them hell when they starved to death.

As you can imagine, my self-analysis startled me as I documented all the differences between my two styles. Ultimately, considering the results I was enjoying at the arena, I was faced with altering my management style.

As I began to look around at other managers, I saw many of the same shortcomings. Looking to confirm that my observations existed beyond my own world, I extended my search to include acquaintances from other industries, as well as books on management. I engaged in conversation after conversation with peers who noticed the same deficiencies in their behavior as I had, while also agreeing that the "lessons" I had learned from coaching were indeed relevant.

What Can We Learn from Sports Coaches?

I set out to change my style of management to match my coaching manner more closely. I documented lessons learned behind the bench. I compared differences in techniques and planning methods. I started making notes on what I perceived to be good coaching in the professional leagues. Being an avid sports fan, I knew well the legacies of the great coaches.

Looking to validate my lessons from the arena, I studied professional and collegiate coaches who had been successful, reading many documentaries of their methods. I paid particular attention to the coaches who were able to achieve success consistently while facing much adversity. They are great names associated with great legends:

➤ **Vince Lombardi**—NFL coach of the Green Bay Packers and the Washington Redskins. He took over a Packers team that had gone 1-10-1 in the previous season, and within two years, had them playing for the championship. Over seven years, he won five championships, including three consecutive championships.

➤ **Scotty Bowman**—NHL coach of the St. Louis Blues, Montreal Canadiens, Buffalo Sabres, Pittsburgh Penguins and, currently, the Detroit Red Wings. He has won a record-tying eight Stanley Cup championships as a coach. What makes this unique is that Bowman has accomplished this feat with three different teams.

➤ **John Wooden**—UCLA men's basketball coach during the '60s and '70s. His Bruins won ten NCAA national championships, including seven in a row. Over his career, he amassed a winning percentage of more than 80 percent.

➤ **Anson Dorrance**—University of North Carolina women's soccer coach. In the eighteen years that the NCAA has held a national soccer championship for women, Dorrance's Tar Heels have won fifteen of them.

➤ **Dean Smith**—former head coach of the University of North Carolina men's basketball team for thirty-six years. He holds the college record with 879 wins as a coach, all during a period when he established high moral ethics in a program that saw 97 percent of its players graduate.

➤ **Lou Holtz**—head coach of NCAA men's football teams at Notre Dame and the universities of Arizona, Minnesota, and South Carolina. While spending most of his time at Notre Dame, Holtz built a record of 216-95-7 over twenty-seven years, including a national championship.

➤ **Pat Riley**—NBA basketball head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, New York Knicks, and the Miami Heat. During the 1980s with Riley at the helm, the Lakers dominated the league, appearing in the finals seven times in eight years, winning the championship on four of those trips. Additionally,

> L.A. won one other championship earlier while Riley was an assistant coach.

> ➤ **Bill Walsh—**former head coach of the San Francisco 49ers and Stanford University football team. In ten years at the helm, his 49ers won three NFL Super Bowl championships, the first one coming after only three years. Long considered an offensive expert, he won two NFL Coach of the Year awards.

This list is by no means all-inclusive. There are so many other excellent coaches from which to learn.

From all the coaches that I studied, however, I noted many similarities in their coaching methodology that were reflected in my own. Everything begins with the establishment of a well-detailed game plan. And that's when the teaching begins. There is such a strong focus on the preparation of the team in sports, and all the coaches above were, or still are, masters of it. What makes teaching in sports even more definitive is the occurrence of an event from which to learn. Games are used by coaches as the opportunity to reinforce the proper or improper execution of the game plan.

It was obvious that to be a successful coach, you must:

1. Prepare a game plan, based on team strength, that details players' individual roles.

2. Through intense practice, develop the players' abilities, comprehension of their roles, and capability to execute the plan.

3. Allow the players to execute the plan with great discipline at game time.

4. Use past games as opportunities for the team to learn and base all reinforcement on the game plan.

This was typical for so many coaches. In fact, it was how I coached. For myself, it was interesting to note that areas identified as weaknesses for myself as a manager were ones that were strong focuses for me as a coach. As I made notes to myself during my period of self-analysis, I kept noticing that the coaching methodology was fairly well-defined for me. What was most

impressive to me, however, was that in sports, the overall game plan permeates every aspect of the team's progression.

What I saw in this approach was present in the methods of some of the legendary coaches that I studied. There is a common methodology to creating a winning team. When I studied the methodology that these other coaches seemed to follow, I found it similar to my own. That's what made me realize that when coaching a sports team, one naturally moves towards this methodology without necessarily determining to do so.

These are the four basic phases in the development of a team. A few years ago, I jotted down these four steps using sports terminology and have referred to them ever since. (More than coincidentally, they are the titles of this book's four sections.) They are:

Step 1: Create and Focus on a Game Plan

Step 2: Develop the Players and their Roles

Step 3: Execute at Game Time

Step 4: Learn From the Game After the Game

The sequence of these steps, obviously, is important. One step cannot happen well until the previous phase has been successfully completed. What is wonderful about this methodology, however, is that it is a dynamic cycle. It can repeat itself in various levels of detail and for an infinite number of times. The only absolute for this approach is that the game plan must be the foundation for it all. Every step of the way, the plan will permeate all activities for a coach and, hopefully, the winning team.

The team's focus will be unified in its direction. Individual actions and group actions will be based on the same premises. The development of the players will be targeted specifically on what is needed for the team's success, since the roles that need to be taught were defined by the plan. Game time actions will be scripted by the methods and individual actions that are itemized in the game plan. And in the end, reviews of the team and player performance will be based on their execution of the game plan's defined assignments.

The Relevance of It All

When I looked at my notes and mulled over my observations, it all became clear to me. There were simple reasons why I was successful as a coach and not as a manager. It was nothing short of a revelation to me. And yet I was embarrassed. Embarrassed by the fact that I could have allowed myself to be so different in the first place, and for not knowing better. But, really, how could I have known? It's not as if anyone ever sat me down and gave me this level of insight. In business today, there isn't always that level of clarity, nor the time to explore it, dwell on it, and absorb it.

When I compared the coaching methodology to the typical management methodology, I found differences in techniques that were obvious to me. For example:

	SUCCESSFUL COACHES	TYPICAL MANAGERS
PLAN	The coach's game plan leads to a team focus that relates the team's objectives to individual roles and predefined performance expectations.	The manager's overall plan leads to quantified goals that usually become the only expectations for employees.
DEVELOP	The most important task for the coach is the development and preparation of the team before the game.	The manager sees himself as most important in the heat of battle because he is the key decision maker.
OBSERVE	The coach can't play the game.	Managers can and do get involved with each employee's work.
LEARN	Coaches review every game with their teams, win or lose, looking for opportunities to reinforce good performance and to correct inappropriate performance.	Managers primarily review performance on an individual basis and often only when it's bad or when required for an annual review.

It was surprising that for two activities that really are very similar, the typical methodology is so very different.

We don't have an easy task as managers. Not only do we have to deliver results, but we also have to worry about employee job satisfaction, workplace harmony, and working collaboratively. The truth is that these latter issues tend to be rather low on the priority list. The nature of business and the need for immediate results tends to drive "softer" issues to the bottom. Understandable, but detrimental.

However, if we can achieve an improvement in the work environment and an increase in employee morale using the same approaches and tactics that will also bring better results, then why not try it? The truth is that it is possible. By trying to create a unified, focused team of individuals who are knowledgeable about their roles and purposes, and who execute well-laid plans and revel in their own successes, we can do just that—get better results while increasing our employees' morale and job satisfaction.

The lessons from my years as a sports coach are laid out in the next four sections. Each lesson, or chapter, is structured in the same manner as my own lessons were: education at the arena, validation of the lesson from the legendary coaches, and the transfer of that lesson into the workplace. At the end of each section, I have included a **Coach's Playbook,** a practical checklist that you can use to help implement these lessons in your organization (the Coach's Playbooks are also consolidated at the end of this book for easy access and use). I hope you'll be able to take these checklists and lessons, which teach valuable techniques and methods, and put them to work building your own winning team.