

Culture – The Forgotten Element of Business
Three Lessons from Sport Titans

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*Build for your team a feeling of oneness,
of dependence on one another and of strength to be
derived by unity. - Vince Lombardi*

In his nine-year tenure as the Green Bay Packers' head coach, Vince Lombardi accrued a 98-30-4 record, five NFL Championships, and two Super Bowls (I & II). Voted ESPN's *Coach of the Century*, Lombardi's winning ways maintain a healthy legacy, inspiring corporate and pro-sport executives alike. As with many successful leaders, he placed significant emphasis on the big picture, the human relationships, the culture of his team.

Through research based on interviews with titans in professional sport (e.g., Jeffrey Lurie, Owner of the Philadelphia Eagles; Bill Polian, President of the Indianapolis Colts; Dan Rooney, Owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers), as well as NCAA championship lacrosse coaches (e.g., UVA, Johns Hopkins), we have interviewed more than a dozen acclaimed *winners*. In talking with these individuals about *how* they were able to build such dominant organizations, their shared commitment to culture is striking. Beyond x's and o's, tactics, and starting line-ups, the luminaries we've spoken with place considerable emphasis on values, consistency, decency, and these *larger* concepts that are easily overlooked throughout the day to day.

In business, much as in sport, a zeal for developing and maintaining a healthy culture can be a recipe for success. From IT to HR, culture requires a unique brand of compassion and dedication that, when delivered, will pay striking dividends. While such effort requires a natural shift in focus, the end gain will be well worth the effort. We are all subject to the distractions of the day-to-day, but IT and HR executives who carve time to share values and a story with employees may be on to something. To follow are three clear focus-shifts that may also assist you in building and/or maintaining a *winning culture*.

Clarify & Communicate Your Values

When a leader is asked to outline values it is easy to offer a boilerplate response: Our Customers, Staff Development, Our Product. However, the executive who expresses unique values that clearly represent him/her as well as the organization attracts willing *followers*. Similarly, those who broadcast their values consistently through appropriate channels are on the road to gaining buy-in from their employees and customers alike. The CIO who lists teamwork, compassion and swift delivery amongst her values will benefit from posting the following team vision on her website:

My vision is to direct a cadre of highly skilled and talented individuals in effectively delivering services while maintaining a congenial and caring environment.

Triangulate

With minimal effort, it is possible to determine if leaders aren't truly invested in what they say they are. While an HR exec may tout a primary value of trust, his/her addition of a sign-in sheet for staff trainings may compromise the initial claim. Implicit within such a mandate is the notion that employees need to be monitored. Since the policy doesn't align with the promoted value, confusion and resentment may result.

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The individuals we interviewed are hyper-aware of the messages that every word and action may communicate. They want to maintain consistency, and properly reflect their values even in times of duress. As one winner of three NCAA titles said, "when you say something that could hurt somebody, which could be very satisfying at the moment . . . you've got a hell of a job trying to make that ground back up with that kid. He may never trust you again."

Similarly, these individuals were methodic even in what they displayed throughout their office space. One coach reflected his appreciation for family and team with a stark office that had only two photos: one of his family and one of his team! An NFL executive who had more of a flair for décor as well as a Super Bowl Championship reserved the most prominent wall in the organization's headquarters for a photo of the Championship team,

communicating the value of “team” success over an individually focused wall of fame.

Beyond words and office displays, values are articulated through practice. Those who walk the talk often get the most stunning results. One Major League Baseball GM worked to be the first in the office, even the morning after a night game, so as to reflect his value of hard work.

In communicating values through words, displays, and actions, leaders can *triangulate their values*. This eliminates confusion amongst followers on what values and behaviors the organization supports. Triangulating values successfully eliminates anxiety on the part of followers while simultaneously providing a clear path regarding desired and undesired behavior.

Maintain Accountability

Once a leader’s values are articulated and clearly tied to the vision of an organization, there is typically opposition. It’s natural for some to resist and/or buck change. If they are successful, they can wreak havoc on team dynamics, the mission, and overall performance. In working to avoid such conflict, a leader best hold employees accountable. Although an extreme, one NFL exec spoke of how he cut two players after he noticed their reduced effort during a tough loss. He followed his actions up with some straight talk, stating that he wouldn’t tolerate such lackluster efforts, and others would be cut if they ever quit. Needless to say, no other player has let his performance drop to such a level since.

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An HR exec who becomes aware of an employee testing recently-imposed boundaries will avoid future issues by talking with that employee quickly and decisively. For one, employees may not be aware that their actions are conflicting with the new values - The simple reminder that “we’re trying something new” may go a long way. Additionally, those who are knowingly contesting the new culture should have a professional arena to voice their concerns. They may have good points that should be considered moving forward, or they may need to be

reminded that change is upon them and the organization is depending on their efforts to embrace it.

Culture is a critical part of any organization, regardless of the industry. An organization's culture determines how employees treat one another and how they treat customers or potential clients. When leaders adhere to the three methods outlined above, they can slowly shape or stabilize an existing culture and construct a solid foundation from which to grow. Through defining values, triangulating those values, and maintaining accountability, leaders increase their chances of long-term and sustainable success. Leaders in business may never need to win a game or blow a whistle, but the lessons learned from famed sports executives and coaches may lead to successes unexpected in industry and beyond.

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