

Newsweek

How to Build a Winning Team

Winning is about leading your people. And about leading them in four very specific ways.

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If you travel around the how-to-succeed-in-business lecture circuit enough, which we both happen to do, you end up hearing a lot of interesting stuff about competitive strategy, disruptive technologies, resource allocation, asset management, and the like.

Interesting—and sort of beside the point. Because when it's all said and done, winning teams win because they have the best players and a coach who knows how to make the sum greater than the parts.

It's as simple and as complicated as that. Simple because as soon as people hear that dictum, they typically mutter, "Oh, yeah." It's hardly a controversial notion that great players plus a great coach equal great performance.

Complicated, though, because actually doing it is so damn hard. We get distracted. The board wants a presentation, or a customer is getting pesky. Or we lose our nerve. Or we get tired. Whatever: something, anything, makes us forget that winning is about leading your people. And about leading them in four very specific ways.

FIRST, the leaders of winning teams always—always—let their people know where they stand.

We're not talking about "Good job, Sally," or "Thanks for your hard work, Tom." Effective leaders let their people know whether they are star performers without whom the organization would writhe in agony or whether they should be thinking seriously about finding another job.

Amazingly—to us, at least—the habit of continuously evaluating each team member is a rare and wondrous thing. Sure, leaders evaluate their people all the time—but they too seldom share those observations with the team members themselves. In the silence, stars become disaffected and leave seeking more appreciation, either in the soul or the wallet, or both. Meanwhile, the solid center wanders around in undirected ignorance, and the real underperformers drive their teammates crazy because others must carry their load (and no one upstairs ever seems to do anything about it).

By contrast, on winning teams, leaders spend the vast majority of their time lavishing love on top performers. Yes, love: rewarding them for every contribution, building their self-confidence so they have the guts to take on even greater challenges, and holding them up as a role model for others on the team. Similarly, on winning teams, leaders devote a lot of energy to middling performers, relentlessly coaching. And as for the do-nothings: leaders face into these individuals with a sense of reality, spending only the time to help them put together a résumé and find a job where they will be more successful.

Unfortunately, in most organizations, managers spend an inordinate amount of time working around their worst people, counseling their aggrieved co-workers and rearranging work to accommodate their incompetence. They also spend a lot of hours fretting over how they can possibly break it to their underperformers that they're terrible at their jobs without hurting their feelings. It's all backward. Rather than hurting their feelings, you're doing your underperformers a favor if you let them know they need to go, and the sooner the better, before they have to look for work in a recession. After all, who were the first employees to be cut in 2008 or 2009? You guessed it: mainly those who should have been set out on new paths years earlier.

SECOND, winning teams know the game plan.

There's never been a Super Bowl team that charged the field thinking, We'll figure this out as it goes along and see what happens. And there will never be a winning business team that lacks a clear sense of how the competition thinks and fights—and how it's going to think and fight better. Nor has there ever been a winning team that didn't believe that winning would make life much, much better in very real ways.

Don't get us wrong. We're not huge fans of strategic planning as it is commonly taught in business school, nor as it is practiced in too many companies. Lengthy reports about strategy from headquarters or consultants—in particular, those that involve PowerPoint slides—frankly scare us. They usually claim to predict the future in a way that no one can anymore, and they're ridiculously expensive to boot. No, in today's global market,

strategy means picking a general direction and executing like hell. And that's what winning teams do.

Here's the catch. Most leaders explain the game plan in mushy, vague terms. "We need to gain market share. That's going to mean beating Acme Widgets," they might say. "Everybody's quota is going to be doubled, and we're reorganizing so that everyone is reporting to someone new. Change is hard, but it's necessary. Go get 'em."

Ready, forward—what?

On winning teams, leaders infuse their people with crazy-positive enthusiasm about what winning will look like for the company and, more important (as it's often forgotten), for them as individuals. "Look, Acme's killing us," they might say. "Their on-time delivering makes us look like we're driving horses and buggies around here. But we can beat them by coming up with a better idea for efficiency every single day. And when that happens, your life is going to change and everything is going to get better. Our company will start to grow again; you'll have more job security and a chance for advancement. Even though we're going to enter into a long, hard slog of change ahead, at the other end of it you'll be smarter, richer, and your life will be more exciting."

Clarity. Direction. Outcome.

Ready, forward, charge.

THIRD, winning teams are honest.

Or let us be more precise. On every single winning team, you will discover that the leader is candid; he rewards everyone else who is candid, and outs the people who aren't candid. Oh, sure, there are exceptions. But in time, they always backfire. Because when people don't say what they mean, play politics, or withhold their ideas, everything gets screwed up. Resentments accumulate. Cliques form. Good people leave. Work slows down.

By contrast, the simple truth is that candor breeds trust. And when a team is infused with trust, people play to their better angels. They share ideas freely. They help their colleagues when they're stuck and need an insight. What they do every day then becomes about the group's success, not their own. They're not worried about not getting the credit for some big win; they know a teammate will say something like, "Hey, don't thank me. Cary was the one with the eureka moment that set the whole thing in motion." And Cary will say, "Thanks. I may have had the idea, but you executed."

The candor-trust connection has another benefit: it promotes an environment of risk-taking. Who wants to try something new if they sense they'll get a stick in the eye (or worse) should they fail? Leaders of winning teams encourage their people to take on huge challenges and let them know that they're safe no matter what happens. And then they make good on their word.

Only in such environments will people be bold. And only bold teams win.

FOURTH, and finally, winning teams celebrate.

No idea we talk about gives people hives more than this one. Maybe it has something to do with the recession—“How can you party in times of austerity?”—but people balked even before the economy went south.

Most leaders don't understand the tight link between celebrating small successes along the way and achieving the big one at the end. But it's irrefutable. Teams that get pizza when they land a new client, or go on trips when they hit a sales milestone, or otherwise whoop it up every time something good happens create a delicious dynamic. They teach people what it feels like to win, which is, well, a very good feeling. It makes people want to win more. In fact, they never want the feeling to go away. So they do everything to keep winning.

We would call it magic, except there's nothing mysterious about it. Like all four of our maxims here, the only mystery about winning teams, really, is why there aren't more of them.

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