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Inside Baseball

Take cues from successful baseball strategies to improve your game in business.
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Those who don't know anything about baseball think the game is boring because there's not enough going on. But those who understand the game inside and out know that plenty is going on in between pitches and runs. In fact, learning the game of baseball not only makes you appreciate it more, it also provides many lessons and applications for real life. Watching a baseball game and seeing how the coaches interact with the players and how the players interact with each other gives valuable insights into the game of business. A few lessons include how to position your employees for success, how to take risks, when to take your best shot, coaching employees well and then letting them do their jobs, determining who your star players are, and celebrating all your successes in the game.

Like the game of baseball, managers who use these strategies will be batting above .500 in the game of business.

Position Your Players For Success

A lot goes on in between pitches. Just picture this scenario: There's a player on first and one on second base, one out, and a left-handed singles hitter up to bat. The coach is hand signaling to the catcher, who is sending a signal to the pitcher. The coach is signaling to the shortstop and outfielders—two taps on the nose and one touch on the hat. What the heck does all this mean?

This means the coach knows the likely scenarios for success. He knows that a ground ball on the left side of the field could create a double play that ends the inning. He knows that the batter is not a power hitter and is not likely to pull a ball and put it over the right field fence.

What does this have to do with leadership? In the book *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates looks at information as reduction in uncertainty. The leader or coach uses information to narrow the likely outcomes, and positions his players or employees to optimize success.

The baseball coach is having the pitcher throw an outside pitch with a downward spin framed by the catcher, who scoots outside the plate just a notch. By doing this, the batter is likely to hit a ground ball to the left side of the infield. The third baseman and shortstop, who anticipate this, move to the left a little to guard the line, hoping to come up with a ground ball that goes from third to second to first for an inning-ending double play.

In business, as in baseball, leaders have to anticipate possible outcomes and be ready for whatever they are confronted with. The players, or workers, will be looking up to the leader for direction and coaching when they are faced with uncertainties. By knowing what the possible outcomes are, the leader can make sure he has the best person for the job in place to increase the employee's and organization's opportunity for success.

Leading Off To Steal a Base

You have a double, and you are standing on second base with your foot on the bag. As long as you keep your foot on the bag, the pitcher doesn't have to worry about your stealing third, and the second baseman and shortstop don't have to worry about keeping you close to the bag. But, if the next batter gets an infield hit, you likely will not get to third. And, if the next batter gets an outfield hit, you are likely to get thrown out at the plate if you try to make it home.

Ordinary measures get ordinary results; you have to take risks to increase the likelihood for success. If you lead off the bag, the pitcher gets distracted, the shortstop needs to move closer to second base to keep you close and the third baseman stays a little closer to the bag in case you try to steal. Then the gap widens between third and second, and when the hit gets through the infield, you will be a blur as you race by third for home and score another run.

Leaders take risks for success. Leadership takes courage, and leaders have the courage to try something a new way—to go above and beyond what is normally expected. Showing your employees that you are willing to take risks for success creates a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. Employees are then willing to take a chance to see if there is a way to build a better mousetrap.

Winning always feels good. But think about a time when the squeeze bunt scored the game-winning run in the 12th inning. You may have won by one run just like you did the day before, but it was the risk that made the win feel really special. Leaders who get their employees to take a risk and succeed teach their employees to stretch for extraordinary results. Meeting or exceeding a customer's seemingly impossible request brings the whole team together better than any team-building session. Winning when it is easy just isn't the same.

Take Your Best Whack

The last two pitches have been curveballs just outside the plate for balls one and two. It's the third pitch in this at-bat, and what do you think the pitcher is going to throw you? His curveball has been spotty—often off the plate. You know the pitcher doesn't want to get behind in the count for three balls and no strikes. You also know he has more control over his fastball than any other pitch. Realizing that he can throw a 90-mph fastball, you have to be ready to swing with all you've got.

Well, go for it. If you hesitate, wondering if it is going to be a fastball, a curveball or a change-up, the ball will be whizzing by you by the time you make up your mind.

A good phrase for management is “Decide; you can always decide again!” Decisiveness is a core competency of a leader. Leaders need to weigh the likelihood of different outcomes, pick one to focus on and get everybody moving in one direction. If things do not seem to be going as planned, perhaps new variables have been introduced and it is time for a new decision. Weigh the new facts, make a decision and take your best whack.

Being decisive does not necessarily mean you have to decide right away. Sometimes the decision is to let the competition show their cards. In baseball, a manager may wait to see who the opposing team brings in to pinch-hit before he brings in a relief pitcher. If they bring in a good fastball hitter, he may bring in a pitcher with a good change-up to keep the batter off balance.

The key is to take decisive action. Joseph Badaracco, in his book *Leading Quietly*, refers to this approach as “strategic stalling.” Communication is key with this strategy. The leader should let the followers know that the decision is to see what the competitor’s move is first for long-term positioning so it does not look like indecision.

Coach People And Send Them up To Bat

If you have ever coached a kid’s team, I am going to bet there has been a time when you wanted to go in to pitch or bat for a struggling child. The opposing team has walked three batters and is about to walk in a run. You would love to go in for the child and throw that next strike just to get him going in a positive direction.

But, you can’t. If you did go in for the child and got a hit or threw a strike, that player would not be any better prepared to overcome this situation the next time he is in the very same spot. The best thing to do is to call a time-out, remind the player of all the things you practiced and the skills he needs to use in this instance, and tell him that you are confident he can do it.

Similarly, the only choice in business is to teach employees how to do what they need to do, give them the opportunity to try it, give them immediate feedback on how well they did and let them try it again. Don’t forget to point out what they did right.

Everyone Can’t Play Shortstop

The glamour positions in baseball are shortstop and pitcher. Everybody wants to touch the ball. They want to be the one who gets more balls hit to them or the one who can strike out the other side.

To be a shortstop, however, takes great range. You have to have the ability to dive left and right, catch a sharply hit ball, hop to your knees and fire a throw to first base. You have to be acrobatic to jump over the runner that is trying to take you out as you tag the

bag at second and fire to first for the double play. You need to have a rocket arm to make the throw from deep in the hole to get the runner at first. Everyone does not possess the skills to be a shortstop, and this is a key position for overall team success.

What is your shortstop position? What are the critical skills needed for success in that position? Who on your team has the skills or can learn the skills to be your shortstop?

A leader must accurately assess the required skills for success and measure who has those skills. Close enough is not good enough. The leader must provide the opportunity to develop and demonstrate the required skills. When someone simply does not possess the necessary skills, an honest discussion must ensue. Be honest with the employee and explain to him what skills are required for the position, how he is performing on each skill, where he needs improvement and how you as the manager can help.

Far too many leaders lack the courage to be honest about addressing performance problems. If the player is having a problem at shortstop—or anywhere else for that matter—honesty is the only avenue for improvement. It is much easier to deliver a nonconfrontational assessment that will be accepted rather than one that addresses needed improvements that will be tougher to deliver but better for the team.

Winning Isn't Everything

Pick up the sports section from the newspaper and go to the pages covering baseball. What statistics do you see? You will find wins and losses for each team and team standings. You will also find each batter's batting average, hits, runs, walks, errors, and the pitchers' earned run averages—runs scored against them for which they are responsible. A coach's success is measured in wins, golden glove awards and batting titles.

Companies have the same statistics. Their wins and losses are measured in revenues and profits. The market share they hold in the industry represents their standing in the league. Without players, there would be no wins and losses. Without employees, there would be no company. Leaders help the organization generate revenue and maximize profits by inspiring employees to be their best.

Inspiration involves emotion. Leaders get people charged up and get their hearts pumping. The inspiration should reach employees on two levels: team and personal. Rallying everyone around a common goal or a common enemy can get a team inspired. You can get your employees charged up to be No. 1 if you are a close second. Or, if there is a dreaded competitor, you can rally around a desire to beat them every opportunity you get and show them who is better. Create some excitement! Sometimes people need a cause to drive for extraordinary results.

Inspiration on a personal level is all about helping your employees be the best at what they do or what they strive for. The win-win is achieved when individual and organizational success is in sync.

Congratulating the team on the win is important. Just as important is recognizing that clinch hit that changed the momentum of the game, that key catch to save the extra run from scoring or that strikeout with the bases loaded to end the inning. Good leaders take the time to reward and recognize all the individual accomplishments that contributed to the overall success.