

intelligence vault
LEADERSHIP AND
TALENT DEVELOPMENT**leadership lessons from the nfl**

~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque

The NFL season kicked off this past weekend. Finally. If you are like me, it is a LONG off-season. Sure, I read blogs. I watch NFL Network. I listen to prognosticators make predictions. I make my own, usually completely inaccurate, predictions. (Perhaps that is why I write for Report on Business and not ESPN.) But really, this is all to kill the seven months between games. Nothing compares to the majestic grind of the march through the regular season toward the playoffs. And, as a business person, to watching the marketing juggernaut – the money making machine – that is the NFL.

To say the NFL is the premier (North American) sports league is not just an understatement, it is, well, a bit insulting to the league. Think about it – the NFL is tops among pro sports with total annual revenues of US\$5.9 B* (Major League Baseball is second at US\$5.2 B*). And each team plays only eight home games. The Jays play 81 home games! NFL teams outdraw MLB teams on average more than 2:1*, and let's not even talk about revenues from TV rights. Even the bad teams make money. It's a hell of a business.

THE LESSONS

One of the reasons I enjoy the NFL so much is not only studying the business side of the game, but also in drawing direct parallels between football and business. There are a number of leadership and talent development lessons from football which can be applied in business. Here are ten that apply:

1. It's about talent.

One third of a team's success is determined in the off-season – when teams are constructed. Teams are built through the draft (finding young talent in the college ranks) and through free-agency (bringing over experienced players). The best teams (i.e. New England) draft the best available talent on the board, and not for position. And the best teams pay as much attention to character as skills, when interviewing/trying out free agents.

I don't care what business you are in, you likely depend heavily on your talent. Building out a talented team, where both skills and character are emphasized, is key to succeeding. Good people will figure out just about anything.

2. It's about strategy and planning.

One third of a team's success is determined in the weeks leading up to games. The overall team strategy doesn't change, but the week-to-week tactical strategy (depending on opponent) does. And then there is planning and preparation. The best coaches (i.e. Bill Belichick) are meticulous in contingency planning, and the best players (i.e. Peyton Manning) put in extra time in the film room.

The core of your business strategy probably doesn't change much over time, but I bet your yearly (or even quarterly/monthly) strategy does. As it should. Business conditions and competitors change, and you have to adapt. And I also bet the more effort you put into your sales or marketing planning, the better your results are. Sometimes there is no substitute for hard work.



3. It's about execution.

One third of a team's success is determined on game day, in how well the players execute the game plan and adjust to changing conditions on the fly. Better players, and better prepared players, tend to out-execute those with less talent or training. But there is something about good teams – they all seem to have a 'find-a-way-to-get-it-done' attitude.

Creating a 'refuse-to-lose' culture of pride and accountability will go a long way toward ensuring proposals go out on time, or orders are always filled.

4. You cannot have a team of quarterbacks.

Each position on a football team is important, and demands different orientations and skills. Great teams get the most out of not only their stars, but also from their role players.

In business, balanced teams (i.e. a 'numbers' person, a 'sales' person, a 'people' person, etc.) tend to make it more often than all-star, one-dimensional teams (i.e. four tech experts), especially when it comes to management. Diversity in terms of skill sets and cultures is very healthy.

5. Sometimes it is better to throw the ball out of bounds and live for another down.

Most quarterbacks who try to force a ball into a tight space, or scramble when there is little room to maneuver, get their teams in trouble. They compound the errors. Smarter quarterbacks see the first problem and throw the ball (safely) away, instead of risking an interception or fumble.

For many businesses, the analogy applies. Imagine a small manufacturer, about to bid on a large contract in a compressed timeframe. Rather than guess on costs, the firm would be wise to call the client and ask for a bid extension, or to not bid at all, instead of risking a large, long-term money-losing deal.

6. Winning individual battles can be about creating separation at the line of scrimmage.

Great wide receivers are usually not faster than the defenders that shadow them. They just work harder in the first three seconds of a play to create some space between themselves and their opponents. It can then be an even footrace the rest of the way, but the receiver has already won.

I like this idea in two spots for businesses. The first is in a competitive situation for a contract or a new customer. If you work a little harder than your competition out of the gate, you can be stack up evenly against them for the rest of the sale/process/whatever, and you will likely still win. I also like it when it comes to project management. Hitting projects (internal or for clients) hard in the early going is a really important ingredient to finishing on-time and on-budget.

7. You cannot coach speed.

And it is just plain tough to defend. Great teams are fast – fast onto the field, fast running the ball, fast tackling opponents, and fast attacking the quarterback.

If you run an SMB, one advantage you have over larger competitors is your agility – your ability to react more quickly. Speed, as long as quality is not compromised, should be an orientation – your systems should be designed to maximize on quick turnarounds (for proposals or products, etc.).

8. A good defense is as important as a good offense.

It is very difficult to win in the NFL with a highly ranked offense and a poor defense, or vice-versa.



You likely don't have a big/well-known brand to fall back on. This means your sales and marketing effort has to be almost perfectly balanced with your fulfillment effort (fulfilling on whatever you are selling). If you are strong at sales, but suck at delivery, you'll struggle with repeat business. If you're great at execution but stink at sales, your growth will be slow and painful.

9. Win the turnover battle.

Every team makes mistakes in games. Mistakes usually lead to turnovers, where the opposing team gets the ball and a chance to score. Good teams make fewer turnovers, and win a much higher percentage of games.

Everybody makes mistakes. You will make mistakes. Your team will make mistakes. The trick is to make fewer than your competition. And the path to fewer mistakes is learning from the ones you do make, so you don't repeat them. This means you need some kind of 360 degree feedback and knowledge management/knowledge sharing system.

10. Great coaches find ways to win.

Even with injuries. Even on the road. Even when they are behind in the 3rd or 4th quarter. Great coaches are part problem-solver and part motivator.

Isn't that your job, at least on 'game day'? You've done your preparation. You've done your teaching. But in the moment (during a negotiation, when presenting to a client, etc.) your job is to figure out the answer, and to inspire those around you to contribute in the best way possible.

** Plunkett Research, Ltd.*

Mark Healy, P.Eng, MBA is a Partner at Torque Customer Strategy, a boutique marketing consulting firm in Toronto, Canada. Torque focuses on bringing organizations closer to their customers via insight development and a no-assumptions™ model. Mark has completed over one hundred engagements in this new space over the last four years. He is regularly quoted in the national media on topics ranging from customer insight to managing professional service firms. Mark teaches "Customer Intimacy for Marketers" at the Canadian Marketing Association, and a "Demystifying Consulting" module at top Canadian business schools. His full bio can be found at www.torquecustomerstrategy.com.

