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Sports teams as a model for workplace teams: Lessons and liabilities

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Executive Overview

Over the last decade, the management literature has been flooded with books by prominent sports figures, promising to share the secrets of building a winning team. Managers often look to sports for inspirational examples and useful models of teamwork. What exactly can managers learn from sports about leading a high-performance team? The purpose of this article is to help managers derive maximum value from sports-team comparisons. It identifies seven lessons on how to motivate the members of a team and how to structure a team and its work. Managers also need to be aware, however, of the liabilities of drawing on sports references. When used inappropriately, sports comparisons can lead managers and their employees astray. Four critical liabilities are discussed and suggestions are provided for avoiding these risks.

As work organizations increasingly rely on teams rather than individuals to accomplish key tasks, managers face the question: What are the secrets to leading a truly outstanding team?

An impressive line-up of sports figures is available and eager to provide answers. For example, for $65,000, one can hire Pat Riley, coach of the Miami Heat, to make a personal appearance and discuss the secrets of team building. Riley accrued the best regular-season winning percentage of any coach in National Basketball Association history during his tenure with the Los Angeles Lakers and New York Knicks. Alternatively, for $595, one can obtain Riley's 20-minute video on the essential ingredients of superlative teamwork. Or for $12.95, one can purchase Riley's book, *The Winner Within: A Life Plan for Team Players.*

Not a fan of Pat Riley? There are similar books by Phil Jackson of the Chicago Bulls and L.A. Lakers, and Bill Russell, formerly with the Boston Celtics. Prefer college basketball? Then consider books and videos by Pat Head Summitt, who led the University of Tennessee women's team to five National Collegiate Athletic Association titles, and Tara VanDerveer, who led the Stanford women to two national championships and the U.S. Olympic team to a gold medal.

Not a basketball aficionado? Then one can turn to team-building books by such luminaries as Joe Torre, who led the New York Yankees to three World Series victories, or John Robinson, who led the University of Southern California to multiple Rose Bowl appearances. It's a cottage industry—hundreds of sports figures on the speaking circuit, publishing books and videos aimed at managers on their experiences with winning teams.[1]

Whether one chooses to spend $65,000 or $12.95, there is reason to ask what value is provided for the money. This leads to a larger question: What can a manager learn from sports teams about leading a team in the workplace? This article identifies seven topical lessons derived from sports on how to motivate the members of a team and how to structure a team and its work. Managers also need to be aware, however, of the liabilities of drawing on sports references. This article highlights four key caveats to keep in mind. The purpose of this article is to help managers derive maximum value from sports-team comparisons.

Learning from Successful Sports Teams

The focus here is not on sports where the success of the team is essentially the sum of individual players' independent performances, such as swimming, gymnastics, fencing, tennis singles, or track and field. Rather, the focus is on sports where team members play different positions, are interdependent, and must work together closely to beat a competing team, as in soccer, basketball, hockey, volleyball, baseball, football, or tennis doubles. As for workplace teams, the focus here is not on large, loosely defined groups. By workplace team, I mean a group with clearly defined membership whose members are interdependent to perform a specific task and who operate in the context of a larger organization.[2]

The lessons managers can learn from sports teams fall into two broad categories: how to motivate a team, and how to structure a team and its work. The first three lessons described below concern motivation; the subsequent four concern structure.

Lesson 1: Integrate cooperation and competition

A fundamental challenge in motivating a team is promoting an optimal mix of cooperation and competition among team members. A number of management gurus have argued that managers need to learn how to better cultivate relationships that are simultaneously cooperative and competitive.[3] The goal is to tap the benefits of both cooperation and competition. This means teammates help one another and are invested in one another's success, but also push one another to perform at their best by striving to outdo one another. Figure 1 summarizes the positive impact of promoting high levels of both cooperation and competition within teams, and the negative effects of failing to do so.

While substantial research has examined ways to promote cooperation among teammates, there is relatively little solid data or guidance on how to promote constructive competition within a team.[4] Indeed, competition within a team is often strongly discouraged. Yet attempting to eliminate competition among teammates is neither realistic nor healthy, for two reasons. First, the team misses out on the potential benefits of internal competition—the energy, the spark, the drive to keep improving. Second, the impulse to compete with peers is not eliminated, but rather is driven underground and expressed covertly. My research suggests that, when expressed covertly, the competitive drive is likely to take an unhealthy form—wanting to outperform teammates in part by impairing their performance. When openly acknowledged and treated positively, the competitive drive is more likely to take a healthy form—wanting to outperform teammates without undermining their performance.

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Sports coaches grapple daily with the challenge of promoting a balance between cooperation and competition. In fact, the coach of the team with the longest winning streak in college sports, Anson Dorrance of the women's soccer team at the University of North Carolina, has stated that integrating cooperation and competi-

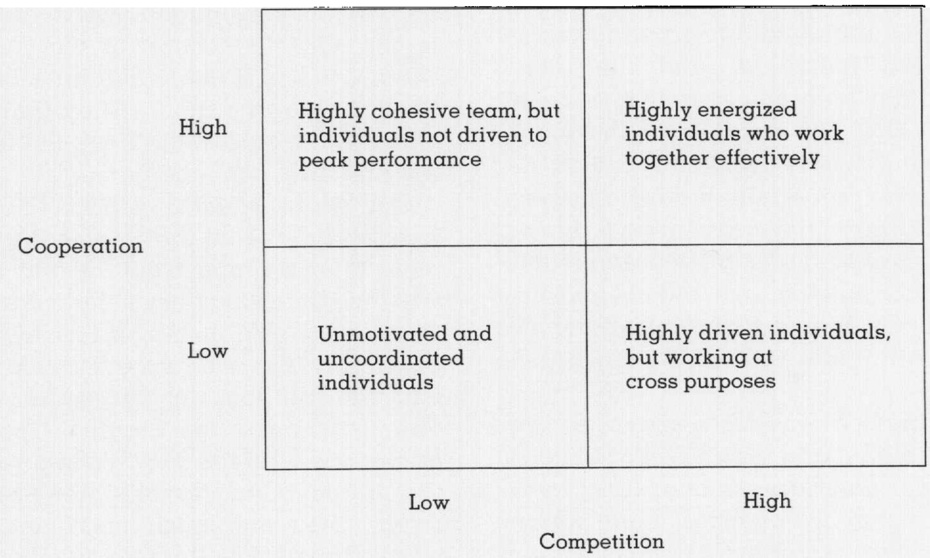

FIGURE 1
Impact of Intrateam Cooperation and Competition

tion was an important ingredient of his team's success. Dorrance says that getting his players to cooperate with one another was easy; getting them to compete with one another was hard. How did Dorrance accomplish that? He never treated practice as just practice. Every player's performance on every drill was duly recorded and posted after every session. Players were encouraged to benchmark their performances against one another and to outperform one another.[5]

My research substantiates the wisdom and success of Dorrance's approach, and identifies further techniques for promoting an optimal mix of cooperation and competition. I studied how the coaches of 32 male and female college basketball teams foster cooperation, healthy competition, and unhealthy competition within their teams.[6] Teams with the best win-loss records had coaches who promoted a strong spirit of cooperation and a high level of healthy competition among their players—in contrast to the conventional wisdom that high performance teams are purely cooperative. On average, the win-loss records of such coaches were 10 percent better than the win-loss records of coaches who promoted cooperation but not healthy competition.

It wasn't that members of losing teams didn't compete with one another; they competed abundantly. But their competition took unhealthy forms. Three factors distinguished between the competition within winning and losing teams: how, when, and around what teammates competed. First, competition on winning teams involved trying to outperform teammates without undermining them, whereas competition on losing teams involved trying to outperform teammates in part by undermining them. Thus competition within winning teams benefited both the individual and the team, whereas competition within losing teams benefited the individual at the expense of the team. Second, on winning teams competition was intense during practice, but minimal during games. On losing teams competition was intense during both practice and games. Third, on winning teams players competed for playing time, but not for scoring opportunities. On losing teams players competed for both playing time and scoring opportunities.

What are the implications for a manager? By shaping the how, when, and around what of competition, a manager can harness and direct competitive energy so that it enhances team performance. Consider the example of IDEO, widely viewed as the preeminent product-design firm in the United States. IDEO uses competition as a spark to generate some of the company's most valuable ideas.

Managers at IDEO frequently call brainstorming sessions; these sessions exemplify healthy competition.[7] Designers vie with one another to produce the most novel and useful ideas. These ideas are listed on sheets of paper pinned to the walls. Often, a good idea is referred to by the name of the person who suggested it. Designers are thus encouraged to compare their performance with others' and to use each other as benchmarks to exceed. Listed on the walls at IDEO are rules that govern all brainstorming sessions. Chief among those rules: don't criticize someone else's idea. Thus unhealthy competition is officially forbidden.[8] As on the sports teams described above, competition at IDEO is bounded; competition is encouraged only at certain times (during brainstorming sessions), around certain goals (coming up with the most useful idea), and in accordance with certain ground rules (no criticizing others).

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Lesson 2: Orchestrate some early wins

Whether a team's first few efforts meet with success or failure can profoundly influence the team's future. Early events shape the path a team will follow. For proof that getting off to a strong start makes a difference, one need only consider the example of professional hockey teams. Researchers Gayton, Very, and Hearns analyzed every game in the 1988–89 season of the American Hockey League to see if the team that scores first is more likely to win the game. They found a significant effect: two-thirds of the time, the team that scores the first goal wins the game.[9]

One might wonder: perhaps this finding merely indicates the team that scores the first goal is the more talented team, and for that reason likely to win the game, and doesn't indicate anything about the value of establishing an early lead. To test that possibility, Gayton and his colleagues ran a second analysis focusing on teams of equal ability. They examined all Stanley Cup Final Playoff games from 1974 to 1987. (While teams that reach the Stanley Cup Playoffs aren't exactly equal in talent, they are much more nearly equal than teams drawn from throughout a league.) Did being ahead at the end of the first period predict winning the game? The researchers found that 72 percent of the time the team that was ahead at the end of the first period went on to win the game.

The importance of early success is just as true for teams in the workplace. As Richard Hackman has shown, workplace teams have a tendency to fall into "self-fueling spirals."[10] Hackman found that: "Groups that somehow got onto a good track tended to perform even better as time passed, while those that got into difficulty found that their problems compounded over time." Early experiences are crucial because a team that starts out with success will aspire to more, and expect more of itself, than a team that starts out with failure. Early successes build teammates' faith in themselves and in their capacity as a team. A team that believes it can succeed is in fact more likely to succeed.[11] Just as significantly, a team that gets off to a strong start will elicit a different response from its environment: it will attract greater resources, more information, higher quality feedback, and better assignments than a team that gets off to a weak start. People outside the team will expect more from it, and give it more opportunities to succeed.

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The challenge for a manager leading a workplace team is to set an upward spiral in motion. This requires getting some early successes under the team's belt. While of course a manager cannot guarantee success, there are things a manager can do to increase the odds that the team's first efforts will succeed. First, one can carve the team's larger task into smaller tasks, and sequence those tasks wisely. The early tasks should be comparatively straightforward and simple—easy wins.[12] Second, those early tasks should be relatively short-term, so that the team can experience success quickly and repeatedly. Third, they should be tasks where success is concrete and unambiguous, so the team gets clear task feedback. Fourth, the manager should call attention to the team's early success, so that members of the team—and those outside the team—will take note of the success. By carving out early tasks that meet these criteria, a manager may jumpstart an upward spiral.

Lesson 3: Break out of losing streaks

While Lesson 2 is concerned with how to set in motion an upward spiral, Lesson 3 is concerned with how to reverse a downward spiral. Downward spirals are pernicious because they are easy to start and difficult to stop. All that is required for a downward spiral to kick in is a couple of failures. The team sees what looks like a pattern of failures in its wake and predicts that failure is likely to recur. Just as with upward spirals, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.[13] Even if the team eventually enjoys a small success and receives positive task feedback, there's a good chance the team will ignore or misinterpret the feedback, because the information is inconsistent with the team's view of itself. Furthermore, once outsiders see the team failing, the team is less likely to get from outsiders the resources and feedback it needs to succeed.

Of course, the best path is to avoid downward spirals altogether. But sometimes a team with plenty of talent can find itself slipping into a downward spiral. How does a team break out? This is an area where managers can learn much from sports teams, particularly those that have made coming from behind their signature. Take, for example, the Denver Broncos football team. Under quarterback John Elway, the team was renowned for its ability to turn around seemingly hopeless situations. In one famous playoff game against the Cleveland Browns, the Broncos trailed 13–20 with only a few minutes left. They had virtually the entire length of the football field to cover if they hoped to tie the score. Many teams in that spot would expect to lose the game. But in the huddle, guard Keith Bishop announced to his teammates, "We've got them right where we want them." Bishop took a seemingly bleak situation and reframed it as an opportunity. He redefined what it meant to be on the two-yard line with just minutes on clock. Bishop rejected the assessment, "We're sunk," and replaced it with, "We're in a prime position," thereby creating an entirely different sense of possibility about what could happen next. Bishop's remark reminded the team that it was capable of turning things around—indeed that it had a record of last-minute turnarounds. If the Broncos had done it before, they could do it again. The team proceeded to carry the ball the length of the field for a touchdown, and then won the game in overtime.

How did Bishop's comment exert such a powerful influence? Bishop challenged his teammates' attributions—their beliefs about what was causing their failure. Attributions are a key underlying mechanism in sustaining a downward spiral. Researchers Lindsley, Brass, and Thomas have shown that two features characterize the attributions of failing teams: failing teams are particularly likely to attribute their problems to causes that are stable and uncontrollable.[14] Stable means the team identifies as the cause of its failure something that is unlikely to change. Uncontrollable means the team identifies as the cause of its failure something that is beyond the team's capacity to influence. This type of attribution leads to demoralization and helplessness. Bishop's comment provided an unstable, controllable attribution for the team's problems, thereby giving everyone the feeling that the team's fate could change (unstable) and that the team could make that change happen (controllable). This new mindset created new options.

What does this mean for a manager leading a workplace team? An important part of a manager's job is shaping the attributions team members make when they encounter setbacks. Whether a couple of failures will snowball into a downward spiral depends in part on the manager's capacity to influence how team members understand their situation, and to provide explanations that are built on healthy attributions that increase the odds that team members will feel capable of turning things around.

Consider, for example, a team that sells big-ticket items that are sensitive to economic cycles. Suppose the stock market drops, consumer confidence is shaken, and product sales falter. The team believes it is at the mercy of uncontrollable forces. Assuming all it can do is wait for things to turn around, the team retreats into a passive, anxious stance. A manager should not let such counterproductive attributions go unchallenged. Of course, the team cannot influence macro trends like economic cycles and consumer confidence. But there are other factors the team can influence, and the team needs to focus on those.

The manager can convene a session to encourage team members to generate a list of all the factors, from large to small, that affect product sales. Then the manager can push team members to dissect each factor in turn. Is it determined exclusively by economic cycles, or are other influences also at work? Probably each factor is multiply determined, and the team can break each down into subsidiary causes. The manager can then guide the team through an assessment of every subsidiary cause. Is it entirely uncontrollable? Or, as is more likely, are there some aspects of some causes that the team can in fact influence? This process of breaking down every contributing factor into its constituent elements can help people feel less overwhelmed, and focus their attention and energy on those areas where they can have an impact.

Lesson 4: Carve out time for practice

A basic structural feature of competitive team sports is that games alternate with practices. Games and practices represent two different modes of team functioning. During games, a team is in performance mode. Games are a do-or-die setting, where the team must flawlessly execute well-trained plays. During practice, a team is in learning mode. Practice is an opportunity for experimentation and innovation, when a team can develop and test new plays, making mistakes along the way. While games are what fans flock to see, practices are equally important to a team's success. Coaches know this well. The winningest coach in NFL history, Don Shula, missed only one regular season practice session during his 25 years with the Dolphins—and that one time he was undergoing surgery. As Shula explains: "Practice is . . . where we outstrip the competition . . . . We'll do it until we get it right. Then we won't deviate from it in the game. I'd rather throw out a play or formation during practice than find out it can't be done correctly in the ball game. We seldom try anything on game day that we haven't been able to perfect in practice."[15]

In the world of competitive team sports, the rhythm of alternating game mode and practice mode is built into the season's structure. Workplace teams are often under such intense pressure to produce results that they are in performance mode all the time; the need to balance this with learning mode is frequently neglected. Therefore, it is a manager's responsibility to deliberately carve out time and space for learning mode. That requires understanding what aspects of a sports team's practice make it an ideal setting for learning, and then replicating those conditions to create the equivalent of practice in the workplace.

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The most significant characteristic of practice mode is that it is okay—indeed desirable—to try new things and fail. Experimentation and failure are an integral part of learning. In fact, organizations that specialize in learning and innovation don't just tolerate failure, but systematically promote it. Consider once again the product-design firm IDEO. In addition to designing award-winning products, IDEO also trains other companies how to become more innovative. IDEO's attitude toward experimentation and failure is succinctly expressed in the organization's motto: "Fail often, so you'll succeed sooner."[16]

This is not to say that a manager should welcome all failures. A manager needs to promote what researcher Sim Sitkin terms "intelligent failure." Intelligent failure promotes learning. Intelligent failure does not happen by accident. It is the result of conducting small, thoughtfully planned experiments.[17] A sports team's practice sessions exemplify three key conditions that Sitkin has shown are essential to fostering intelligent failure. First, practice is a stable, familiar environment. Because of the controlled conditions, a team can experiment with subtle variations in behavior, observe their impact, and draw causal inferences. Second, practice is a low-risk environment. A team's win-loss record is not at stake. Therefore, a team can afford to make multiple mistakes, in the spirit of generating multiple data points. More data allow for more solid inferences. Third, practice is a relatively low-arousal setting, because the team is not exposed to crowds of screaming fans or the scrutiny of television cameras. This is important because arousal and evaluation apprehension can interfere with concentration and learning.

A wise manager will carve out time and space where a team can experiment with its usual procedures—an environment that is familiar, low-risk, and low-arousal. Consider, for example, a team that regularly makes important presentations to clients or customers. Such a team will likely develop a standard approach to both the content and format of its presentations. This is reasonable; having a standard approach is efficient. As conditions change over time, however, the standard approach may gradually become suboptimal. Under the press of daily operations, no one has the time or energy to revamp the standard approach. The manager can build in practice time by regularly scheduling a session (every quarter, perhaps) where team members review, question, and revise the presentation script.

Organizations can foster practice in less direct ways as well. McKinsey, the consulting firm, is an interesting example. In the past, many McKinsey consulting teams spent virtually all their time on site at their clients' facilities. Recently, senior management began encouraging teams to spend at least one a day a week, if not more, in their home office. Part of the rationale for this change was that, while on site, consultants need to be in performance mode, making a good impression on the client. At the home office, in contrast, consultants can acknowledge their mistakes and limitations, and can toss around new ideas. By encouraging consulting teams to spend more time at their home office, an environment safer for experimentation and learning, senior management is creating more opportunities for practice.[18]

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Lesson 5: Call half time

For teams that play against a clock, such as football or basketball, a basic feature of the game is the half-time break. Because nothing is happening on the field during this time (other than entertainment), one might assume that half time is not an essential part of the action. In fact, half time is a crucial piece of the game, and something that a manager who is leading a team that is working against a clock would be wise to emulate.

What is so valuable about half time? By definition, half time occurs at the temporal midpoint of a team's work. The temporal midpoint is a time of special opportunity in a team—not just in the world of sports, but in the working world as well. Researcher Connie Gersick has studied how work teams that face a deadline (that is, project teams with a prespecified end point) evolve over time. She found there was one point—and usually only one point—when team members were open to questioning and revising their task strategies and methods. That point typically occurred at the chronological midpoint of the team's work. Gersick found this consistently, even in teams of different durations, working at different paces, on different tasks.[19]

Why is the midpoint so special? Gersick found that the midpoint serves as a kind of alarm clock or pacing mechanism by which teams manage their work. The temporal halfway point provides a handy milestone at which team members can gauge how well the team is doing and how likely it is to meet the deadline. At the halfway point, the team can look back and estimate how much it has accomplished thus far, and then project how much it will accomplish by the deadline if it continues to work in its current manner and pace.

If a manager tries to push a team to evaluate its work and its task strategies at any other point in the team's life cycle, the manager is likely to meet with resistance. When a team first forms, in the rush to get down to work, team members are likely to devote only brief discussion to weighing different task strategies. Team members generally want to jump right in, and once they have adopted a given task strategy are reluctant to question it.[20] The midpoint thus represents a moment of opportunity. At the midpoint, the team is willing to pick its head up, metaphorically speaking, look around and ask: "How are we doing? Is our approach to the task likely to prove effective?" After the midpoint, Gersick found, team members again become absorbed in the doing of the task, and inertia makes it unlikely they will reconsider their approach.

This translates into four concrete practices for a manager leading a workplace team. First, time your interventions at auspicious moments—which may mean waiting until the temporal midpoint before trying to influence the team's process. Second, formally structure a half-time assessment into the work of the team. At that time, encourage team members to address questions like: How much have we accomplished thus far? How much do we still need to accomplish? If we continue to allocate our time, abilities, and resources in the way we have, are we likely to meet our goals? How can we better allocate our time, abilities, and resources? Third, create more opportunities for effective interventions—more midpoints—by creating more deadlines. This involves breaking the team's work up into smaller chunks with interim deadlines. Fourth, if the team's task is ongoing rather than finite, introduce an artificial endpoint, such as end-of-quarter results or annual performance.

Lesson 6: Keep team membership stable

A team needs time to jell. Especially when the team's task requires a high level of collaboration among teammates, it is important to keep team composition stable long enough that teammates can learn how to work together and how to combine their efforts into a coherent whole. The performance of teams in the National Basketball Association demonstrates this. Researchers Berman, Down, and Hill analyzed the records of all teams in the NBA from 1980 to 1994, to see if there was a relationship between team performance and team members' "shared experience," based on the average length of time team members worked together.[21] Berman and his colleagues found a significant effect: the more stable a team's membership was, the more likely the team would win. To make sure this effect was truly linked to team stability rather than other variables that might influence team performance, the researchers controlled for such things as the average level of talent on the team (measured by draft order) and the age of the players. Even controlling for these variables, teams with more stable membership were more likely to win, all other things being equal. The researchers explained that stable membership was important because it gave players the chance to learn how to read one another and to predict one another's moves. Players also learned about the unique way this particular combination of players functioned. This knowledge was a crucial ingredient of effective collaboration.

One might wonder: could causality work in the opposite direction—that is, winning leads to stability, rather than vice versa? It seems reasonable to expect that a team that wins is likely to be kept intact, so team members therefore have a high level of shared experience. A team that loses is likely to be broken up. Although causality can work in this direction, Berman and his colleagues showed that there is still a strong causal link going from shared experience to performance. The more time teammates have together, the more able they are to anticipate one another's moves and the clearer they are about one another's roles, and this results in enhanced team performance. Shared experience constitutes a tremendously valuable strategic asset for a team, since it is based on knowledge that is unique and non-transferable.

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The need to give teams time is just as true in workplace settings where the task requires a high level of collaboration among teammates. Product-development teams provide a good example. Researcher Ralph Katz studied 50 product-development teams, and found that group longevity significantly influenced team effectiveness.[22] It took an average of two years for teammates to develop the knowledge of one another, the comfortable routines, and the working practices that translated into enhanced team performance.

In today's high-velocity workplace where job switching is the norm, keeping a team intact for two years may be impossible. Still, there are steps a manager can take to increase the stability of membership, even on a short-term team.[23] When setting up a team, a manager should assign to it only people who will be free to stay for the duration of the project. As a team proceeds in its work, a manager must protect the team—that is, influence work assignments so as to keep the team intact. To increase team members' desire to stay with the team, a manager must enhance the benefits and minimize the costs of being a team member. One way to increase the benefits is by having the team talked up publicly—via newsletters, awards, or whatever form of public recognition is acceptable in the organization. One way to minimize the costs is by making sure that team membership doesn't interfere with promotion and career advancement.

Lesson 7: Study the game video

For sports teams, especially on the professional level, it is standard operating procedure in the days following a game to study the game video. Don Shula, for example, had his players watch the video the day after the game, and then watch it again and again over the course of the week. Each time the players watched the video they were split up into different groups; Shula said different groups were likely to notice different subtleties. Furthermore, Shula found that these viewings functioned as a time for teammates to see and appreciate one another's contributions, which they could not necessarily do during a game. It was an opportunity for an offensive star like Dan Marino to notice and comment on a great hit by a defensive player who rarely got the limelight.

Why should a manager institutionalize a similar kind of analysis and debriefing in the workplace? Teammates who do not take the time to reflect on how they worked together are missing out on an invaluable opportunity to learn new things, as well as to consolidate old lessons. If a manager doesn't make a ritual of the debriefing and build it into the team's routine, it is unlikely to happen regularly. And regularity is essential to the value of the act of debriefing. Teams have much to learn from both their failures and their successes, and teams are especially unlikely to reflect on their process when they succeed. Researcher Barry Staw has shown that when a team succeeds at its task, team members are likely to infer that they succeeded because they worked together effectively. In fact, the team might have succeeded despite the way members worked together.[24] The team could have been highly dysfunctional, and the source of success could have been the heroic efforts of just one team member. Nevertheless, successful teams are likely to assume that they worked together effectively and don't need to analyze their process. Furthermore, even if teammates did work together effectively, as long as team members don't analyze and try to understand what made their collaboration effective, the success will be, in researcher David Garvin's words, an "unproductive success." The success is unproductive because it cannot be reliably replicated, since no one knows exactly how or why things went well.[25]

Teams have much to learn from both their failures and their successes, and teams are especially unlikely to reflect on their process when they succeed.

How can a manager promote collective analysis of how team members worked together? A manager can pose questions that will prompt team members to replay in their minds the team's figurative game video, and to bring key data to the surface. This involves asking questions like: Were any handoffs sloppy? Was every position covered? Did we miss any opportunities to make assists that would have led to scoring opportunities? The debriefing does not have to be time-consuming or elaborate. The U.S. Marines have institutionalized a simple but potent practice called the "hot wash." At the end of a team's task, team members always take a couple of minutes to address the questions: What did we do well? What did we do poorly? Other organizations have copied this technique. For example, at City Year, a national social service organization, teams conclude every meeting with reflection on their methods and performance. At City Year, this ritual is known as "pluses and deltas."

Caveats for Managers

While there is much that managers can learn from sports teams, managers also need to be aware of the liabilities of drawing on sports as a model. When used inappropriately, sports comparisons can lead managers and their employees astray. Four key caveats are described below; the first two concern using sports teams as a model for teams in the workplace, the second two concern using the language of sports in the workplace.

Caveat 1: Choose the right sports team as a model

Sports teams in general can provide valuable lessons for managers, but sometimes one sport is a more relevant and instructive model than others. A manager should consider the degree of fit between the team being managed and the sports team being emulated.

The most important dimension of fit concerns the extent and nature of interdependence among teammates. Researcher Robert Keidel has shown that, when it comes to interdependence, there are three fundamental types of team sports, exemplified by baseball, football, and basketball.

Among these three sports, baseball has the least interdependence among teammates, and the nature of that interdependence can be described as "pooled."[26] There is relatively little interaction among teammates. Team members are widely dispersed across the playing field, and rarely are more than two or three players directly involved in a play. Offense and defense are completely separated. Coordination is achieved through the structure of the game, which determines the sequence of plays. The performance of the team is largely the sum of the performance of its individual members. An excellent team is made up of excellent individual performers.

Football teams have a moderate amount of interdependence among players, and the nature of that interdependence is "sequential." Players interact in a series: the quarterback hands the ball off to the running back; the offense yields the field to the defense. Interaction among the players is highly programmed and routinized, and each player's role is narrowly circumscribed. Coordination is achieved by the head coach, who, with the offensive coordinator, plans a highly choreographed series of plays. The quarterback is the on-field executor of the coach's master plan. It is a model of hierarchical, top-down planning and control. An excellent team is made of a combination of excellent individual and team performance.

Basketball teams have the highest level of interdependence among players, and the nature of that interdependence is "reciprocal." Coordination is achieved through constant mutual adjustment among players. There are only 10 players on the court at one time, and their geographic distribution is dense. Usually all players are involved in every play, and there is continuous movement by all, not just the player with the ball. Play is highly fluid and the coach intervenes on an exceptional basis. The performance of the team is more than the sum of its individual players. An excellent team is made up of excellent team players.[27]

Workplace teams tend to resemble one of these three sports models.[28] A sales team, for example, will likely be of the baseball type. Each salesperson works largely independently, and the success of the team depends on each individual salesperson performing at his or her peak. An assembly-line manufacturing team is of the football type. As a product moves down the line, it is passed off from one teammate to the next; each member of the team executes a narrowly defined piece of the work. A cross-functional task force is likely to be of the basketball type. There is continuous involvement by all team members, as the work is repeatedly passed back and forth among them. One may find all three types of teams within one workplace.

Each type of team has certain characteristic features, which spring from the nature of interdependence among teammates. In a baseball-type team, the flow of information is both top-down and bottom-up. The dominant value is self-reliance. Recruitment is geared to select self-starters. Rewards are contingent upon individual performance. One of the manager's most important tasks is determining the line-up. Amassing strong individual talent and playing those individuals in the right sequence is a central challenge.

Each type of team has certain characteristic features, which spring from the nature of interdependence among teammates.

In a football-type team, the flow of information is top-down. The dominant value is loyalty. Recruitment is geared to select dutiful soldiers. Rewards are contingent upon both individual and team performance. One of a manager's most important tasks is preparing the game plan. A manager must also establish a hierarchy within the team that is responsible for seeing that the game plan is accurately executed, and delegate authority to the team member at the top of the hierarchy.

In a basketball-type team, the flow of information is top-down, bottom-up, and lateral. The dominant value is cooperation. Recruitment is geared to select ready collaborators. Rewards are based on team performance. The manager needs to help team members learn how to coordinate themselves. The manager's role is one of integrator, who fosters a sense of shared responsibility among teammates.

Armed with an understanding of the characteristic features of each team type, a manager can assess the degree of fit among features of a team, and identify inconsistencies that could be causing problems. In general, one cannot expect a team to play superlative basketball if its information flow is top-down (as in football) and its reward system entirely individualistic (as in baseball). Keidel suggests that a manager ask him- or herself a series of questions: First, what game are we organized to play—baseball, football, or basketball? The answer will depend on the nature of the interdependence among players. Second, are the information flow, dominant value, recruitment process, reward system, and manager focus in synch with that game? Third, if there are inconsistencies, are they causing any problems? This series of questions can help a manager identify a lack of fit among key features of the team.

Caveat 2: Don't confuse coaching with managing

The role of coaching is different in the workplace than it is in sports. Assuming it is the same can be dangerous. This is a tempting assumption to make, because it is popular nowadays to view managing as a kind of coaching. But a manager who focuses exclusively on coaching is severely limiting his or her capacity to influence team effectiveness.

In sports, the quality of coaching—defined as day-to-day interaction with the team and team-building activities—can be a decisive factor in determining a team's success or failure. This is because in an athletic league, other variables such as the design of the task, the design of the team, and the team's context, vary relatively little from team to team. But in the workplace, such variables can vary tremendously from team to team.[29]

Richard Hackman has shown that the design of the task, the design of the team, and the team's context play a critical role in a work team's effectiveness. The manager needs to address five key issues. Is the task one that is better accomplished by a team rather than by individuals? Does the task represent a clear, compelling goal that is meaningful to everyone on the team? Is the team the right size—that is, no larger than absolutely necessary? Does the team membership include people with the necessary knowledge and skills? And does the team have the time, space, information, and other resources it needs? These variables are fairly constant among sports teams in a league, so they do not explain much variance in a sports team's relative performance. Coaching therefore looms large as an explanation of a sports team's relative performance. But these variables vary greatly among workplace teams, and a critical part of managing a workplace team involves getting these structural and design variables right.[30]

Indeed, in the workplace the importance of these variables can dwarf the importance of coaching, according to research by Ruth Wageman.[31] In a study of 50 customer-service teams at Xerox, Wageman examined how managers who are leading workplace teams divide their time between coaching (day-to-day interaction with the team and team-building activities) and structure (the design of the task, the design of the team, and getting the team the resources it needs). Wageman found that getting the structural variables right had a much bigger impact on team performance than coaching. Furthermore, if the necessary structural factors were not in place, coaching could not do much to improve the team's chances of success. If the structural factors were in place, coaching could improve the team's performance even further. Wageman's work clearly indicates that managers who want to leverage their limited time and energy are probably better off focusing on getting the team set up for success than on coaching.

Caveat 3: Build bridges, not boundaries

When drawing on sports as a model, managers often use sports metaphors and examples to illustrate what they mean. In theory, sports metaphors and examples can help a manager connect with and inspire the members of his or her team. A reference to basketball or tennis can create a lingua franca and a "source of orienting ideas"[32] for teammates who otherwise share no common points of reference.

But in reality, sports references often build boundaries rather than bridges. While the use of sports language need not involve an intention to exclude some members of the team, its potential to have that effect must be recognized. Not everyone on the team is necessarily conversant in sports. A manager who doubts that anyone could feel left out should take a look at such recent books as *Talk Sports Like a Pro: 99 Secrets to Becoming a Sports Goddess*, by Jean McCormick, or such articles in women's magazines as "Talk Like a Team Player," by Elizabeth Danziger.[33] These are intended as primers to help women learn the language of sports in order to function more effectively in the workplace. (This is not meant to imply that sports language leaves all women—or only women—feeling excluded.)

While the use of sports language need not involve an intention to exclude some members of the team, its potential to have that effect must be recognized.

The solution is not to avoid sports references altogether, but to use them thoughtfully and inclusively.[34] How can one accomplish this? One can draw upon both men's and women's teams, as well as international sports like soccer. One can also take the time to explain the example fully, so that the sports reference is less likely to be perceived as a kind of code.

Caveat 4: Don't assume winning is the only thing

When drawing on sports references, it is important to recognize that one can be sending unintended messages about one's own and the organization's values. Employees may infer that the organization is governed by the same rules as sports. In some minds, this boils down to the words of Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers: "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing."[35]

Lombardi's definition of winning might be acceptable on the playing field, but in the workplace his approach is problematic. The workplace is a more ethically complex and higher-stakes arena than the playing field. As researcher Joshua Margolis has noted: "While sports are neatly circumscribed, business is expansive. In sports the field of play is clearly marked—a visible distinction separates what is 'in-bounds' from what is 'out-of-bounds.' Participants include only willing members of opposing sides. The outcome is clearly tabulated in terms of wins and losses. Consequences of how the game is played—injuries, rankings—are visible, finite, and easy to record. Rarely is any one of these elements so neatly defined in the workplace. The consequences of workplace activity are far-reaching and affect a range of stakeholders—such as shareholders and customers—beyond willing contestants."[36]

The workplace is a more ethically complex and higher-stakes arena than the playing field.

Margolis asserts that, when a manager uses sports language, employees may infer that the workplace is ethically no more complex than the playing field. Therefore, when using sports references, a manager should make clear that success in the workplace consists of more than racking up an impressive win-loss record.

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[8] Another important factor in supporting healthy competition

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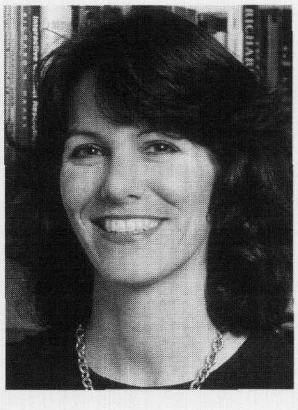

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Executive Commentary

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Sports metaphors are among the most common clichés in the business world, as management gurus preach the gospel of building and managing teams. But Harvard University Professor Nancy Katz tackles the topic with a fresh approach, arguing persuasively that, while there are positive business lessons to be learned at the altar of team athletics, there are also plenty of pitfalls.

In sports, the players understand that the goal is to win and the path to achieving the win is generally straightforward and clear. Not so for business, where goals change frequently and companies find it difficult to convey the strategy for achieving the desired result to all the team members, says Katz, who closely studied and analyzed the habits of winners and losers in college and professional sports.

In her analysis, Katz found that while individual talent was important, teams with the best win-loss records didn't necessarily have the all-stars. The best teams did, however, share a strong spirit of cooperation and a high level of internal competition. Coaches and managers encouraged players to benchmark against their teammates for individual achievement that resulted in overall team success. Once the team managers were successful in integrating cooperation and competition, they orchestrated some early wins to build confidence and were able to break out of losing streaks through individual and team motivation.

This particular lesson has been well demonstrated in Major League Baseball this year, with the Seattle Mariners enjoying one of the strongest records in the history of the game, despite the loss of four marquee players this season. Meanwhile, the Texas Rangers, the team with the highest paid player in the league, is having its worst season in nearly a decade.

The value in pushing for individual performances that lead to a strong team performance became clear to us at the Higher Education Division of Sodexho, the nation's largest provider of food service and facilities management, several years ago when we adjusted our management bonus incentive program to reflect a "we win as a team, we lose as individuals" philosophy. Our previous incentive plan overly focused on individual performance, and managers had little incentive to achieve in areas that would benefit the entire team. There was no sense of work towards a common goal. This "none for all" attitude was further compounded when only a segment of the managers received bonuses.

When the program was changed to award team success, we found that managers began helping each other, sharing resources and knowledge. The division enjoyed positive results in several key areas and nearly all managers received incentive bonuses. As Katz's article predicted, our initial successes provided the early win we needed to get us out of a downward spiral and gave us the jump start to consistent success.

As Katz's article predicted, our initial successes provided the early win we needed to get us out of a downward spiral and gave us the jump start to consistent success.

Katz's other lessons provide similarly useful operational strategies. Smart managers in all industries understand the need to carve out time for practice, call for half-time breaks, and work hard to keep the team roster stable. Post-game reviews of the plays are also important.

And who could disagree with Katz's contention that managers need to provide team members with clear and prompt performance feedback? In pro sports, there's no hiding poor performance, with everyone from the TV announcer to the armchair quarterback providing players with strong and immediate feedback. But at my own company, even the most well-meaning managers often don't take the time to adequately assess the performance of their team members and fail to effectively communicate expectations. As we've seen time and again at Sodexho, this can set up employees and managers for failure.

Katz identifies other important pitfalls, such as the tendency of modern managers to confuse coaching with managing. As she accurately points out, coaching activities such as team-building events are all good and well, but managers will only be true leaders when they provide clear goals, hire the right people, and provide sufficient resources to get the job done and coach at the same time.

Finally, advises Katz, don't overdo the sports analogies. Winning in business isn't as simple as it is in sports. In business, the win can come in more than one way and can mean different things for different stakeholders. As our workforce becomes increasingly diversified, we find that our company and our employees have many more dimensions and variables than what are found on the basketball court or football field.

Professor Katz provides some valuable reminders on how to motivate and structure a team to achieve the win, as well as noting common, but critical, mistakes that can spell disaster for even the most talented group.

In sports, the teams tend to be smaller and organized differently than in business—there's likely to be an offense and defense, as well as a punting team or a pitching staff in a sports team. In business, there are myriad teams all playing at the same time. The team may be two people or 100,000. But no matter the size, they each require their own unique and complex blend of coaching, managing and leading. Dr. Katz provides a solid game plan which we all need to execute.

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