

## Football and Prioritization

Not everyone loves football.

But leaders don't need to be football fans to adapt a few key lessons on strategy and winning from the sport.

In football, you have a clear goal and set rules for play.

But **winning** depends on individuals' and the teams' commitment and ability to adapt and change to conditions that change every week, indeed, every moment. Getting the best guys is important, but at the pro level the variation is pretty minimal. Everyone can build a champion roster.

How the coach sets up the team (or doesn't) to deal with an environment of constant change --*THAT* is key. It is a powerful predictor of a winning or losing season, and it's the magic formula everyone wants to know.

Business is becoming more like sports: Predictability is out the window. Circumstances can change lightning fast. Adhering to static, stodgy business models and practices will ensure "early retirement" for weak leaders and companies. Coaching and strategy is as important as players' ability. Flexibility and knowing how to adapt "on the fly" is what separates winners from those who sacrifice millions of dollars and hours in lost customers, talent, and productivity.

The ability to re-prioritize intelligently is a critical skill in this new game.

Here are five practices:

- 1) **Buy-In:** The #1 predictor of ANY change is buy-in. However its importance and how to get it, is often misunderstood by leaders who tend over-use authority to get things done. If you invest even a little bit in developing understanding and commitment, it pays off in aligned action. If you're changing the game plan, take time to tell people why.
- 2) **Relevance.** How do the existing priorities either link to the strategy and goal, or distract us from it? In football, certain plays work better in certain field conditions or with certain teams, but not others. Constantly evaluating the weekly game plan based on the big picture is essential in today's fast-moving

environments. “What should we stop ... what should we start ... what should we continue”? is a useful format.

- 3) **Where’s the tackle?** Leaders are too-often surprised by the 300-lb tackle they didn’t see coming. Making it safe to talk about “unseen tackles” is a missing practice in business. Putting structure in place so it’s not “personal” helps. If you’re trying to influence someone up the hierarchy or sideways, know their pain point. Conversations that begin with “I know you are frustrated by \_\_\_\_\_ or concerned about \_\_\_\_\_, and I think I might have a solution” is a better play than “We can’t possibly get all of this done on time.”
- 4) **Urgency is NOT hair on fire.** In football, teams get 1 hour to win or lose, but they still play a strategic game. In business, thinking in increments of 30-60-90 days and small changes *works*. Know when to play the “incremental” game versus the big plays. Sometimes gaining 2 yards is the goal. Too often, leaders run teams on back-to-back urgent plays when they need to advance the ball steadily. When they need a 70-yard pass in the last 10 seconds of the game, people are too burned out to make the big play. Or, they choke commitment with an “endless taxi, no take-off” game of 100 projects, where people aren’t sure which ball to chase or where to run, and are drowning in meaningless adminis-trivia. Keeping a sense of urgency toward a goal WHILE narrowing to fewer strategic choices – that’s the job of today’s leaders.
- 5) **Focus.** “Everything Takes Longer” than you think it will. In our “over-busy” life we mostly ignore this truth. Focus means narrowed attention. Relentlessly slash and burn tactics that aren’t working. Let go of your ego and quit those pet projects. People get more done with a strong drive to meet one key deliverable every 30 days, versus scattered attention on 3 impossible deliverables for the quarter. EVERY GOAL should be linked to the big picture. “How can we maintain possession of the ball and stay in control of the game right now?” What does “Winning the game” mean this quarter? This year?

You don’t have to like football to appreciate the power of learning to effectively adapt to change, be decisive, and drive aligned action in fast-moving environments.

Your leadership challenge?

Act fast, respond fast, and hold onto the ball.

That’s what champions do.