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PEOPLE + STRATEGY

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FEATURE
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Executive Roundtable

What Does It Take to Build a Great Team Year After Year?

Sports metaphors get overused in business. Further complicating matters, we often draw the wrong lessons from sports: that a good halftime speech can overcome poor fundamentals, a toxic culture, or a lack of clarity. At the same time, high-performing athletic teams do offer strong parallels to high-performance business teams, and sports is also a business. What are the most applicable lessons we might draw from those whose careers have been spent grappling with what it means to build and lead great teams? Executive Roundtable Editor David Reimer and colleague Sonja Meighan recently posed that question to five successful coaches and leaders from the National Football League, Women's National Basketball Association, American Hockey League, as well as a legendary high school basketball coach and author.

People + Strategy: How important is having a system for building a successful team?

Cheryl Reeve: I think it's more than a system. An identity is what I tend to move toward. You need to be clear in who you want to be on the court. Many times I watch teams play and I don't know what their identity is. The most successful teams are clear in how they define themselves.

Roy Sommer: I'll build on that. The system is one part of helping the players form an identity. Our identity is our fore-check, and we get pucks in behind. We are tenacious down low, and we have really good goal tending.

Participants

Roy Sommer

- Head Coach, American Hockey League's San Jose Barracuda
- All-time AHL winningest coach with over 700 wins
- 2017 AHL coach of the year and 1996 ECHL coach of the year

Cheryl Reeve

- Head Coach, WNBA's Minnesota Lynx
- Most coaching wins in franchise history, including guiding the Lynx to their first championship ever
- 2011 WNBA coach of the year

Gus Alfieri

- Noted sports author and former high school basketball coach
- Authored definitive book on NBA great, Joe Lapchick
- Coach of two-time New York State basketball champion teams

Amy Trask

- Former CEO of NFL's Oakland Raiders
- Currently a host on CBS Sports Network
- Author of the book *You Negotiate Like a Girl* detailing her experience as an executive in the NFL

Bob Wallace

- Former EVP and General Counsel with the NFL's St. Louis Rams
- Worked for three NFL teams over 35 years
- Partner of the law firm Thompson Coburn LLP where he chairs the Sports Law Group

Kevin Warren

- COO of the NFL's Minnesota Vikings
- Worked in the front office of the NFL's St. Louis Rams and Detroit Lions

We have learned to play a scrappy game as opposed to being a skills team.

Amy Trask: Ultimately, a system should never trump the people who are part of the team. It is a constant source of irritation and perplexity when I see a coach force his or her talent into a scheme for which the team is not suited, as opposed to building a scheme that best maximizes the talent he or she has that will put the talent in the best situation to succeed.

Roy: It is critical that your system be flexible. I have had to tweak my system to match the players I have in a given season.

Bob Wallace: I always go back to Don Shula of the Miami Dolphins. When he had David Woodley as quarterback, they played a pounding run game. However, when he got Dan Marino as quarterback, he realized he had a special thrower. He adapted his system and rebuilt the offensive scheme around the talent. This is how you build consistency. Don't get so stubborn in your view and force-feed it to your players.

Amy: The best coaches best position their talent to best maximize their skills. This also applies in the business world. Look at your talent and do what is best for the people in your organization to maximize your talent, while also seeking people who have the talent you need.

Gus Alfieri: It's a bit like writing a book. When you write a book, many times the publisher asks you to outline the chapters and what you think you are going to do. As you interview people, it often becomes a completely different book. If you apply this to teams, you have to be aware of opportunities to develop your program that you may not have had when the season started. You need to constantly reassess the horizon and build a system that best capitalizes on the talent you have.

P+S: How does the team's identity apply to the daily grind?

Roy: You have to have a clear vision and clear goals. I sit down at the beginning of each season and talk to the players about their goals. Then as a team, we discuss my vision and our specific goals for things like the power play and what we will do at home vs. on the road. As a leader, you have to work to get buy-in. To do this, you have to believe what you are teaching and you have to know what you are talking about. Guys will sniff it out if you are just BS-ing them. Before you go talk to them about your plan you better be

ready to answer questions, because they will know if you are faking it.

Cheryl: I agree. A key to developing the team's identity is creating tangible day-to-day goals. For example, we want to be the best defensive team. In order to do this, our opponent's field goal attempts needs to be X. In order for it to be X, these are the things we have to do. Every day we are going to do our shell drill and every day we are going to do our pick-and-roll defense. They understand that if they play at a certain angle, then the shot the opponent will take is going to be outside the pane, over contested hands, and we are going to reach our team goal. We will finish our play with a rebound. In order to be the best defensive rebounding team in the league, here is what we have to do. There is the stated goal, big picture, but it is the day-to-day that we ask our players to focus on.

Gus: Everyone always knew my philosophy. I believed in three key things: defense, ball handling, and rebounds. If you had two out of the three, you would have a pretty good team.

Roy: Every night I sit down and grade every player on each game from one to five. One is really bad, two is an ECHL game, three is average, four is a really good AHL game, and five is an NHL game. I write a couple of things down that I thought they did well in the game. Then I bring them to my office after every 10 games and go over how I think they are playing. It is an opportunity for me to give feedback and for them to give me feedback.

P+S: Is there a single principle or philosophy that has stayed with you through every instance, at every level, when it comes to building a team?

Roy: As simple as it sounds, I like guys having fun. If they are not having fun in their workplace, then you probably don't have a good team.

Cheryl: The selection of personnel is critical and it directly affects the culture. I have a certain type of person that I want. Addition by subtraction is the most valuable thing I can do as a leader. I need to figure out who stays and who goes, and I need to do this in a hurry. I am never going to go the route of "this



person is a jerk but she is so talented.” I cannot stress enough how important I think the role of HR is in this process. You can’t screw it up. If you are wrong you will feel the effect for a while—you can trade people, but that is not best for the organization. Getting it right is what’s best for the organization.

Amy: Every single person has to understand that you win and lose as an organization. When you win as a team, you lose as a team. Nothing irritates me more than when people say “we” when a team is winning and “they” when a team is losing. If you are going to be on the sidelines reveling in the team’s victories, you better be miserable when your team loses.

Bob: The one thing I have learned from being a part of good teams is that respect and communication are key. There is no excuse for not having good communication in an organization.

Kevin Warren: You need to be equally yoked with each other. That said, poor communication can hold a team back. Poor performing organizations do not communicate at all. The unsuccessful organizations communicate, but they end up wasting so much time, energy, and effort dancing around the point—dancing while communicating. Great organizations communicate in a very direct manner.

Roy: I hear a lot of business leaders and coaches don’t communicate with their teams. I always like to know what is going on with my players—if there is a death in the family, something with the girlfriend, or a family member has cancer—if you don’t get on issues quick, 10 off games can turn into 20. If they aren’t doing something they should be, you know why and equally important, they know your expectations.

Kevin: My parents taught me as a young child that we all have a limited amount of time and energy units in a day. If you cannot communicate on very difficult issues in a direct and concise manner, it will cost you energy and time, and those are the two things that you cannot purchase regardless of

your financial situation. That type of organization will fall behind.

P+S: Sports teams, like business teams, are made up of people with egos and attitudes. What’s the role of attitude in a great team?

Roy: Attitude is everything. It is how your players treat their teammates, how they carry themselves on and off the rink. When you are explaining something, are they rolling their eyes or nodding their head?

Cheryl: We talk a lot about body language to the point where we chart what we call contact—eye contact and physical contact. It is not just on the court. How you walk through your place of work and how you treat people says a lot about who you are as a person.

Roy: One of the things I started doing about 10 years ago was to take the guys camping before the season started. This was before I knew anything about their character or attitude. I let them coordinate everything—the tents, the sleeping bags, the food, etc. I would just sit back and observe their behavior and interaction. I learned a lot about my players on these camping trips. I have been on a couple of these where we had the time of our life. Everyone had a blast. I’d wake up in the morning with most of the people still talking and getting to know one another. One year, the guys didn’t do anything. No one set up tents, no one fetched firewood, and the team did not work together. Each guy was focused on himself. During that trip I knew we were in trouble. It was one of the worst seasons we ever had.

Cheryl: What has helped our success has been the chemistry that has formed when players were not thinking of themselves, but instead thinking of what their teammates needed from them. My view is, any time you are thinking of yourself on the court, you are doing a disservice to the team. If you watch our bench, it is a genuine interest in each other. We see real value in connecting as teammates. We think it makes us hard to beat and difficult to break. And, it’s just way more fun.

Roy: I have one guy that is the epitome of that kind of attitude—and it’s paying off for him and our team. His name is John McCarthy. He is the captain of the team and a great leader, but he only has six goals all season. Despite only having six goals, each time I review tape, he is doing the right thing. He is an extension of the coaches and everyone knows it. I recently called the coach of the Olympic team, Tony Granato, who came to scout him. After seeing John’s attitude on the ice, Tony offered him a position on the Olympic team.

P+S: Think of the most successful team you’ve ever led, at any level. What did you as a leader do that helped them gel as a group?

Roy: When we won a championship in Richmond all the players had fun, which led to them really caring about each other. Communication was a big part of it, and because we were very clear and had a real vision and system, we formed an identity built around how the players cared about each other.

Cheryl: After the 2010 season we gathered the captains and I asked them, “Who stays and who goes? Put your management hat on. Who do you want to play with? Who do you want next to you when times are tough?” That was uncomfortable because it meant they were affecting someone’s job. That is how we have formulated things. We don’t do anything we don’t have a consensus on. We don’t trade, waive, or add personnel without them knowing. I think they have enjoyed that input and I think you get real value from what they know.

Roy: That team in Richmond battled for one another. Whether on or off the ice, they stuck up for one another. We were the most penalized team in the league. No one was going to beat us in the alley. That is how everyone carried themselves. They lived on that identity. They had fun together, practiced hard, and worked hard off the ice. When it came to a game, they knew they were never out of it.

Someone was going to get a big goal or make a big save.

Cheryl: What I hope I do and consciously try to be mindful of is hearing my leaders and essentially getting out of the way. With my leadership team, I give them the opportunity to speak and express themselves. I have allowed them to lead themselves.

P+S: How important is it for players to understand the roles of the others on the team? Is that a nice idea in theory or is it practical to performance?

Cheryl: It is hugely important.

Gus: You can't win without everyone knowing each other's role and being committed as a team.

Bob: Not only do players have to understand what each teammate is doing, they have to appreciate it and respect it. They have to acknowledge that their teammates are doing a role that makes them more successful. If you don't have those three things, you are fighting an uphill battle.

Amy: Every role in an organization is important. You never know from where or whom the next great idea will come. Your receptionist may have the answer to a fan issue or your groundskeeper may be a social media aficionado and may have the best answer to the problem you are experiencing. The left tackle's job is to protect the quarterback, but if the left tackle has a really good idea for the social media team, you should listen. Everyone should know that he or she is empowered to make the organization as great as he or she can.

Roy: Whether you are a scorer, play-maker, leader in the locker room, or tough guy, everyone has a role and everyone needs to know the other guy's role. If they all play to their respective role and rely on their teammates to do the same, you probably have a pretty good team.

P+S: Did you ever have a team that didn't know (or had forgotten) how to win and that you helped turn around?

How did you re-instill that sense of winning?

Kevin: In my opinion it is not about remembering how to win. It is about understanding the responsibility, demands, commitments, and sacrifices that come along with winning. In many ways it is a lot easier to be an average team or franchise—the tension and stress are much less. When you are a winning team, people know what is at stake. So it is not about forgetting how to win—it is remembering that the demands are higher.

Bob: When I was with the Rams, we went from worst to first. In the process, we lost Trent Green who was the quarterback we were depending on. Our backup was a guy named Kurt Warner who only had four snaps in the NFL. Nobody knew then that Kurt was going to be the MVP and a hall of fame quarterback. But Dick Vermeil stayed positive. In his press conference he said, we will rally around Kurt Warner. I said to the business staff, I don't want you walking around with your head down. When you see the coaches and players you smile and tell them we will be ok. Let them know we are all in this together. A year later one of the guys said that was the most important thing I ever said to them.

Amy: Bob, I can absolutely envision you not only being the leader who said that, but I can envision you sharing those words with the staff, acting as a leader, and then going to a private place and saying, "Oh my gosh, we lost our quarterback." You were the leader the organization needed at the time, even though you knew how bad the situation could be.

Kevin: I was a VP at the Rams that same season, and the team did rally and we had a regular season record of 13-3 with an 8-0 record at home, and a 16-3 overall record, and none of our players had been injured. But you know what I took away from that, too? Despite all of this—and despite the fact that we had the NFL Offensive Player of the Year and the NFL MVP—we still only won the Super

Bowl by one yard. That is always in the back of my head: there is no time to let up. It comes back to the demands of winning being that much higher.

Cheryl: The best example I have is my first season in the WBNA as an assistant coach. We started the season off 1-10. The likelihood of being a playoff team or even making it to the finals was slim to none. We would be in every game and one or two things would not go our way—such as a missed shot or a call that didn't go in our favor—and we would lose the game. Despite this, we stayed our course, believed in it, and stuck together as a team. We ended up making the playoffs and got all the way to the finals. It was an unbelievable journey.

Gus: I've had a similar experience. The first team I ever coached was soft and not winning. When I inherited them, they were losing games by 20 points. I completely changed our approach. It was like turning a ship around and they didn't like it. Every day was a fight. I stuck with it and by the next season we were winning. The bad attitudes were gone, the system had started to gel, my philosophy was in place, and the kids were buying in.

Roy: It's tough to turn a team around from a losing streak. I believe it all comes back to your philosophy and system. In addition, as a leader you need to stop coaching the obvious. Saying, "We need to skate faster" or "Don't pass pucks through people" is the obvious. Instead, coach in between the margins such as, "If you are on the wall and you pivot to a new spot, you bring yourself from one option to three options."

Cheryl: I tell my team all the time that how you treat each other is incredibly important, especially in the tough moments. Staying the course is one of the hardest things to do when you are 1-10, but Anne Donovan was persistent and the team was dedicated. That team was great—they liked each other, they played for each other, and they stuck together. It paid off. ■■