

GIANTS Lessons for Corporate Leaders

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Those of you who know me well know that I live in the heart of San Francisco and that I am a passionate Giants fan! A few of you have encouraged me to write about the Giants' recent World Series victory, particularly, what lessons from the Giants' World Series run can be applied to corporate leadership?

The Team

A couple of weeks ago, I caught the Giants' most influential leader in a TV interview at the Major League Baseball winter meetings. Baseball teams have many managers and administrators, but their consummate leader is Bruce Bochy—their head coach. Funny thing about “Boch”: here it was more than 50 days after their World Series win, and the guy looked like he was still pinching himself. He looked kid-like, beside himself, still humbled. Afterwards, I realized I felt the same way...still.

And why not? No one predicted that the Giants would win the whole thing—no sports writer or talk radio guy, no one in baseball, no one in the Giants organization (their goal was to make the playoffs)—so it makes it all the more gleeful for the coach, the team, and all of us fans that they won the whole darn thing. The Giants were the true underdogs, and they beat the odds. And to do this in a city that has been starved for 52 years...well, this is a dream come true. I am not the only dreamer, and I came to the party late in the game, as a transplant from Los Angeles. Check out Henry Schulman's heartwarming tribute to the Giants fans who have been waiting for a very long time (<http://bit.ly/hDXlIo>).

Toggling between KNBR sports talk radio, SFGate.com, Yahoo.com, SI.com, and MLB.com, I have read much of what has been written and spoken about why the Giants pulled this off. The discussions have centered on the Giants' stellar pitching (starters and bullpen) and steady defense, which made up for their lack of hitting prowess and power. They did win a lot of low-scoring games by just one run—during both the regular season and the playoffs. This “talent assessment,” based on tangible factors, is pretty accurate and hard to dispute. However, the “intangibles” are what sealed the postseason success.

So what were these intangibles? The Giants certainly peaked at the right time with their hitting, and they had fascinating team chemistry. Bochy even called the team “characters and misfits” because two of the starters (Burrell and Ross) were mid-season “castoffs” from other teams. And the Giants have players called the Freak and the Machine; a first baseman who wears a red thong; and use the unusual team mantra “Fear the Beard.” The team seemed to relish in these off-the-wall characterizations, and so have the fans. (You've got to check out the Brian Wilson “Fear the Beard” Fan Club <http://bit.ly/gzmD34>).

One thing that doesn't get a lot of press—understandably, because Bochy is a pretty unassuming guy—is his role in all of this. I want to turn my attention to this because I think his managerial moves have excellent applications to the business world. I will focus on three areas of team chemistry: *Optimize Talent*, *Let Your Team Members Be Who They Are*, and *Be Humble*.

What lessons can we glean from Bochy's managerial masterpiece?

Optimize Talent

The way the Giants “optimized their talent” was the most significant “intangible.” Each game, Bochy was a creative master at utilizing the team’s talent, putting players in different positions and batting orders and being keen to who was on/off. During the regular season, much of his mixing and matching was out of necessity because of injuries (F. Sanchez, DeRosa, Renteria), readiness (Posey), and lack of performance (Sandoval). However, it became evident as the season wore on that the ever-changing batting order actually became a strength and contributed to the team’s resilience into the playoffs. Baseball players and managers are creatures of habit—they typically like order and seem to be more superstitious than other professional athletes. Not the 2010 San Francisco Giants. They thrive(d) on chaos; they didn’t let change bother them. In fact, they ate it up. In turn, the team was even branded by KNBR announcers (and then, the fans) as *GIANTS: Torture* because of all the one-run games and ninth-inning thrillers.

Just as optimizing talent has been a key factor to the Giants’ success, it’s one of the most important factors in business success as well. Most corporations focus on *acquiring* great talent; some are good at *developing* and *retaining* talent. Still, *optimizing* talent is a little different. *Optimizing* means building on the strengths that a person brings into the corporation; yet it’s also being ardent about matching incumbent talent with the evolving needs of the company. This very often could mean a change in a person’s original job title or job requirements. Talent isn’t just about specific job skills; it’s also about the leadership qualities of flexibility and resilience in the face of unpredictability. Just as change is a constant, so will be continual optimization.

Another incredible move Bochy made in optimizing talent was making the very difficult choice of leaving the most highly paid guy (Zito) off the 25-man playoff roster. It was a gutsy move—I’m not sure many managers could stomach that. Not only was this personnel decision just “plain ole” hard, all parties handled it in the press/public in a very professional way. In business, this would be like asking your most highly paid engineer to step aside and not work on the juiciest project (that s/he may have brought to the company) because his/her protégé is better suited to get the thing done faster and better. A lot of feelings might get hurt, but if you have the right conversations and a good rationale, then it works out best for all individuals and the team as well.

Even when Bochy made a rare bad decision, the team made up for it. The most glaring one: Leaving Burrell in to hit in Game 5 of the World Series. After Burrell struck out for the 11th time (out of 13 plate appearances) in the World Series, we all know what happened, right? Edgar Renteria got up to hit, and he made up for Burrell’s strikeout by hitting a 3-run homer that proved to be the game-changer on the way to being the World Series Champs!

Renteria’s ascension to World Series’ MVP (for hitting that winning homerun) was quite remarkable, considering he was on the Disabled List much of season and wasn’t in the starting lineup during most of the playoffs. Here’s yet another example of how Bochy optimized talent. He had ample backups in key positions, platooned players successfully (at first base, right field and left field), and he had an inordinate number of players who could play multiple positions (especially key were Huff, Ross, and Uribe). This gave Bochy more flexibility to play the hot hand and get the best combination of players. In fact, through the 15 playoff games, Bochy had 11 different lineups. This is probably some sort of baseball playoff record (MLB keeps records on everything, don’t they?). It’s certainly quite different from other typical playoff teams which have their lineups set and change them up only if there are injuries.

The application of a strong and flexible bench is integral to corporate success as well. The key to succession planning, for example, is not only having back-ups in key positions, it’s cross-pollinating people to different parts of the corporation. Good leaders should be able to work in multiple positions and incorporate the unpredictability that comes with that approach.

Let your team members be who they are

The Giants emulate more of a Silicon Valley business-type culture than a banker's culture. More a Haight-Ashbury culture than one nipped and tucked. Beards, long hair, red thongs—there was just plain looseness. It seemed like Boch let the team truly be who they are. When you hear Bochy and Dave Righetti, the pitching coach, in interviews, you know they give a lot of leeway, yet, an important guideline emerges: Be loose AND work hard. Nobody epitomized this more than Huff (looseness) and Torres (hard work). Their having fun and their taking-one-game-at-a-time mantra seemed to help with the stress of the close games and playoff pressure. Their personalities came through on the field and in the interview room.

I am not a reporter, so I have never met any of the players or coaches; all I have is the results and what I have seen and heard at the ball park and on TV. My guess is that, not only did Bochy let his players “just be,” he also instilled another principle: Find ways to like and know your teammates, not just respect them. The team looked like they truly had an affinity for one another! They communicated well on defense, they complemented each other in the press after games, those who weren't playing didn't appear disgruntled, and a few of them passed the time with daily games of dominoes. What also contributed to team chemistry is that they had a good mix of veteran players and younger players. There was a lot of positive modeling going on and they had one goal in mind—make the playoffs. Well, they sure blew past their goal!

Applications to business are wide spread here. The obvious ones are “don't micromanage” and take those “get-to-know-you” icebreakers at off-site meetings more seriously. You've heard that advice over and over, I'm sure.

Here are a few other important questions:

- In our roles as managers, how do we set values and a few standards, and then get the heck out of the way?
- How do we best foster creativity and friendships among our employees and team members?
- How do we create a fun environment, one that cultivates loyalty?

These types of questions fall under “employee engagement”—one of the newest trends in corporate culture these days. Sometimes, executives and managers give this concept lip service, which will, unfortunately, perpetuate mere trendiness. Why would figuring out what helps engage employees be a trend; shouldn't engaging employees be a manager's primary responsibility? As an executive coach and as the owner/founder of a small organization, I know it's easy to let employee engagement fall through the cracks because “real work” (e.g., organizing, re-structuring, strategizing, coding, selling/closing, fixing) takes precedence. We fall into traps: We want to know everything that is happening, instead of delegating and staying out of the weeds; we say innovation is important, but don't take the time to ask and then cull the creative ideas we hear from employees; we don't know much about those we work with, and further, do not know specifically what motivates each and every employee (i.e., family time, money, movie tickets, fabulous dinners, shopping in New York City, etc.).

Team chemistry is a tricky thing, and is very hard to pinpoint; however, whether it's in the clubhouse or in corporate cubicles, it doesn't just emerge spontaneously. It takes reflection and trial and error from the manager; taking the time to do the little things for your employees/teammates will contribute to success and long-term loyalty.

Be humble

In interview after interview, Bochy and his team were accountable to the fans and so appreciative of their support; the team didn't make excuses when they failed or when the umpires messed up; and I never saw anyone demonstrate arrogance or an “I-told-you-so” type attitude. The team was irreverent, yes, but certainly not arrogant. Amazing and different from other well known athletes (i.e., most recently, Michael Vick's “If I had a vote, I would vote for myself for NFL MVP” or Cam Newton's “I didn't know anything about what my dad did with Mississippi State”).



This is refreshing, to say the least, and again has valuable applications in the business world. Many of the executives I work with feel pressure to “toot one’s own horn” and name drop to get ahead, even though they are uncomfortable doing it. Heck, I am stressed to do that, too, as a business owner. However, I try to take my own advice, and ask myself and other leaders: How do we consistently bring grace to our organizations? This is especially hard to do with the growing number of stakeholders putting pressure on us to produce, cut costs, increase revenues, etc., which puts even more pressure on us and can create more “digging in,” hoarding of resources, and further isolation.

I have encouraged leaders not to dig in, but rather to reach out more than they have ever before, and with a grace like they have never shown before. Instead of taking credit for something, give credit; instead of having to have an agenda for every conversation, simply connect with others and talk about something of common interest; instead of doing something yourself (because you know you can get it done faster), coach a direct report through a problem (so they can do it themselves the next time).

Interestingly, one of the silver linings of this recent economic downturn is one big collective humbling effect. What has worked in the past doesn’t work as well anymore. More and more, I am noticing that executives are asking for help and support, when they would have been reticent in the past. More and more, I am noticing that executives are not fixing things in isolation as much as they used to; instead, they are reaching out to their colleagues in other departments. More and more, I am seeing executives do “listening tours” with employees to gather ideas to solve intractable corporate problems. More and more, I am noticing successes are celebrated across organizations collaboratively, instead of in isolation.

Let’s take the Giants’ lead: Be graceful under pressure and be humbled by successes!

Last words

When you do have a good thing going, and you have an amazing team, keep them together, just as the Giants have been able to do this off-season. The Giants’ team chemistry not only contributed greatly to the win column, it also created an incredible amount of loyalty. For example, the Giants’ leaders in the clubhouse (Huff and Burrell) were free agents after the post-season. They both made honest, heart-warming statements in the press about how important it was for them to be able to play with the Giants again next year. Burrell even took a huge “hometown” discount. This type of loyalty is hard to find, hard to explain, and is what separates great programs and organizations from mere good ones!

How can you create a team environment which produces loyalty and legacy?

One last thing...for you diehard Giants fans out there: Do you think OOO-Ri-Be’s going to miss playing dominoes every day with our Closer? My guess: Heck yes!

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Sue welcomes your comments, Giants tales, business tales, and questions! Please write to her at: sueb@mariposaleadership.com.