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by Bill Parcells



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RICHARD WISE & DAVID MORRISON	Beyond the Exchange: The Future of B2B	R00614
	HBR Special Report: Making M&A Magic	
ROBERT J. AIELLO & MICHAEL D. WATKINS	The Fine Art of Friendly Acquisition	R00602
RONALD N. ASHKENAS & SUZANNE C. FRANCIS	Integration Managers: Special Leaders for Special Times	R00604
DAVID KENNY & JOHN F. MARSHALL	Contextual Marketing: The Real Business of the Internet	R00608
DAVID ARNOLD	Seven Rules of International Distribution	R00603
RENEE DYE	The Buzz on Buzz	R00606
HOLLIS HEIMBOUCH	Racing for Growth: An Interview with PerkinElmer's Greg Summe	R00607
	FORETHOUGHT	
	Napsterizing B2B, Chief Privacy Officers, ASPs, and More	
DIANE L. COUTU	HBR CASE STUDY Too Old to Learn?	R00605
JON MELIONES	FIRST PERSON Saving Money, Saving Lives	R00612
DOROTHY LEONARD & WALTER SWAP	HBR AT LARGE Gurus in the Garage	R00609
DOUGLAS M. McCracken	BEST PRACTICE Winning the Talent War for Women: Sometimes It Takes a Revolution	R00611
FREDERICK H. ABERNATHY et al.	TOOL KIT Control Your Inventory in a World of Lean Retailing	R00601
BILL PARCELLS	DIFFERENT VOICE The Tough Work of Turning Around a Team	R00613
CHRISTOPHER LOCKE	BOOKS IN REVIEW Smart Customers, Dumb Companies	R00610

The Tough Work of Turning Around a Team

by Bill Parcells

Even the most talented teams can fall into a habit of poor performance. If you want to break that habit, says one of the NFL's winningest coaches, you'd better be prepared to get in people's faces.

With this article, we introduce a new department, Different Voice. We will use this forum to publish the ideas of leading thinkers from outside the world of business—scientists, coaches, religious leaders, artists, and others—whose work contains salient lessons for executives.

THE PEOPLE IN YOUR COMPANY have little loyalty; some even want you to fail. Your star performers expect constant pampering. Your stockholders are impatient, demanding quick results. And the media scrutinize and second-guess your every move.

I can relate.

PHOTOGRAPH: ©REUTERS NEWMEDIA INC./CORBIS

As a coach in the NFL, I've been in a lot of pressure-cooker situations, and my guess is that the challenges I've faced are not all that different from the ones that executives deal with every day. I'm not saying that business is like football. I am saying that people are people, and that the keys to motivating them and getting them to perform to their full potential are pretty much the same whether they're playing on a football field or working in an office.

The toughest challenge I've faced as a coach is taking a team that's performing poorly and turning it around. I've done it three times now. In 1983, my first year as a head coach, I led the New York Giants through an abysmal season—we won only three games. In the next six seasons, we climbed to the top of the league, winning two Super Bowls. When I became coach of the New England Patriots in 1993, they were coming off two years in which they'd won a combined total of three games. In 1996, we were in the Super Bowl. In 1997, when I came to the New York Jets, the team had just suffered through a 1-15 season. Two years later, we made it to the conference championship.

Those turnarounds taught me a fundamental lesson about leadership: You



uncomfortable confrontation. So be it. The only way to change people is to tell them in the clearest possible terms what they're doing wrong. And if they don't want to listen, they don't belong on the team.

Taking Charge

To lead, you've got to be a leader. That may sound obvious, but it took me an entire year to learn—and it wasn't a pleasant year. When I started as coach of the Giants, I lacked confidence. I was surrounded by star players with big names and big egos, and I was a little

and that's all there was to it. On the first day of training camp, I laid it on the line: I told everyone that losing would no longer be tolerated. Players who were contributing to the team's weak performance would be given a chance to change, and if they didn't change, they'd be gone.

It was a tough message, but I balanced it with a more positive one. I told them what I think a team is all about: achievement. Sure, they could make a lot of money in football and they could buy a lot of nice things, but the only permanent value of work lies in achievement, and that comes only with relentless effort and commitment. It wasn't going to be easy, but at the end of the day, achievement would be the most important thing they would take home with them.

After I talked to them as a group and established my credibility as a leader, I began talking with them personally. With the Giants, and with the other teams I've coached, I've found that holding frank, one-on-one conversations with every member of the organization is essential to success. It allows me to ask each player for his support in helping the team achieve its goals, and it allows me to explain exactly what I expect from him. I try to appeal to the players' passion for achievement and winning, but I'm also very clear that if they don't give the team what it needs, then I'm going to find someone else who will. I tell them, "If you don't want to play in the championship games and you don't want to achieve at the highest level, then I don't want you here, because that's what I'm trying to do. I am not trying to finish fourth." Leaders can do everything right with their teams and still fail if they don't deliver their message to each member as an individual.

Those conversations also give me a basis for making an honest evaluation of every player. It's all too easy to come into an organization that's been struggling and make blanket judgments about everybody—to think everybody's failing. But that's a mistake. There can be many hidden strengths

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have to be honest with people—brutally honest. You have to tell them the truth about their performance, you have to tell it to them face-to-face, and you have to tell it to them over and over again. Sometimes the truth will be painful, and sometimes saying it will lead to an

tentative in dealing with them. I didn't confront them about how they needed to change to succeed. As a result, I didn't get their respect and I wasn't able to change their attitudes. So they just kept on with their habit of losing.

At the end of the season, I figured I'd be fired. But management ended up asking me back for another season—mainly because they couldn't find anybody to replace me. At that point, I knew I had nothing to lose, so I decided I would do it my way. I was going to lead and the players were going to follow,

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on a team, just as there can be many hidden weaknesses. The only way you can bring them to the surface is by watching and talking with each team member. You'll quickly see who's a contributor and who's an obstacle. And, for the good of the team, you'll want to move swiftly to get the obstacles out of the way. The hard fact is that some people will never change.

So if you're called in to turn around a team, here's Rule One: make it clear from day one that you're in charge. Don't wait to earn your leadership; impose it.

The Power of Confrontation

If you want to get the most out of people, you have to apply pressure—that's the only thing that any of us really responds to. As a coach, I've always tried to turn up the heat under my people, to constantly push them to perform at a high level.

Creating pressure in an organization requires confrontation, and it can get very intense, very emotional. I've seen coaches avoid confrontations with their players because they don't like conflict, and I assume the same thing is true among the leaders of business teams. But I've actually come to relish confrontation, not because it makes me feel powerful but because it provides an opportunity to get things straight with people. It's not until you look people right in the eye that you get to the sources of their behavior and motivation. Without confrontation, you're not going to change the way they think and act.

Confrontation does not mean putting someone down. When you criticize members of the team, you need to put it in a positive context. I've often said to a player, "I don't think you're performing up to your potential; you can do better." But I also made it clear that my goals were his goals: "It's in your best interest that you succeed, and it's in my best interest that you succeed. We really want the same thing." Once you set that context, though, you shouldn't be afraid to be blunt about people's failings. You shouldn't be afraid to offend



them. You need to do what it takes to get a strong reaction because then you know you've reached them.

In the end, I've found, people like the direct approach. It's much more valuable to them to have a leader who's absolutely clear and open than to have one who soft-soaps or talks in circles. I've had many players come back to me ten years later and thank me for putting the pressure on them. They say what

Even as I'm confronting players about their weaknesses, I'm also always trying to build a culture of success.

they remember most about me is one line: "I think you're better than you think you are." In fact, they say they use the same line with their kids when they're not doing so well in school or are having other problems. My father used that expression with me, and there's a lot of truth to it—people can do more than they think they can.

That's Rule Two: confrontation is healthy.

Success Breeds Success

The prospect of going from a team that's at the bottom of the standings to one that's on top is daunting. When you've done a lot of losing, it gets hard to imagine yourself winning. So even

as I'm confronting players about their weaknesses, I'm also always trying to build a culture of success. That's not something you can do overnight. You have to go one step at a time, the same way you move the ball down the field, yard by yard.

Here's my philosophy: to win games, you need to believe as a team that you have the ability to win games. That is, confidence is born only of demonstrated ability. This may sound like a catch-22, but it's important to remember that even small successes can be extremely powerful in helping people believe in themselves.

In training camp, therefore, we don't focus on the ultimate goal—getting to the Super Bowl. We establish a clear set of goals that are within immediate reach: we're going to be a smart team; we're going to be a well-conditioned team; we're going to be a team that plays hard; we're going to be a team that has pride; we're going to be a team that wants to win collectively; we're going to be a team that doesn't criticize one another.

When we start acting in ways that fulfill these goals, I make sure every-

body knows it. I accentuate the positive at every possible opportunity, and at the same time I emphasize the next goal that we need to fulfill. If we have a particularly good practice, then I call the team together and say, "We got something done today; we executed real well. I'm very pleased with your work. But here's what I want to do tomorrow: I want to see flawless special teams work. If you accomplish that, then we'll be ready for the game on Sunday."

When you set small, visible goals, and people achieve them, they start to get it into their heads that they can succeed. They break the habit of losing and begin to get into the habit of winning. It's extremely satisfying to see that kind of

shift take place in the way a team thinks about itself.

So Rule Three is: set small goals and hit them.

Picking the Right People

Another challenge in building a winning team comes from free agency. I know that companies today are having trouble hanging on to their best people; there's a great deal of turnover and not much loyalty. That's a situation that I had to adapt to as a coach.

One of the things that initially helped me become successful in the NFL was my ability to develop players with the Giants. We had a program in place, and we brought people along slowly. Today, you no longer have the time to develop your talent in the old way. The situation is more like coaching high school football in some respects – every year, the senior class graduates and moves on. When I started, coaches reworked maybe 8% or 10% of their teams every year. Now it's sometimes as high as 30%.

That kind of turnover adds a tough

new wrinkle to turning a team around and keeping it on the winning track. In particular, you have to be extremely careful about the new people you bring on. You can do serious damage with a few bad choices. Unfortunately, there's no science to picking the right people. There's a lot of trial and error involved. You're going to get fooled by people, and you're going to make mistakes – I know I've made my share. But after a while, you start to develop a sense of who's likely to work out. I've found it's not always the one who has the best reputation or even the most outstanding set of talents. It's usually the one who understands what it will take to succeed and is committed to making the effort.

For example, there's a player, Bryan Cox, who had a terrible reputation in the NFL. He'd been fined a lot of money by the league – maybe more than anyone in its history. My teams had played against him so many times that I almost felt like I knew him. And watching him play, I'd say to myself, this guy plays so

hard and tries so hard – he's got something that I want to have on my team. So when he was a free agent, I called him on the phone and we had a straight, tough talk. I told him exactly what I wanted from him, and he told me what he wanted from me, which boiled down to this: "Don't BS me." I told him he'd always know what I was thinking. Bryan signed on with the Jets, and he's done a great job for the franchise.

I'm no psychologist. I don't care about what kind of personality someone has or whether it corresponds with my own. I don't care if they're "well adjusted." I just want my players to want to win as much as I want to win. I'm convinced that if you get people onto your team who share the same goals and the same passion, and if you push them to achieve at the highest level, you're going to come out on top. 

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