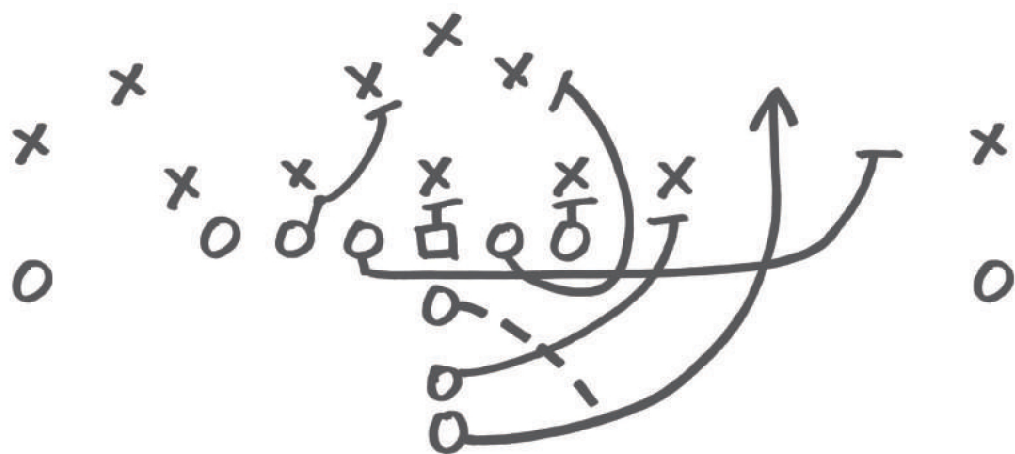


GREAT TEAMS

16 THINGS

HIGH PERFORMING ORGANIZATIONS
DO DIFFERENTLY



DON YAEGER

11-TIME *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GREAT TEAMS UNDERSTAND THEIR “WHY”

They are connected to a greater purpose.

Every day, whether it's at practice or a game, an important meeting or an ordinary day at the office, the highest performing teams show up with a sense of purpose; they understand the “why” of what they do and can clearly see how it matters. The better an organization understands who it is in service of, the more effective it will be in weathering challenges along the way.

For this reason, a Great Team will constantly remind its players and employees that they are involved in something larger than themselves and their individual goals. Some team members will instinctively grasp this essential concept and will appreciate and respect the tradition of what they do or who they work for. Others will need reminding, and leadership must intentionally create emotional moments that connect them to their greater purpose. But whatever the case, understanding the deeper motivation behind the effort is one of the most important elements of a truly Great Team.

GREAT TEAMS IN SPORTS

In the early years of the twenty-first century, reconnecting with the true purpose of playing for their country became the driver that allowed

Great Teams

members of the US men's basketball team to return that program to elite status from the brink of disaster.

The 1992 Olympic tournament in Barcelona, Spain, had been an unmitigated triumph for Team USA, who won its games by an average of 43.8 points on the way to a gold medal. This had been the first year professional athletes were allowed to play in the Olympics, and the US "Dream Team" had been determined to show the world that when its best players were on the court, they simply could not be beaten.

But in the following years that sense of purpose waned, sputtered, and eventually lost steam. By the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, international teams had cut Team USA's margin of victory in half. In fact, one game came down to a critical 2-point win over Lithuania—30 points closer than the narrowest game played by the Dream Team in 1992.

"The awe factor was gone, and the players from other countries were now either playing in US colleges or in the NBA against our players," said Jim Tooley, CEO for USA Basketball, the nonprofit organization that runs the team. "More significantly, international teams had something we didn't have—continuity. Their teams were together many, many years in a row. It was a big deal in many of these countries to be on your national team, and the best players always wanted to be on the team together. On Team USA, we were shuffling new players in every year."

There were other problems, too, all connected with a loss of purpose. Team USA spent very little time educating its players on the significance and honor of playing in the Olympics. They also spent little time or energy scouting opponents, Tooley said. As a result, by 2002, international competition had caught up. Team USA went 6–3 in the FIBA world championships and finished sixth—a mere decade after the Dream Team. In the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece, the team was a failure both on and off the court and ultimately took home the bronze medal. The poor result wasn't because the team lacked talent. In fact, the team was built around five players who are or will be first-ballot Hall of Famers.

USA Basketball had clearly lost its "dream," and the losses prompted

Great Teams Understand Their “Why”

some much-needed soul-searching within the organization. “We just picked guys in 2002 and 2004 and said, ‘You have 13 days to train—let’s go,’” Tooley said. “In comparison, you had international teams who had been together for a long time, knew the intricacies and etiquette of the game, and understood the responsibilities that came along with being an ambassador for the game and your country.”

There were valuable lessons to be learned in the difficult losses, however. The organization realized that what had worked in the early 1990s no longer applied and that the team needed to reengage with its central purpose. Tooley described this time as rough from a professional standpoint, but possibly “the best thing that could have happened to us.”

In 2005, the Olympic program brought in Jerry Colangelo to be the managing director of USA Basketball. One of his immediate changes was to reinforce the team’s connection to its patriotic purpose and to minimize the attention that had been devoted to the individual players. Colangelo understood that the focus needed to be on the *program* and what it represented, not the recognized superstars. So one of his first changes was to have the size of the players’ names reduced on the jerseys and the USA lettering enlarged.

“When you put a uniform on with ‘USA,’ you’re diminishing the player’s name,” Colangelo said. “I wanted our players to regain respect for what it meant to represent their country.”

Colangelo also changed the committee format of selecting players and sought to have more consistency in the coaching staff—hiring a permanent coach instead of changing leadership every four years. He wanted to promote and sustain a single vision over a period of time, and he argued that without continuity and consistency, players would not buy in to the long-term goals of the team.

When it came time to choose a new coach, Colangelo selected Mike Krzyzewski of the Duke University Blue Devils to lead the team. Krzyzewski agreed with his new boss that Team USA’s problem wasn’t one of talent but of *culture*. The players had stopped appreciating the

Great Teams

importance of what they were doing and why it mattered that they show up every day prepared to play like champions.

Krzyzewski—a West Point graduate and US Army veteran—suggested that the team needed “feel-it moments” to drive home that players were now involved in something greater than themselves and to fortify the foundation of the team.

“You can try to tell people why what they do matters. You can try to show them. But people get what it means when they can feel it,” Krzyzewski said. “Our job is to make sure that our teams always feel what it is we’re playing for.”

Krzyzewski’s feel-it moments were meant to galvanize the team around more than just winning. To bolster this new sense of purpose, USA Basketball formed a partnership with the US military so the players could feel what it meant to represent their country in a different way.

“We want to stress patriotism and a passion for selfless service in our team,” Krzyzewski said. “Who better to share that example than members of the armed forces? They live those commitments every day, and I wanted our guys to see, hear, and feel what that meant.”

Using the military connection, Mike Krzyzewski repeatedly sought out ways for Team USA to understand its greater purpose. Before the 2006 world championships in Japan, for example, Team USA detoured to Korea. In between team practices, the players wore fatigues and dined and lived with soldiers protecting the Demilitarized Zone. This immersive experience strengthened the perspectives of the players by helping them understand the responsibilities, disciplines, and daily sacrifices of defending American freedoms.

As the time for the Beijing Olympics neared, it had been eight full years since the United States men’s basketball team had taken home a gold medal in the Olympic Games. But recruitment for the 2008 games proved not to be a problem. The very best American players—Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Dwight Howard, Dwyane Wade, Chris Paul—were actually lining up to play for new leaders Colangelo and Krzyzewski,

Great Teams Understand Their “Why”

all because they wanted to be a part of the team’s revitalized and purposeful culture.

The players took representing their country seriously, and their commitment showed in Beijing. Team USA went 8–0 on the way to a gold medal, winning by an average of 28 points a game. In the championship game, Team USA defeated international powerhouse Spain by 11 points. The win created waves of basketball fever across the United States. Around the world, international fans and sports media alike began to love Team USA again.

Winning that gold medal was more than a victory for Team USA. It was also an important example to our nation and to the world that the organization represented more than just basketball; it was also a symbol of national culture, honor, and tradition. After the victory, even more NBA players took notice, and Team USA was flooded with potential recruits who desired to play for the team and take their patriotic responsibility seriously.

In the years that followed, USA Basketball maintained the connection to its “why” by continuing to partner with the military, creating more and more “feel-it” moments for the players. For instance, just before the team left the country for the 2012 Olympics in London, Krzyzewski took his players to visit Arlington National Cemetery. They made their way to Section 60, where many of the most recent casualties are buried, and saw a soldier paying his respects to his fallen comrades. Krzyzewski asked the man to speak with the team, and everyone gathered around to listen to his spontaneous, moving words. When he finished and departed, Krzyzewski turned to his players and said, “That’s why we came here—to feel our country.”

It was the very definition of a feel-it moment, and it deeply affected members of Team USA—especially forward Kevin Durant of the Oklahoma City Thunder, who admits to being forever changed by the visit to Arlington National Cemetery.

“It was overwhelming,” he explained. “You really get a sense of what our soldiers are doing for us every day. I just want to play harder, just

Great Teams

sacrifice. That's all. I may not shoot as many times as I do in Oklahoma City, but this is my small sacrifice, and I know that is important. It is really fun to do that because you know you're doing it for a greater purpose that's bigger than you, your family, and where you come from."

Team USA's players internalized the experience, and their strengthened sense of why they were playing made a big difference at the 2012 Olympic Games. The results were incredible: Team USA was even more dominant than in 2008, winning by an average of 32 points per game on its way to gold, including a record-breaking 83-point victory over Nigeria.

MORE FROM THE GREAT TEAMS IN SPORTS

Great Teams in sports remind their players on a daily basis of the significance of their history: the important things the team has done and for whom they have been done.

The St. Louis Cardinals—winners of the 2006 and 2011 World Series—have utilized this lesson and condensed it into the principled lifestyle and harmonious playing style they call the Cardinal Way. The phrase has become a catchall term to describe every facet of the Cardinals organization, which has been built on high professional standards. Bill DeWitt, managing partner and chairman of the Cardinals, says that this code of conduct ensures a "continuity of success."

"The Cardinal Way is excellence throughout all aspects of an organization," said DeWitt. "It's making sure that everyone from top to bottom is on the same page, and our goals and objectives continue to be at the forefront of Major League Baseball." This includes engaging new recruits in a culture of high character and developing players by stressing fundamentals of play and sportsmanship.

DeWitt credits the Cardinal Way philosophy with providing organizational stability because of the club's traditional roots. "Each decade since the 1920s, our organization has had championship teams or Hall

Great Teams Understand Their “Why”

of Fame players that have added so much to our program,” said DeWitt. “We feel a great responsibility to continue that culture of excellence.”

By appreciating team history and applying it to current demands, the Cardinals have been immensely successful at integrating their “why” into the organization’s professional philosophy. The results show on the field. The Cardinals have won eleven World Series titles and have made the playoffs eleven out of the past fifteen years.

Kevin Eastman, who has coached for both the Boston Celtics and the Los Angeles Clippers and currently is vice president of basketball operations for the Clippers, has unique knowledge of what it’s like to build a winning culture—he’s done it with a team that has a great tradition as well as one with a lackluster tradition. With the Celtics, it was important to draw on the legacy of greatness evident in the seventeen championship banners hanging from the rafters of the team practice facility in Waltham, Massachusetts (a duplicate set hangs in Boston’s TD Garden, where the Celtics play their home games). Eastman and the coaching staff would regularly bring in Celtic legends such as Tommy Heinsohn and John Havlicek to speak with current players. The goal was to never let the team forget what it meant to be a Celtic or the expectations that being in the organization brought.

“Culture must be reminded every day,” Eastman said. “The history gives us a starting point to learn from the past, produce in the present, and prepare for the future.”

But what if you’re leading a team or organization like the Clippers, who lack such a storied tradition? Eastman says that team leadership has to emphasize to its players that they have the opportunity to do something new, to establish that winning culture and create “a legend for future generations.”

“Bad history or no history—frame it,” said Eastman. “Frame it to your advantage. If you have a great record of success, stress it. If you

Great Teams

don't, tell your team that they get to go out and make it. Whatever it is, use your history to create energy for your team.”

AND FOR THE TRULY GREAT TEAMS IN BUSINESS

In the business world, a “why” is often misunderstood as a company mission statement or code of ethics—which couldn't be further from the truth. Author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek has described a company's corporate “why” as “always disconnected from the product, service, or the act you're performing.”

If an organization desires to become a Great Team in the business world, then it must understand how to utilize the “why” properly in order to galvanize support from its professional ranks. “When an organization lays out its cause, how it does so matters,” explained Sinek. “It's not an argument to be made, but a context to be provided. An organization's ‘why’ literally has to come first—before anything else.”

The Declaration of Independence is a primary example of this distinction. It provides a thorough context of belief at the very beginning: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹

The declaration would have read much differently if it had begun with a list of grievances against the king of England. Instead, it starts with the *belief*—or deeper purpose—as to why the colonies felt justification for creating a new country. The beliefs and desires of our country's founders are stated precisely but not without emotion in this document. It stands as the epitome of a “why”—and a Great Team—that changed the world.

Companies that understand the purpose and philosophy behind the “why” are usually astute, high-performing organizations that tap directly into the pulse of those they benefit the most. When utilized correctly,

Great Teams Understand Their “Why”

this understanding can create a powerful sense of duty and purpose for business teams because the employees know exactly who they are working for and to what end.

Great companies connect to the heartstrings of their employees to make their purposes known. Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic, the world’s largest medical technology company, considers the emotional connection between Medtronic employees and the organizational mission to be “one of the greatest achievements” of the company. Though Medtronic consistently leads the medical industry with its innovative therapies and products (a fact stock analysts love), George considers the company’s annual holiday party to be the true highlight of the company’s year.

During this special event, all the employees at the company’s operational headquarters in Fridley, Minnesota, assemble in the company’s auditorium—along with thousands of other colleagues watching via webcast—to hear from families of patients who have received Medtronic products. These families recount the ways that Medtronic devices have bettered their lives. After they are finished, there is never a dry eye in the room. “Every year, it seems, a young woman steps up and says ‘Thank you. Because you did your job so well my father got to walk me down the aisle this summer,’” George said. “That never gets old.”

Through the personal stories and feelings of the patients, the Medtronic employees are able to reconnect annually with just how important their work is. It’s not about just making money for themselves or the company, but making a difference in the lives of others. By seeing the impact of what they do on real men, women, and children, the employees are able to understand the great, life-changing scope of the company “why.”

George said this dynamic is even more important as workforces are getting younger. “There is lots of research that says Millennials are driven to work for companies they believe are engaged in doing good,” George said. “And as more of our workforce comes from that generation,

Great Teams

we have to make sure they know what we're doing and can appreciate its importance.”

The late Steve Jobs, cofounder, chairman, and former CEO of Apple, was heralded for the landmark vision of his computer company, Apple. Apple's particular brand of personal computing revolutionized the technology world and went on to sell millions worldwide, but that was not Jobs's “why.” His greater vision behind Apple was to empower people and to make the personal computer easy enough that everyone could use it.

This deeper purpose can be directly observed in much of Apple's advertising and Jobs' speeches during his tenure at Apple—especially the Orwellian-themed 1984 commercial that promoted the Apple Macintosh computer as an amazing tool that would give people the power to rise up and make demands from society. Jobs and Apple sold America—and ultimately, the world—on the belief that one individual could actually compete against an entire industry if they used an Apple product. That belief was Apple's “why.”

Southwest Airlines considers excellent customer service an important part of its culture. CEO Gary Kelly even gives a weekly “shout-out” to employees who have given outstanding performances. Southwest also does profiles of standout employees in their in-flight publication, *Southwest: The Magazine* (formerly *Spirit*) as well as circulating videos within the company that share stories of exceptional service. Southwest reinforces its culture, just as the Boston Celtics do, by talking about it all the time and celebrating those who are working today to keep that history alive.

A company that is highly philanthropic can help employees feel the greater importance of their work by strengthening the connection with their community. Advisors Excel, an insurance marketing organization, is an excellent example of a company that uses this strategy. In 2014, their employees helped build and outfit a home for a single mother of four in their home city of Topeka, Kansas. They also turn their annual employee and customer conference into a fundraiser for charities such as the V Foundation for Cancer Research, the Make-A-Wish Foundation,

Great Teams Understand Their “Why”

and the USO. The philanthropic “why” is strong at Advisors Excel, and its employees are regularly reminded that the company not only wants to be profitable but also cares about making a difference in the community and the world. Doing “good” in their community is so important to Advisors Excel that the company regularly highlights and praises its employees for their efforts, thereby reinforcing the importance of the stated corporate values.

Modern science, incidentally, supports the idea that a philanthropic orientation can be highly advantageous to a company. Michael F. Steger, associate professor of counseling psychology and applied psychology at Colorado State University, developed the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) for businesses. Steger’s tool processes “meaningfulness” according to the degree that employees find their work to have significance and purpose, the contribution their work makes to their finding broader meaning in life, and the desire and means for one’s work to make a positive contribution to the greater good.

Researchers have also found a link between meaningful work and job satisfaction. According to the Gallup 2010–2012 State of the Workplace reports, the vast majority of employees are not engaged in their work, and this disengagement currently costs US companies 450 to 550 billion dollars in decreased productivity a year.² Providing employees with a culture that emphasizes charity and purpose is an exceptional way for them to feel the meaningfulness of what they are doing and give them a sense of job satisfaction beyond simply hitting sales figures, client counts, or other basic metrics of performance.

If you were to ask most CEOs what their organizations’ number-one priorities are, they would probably give predictable responses about company growth or increasing stock value. But when would they mention their own people? Unfortunately, it is very common in the business world for employees to be far down the list of priorities. The Great Teams in business, however, emphatically support their people. Without happy, engaged employees, a company won’t have organizational growth or the dependable workforce behind increasing stock value.

Great Teams

“The order matters,” said Sinek. “It reveals whether you have a sense of purpose or not.”

While most companies tout the importance of corporate culture and have made it a talking point, few have actually made a priority of shaping that culture around a shared purpose. Instead of a “why” to motivate and unite team members, these companies have only a set of performance goals and targets—not enough to motivate a team to greatness.

“Leaders have to set the tone at the top for the vision of the company and have to walk with a purpose,” said Bill McDermott, CEO of the multinational corporation SAP SE. (The *SAP* name stands for Systems, Applications & Products in Data Processing, and the *SE* is roughly the European equivalent of *Inc.*) “It’s the things that you repeatedly do when things get really hard that tell the world who you really are.”

McDermott’s company, the global market leader in enterprise software, specializes in creating custom programs for specific problems and has more than 291,000 customers in 190 countries. But despite SAP SE’s immense size and reach, it clearly understands its “why”—the fundamental connection to the role it plays in the lives of its customers and how that role directly affects the economy.

“In our case, we really felt that helping the world run better and improving people’s lives was our enduring mission,” said McDermott. “Furthermore, businesses that care a lot about improving people’s lives with [their] solutions are far more likely to not only make a difference in the world, but to also be relevant in the twenty-first-century economy.”

A prime example of this is the Walt Disney Company, who uses SAP SE technology to manage its theme parks—which, in turn, allows hundreds of thousands of starry-eyed young children to create lifelong memories with their parents. McDermott said that this is “authentically” what SAP SE does and that people’s lives run better because of it. This is what makes his company’s “why” so great.

“All we have to do is recognize the things that we do in service to companies ultimately impact the lives and enjoyment of consumers,”

Great Teams Understand Their “Why”

said McDermott. “If we can stretch our mind to start there, we can create great companies.”

GREAT TAKEAWAYS

Having the most talented team does not guarantee success. The talent must also be unified around a culture that makes the overall purpose for the organization clear. The buy-in from employees comes from having more than a theoretical understanding of their working importance; the real connection between employee and employer comes from actually feeling and experiencing that importance in their daily operations. As Coach Krzyzewski said, it is important that every team member *feel* what the team values together.

Perhaps the “why” can be revealed through purposefully focusing—or refocusing—the shared purpose, as happened with the St. Louis Cardinals and Team USA. Maybe, like the Boston Celtics and Southwest Airlines, an organization can look to the past for inspiration in discovering its “why.” Odds are that veteran employees who have been through the highs and lows of a company’s history have experiences and wisdom to share, and their past battles and victories can help the current team understand how to achieve future success. Perhaps, as SAP SE demonstrated, a company can begin by understanding its customer’s “why” and using that to spark motivation for consistent high performance. Or maybe a team could follow the example of Advisors Excel by recognizing excellence and identifying good examples of employees who have a clear understanding of the team goal. This can be leveraged into framing the way leaders and team members interact as they celebrate those who do great things.

If a good team desires to become a Great Team, it must consistently communicate its “why.” Everyone must be aware of a purpose that is greater than producing revenue. Profitability matters, of course, but the bottom line should never be the biggest “why.”

Great Teams

When buy-in does occur, leaders and managers must not miss the opportunity to show the good results that come from a company's work, create "feel-it" moments that evoke serious passion, and find unique ways to put the team's overall goal into perspective. A shared experience can energize a team toward its common goal more quickly than a direct order ever will.

May your team discover your "why."

Thomas Nelson Copyrighted Material