



Talent Lessons from the Major Leagues

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I am a sports fan, specifically Major League Baseball, the NFL, and College Football. Here it is the end of October, and I sit a distraught and disappointed Detroit Tigers fan.

Talent lesson #1: Make sure you have high performing talent in every key role.

Value and develop your stars, and alongside them work on recruiting, retaining and developing your benches of great key players—it takes everyone to win.

At the beginning of baseball season, analysts and commentators of those early games told us that the Detroit Tigers had the strongest starting pitching rotation in all of Major League Baseball—and they were destined for the World Series. I had great hope that my Tigers would make it 1984 all over again—I remember where I was that night—one of the greatest nights in Tiger's fan history—we had won the World Series. But it was not to be this year, and the reason can be traced to simple principles of talent management. By August that invincible starting pitching rotation and the bullpen had gone from #1 to 25th, and we, the fans, saw the decline through the summer with every passing game. So what went wrong?—there were a couple of stars, namely Max Scherzer and to a lesser degree Justin Verlander, but, at what seemed like every turn, the bullpen would blow a three, four, or five run lead late in the game and the Tigers would lose. And even the great offense of Miguel Cabrera (2x American League MVP), Ian Kinsler, and Victor Martinez couldn't offset bad pitching for the last third of nearly every game. The talent lesson here—you can have a few good "A" players, or high potentials, but to really deliver results over the long haul you need a lot of great key players, continuity players, and closers—you know, the people that come in every day and repeatedly do that predictably great job that delivers fantastic product and amazing customer experiences—you need great performances by a lot of key players to win.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Pamela Stroko is Vice President Mid-Market HCM Transformation and Thought Leadership at Oracle Corporation and a recognized leader in the talent management arena with over 20 years' experience as a practitioner. Over her career she has developed deep expertise in all aspects of talent management, focusing on delivering business results by aligning enterprise strategy with strategies for building people capability across the organization.

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Talent Lesson #2: Performance matters—understand what you are buying.

When you get great talent, provide leadership to guide and develop them into great players that can win as a team. You have to re-recruit people every day and develop them to their fullest capability.

This fall, with curiosity, I have watched the decline of University of Michigan football. Having grown up in Michigan and gone to Ohio State, what the Big Ten is witnessing seems unbelievable. The Michigan Powerhouse of the days of Bo Schembechler are long gone and Michigan is in danger of not going to a bowl game for the first time in several years.

Michigan, who has had some of the strongest recruiting classes in the conference over the last few years, has looked aimless and confused on the field, conceding games that one would never expect from the former football dynasty. So what's going wrong?—first every Michigan fan will tell you that Brady Hoke just has not turned in the winning performance that has come to be Michigan football—his first year as coach, he worked with an inherited Rich Rodriguez team and went 11 and 2, and it's been downhill ever since. They have lost 10 out of the last 15 games (at the time of this writing), and overall his winning percentage is 62%. What they don't go on to say though is that Michigan's current win performance is the best in Brady Hoke's career. Prior to coming to Michigan, Brady Hoke won 47% of the time at Ball State and 52% of the time at San Diego State, on average —even with all the losses, Michigan's record is the best he has ever done. The talent lesson here: When you hire outside talent, past performance matters—you should take it into account in the hiring process. Brady Hoke was never going to go from winning 40-50% of the time to winning 90-95% of the time, it was an unrealistic expectation. In the same way that a sales leader whose team is making quota 50% of the time is not going to increase that to 90% without a great deal of development and coaching. There is more to the Michigan Story though, and it has to do with leadership. They have recruited great talent, but even stars need direction and a game plan—that consistent vision of how you plan to win.

Talent Lesson #3: It is never a great idea to throw your talent under the bus.

In a tough talent market it is about creating that compelling value proposition about why someone should join your company, and more importantly, why they should stay. It is about taking responsibility for developing and nurturing people for the long term.

One of my favorite coaches for the post game press conference is Bill Belichick. His lack of expression, whether the Patriots win or lose is fascinating to watch. On this particular Sunday he faced a press room of curious reporters grilling him on a rare Patriots loss—and this was a big loss—earlier that day in the New England Patriots v. the Kansas City Chiefs, the Chiefs were, by far, the better team, and beat the Patriots by a score of 41-14. It was termed a milestone blowout, where Tom Brady threw 2 interceptions, was sacked 3 times, and the Patriots even brought in their backup quarterback. For two days Belichick faced reporters with questions probing the loss. After the game, a reporter asked Belichick if he was going to make a change at quarterback—Bill scowled and stared and didn't answer the question—so the reporter asked again and Belichick replied, “next question,” and threw the reporter a glance that pretty much said...“are you nuts?” without ever saying a word. The next day at a press conference he was asked the same question again and it met the same answer—he did not dignify the question with an answer. Tom Brady is one of the best



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quarterbacks to ever play the game—he had a bad day, and played one very bad game—his mistakes were obvious, and his frustration palpable. Bill Belichick was a great leader that day, trusting his team even though they had a bad game. Tom Brady was not thrown under the bus, and acknowledged that he, and everyone, had to work harder and do a better job next week. Sometimes we see how great a coach is when they have that rare loss.

In corporate talent roles over the last 20 years I have seen many leaders deal with this scenario much differently. I have seen great talent go to a new role and not do well, and instead of asking how to coach and develop the person, there are conversations of how they are not cut out for the job, or not really that great to begin with. I have seen people go from hero to bum in what seems like 60 seconds. I have seen leaders throw their teams under a bus—and not take any responsibility for the hiring decisions, or coaching and developing for success. I have seen people hired to be on a bench for C-level roles packaged out within 6 months. The honeymoon is over, mysteriously they are not perfect—and all of a sudden the person who is on the bench to be CFO can barely qualify to be a finance manager. This demonstrates two other negative behaviors I have observed: the swarm and the pounce. Swarming and pouncing often go hand in hand—they single out a negative behavior and just hammer on it until it is clear that the person's credibility is destroyed, or they are no longer seen as a credible candidate for a senior role.

It seems that in corporate life we sometimes suffer from taking a very short, transitory view of people—and we have people of the moment, instead of looking at the total body of someone's work and their performance. Well, this talent market is a wake-up call for the “people are dispensable” attitude. There are areas of the talent marketplace where we have 2% unemployment and we are essentially at full employment (have you tried to hire a software developer lately)? Today, talent is harder to find and even harder to keep.

Talent Lesson #4: Hire for fit as well as for skill, capability, and smarts.

67% of executives hired into new roles leave within a year—the primary reason—fit, or the job wasn't as expected, or the organization wasn't as expected. Fit is critical in a tight talent market—there is little room for error. The disruption of a bad hiring decision is costly for the organization and for the individual. Making sure the job people actually have when they join and the job you sold them in interview process is the same, is key—making sure they are the best talent for the work you need done, helps everybody win.

One of my favorite talent stories from the NFL was shared with me by a friend who was a fan of the legendary Bum Phillips. It is a story of the great Earl Campbell, one of the best power backs ever to play the game. Earl Campbell had 34 inch thighs and could run with 5 defenders hanging off of him as he was powering toward the first down marker. Earl played most of his career for the Houston Oilers under coach Bum Phillips, a colorful character in interviews with the press. The Oilers, like most NFL teams, put players through a fitness test early in training camp. In this case, Coach Phillips had all players run a mile around the Houston Astrodome, and Earl didn't make it, falling to his knees partway through to catch his breath. At Bum Phillips' press conference at the end of the day, the press corps pounced on this issue of their All-Pro running back being so out of shape that he couldn't complete the mile run without stopping. When one reporter looking for a controversy asked Phillips if he was concerned, Bum paused, and then answered... “Well, the next time it is 1st down and a



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mile, I'll give the ball to somebody else." I love this story because when it comes to talent, fit is everything. Bum Phillips knew Earl Campbell's role, and Earl's typical bulldozing run was for 5 yards (not 1760 yards!) with nothing but a cloud of dust and fallen linemen and linebackers in his wake. Knowing your talent and their unique skills and capabilities is critical to building strong pipelines of talent throughout your organization. Do you have the right person, in the right job, at the right time to sustain and grow the business? Are you maximizing the skills and capabilities of each of your people? Are you helping your people to build their portfolios not only for the job they are in today, but also for the career they are preparing for tomorrow?

I began this article talking about baseball, so it is fitting that I end with some great lessons from the season.

While my Tigers did not win the American League pennant, the Kansas City Royals did. It was a Cinderella story for the ages. The Royals came into the post season with having to play one playoff game just to get into the pennant race—then something amazing happened....they won the next 7 games to get to the World Series. They dispensed with the LA Angels and the Baltimore Orioles, though both teams had better records. So what was the magic of the Royals? It was energy, heart, belief, and a lot of great teamwork. The broadcasts before every game were filled with human interest stories of fans who believed in the team. From Stephanie Hetherington who went into labor at the beginning of game 1 and showed up at the ballpark with her new baby by the end of the series, to Sung Woo Lee, the South Korean Super Fan of the Royals and the subject of an ESPN 30 for 30. He never missed a Royals game and was at Game 1 of the World Series cheering on his team.

While the Royals that began as the boys of summer never quite became the Champions of October as they lost game 7 of the World Series by one run to the San Francisco Giants, they showed us all that how you show up matters, that there is no substitute for hard work, and that believing in who you are and what you can do as a team will take you far.

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