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How do business teams differ from sports teams? Takin' Care of Business

Feb. 22, 2012

It's a good time for sports, and everybody seems to be talking about teams. People seem to be mentioning what teams they like and dislike, whom they like as coaches, and what skills those coaches bring to the field of play. Teams are an interesting entity; they seem to exist primarily to accomplish a goal like winning a game. Thinking of this concept, what are the goals of the business team and are they different? I began to think how athletic teams and business teams are similar and different, and I came to some interesting conclusions.

Every management book I've ever referenced stresses the importance of operating in a team environment or within the team concept. It is the team concept that helps move ideas to production and ultimately to the final customer. In parallel, the athletic coach stresses the importance of team and incorporates the same ideals of delivering the win. So the score at this point is business teams one and sports teams one, each has the same ideology.

Turning the page on both examples, I noted a startling difference. Athletic teams push the ideal of one team, one dream to the end. Coaches acknowledge that they are part of the team making decisions based on the well being of the club and those decisions are fortified with team input. Often strong coaches comment of the theory that "how we practice is how we play, so let's do it as one team. " The feeling of pride and exuberance begins to run rampant through the ranks and the team succeeds. However, in some business organizations, professionals will preach the 'concept' of team but fail when it's time to put the notion into action. This puzzled me, as I believe that they've read the same management books that I have. Therefore, I began to peel back the business practice of team a bit and here's what else I found.

Coaches of any sport spend a majority of their time in unification. They seek opportunities to unite the members of their teams so the concept of one team and one goal becomes a shared responsibility within the organization. Each member from the kicker, to the bat boy, to the led rusher understands their role in the bigger picture and knows their value. Business teams apply the team idea in concept only. Teams are assembled with a productive task in mind; however, legions of leaders are left standing inside the team, each trying to prove their worth and maintain their prominence. Meetings are held at all levels with some being sheltered from the goal but still being conceptualized as part of the team. In other words, part of the team practices on one field and the rest of team practices at a total different venue or level. This habit fragments information that affects the business they are trying to complete. In short, there is no win for the business team.

If you feel this in your business, correct it; look for ways to level the playing field with the people you work with. You shouldn't work for your leadership, you should work with them. Titles and levels have their place but only about 10 percent of the time. The rest should be spent accomplishing the goals of the organization. This seems simple but many organizations are stuck in a septic environment with no chance of winning the game at all.

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Highlights: Walsh college