

COMMON GOAL

How to Create a Team on a Mission

One of your first steps in building a championship team is to discuss and determine a common goal for your season. The importance of establishing a common goal might be better understood using the Million Dollar Cross Country Road Race example which follows.

Million Dollar Cross Country Road Race

I often use this hypothetical example with teams and in my Championship Team Building Workshops to help people understand the importance of determining a common goal. Suppose I told you there was an actual city in the United States where I buried one million dollars. You were part of a select group of 100 people beginning in Tucson, Arizona who were eligible to receive the money. The catch is that only the first person to get to this city receives the money. Each person is provided with a car to drive there. The name of the city is Lockwood. What is the first thing you would do?

Since 99.9% of the population has probably never heard of Lockwood (it's my wife's hometown of barely 1,000 people), the first thing you would do is find out where it is located. You must know where you are going before you hop in your car and go speeding off trying to get there. Without knowing your destination, all of the time and energy you spend could actually bring you in the opposite direction.

After finding a map and locating Lockwood in southwest Missouri, somewhere between Springfield and Joplin, you would then begin

planning your route to get there. Hopefully, you would find the interstate highways and plan the quickest, most direct route. You would likely check into the road conditions, construction, detours, toll roads, etc. Some might think you are wasting your time with all your planning and preparation, while other drivers have already gone 20 miles and are ahead. However, who's to say if they are on the right road or headed in the proper direction? The planning time you invest on the front end will pay off because you are less likely to get lost or head in the wrong direction when you go.

There is also an assumption in this scenario which cannot be overlooked. The assumption is that the million dollars has a great deal of value and significance to all those involved. In essence, the chance for the money has to be of more value and greater potential pleasure than going through the pain and monotony of driving over 20 hours. Without the possibility of a million dollars at the end of the race, few would willingly make a trip to Lockwood (unless of course, they had family there). If instead of one million dollars, I placed a dime in Lockwood and said that the first one to drive there gets it, no one would make the trip.

There must be a compelling reason and anticipated payoff considered worthy of pursuing to justify all of the time and energy that will be invested. This reason must be embraced and shared by the entire group. The team must see the potential payoff as a realistic possibility because there is no guarantee that the journey will lead them to the prize. Getting the million dollars would be nice, but you are one of 100 people vying for it so your opportunities are limited. This is the risk that all teams and individuals must face. There is a chance that if you lay it all on the line, you still might not be the first to get there.

Obviously, for the majority of you, achieving your team's goal is not going to earn you one million dollars. While most teams outside of big time collegiate athletics and the professional level do not have the chance at a million dollars, there is something that is worth much more—namely your team's pride, reputation, character and sense of satisfaction. Those intangibles are worth much more than one million dollars in intrinsic value. It is this intrinsic value and payoff which motivates most players and coaches. For example, while Michael Jordan received higher endorsement contracts with each NBA Championship he and the Bulls

won, I would argue that Jordan's personal pride and competitiveness fueled his drive to be the best much more than the money.

Taking our cross country road race example a step further, not every team begins the race with the same make and model of car. For a variety of reasons, some teams will have sleek, powerful, state of the art race cars that can reach amazing speeds. Others have Volkswagen Bugs that start to shake when they go over 50 mph. Yes, every team wants to get to the final destination first, but sometimes their lack of talent makes it extremely challenging and highly doubtful.

However, keep in mind that the fastest car does not always win the race, just as the most talented team does not always win the championship. Remember that talent + teamwork = success. If your car is not properly maintained and tuned up, gets a flat tire or suffers any other type of adversity and does not handle it well, the car loses much of its effectiveness. Similarly, although you may not be blessed with the best car in the race, if you maintain it properly, keep it oiled and hitting on all cylinders, you can pass by cars with better capabilities.

The cross country road race analogy relates to many of the same factors your team must examine before beginning your journey through your season.

Where is your final destination?

What is the potential payoff if you get there?

Why do you want to go there?

Does everyone in your car want to go there?

How do you get there from where you are now?

What is the best route to get there?

What are the terrain and road conditions going to be like?

What kind of car do you have?

What kinds of cars do your opponents have?

Is your car well-maintained, tuned up and ready to roll?

What happens if your car overheats or has a flat tire?

Do you have the necessary tools to make repairs along the way?

TOGETHER EVERYONE ACHIEVES MORE

Not only do you need to determine a mission for your season, you also need to have players who are willing to sacrifice their individual interests to get there. A common goal requires players to sacrifice some individual glory in an effort to achieve greater team success.

I remember back in the 1993-94 men's basketball season where Arizona had two future NBA first round draft picks in Damon Stoudamire and Khalid Reeves. While Damon and Khalid got most of the shots, the willingness of other players like Reggie Geary, Ray Owes, Joseph Blair and Corey Williams to sacrifice their points and play the unheralded roles helped propel the team to the Final Four. Their apparent sacrifice became an actual investment as the media exposure surrounding the Final Four brought more notoriety to them than if they would have lost in the Regional. Their willingness to sacrifice personal glory eventually helped three of the four players become NBA draft choices a few years later.

***"Good teams become great ones when the members trust each other enough to surrender the "me" for the "we."
This is the lesson that Michael and his teammates learned en route to winning three consecutive NBA Championships."***

—Coach Phil Jackson, Chicago Bulls/Los Angeles Lakers

"The one thing I believe to the fullest, is that if you think and achieve as a team, the individual accolades will take care of themselves. I'd rather have five guys with less talent who are willing to come together as a team than five guys who consider themselves stars and aren't willing to sacrifice."

—Michael Jordan, Chicago Bulls/Washington Wizards

Surrendering the "Me" for the "We"

To achieve as a team, many individual sacrifices must be made throughout the season. You must convince your players that their individual sacrifices are going to actually benefit them and their team in the long run. They may not get the playing time, or number of plays run their way in the short term, but their willingness to help the team will pay off with an even greater reward in the end. Players need to understand that these individual sacrifices are done to benefit the team.

A similar example of sacrifice and selflessness helped the Arizona Softball team win their fifth National Championship. Going into the 1997 season, Coach Candrea had a difficult situation that seemingly most coaches would love to have—an abundance of talent but a lack of positions and playing time. Coach Candrea understood that the key to the season was keeping everyone focused on a common goal.

Because of a red-shirt year, he had two All-Americans returning at catcher for the season. One of them, Lety Pineda, made the sacrifice to help the team and willingly moved to third base. This created another log jam in the infield which stacked up at second base. Two players ended up splitting time throughout the season—Michelle Churnock and Katie Swan. Katie was a stronger hitter and Michelle was better defensively, so it often ended up that one would play the field while the other would hit. Although individually it was frustrating for Michelle and Katie not to completely play the role they would have liked, collectively they formed an effective one-two punch that helped propel the team to the championship.

Problems with Professional Sports

Without a common goal, it is too easy for individual agendas to take over. Professional sports create an especially difficult environment for teams to have a common goal largely because of the differences in player salaries. Players are rewarded more on the basis of their individual accomplishments than they are on their team accomplishments. Thus, scoring averages, batting averages and other individual stats often take precedence over team successes. Each player is basically encouraged to look out for him or herself, often at the expense of the team.

"The most difficult thing for individuals to do when they're part of a team is to sacrifice. . . The Lakers made a covenant with each other to put aside selfishness so that the team can achieve it's goals, saying, 'Whatever it takes for the team to win, I'll do it.'"
—Pat Riley, Miami Heat

***"Ask not what you teammates can do for you.
Ask what you can do for your teammates."***

—Magic Johnson, Los Angeles Lakers

Reward Team Success

In an innovative way to combat the seduction of individual stats, the Chicago Blackhawks once based many of their bonuses on team success. Instead of being based on individual statistics, honors and awards, the team's incentive clauses and bonuses were based on team statistics and successes. The management, coaches and players all believed the idea created better teamwork and success on the team. While individual honors and accolades are important, perhaps you could also create some team incentives or awards that fit with your mission.

For example, if your hockey team limits their opponent's shots on goal to a specific number you can reward them with additional scrimmage time in practice. Or if your basketball team out rebounds your opponents for three consecutive games you can end a practice early or even give them a day off. Finally, if your baseball team plays four consecutive games (or innings for some teams) of error-free defense you can host a pizza party for them. All of these incentives are based on team play and encourage your players to work together to accomplish team goals.

As a coach, be sure to emphasize and acknowledge the importance of team success over individual success. Some coaches will purposely not put their player's last names on the backs of their jerseys. They do this because they want to make sure that the players play for the team name on the front of the jersey—not just for the individual whose name is on the back of it.

Arizona Softball Coach Mike Candrea always stresses the importance of team success with his players. While he has developed numerous All-Americans and National Players of the Year, he rarely talks about

individual honors and awards. Further, he does not post individual statistics. He believes that focusing on individual stats and awards emphasizes the wrong message and leads to jealousies and dissension on the team. Instead, he focuses on team accomplishments and congratulates players privately for their successes.

"The one thing I've decided after looking at baseball from top to bottom is that unless the whole organization is working together for one common purpose and under one common philosophy, the club isn't going to win. . . "

—Coach Whitey Herzog, St. Louis Cardinals

Something In Common

While many players will outwardly profess they are team players, inwardly they hope the person starting in their position plays poorly or gets injured. For championship teams, however, a common goal means that players will pull for each other. Even though the subs would love to be playing more, they still support and encourage their teammates who are playing. Instead of seeing themselves as a collection of individuals with various goals, championship players see themselves as part of a unified team working toward a common goal. They realize that everyone must be pulling in the same direction, otherwise the team will pull apart.

"We all must hang together, else we shall all hang separately."
—Benjamin Franklin