



Book The Packer Way

Nine Stepping Stones to Building a Winning Organization

Paul Attner and Ron Michael Wolf
St. Martin's Press, 1998

Recommendation

Sport is an overused metaphor for business, but Ron Wolf, Executive Vice President and General Manager of the U.S. National Football League's Green Bay Packers, surpasses the majority of management experts with his common-sense organizational wisdom. Recounting his turnaround of a languishing football franchise into a Super Bowl winner, Wolf (along with co-author Paul Attner) shows how he used the very principals he illustrates with his compelling sports analogies. While your organization may not compete on a stage as public as the NFL, you can use the same strategies. If these tactics can help the small-market Packers compete with teams from Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, they can certainly help your firm compete as well. *BooksInShort* especially recommends Wolf's "stepping stone" strategy of incremental improvement, which seems to us the equivalent of building a solid running game while your opponents lob Hail Marys.

Take-Aways

- Before you start making changes, determine what needs to be fixed.
- Your business needs great leaders. Hire the best and always be prepared to find a replacement in case of an emergency.
- Develop an obsession with winning. Today.
- Confront the weaknesses facing your business. Then, play to your strengths.
- Measure your employees' performance by expecting the four C's: certain devotion, certain dedication, certain work ethic, certain results.
- Identify the minimum requirements for each position within your system.
- Lessen the impact of change by identifying a core of leadership.
- Prepare for the unexpected to avoid falling prey to "Woe-Is-Me Disease."
- Stay on top by intensifying your recruitment efforts.
- Maintain a commitment to incremental change through the stepping-stone approach, even when people around you want quick results.

Summary

Determine What Needs to Be Fixed

When the Green Bay Packers hired me in 1991, my football friends told me I was going to the pro football graveyard. The team finished the season 4-12. In 19 of the 24 years since Green Bay's 1967 championship under coach Vince Lombardi, the team finished below .500.

“To keep continuity within your organization and bring about stability, you need to maintain a core group of leaders below the management level.”

We headed the Packers toward the top with a strategy I recommend for your business. Do nothing. Well, nothing but talking, watching and analyzing. I wanted to create a carefully conceived plan that would turn the Packers into champions. To make things right for your business, step back and get an overview of the entire situation. Before you devise any solutions, determine what needs to be fixed. Once you are comfortable with your study and you have an understanding of the people involved, then take your next steps.

“The lowest-paid employee should be governed by the same rules and expectations as the highest-level personnel.”

I studied the Packers on two levels. Obviously, I had to evaluate the players and the coaching talent. But it was just as important to analyze the support staff and scouting operation. I was looking for the leadership that already existed in the organization. I wanted to get a feel for the work ethic and attitude of players and staff. If you want to improve, you can't just concentrate on your key people. Make sure that everyone in the entire organization is fulfilling his or her mission. Do not accept excuses for lack of production and progress.

Hire the Best... Now!

Great leaders are hard to find. It doesn't matter if your business is sports, computers or widget production. You must be prepared to fill leadership positions in your business. If you are unprepared, you will hire managers who are not your first choices - and your business will suffer. Maintain a list of potential replacements for your top managers. The better you prepare, the quicker you will be able to move, particularly if you face an emergency.

“Fire a whiner who everyone thought was safe.”

The Packers had two key leadership roles to fill, head coach and quarterback. In our business, you need great leaders at both positions to be successful. You can win titles if you are weak at either position, but you have to overcome difficult odds. Getting a top-notch quarterback is like hiring a sales manager with great potential and watching him grow into the position. As he improves, people around him improve. Your quarterback might be your night manager or the foreman at your factory. Good leaders will help your business keep pace and even stay slightly ahead. But great leaders can move you into a much stronger position. Don't settle for good leaders, have the patience to find potentially great leaders.

“If it comes to a point where I must choose between the organization and the individual, the organization wins.”

The Packers are owned by shareholders who are represented by an Executive Committee. In one of my first meetings with this committee, I mentioned that we had a huge problem at the quarterback spot. When I came to Green Bay, people were still fairly happy with the quarterback on the scene, Don Majkowski, so this did not endear me to the committee. I told them we had an opportunity to acquire an exciting player who would be so good that he would make people forget about any other player. Then I told them it was Brett Favre, a third-string quarterback with the Atlanta Falcons. At that time, Favre had done nothing in the NFL. But I wanted him for the leadership abilities he demonstrated in college. I had to face some tough criticism, but I showed that I was extremely serious about the quarterback.

“Resist the temptation - and it is only human nature - to become an instant hero by arriving quickly at glittery solutions.”

It turned out that the best head coach for our team was already on the payroll. Mike Holmgren had never been a head coach in college or the pros, but he had a reputation for success stemming from his days as offensive coordinator for the San Francisco 49ers. His confidence in his ability to succeed made me overlook his lack of head coaching experience. With Holmgren and Favre, the Packers had the foundation in place to improve rapidly. The extra time it took to find great leaders was well spent.

Become Obsessed with Winning Today

You must become obsessed with winning. Period. A winning attitude gives you an edge that separates you from the competition, as I learned from Red Cochran, a former Lombardi assistant. I asked Red about how Lombardi built the Packers into champions. He told me that Vince wanted to win and wanted to win now. Winning today was all that was acceptable.

“Eliminate those employees who are trying to survive instead of trying to improve.”

When you set a four- or five-year plan it is easy to relax and accept less than a win every time. You convince yourself that losing is acceptable. Get rid of the idea that going backward before showing progress is okay. Make becoming the best a priority. Employees in every aspect of your business should feel the desire to win today. Your employees should be motivated by an internal fear of letting down their co-workers, not by fear of you. Show your employees how important they are individually to the overall success of your organization.

Use Your strengths

All businesses have negatives. Don't ignore your weaknesses; confront them. We had two major obstacles in Green Bay. First, the players' underground network viewed Green Bay unfavorably. In particular, black players felt our city lacked a social life for them outside football. Our other weakness was the cold weather. I decided that we could use that weakness to our advantage. We went about building a team that thrived in colder conditions.

“Hire leaders who complement your strengths, not those who duplicate them.”

While we could use the weather to our favor, we had to confront the low rating our city got from the players. It's true that Green Bay has only a small black population, but the Packers also have had many successful black players. We started by bringing in a barber once a week who specialized in cutting the hair of black players. We served soul food twice a week at the practice facility. We took a series of small steps to make the Packers a more attractive football team and social environment. Each step was minor, but together they helped us win.

“If you don't demand immediate results, you're creating an atmosphere where less than the best is acceptable.”

Once you confront your weaknesses you can play to your strengths. I believed the Packers greatest strength was in the team's history. Green Bay has a history of success that begins with the team's founder and first coach, Curly Lambeau, who won six world championships. We went about publicizing all of the successes of the organization and its players. Your company could also benefit from a dose of historical pride. Learn about the successes of your past and publicize them. Paint a picture of a great organization trying to live up to its legacy.

Measure Performance with the Four C's

The Four C's are criteria I set for the people who work for me. You can do the same.

- Certain devotion - I expect my employees to embrace the Green Bay Packers and to develop incredible loyalty. Get rid of employees who think your organization owes them something. A relationship between an employer and employee should stem from a mutual bond. Everyone should be devoted to the same goals. Green Bay Packers employees rightfully take incredible pride in the accomplishments of the organization.
- Certain dedication - Employees must be dedicated to winning. They must be willing to make the sacrifices needed to get to the top of their profession. If they can't accept that and do what it takes, they shouldn't be working for you.
- Certain work ethic - Your people need a strong work ethic so they can be constructive without constant monitoring. Your internal leaders must use their authority wisely. Power inflates egos, so you don't want to promote someone who will become a

pocket dictator.

- Certain results - Expect your employees to fulfill their job requirements. A longtime employee who can't produce minimum results must be fired. You can't let loyalty and sentimentality become more important than production. Always look for examples of superior performance and reward those responsible.

Make it work

You must believe in your system. It should be well grounded, proven and easy to understand. If your structure provides all employees with the same direction, you increase the chances of realizing your goals. Top-rate managers know the exact traits people need to have to function under their system. They know the personalities, educational background and experience needed for each position.

“Determine all the positives that exist within the organization and figure ways to use these as a foundation to begin the turnaround.”

Don't even interview a candidate who doesn't meet your minimum requirements. Being specific about what you need can speed up your job search. With the Packers, we set certain height and weight requirements for each position. We won't draft players who don't measure up. Set key principles as the foundation of your system; never allow them to deteriorate.

Keep it going

Change creates turmoil. To reduce its impact, identify and maintain a core of leadership below the management level. When we started with the Packers, we looked for about eight players who could become spokes on a wheel. Our leaders. We expected another 20 or so players to attach themselves to the spokes and become our best players. The players that fall between the spokes could be replaced.

“Everyone should understand that, no matter his seniority or loyalty, lack of performance will lead to dismissal.”

Identify your key employees and keep them in the information loop. Mike Holmgren formed a players' committee made up of leaders such as LeRoy Butler, Sterling Sharpe and Brett Favre. Meeting with them and implementing some of their ideas created a sense of team ownership. All businesses could benefit from forming a worker's committee that meets regularly with key managers. Your leaders can provide stability in the midst of change.

Handle the Unexpected

Beware of the "Woe-Is-Me Disease," which can strike at any time. A key salesperson quits. Your big deal falls through. A machine at the factory breaks down and stalls production. House repairs ruin your vacation. Planning for the expected is easy; but how you handle the unexpected will decide whether you continue growing or suffer long-term setbacks. You can handle the unexpected in two ways: feel sorry for yourself and curse the world for being unfair; or forge ahead and deal with the problem.

“Maintain your greed when striving for improvement and progress within your company.”

In 1997, we started the season as Super Bowl champs, playing against the Chicago Bears on a Monday night. Expectations were high; excitement was in the air. The feeling was tempered quickly. On the Bears' first play, our starting cornerback, Craig Newsome, twisted his knee and fell to the ground. Our training staff said he could be gone for the season. While we were considering replacements for Newsome, our tight end, Mark Chmura, also went down. Instead of succumbing to the woe-is-me disease, we looked to our system to solve our problem. We asked second-year player Tyrone Williams to step up from his reserve role. We promoted Randy Kinder from our practice roster. We recruited fullback Steve Lee, to take Kinder's place. We did all of this in less than 90 minutes because we didn't panic; we simply executed our plan for the unexpected. It hurt to lose two key players, but it didn't paralyze us.

Stay on top

We use the draft to improve our football team. Once your business achieves success, you should increase the effort you put into

recruiting. When your company is successful, your competitors will start trying to hire your employees. Constant recruitment keeps new blood in your organization. When you have achieved success, it is normal to suffer some erosion as your best people are lured away. Remain true to the same principles that made you successful in the first place. Don't rest. Always want to stay the best.

About the Authors

Ron Michael Wolf is the executive vice president and general manager of the Green Bay Packers. He was named NFL Executive of the Year by *The Sporting News* in 1992. He has been involved in the NFL for more than 30 years. **Paul Attner** is a senior writer for *The Sporting News* . He is the author of *Redskin Country* (with Ken Dilinger), *The Fat Lady Sings* and *The Terrapins*.
