

**Harvard  
Business  
Review****Organizational Culture****To Build a Winning Team: An  
Interview with Head Coach Bill  
Walsh**

by Richard Rapaport

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Joining the august company of Knute Rockne, Paul Brown, and Vince Lombardi, former San Francisco 49ers and current Stanford University football coach Bill Walsh is recognized as one of the most important figures in football history. Walsh, like other coaching legends, has done far more than produce consistently winning teams: in his case, three Super Bowl championships for the 49ers in eight years and an organization enshrined in the press as “The Team of the ’80s.” During his ten-year career with the 49ers and as a coach at the high school, college, and professional levels, Walsh developed a uniquely thoughtful style of play and a successful system of team management that has become one of the most respected in the modern game.

Less of a psychologist than Rockne, and never a disciplinarian like Lombardi, Walsh nevertheless produces winners through a businesslike approach to maximizing the potential of players and coaches. His ability to coolly analyze opponents, matching their weaknesses with his teams’ strengths, has made come-from-behind wins a Walsh football hallmark.

Believed to be too cerebral for a top position for which extreme macho was long considered an ineluctable quality, for years Walsh was forced to content himself with assistant coaching positions. Prized nonetheless for his skills on offense, Walsh was honored for honing All-Pro quarterbacks Dan Fouts, Kenny Anderson, and Greg Cook.

In 1977, at age 47, Walsh became Stanford's head football coach. That year, he took a moderately talented Stanford team to a national ranking and a win in the Bluebonnet Bowl. In 1979, Walsh was named head coach and general manager of a dreadful 49ers team that had been virtually dismembered in the late 1970s by mismanagement and horrendous personnel decisions.

Walsh immediately began to develop long-range strategic and personnel plans for the 49ers. He also focused on what other coaches had considered the minutiae of the game: minute-by-minute choreographing of practices, breaking down individual and group tactics into parts, and defining responsibilities and setting objectives for both players and coaches.

This season, Walsh has been paid the ultimate accolade for a coach: former Walsh assistants are NFL head coaches in Tampa Bay, Minnesota, Green Bay, New York (Jets), and San Francisco.

Retiring after his third Super Bowl victory in January 1989, Walsh signed on as a football analyst for NBC Sports, eschewing numerous bids to coach professionally before stunning the football world in 1992 by returning as head coach at Stanford.

This interview was conducted by Richard Rapaport, who is a San Francisco-based writer and a contributing editor to *San Francisco Focus* and *Forbes/ASAP*. His political commentary appears frequently in Knight-Ridder and other newspaper chains around the United States.

HBR: Do you see a link between managing and coaching?

Bill Walsh: I see coaches and executives who have more similar skills today than ever before. When I was with the 49ers, I was both head coach and general manager, so my duties were more business oriented than those of a lot of NFL head coaches. Today's NFL is a very complex world, and great football knowledge alone won't get your team to the Super Bowl.

Historically in sports, there has been one central figure in the organization whose presence dominates everything and whose judgments people identify with. That one person is the dictator, and everyone else simply does whatever he says. In a lot of ways, the old system was much easier for all involved. The dictator gave orders and everyone else just followed them.

Now working successfully with the people in the organization demands more from the coach or the executive. In coaching, I think of it as the coach's ability to condition the athletes' minds and to train them to think as a unit, while at the same time, making sure each athlete approaches his own game with total concentration, intensity, and skill. There should never be a moment on the football field when a player doesn't feel challenged both physically and intellectually. That is why the old bludgeon approach is leaving football the same way it is leaving business.

What is replacing the old approach?

Management today recognizes that to have a winning organization, it has to be more knowledgeable and competent in dealing with and developing people. That is the most fundamental change. The real task in sports is to bring together groups of people to accomplish something. In the old days, the approach was rather crude. The organization would simply discard a player who did not fit a specific, predefined mold. If a player did not conform to the way management wanted him to behave, or if he made the organization uncomfortable, it got rid of him. That was the typical response.

Today, in sports as elsewhere, individualism is the general rule. Some of the most talented people are the ones who are the most independent. That has required from management a fundamental change in the art and skill of communication and in organizational development. Most important, there has been much more recognition and acknowledgment of the uniqueness of each individual and the need that people have for some degree of security.

How does that translate into winning teams?

Those teams that have been most successful are the ones that have demonstrated the greatest commitment to their people. They are the ones that have created the greatest sense of belonging. And they are the ones that have done the most in-house to develop their people. That commitment has come through in the personality of the organizations. It is true of the Redskins, the Raiders, and, of course, the 49ers.

What is the biggest obstacle to creating this kind of organization?

The coach must account for his ego. He has to drop or sidestep the ego barrier so that people can communicate without fear. They have to be comfortable that they will not be ridiculed if they turn out to be mistaken or if their ideas are not directly in line with their superior's. That is where the breakthrough comes. That is what it takes to build a successful, winning organization.

That approach was certainly critical to the success of the 49ers. It contributed to an environment where our team could be more flexible and adaptable in responding to the unexpected moves of our opponents.

I tried to remove the fear factor from people's minds so they could feel comfortable opening their mouths. They knew they could be wrong one time and then, when they got a little more information, change their opinion and not be demeaned for it. In fact, I made a point of reminding our coaching staff that I expected them to change their opinions and impressions over time. It's quite natural: the more

information you develop, the faster things can change.

But having enormous self-confidence seems essential for a leader—especially in pro sports. What is the role of healthy versus unhealthy ego in a competitive organization like a football team?

English is a marvelous language until it comes to the word “ego.” We Americans throw that around, using that one word to cover a broad spectrum of meanings: self-confidence, self-assurance, and assertiveness—attributes that most people think of as positive.

But there is another side that can wreck a team or an organization. That is being distracted by your own importance. It can come from your insecurity in working with others. It can be the need to draw attention to yourself in the public arena. It can be a feeling that others are a threat to your own territory. These are all negative manifestations of ego, and if you are not alert to them, you get diverted and your work becomes diffused. Ego in these cases makes people insensitive to how they work with others and ends up interfering with the real goal of any group efforts.

### **The Turnaround CEO**

By 1979, when I came to the 49ers, things were about as bad with the team as they could get. The 49ers fans had been let ...



What do you think are the essential management skills of a successful head coach?

The role of the head coach begins with setting a standard of competence. You have to exhibit a strong working knowledge of the

game. The head coach must be able to function effectively and decisively in the most stressful situations. And the head coach must demonstrate resourcefulness—in particular, he is responsible for designing a system of football that is not simplistic. The head coach's system should never reduce the game to the point where he can blame his players for success or failure simply because they did not physically overwhelm the opponents.

Successful coaches realize that winning teams are not run by single individuals who dominate the scene and reduce the rest of the group to marionettes. Winning teams are more like open forums in which everyone participates in the decision-making process, coaches and players alike, until the decision is made. Others must know who is in command, but a head coach must behave democratically. Then, once a decision is made, the team must be motivated to go ahead and execute it.

What does it take to create a decision-making process in which people feel they can participate?

It starts with the expectations the head coach sets. It is part of the job to expect everyone in the organization to be an expert in his or her particular area of responsibility, to refine their skills continually, and to be physically and intellectually committed to the team. The head coach has to make it clear that he expects everyone to participate and volunteer his or her thoughts, impressions, and ideas. The goal is to create a communication channel that allows important information to get from the bottom to the top.

## On Organized Labor

I've always believed there should be a football players' association. But sometimes the association has worked against ...



During 49ers games, my coaches and I always tried to respond to what the players said. We knew that we needed their input. And it often made a difference. For example, in a game against New Orleans in 1987, I told the team at halftime that we would call one particular pass play when we got inside the Saints 30-yard line. In the stress of the moment, when we got there, I simply didn't think of sending in the play. But on the sideline, Steve Young, our backup quarterback, immediately reminded me of it. He wasn't a bit hesitant. I called it, and we scored.

I couldn't worry about being embarrassed because I had forgotten what I said in the locker room. We were after results. We all wanted to win.

If that is what it takes to be a successful coach, what are the qualities that define the modern football player?

The key to being a modern football player is the ability to respond quicker, both mentally and physically, than the other player. Some people are naturally quicker physically. But to win, you need to be quicker as a team. You must beat your opposition to the punch every time.

Physical strength and speed are important advantages, but even more

advantageous is having the training that permits you to respond intelligently to whatever confronts you. That means more precision, better execution, and quicker response than your opponents. Under the extreme stress of game conditions, a player must condense his intellect and focus it on thinking more quickly and clearly than the opposition.

How do you achieve that quickness and responsiveness in your teams?

It is all in the way you prepare. Preparation allows us to overcome the fact that we might not be the most physically talented team. During the 1980s, the 49ers may not have been as talented as the New York Giants or Chicago Bears, who had measurable advantages in speed or strength. But we were able to compensate in the way we prepared for a game.

Some coaches rely on relatively simplistic plans. When their plans don't work, they say that it was the players who did not block hard enough, did not run hard enough, or just were not tough enough. We have gone beyond that pattern of failure and finger-pointing. The responsibility for the success of the team starts with the coach, who develops the plan that is then executed by the players—who are extremely well-prepared.

Being prepared starts with identifying the essential skills our team needs to compete effectively. The next step is to create a format to teach those skills. Here at Stanford, our practices and game plans are far more detailed than those used by most of our opponents. There is more to learn with our schemes, so we demand more mental commitment and concentration from the players.

How do you approach the job of structuring practices so your players will be prepared?

I believe in extremely precise, minute-by-minute, tightly structured

practices. We focus far more intellect and put far more thought into what we do in practice than other teams do. We have five or six skills or techniques that we want each of our players to be able to use in carrying out his assignment, where our opponents usually will have only one or two.

Take an offensive lineman, for example. Before the ball is snapped, that guard or tackle might have only three or four seconds to decide what kind of blocking technique to use on the man in front of him. Say there are four blocking techniques he can use. By the way his man is positioned, by the situation in the game, by what he has learned to expect from his opponent, he will be able to select one of those techniques.

Many other teams take a more simplistic approach. They teach their players one approach, one technique. Our approach gives our players more dimension. When we are playing powerhouses like Notre Dame, Texas A&M, or Washington, we have to use our extra dimensions to compensate for being physically outmanned. That is the intellectual part of the game. That is the area in which we ask more of our players than our opponents are asking of theirs.

How do you teach those skills?

The most important tool for getting things done is the drill. For example, we work on drills to teach running backs about pass protection against blitzing linebackers. You have to identify the 6 different situations that can occur. Then you have to allocate the time to work on those 6 situations and also the 20 techniques that you want your running backs to be able to apply. In teaching those skills, sometimes you want to have your guards and tight ends participate, or even the entire offensive unit. All of that requires preparation, discipline, and focus from both coaches and players.

The way I coach, I know ahead of time how I am going to run the whole season's worth of practices. I have established the priorities for

what we need to accomplish and allocated the time in which to teach the necessary skills.

I establish the program long before we take the field so I can use most efficiently the time available for learning and so the players do not get bored or distracted. The players must know clearly and at all times exactly what it is that they have to get out of any given drill. After 35 years of coaching, I have found that you can't do anything in less than 10 minutes or in more than 20 minutes.

Another distinction in drills is between those skills and techniques that can be taught individually and those that require groups. It is also critical to allocate time for team play and to build in practice segments that focus on the execution of particular plays and particular game situations that you want to be ready for.

Why is it important to prepare so many skills for so many contingencies?

Making judgments under severe stress is the most difficult thing there is. The more preparation you have prior to the conflict, the more you can do in a clinical situation, the better off you will be. For that reason, in practice I want to make certain that we have accounted for every critical situation, including the desperate ones at the end of a game when we may have only one chance to pull out a victory. Even in that circumstance, I want us to have a play prepared and rehearsed. Say it is the last 20 seconds of a game and we're losing. We have already practiced 6 plays that we can apply in that situation. That way, we know what to do, and we can calmly execute the plays. We'll have no doubt in our minds, we will have more poise, and we can concentrate without falling prey to desperation.

Can you recall a specific instance where this actually paid off for one of your teams?

In 1987, we were down 26–20 against Cincinnati. We got the ball

back on their 25-yard line with two seconds left in the game. It could have been a hopeless situation. We put three receivers to the left and Jerry Rice to the right. Joe Montana got the ball, looked left, pump faked, and then threw right, where Rice was covered man-to-man in the end zone. It was a touchdown, and it won an important game for us. But it would not have happened if we had not been prepared.

You need to have a plan even for the worst scenario. It doesn't mean that it will always work; it doesn't mean that you will always be successful. But you will always be prepared and at your best.

**“You need to have a plan even for the worst scenario. It doesn't mean that it will always work.”**

But the same applies to virtually every situation at every point in the game. Say you are on the defense and inside your own 25-yard line. The situation can vary, so there are a number of particulars you need to prepare for. You have third down and inches. Third down and feet. Third down and yards. Inside the 15-yard line, all that changes, and inside the 5 it changes again. Each situation is different, and for each you might have 15 different game situations to practice. You have to allocate time for all of them, you have to practice plays, and you have to work with individuals. And then all of the separate situations have to be pulled together to give a continuity to the team's play.

One of the most impressive attributes of your 49ers teams was their ability to take what some people might consider a disadvantage and use it to their advantage. Did you work on developing this skill?

I can think of several cases where we consciously tried to work on the players to reverse what in football are usually crippling disadvantages.

One was playing on the road. In football, the home-field advantage is often decisive. But we were able to bond together, play in enemy territory, and feed on the emotions of the situation, without being intimidated by the other teams or their fans.

To accomplish that, I would condition the 49ers to adversity. We would talk about how it feels to fly into enemy territory. We would discuss what crosses your mind when you take the field. It allowed us to turn our status as outsiders into our advantage. When I talked with the team, I would use examples from the early days of World War II as illustrations of the desperate and heroic fights we could emulate. By talking about what could be a disadvantage, we turned our people on. We made it an advantage.

The other example is the injury factor. Some teams come unraveled when a star player gets injured. With the 49ers, an injury often served to arouse the team to play harder. Again, my approach was to talk about it openly. I would make the point that reserve players always had to be prepared, and that when they got the chance, they should actually improve on the performance of the injured player. Again, I used historical examples from warfare. For instance, in the Civil War, the best trained people, the front line and even generals, were often the first to fall. Often it was the reserves who would achieve victory. So when our reserves took the field, they were conditioned to feel this way and they knew what was expected. They would feel much more positive about going into the game.

In teaching skills to your players, how do you organize your own thinking about the players you are trying to reach?

Take a group of ten players. The top two will be supermotivated. Superstars will usually take care of themselves. Anybody can coach them. The next four, with the right motivation and direction, will learn to perform up to their potential. The next two will be marginal. With constant attention, they will be able to accomplish something of value to the team. The last two will waste your time. They won't be

with you for long. Our goal is to focus our organizational detail and coaching on the middle six. They are the ones who most need and benefit from your direction, monitoring, and counsel.

How do you achieve a balance between group skills and discipline on the one hand and player individuality on the other?

They go together in defining the two directions you need to pursue at the same time. First, you develop within the organization and the players an appreciation for the role each athlete plays on the team. You talk to each player and let each one know that, at some point, he will be in a position to win or lose a game. It may be one play in an entire career for a certain player or many plays each game for a Joe Montana. But the point is that everyone's job is essential. Everyone has a specific role and specific responsibilities. And each player has to be prepared both mentally and physically to the utmost to play that role.

**“At some point, each player will be in a position to win or lose a game.”**

Second, you talk to each player and indicate the importance of everyone's participation in the process—that it is important for everyone to express himself, to offer ideas, explanations, solutions, formulas. You want everyone to enter into the flow of ideas, even ideas that may seem extreme in their creativity.

You are actually striving for two things at the same time: an organization where people understand the importance of their jobs and are committed to living within the confines of those jobs and to taking direction; and an organization where people feel creative and adaptive and are willing to change their minds without feeling

threatened. It is a tough combination to achieve. But it's also the ultimate in management.

Is there a situation with a player that exemplifies this balance between giving explicit direction and permitting individual creativity?

Take Joe Montana, for example. He is a perfect combination of the two vital aspects that are necessary for developing greatness as a quarterback.

The formula for the success of the 49ers offense was a highly disciplined, very structured form of utilizing the forward pass. To make our system work, Joe had to master the disciplines to know which receiver to throw to, when, and why. The success of the team depended on Joe's ability to work within that framework. Consequently, the job of the coach was to use drills and repetition so that Joe developed almost automatic moves and decision-making ability.

But there is an extra quality that it takes for a quarterback to become a world champion—or, in Joe's case, the best ever. And that is an instinctive, spontaneous, natural response to situations that arise in games. Part of Montana's greatness was that 10% to 15% of the time his spontaneous instincts would break loose and make a phenomenal difference in the outcome of a game.

It is the job of the coach to find the best of both sides. We had to have a very structured system of football, and we also wanted instinctive and spontaneous play.

How do you go about the job of coaching a player like Montana to develop that kind of balance?

Early on, we had to encourage Joe to trust his spontaneous instincts. We were careful not to criticize him when he used his creative abilities and things did not work out. In practice, we worked with Joe

repeatedly on specific plays. When he was placed in a game, we called only those plays because we knew that he should be confident that he could execute them. But we didn't jump him the minute he would break the pattern. Instead, we nurtured him to use his instincts. We had to allow him to be wrong on occasion and to live with it.

Of course, with different players the problem takes on a different look. In the case of quarterback Steve Young, it was almost the opposite. We had to work with him to be disciplined enough to live within the strict framework of what we were doing. Steve is a great spontaneous athlete and a terrific runner. But we found that we had to reduce the number of times he would use his instincts and increase his willingness to stay within the confines of the team concept.

For example, we would be at a point in a game where we had designed a special play to break the defense wide open and score a touchdown. In his early days, Steve might not have had the discipline to wait for that play to develop. Instead, he would see an opening and run with the ball for a five-yard gain. He would let his instincts and emotions affect his patience with the play and his confidence that the entire team could execute.

As a coach, how do you know what it takes to bring out the best in a young player's abilities?

Unfortunately, there is nothing exact about it. Experience is really the only teacher. I was 47 years old when I became an NFL head coach. Typically, that job comes to people when they are between the ages of 35 and 40. I was in a subordinate role as an assistant coach for a longer period of time than most, so I was forced to analyze, evaluate, and learn to appreciate the roles that other people play more than I might have. In retrospect, I was lucky.

## College Football: The Professional Approach

Part of the agreement that brought Bill Walsh back to Stanford in 1992 was that he be allowed to pick his assistant ...



But if developing your players is an inexact art, there are bound to be mistakes. How do you deal with them?

Again and again in the development and selection of personnel, you have to account for miscalculation. In professional sports, the person who is best at dealing with personnel is the person who recognizes his or her errors and deals with them the quickest and most effectively. That could mean adopting a long-term approach, or it could mean the release of a player.

Take our drafting of John Taylor in 1986. John came to the 49ers as a wide receiver from Delaware State. He had great physical talent, but not a lot of background in playing sophisticated football. We simply miscalculated how long it would take John to be ready to play in the NFL. Consequently, we were disappointed in him. John was not adapting well to the competition, he appeared confused and frustrated, and he had lost his enthusiasm.

But instead of giving up on him, we took a longer term, more patient approach. We waited an extra year to allow him to mature and grow into this level of competition and into the role we wanted him to play. Now he is an All-Pro and one of the great receivers in the game.

The other side to that would be the decision I made with Thomas

“Hollywood” Henderson. He was a very bright, articulate, charming person, but he also had an uncontrollable drug habit. I made a calculated choice that involved a high risk when we acquired him from Dallas—that I could personally nurture and rehab and influence Thomas into once again becoming a great linebacker. It was a miscalculation on my part. I gave it every chance to work, but finally I had to decide that it simply was not going to.

When you reach that point, you have to make a controlled and well-planned retreat. You regret the decision that you made, but you have to live with it, and you have to work yourself out of it. That is one important facet of good management: deciding how to acknowledge your mistakes.

Do you simply gloss over them? Do you blame someone else? Are you so insecure that your ego will not let you do anything but maintain that your original decision was correct? I could have kept Thomas Henderson on the team, but then the 49ers would not have become world champs. Or I could have had the public blaming Thomas or blaming an assistant coach. But none of those approaches would have helped the team.

In this case, I did not want to publicly embarrass Thomas, but I did want to show the team that I was still in control and that drug abuse would not be tolerated. We simply had to move as smoothly as possible to release Thomas for any number of reasons, remove him from the picture. I made a mistake, acknowledged it, and decided what to do about it.

If the personnel issue is so overriding, do you have a methodology for the way you evaluate players?

We use a five-bracket ranking system to categorize people we are looking at. The first is the star player who cannot miss. The second is a player who will someday be a starter and play for a number of years. The third will make the team, and the fourth has an isolated specialty

—covering kickoffs or fielding punts. The fifth is someone who will make the squad and help you by playing solidly in a backup role.

You want as many superstars as you can get. The more stars, the better. But the difference between winning and losing is the bottom 25% of your people. Most coaches can deliver the top 75%. But the last 25% only blossoms in the details, in the orchestration of skills, in the way you prepare.

When you go into a draft, what are the particulars you are looking for in a player?

It is always a combination of factors that add up to the right person. It's his level of natural ability. It's his competitive instincts. It's also the history of that athlete; his ability to learn, retain, and apply what he has learned; and his ability to work under stress with other people.

Then you have to be able to project those qualities into the slot or role that athlete would play for your team. And you have to do that over time, thinking about the short, middle, and long term. For example, a player could come in and play a certain role in his first year, and then in his second year that role could develop or be enhanced. After a number of years, that player might end up in a feature role, and then revert back to the role in which he started as the wear and tear of the game begins to take its toll.

You have said that one of the most important attributes of any organization is the way it treats its people. In pro football, with frequent trading and the yearly competition from rookies for veterans' jobs, cutting a veteran player or convincing him to retire is a big part of your job. How do you handle that part of the personnel issue?

Any good coach or manager has got to be responsible for phasing his people through the organization. It may be the most emotionally difficult part of the job. When you do it, you often end up as the most

unpopular person in the organization. Yet it is part of the role that the leader must play. It has to be done and done continually. You have to be prepared to use your own professional judgment as to when and why it is time for one of your players to call it quits.

As the head coach, I forced myself to deal with this process rather than turn my back on it or hand it off to the assistant coaches. In fact, in this area you can only listen to the assistant coaches so much because, typically, they would rather have veteran players on the team. It makes their coaching job easier. Subconsciously, I think assistant coaches feel much more comfortable with ten-year players than with the rookies. The coaches have become friends with the veterans, they have great faith in them, they understand each other. And the veterans already know what the coaches want done out on the field.

In sports, there is an arc of utilization that describes most athletes' careers. By that I mean a curve that a coach can use to project what a player can do now, next year, and ten years from now. A player may be a superstar this year, but with minor injuries nicking at him and starting to add up, he won't be a superstar three years from now. And then in the next phase you have to begin thinking about replacing him.

Most people don't realize it, but the players who get all the attention are usually the ones on the downside of their careers. Ironically, the organization is often paying the most money to the team members who are on the descending curve as players. When players are starting to wind down their careers but are still playing effectively, you have to remind yourself how to use them. You have to gauge how they practice, what you ask them to do on the field, what kinds of situations you use them in, how much playing time they get. These are all factors that ultimately lead to the point where you judge that a younger player could do the job as well. That younger player is on an ascending curve on the arc. That is when you have to make your

move.

How do you go about making that move without dealing the veteran player a crushing blow?

There will be some suffering, and there is no way to avoid it. It's simply part of the process. There will be agonizing, frustration, and anger. But the coach has to make the decision to improve the team. The real danger is if the decision aimed at improving the team leads to so much bitterness that the fallout causes other players to take sides. When the team becomes divided, the decision has done more harm than good.

That is why managing people's emotions is such an important part of the coach's job. You begin by acknowledging that your decision will cause some suffering. Then you do whatever you can to soften the edges, to reduce the anguish and frustration, to communicate your own sensitivity, and, in a sense, even to manipulate the player.

You recommend manipulating people rather than being honest?

The easiest thing is to be truly honest and direct. In fact, it sounds just great to say that you are going to be honest and direct. But insensitive, hammer-like shots that are delivered in the name of honesty and openness usually do the greatest damage to people. The damage ends up reverberating throughout the entire organization. Over time, people will lose the bonding factor they need for success. And over time, that directness will isolate you from the people with whom you work.

The real task is to lead people through the troubled times, when they are demoted or find themselves at the end of their playing days, and to help them maintain as much of their self-esteem as possible. These are the tasks that really define the job of the manager. A manager's job is not simply having a desk filled with family pictures and a wall covered by plaques for good behavior. It's developing the skills to

understand and deal with people.

You have described a variety of tasks that the coach has to be sensitive to, including the ability to make tough decisions and the need to soften the edges when it comes to dealing with people. What has made your system so successful?

The bottom line in professional sports is winning. Everything has to focus on that product: winning football games. Other offshoots—the public relations, the merchandising, the high-sounding philosophical approach—mean little compared with being successful on the playing field.

But winning does not necessarily mean being a victor in every game. It's not winning every game at any cost. We have to remind ourselves that it's not just a single game that we are trying to win. It is a season and a series of seasons in which the team wins more games than it loses and each team member plays up to his potential. If you are continually developing your skills and refining your approach, then winning will be the final result.

But I have seen coaches who are simply too sentimental, who allow themselves to be too maudlin about “breaking up the old family.” They are going to lose sight of the bottom line. And there is another kind who are severe, tough, and hard-hitting. But they sacrifice the loyalty of the people around them. In that situation, people are always afraid that they are going to be the next to go. These coaches rarely have sustained success.

Somewhere in the middle are the coaches who know that the job is to win, who know that they must be decisive, that they must phase people through their organizations, and at the same time they are sensitive to the feelings, loyalties, and emotions that people have toward one another. If you don't have these feelings, I do not know how you can lead anyone.

I have spent many sleepless nights trying to figure out how I was going to phase out certain players for whom I had a strong feelings, but that was my job. I wasn't hired to do anything but win.

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