

THE BRAVES, THE JETS, THE PACKERS - HOW THE BEST LEADERS IN SPORTS BECOME LEADERS IN THEIR CITIES

The minutes are counting down in the bottom of the third period in a heated game four of the Stanley Cup playoffs -the fans are preparing for a sweep as they all rise to their feet with 5 minutes left on the clock to cheer their team on with a resounding cry that carries through a commercial break and into the final seconds. “Go Jets Go” fills the stadium as the Winnipeg Jets falls to the Anaheim Ducks in the city’s first playoff since losing the original Jets 20 years beforehand - a cry so loud that fans of the Jets around the globe joined in and could feel it in their hearts as surely as they were in the stadium themselves. This display had people asking “Why the Jets?” The answer to this question is simple - all Major League sports teams are built by a front office staff usually hidden away from the limelight - but the best team leaders will also lead their cities alongside their teams.

The story of the Winnipeg Jets leadership starts in Atlanta, with a very different kind of leadership team - the Atlanta Spirit Group (ASG) and their ownership of the future Winnipeg Jets - the Atlanta Thrashers. Scott Burnside, longtime ESPN writer observed in 2011, “In Atlanta, for all its corporate might, the city never connected with the team. [...] They did not believe the Thrashers would be good enough to waste their precious money on.” (para. 12). He continues this thought with the stark observation, “the Atlanta Spirit Group and its bungling of the team represents a blueprint on how to ruin a franchise” (para. 17). He further discusses that the bungling of this team in Atlanta was due entirely to a leadership group that had no

interest in developing hockey as a viable form of entertainment in the city. Because of their failure to help the Thrashers thrive ASG was forced to sell to True North Entertainment in a move that would see their team relocated to Winnipeg after a decade of failure in Atlanta. Looking from the outside in, it becomes plain to see that what ASG was trying to accomplish was to use a Commanding style of leadership (Goleman 55). They wanted to command the city to want hockey, tell the city they needed to buy in, order the team to do well... and fail when it was too heavy handed and not able to really listen to the needs of the team and the city that was supposed to support them.

ASG's failures are particularly interesting from a leadership perspective as the newly appointed CEO of the highly successful Atlanta Braves, Derek Schiller, was formerly the Vice President of Sales and Marketing for the failed Thrashers Franchise (MLB). During his career with the Braves Schiller was a part of a large rebuild headed up by, "one of the game's greatest executives," John Schuerholz (Doolittle para. 21). This rebuild was designed to take the team back to the roots that made it great in the 1990's, or as Scherholtz put it, "You keep the pipeline filled because you know the kind of guys you want, and we got them. [...]To build our organization and sustain our organization using homegrown players. We got away from that during one of the regimes that was running the baseball operations department. Their eye was off the ball, no pun attended, but that's what happened." (qtd in Doolittle). This is a leader that clearly understands the real needs of an organization are to grow and coach from within.

Doolittle's article clearly shows that Scherholtz and the larger Braves leadership team are dedicated to a Coaching style of leadership (Goleman 59-63). There is a clear decision to

find young players and connect them to what the team most needs from them (both as a player and as a community leader), and to then connect them to their own roles so they can succeed as best as possible. They are adhering to Goleman's message of "I believe in you, I'm investing in you, and I expect your best efforts" (62). As the Braves have gotten their eye back on the ball their adamant approach to drafting and developing rather than temporarily trading for talent has been keeping players on the payroll longer and as such helping them create a connection to the city. This is causing the type of buy-in that the Thrashers owners neglected to create. As a result, the Braves are moving into a state-of-the-art facility (spearheaded by Derek Schiller) at the cost of \$400 million to the Atlanta Taxpayers (Lacques para. 4). Quite the contrast to the sale and relocation of the Thrashers to Winnipeg - all because the leaders of the Braves are highly invested in creating a team their city can relate to and are excited to support.

Connecting your team to the city is a practice that the leaders of another great sports team have perfected – the Green Bay Packers. This is a leadership-based organization for a team that is the only publicly owned franchise in the three leagues we are looking at today (NHL, NFL, MLB). The Packers are a team that has highly impactful leadership going back to the 1950's with Vince Lombardi – as Westerbeek points out, "one similarity between sport and business lies in the way in which leaders understand and deal with subordinates. A great example here can be seen from the story of Vince Lombardi, the legendary Green Bay Packers coach" (52). Lombardi started a long tradition of honoring the hundreds of thousands of owners of his team by ensuring they were successful, by stripping away underperforming players, and supporting those players who were genuinely contributing to the team. This

resulted in a team that “was more important than any individual” (Westerbeek 53). For the Packers, because the team ownership was also literally their fans, treating the team as a whole as more important than any individual also connects the fans in this way – making sure they are connected as a team rather than individual fans.

The Packers long standing tradition of strong leadership is apparent in their new CEO as well, Mark Murphy. As discussed by Richard Ryman in the Green Bay Press Gazette, Murphy is upending the traditional organizational structure of the packers by putting himself in a position to better oversee football operations, despite the unpopularity of changing the structure away from the winning format of previous Presidents and CEOs. This structure change puts Murphy as the direct “go-to” for a number of departments within the organization that were previously reporting to more “middle management” levels of the organization. By restructuring, Murphy is making sure all of his staff members can feel connected to the leaders at the top of the pack rather than being stuck trying to get middle management to pass along concerns. While many think this may distract Murphy from all the needed goings-on at the Packers, it is clear he is adept at following a Democratic leaderships style (Goleman 66-69). As noted in Ryman’s article, “Murphy prefers that the general manager and head coach collaborate, rather than one work for the other. They have clearly defined responsibilities, but there are areas where they need to work together. ‘It would be very different if Matt was reporting directly to Brian and he was a supervisor. Now there is a partnership that I think will really benefit the organization’ Murphy said” (Para 22-23). This democratic style of leadership is essential when dealing with the Executive Committee of the Green Bay Packers – because being able to hear and listen to

what works best for each member of the organization is essential for an organization owned by hundreds of thousands of fans. Despite, however, a long tradition of leading the Packers to victory their leadership team now faces challenges from outside with this new structure – so to remain great it is clear from reading the Ryman article that Murphy needs to get out and help establish his own “Solid Ground”. As Maxwell points out “Trust is the foundation of leadership” (66). Murphy, in making a grand sweeping change to how the Packers are organized, has spent quite a bit of his leadership “pocket change” – he needs to make sure he keeps making good decisions and keeps recording wins or very quickly with these changes the fans, his owners, will find a way to encourage him to move on to less cheese-headed pastures.

Trust in the ownership became the tipping point in Atlanta. What fans had gathered to the Thrashers banner were losing trust in ASG. The NHL was losing trust in ASG as a group capable of running an NHL Franchise. The players were losing trust (and games) because of the leadership woes filtering down from ASG. It was time for a change. When it was announced in 2011 that the Thrashers were moving north to Winnipeg it was time to start building trust in this new organization. With immediate buy-in from the fans, the Jets were able to create a bond with their city before their wheels ever touched ground. The feeling of instant connection is discussed by Jets captain Blake Wheeler, "It's kind of like the Green Bay Packers, you know? [...] It's a small community. The people are incredibly passionate about what we do. So we take a lot of pride in knowing that what we do means something to them. They really care, you know? And there's a responsibility to play a certain way, bring a certain amount of work to the

rink every night" (Qtd. In Wyshynski Para 6). Wheeler is clearly feeling the need to bring his best effort to the rink nightly under the new Winnipeg owners.

The Jets had immediate love from their city, but that doesn't always translate immediately into a playoff winning team. Wyshynski discussed in his ESPN article how the Jets headed down the road to becoming a team all NHL franchises should envy, "Chevel dayoff sat down with owner Mark Chipman and laid out what he felt needed to be done for the Jets to contend for the Cup. They needed to get younger, and allow those players to make a multitude of mistakes. The growing pains needed to be palpable, with the knowledge that the franchise would eventually be better for it" (Para 14). If this method sounds familiar, you're right – it is exactly what helped connect the Braves to Atlanta – a strong draft and develop approach that connects the fans to the members of the team, and conversely the team right back to their fans. Mark Chipman, in an interview given to his alma mater's newspaper discussed the code of conduct he established for the Jets, " [I]t is an assertion that 'you don't just represent yourself; you represent our organization; you represent our community and we take that very, very seriously'" (Qtd. In Williams Para 21).

Where the Braves have worked to Draft and Develop, Wyshynski notes that the Jets have also relied heavily on their veteran players, many of whom made the switch with the team from the Atlanta Thrashers. Blake Wheeler, for example, has grown from being a solid player for the team to being a captain that lead before he was even officially designated the leader. In a season where the Jets traded their captain to make room for younger talent, Wyshynski points out that they never officially gave Wheeler the "C", but he was clearly acting as the

Captain long before receiving it officially. This veteran leadership on top of the young talent that Chipman is focused on bringing into the fold has helped carry the remaining few Thrashers fans by allowing them to remain connected to the members of the team they knew and loved.

While all three teams are focused on connecting to their fans they all clearly do so in their own ways. The Packers lean on knowing that their fans are also their owners and ensuring they keep a high level of trust with those fan-owners. The Braves are reconnecting to a city that lost a little faith in them by building a team their fans recognize and grew into success alongside. The Jets are building a new team to rival the love of their old team and are capitalizing on a city's love of hockey. What all three teams have in common is the fact that their ownership and leadership teams clearly understand the need to keep their fans in the room as a relevant business partner – much as we in business must be careful to keep our fans (or consumers) in the room as a relevant business partner. A good team, a good leader, can keep their own employees and staff invested and involved in the company, but a great one can make their fans just as invested.

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