

OPINION

Stinging loss. Remarkable season. 5 leadership lessons from Green Bay Packers.

Lessons for other leaders: Packers created a culture of continuous improvement, personal responsibility and selflessness that led to rapid improvements in performance

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The defeat still stings for us Cheeseheads after the Packers' season-ending playoff loss to the San Francisco 49ers. What the Packers accomplished this season, however, was remarkable: The youngest team in the league made it to the playoffs, crushed the No. 2-seeded Cowboys and nearly beat the No. 1 49ers.

A key factor was the role of leadership by the Packers' management, coaches and player leaders. They created a culture of continuous improvement, personal responsibility and selflessness that led to rapid improvements in performance.

For those of us who don't work under the lights of Lambeau and instead lead, help lead or someday hope to lead businesses or other organizations, I'd like to suggest the following steps to build a successful team, drawing on how the Packers accomplished so much this season:

1. Hire employees who have a healthy sense of confidence, not big egos

The Packers this year were, by and large, a remarkably humble and selfless group — no small feat for highly paid professional athletes.

As head coach Matt LaFleur put it in his postseason press conference, "One of the things you love about this [team] is all these guys have their own hopes and aspirations and their own personal wants and desires, but can you still put the team first, and that's not easy to always do."

Having a locker room of high-character players is a credit to, well, their parents. But credit also goes to general manager Brian Gutekunst, who drafted and acquired talented players who were team-oriented, not me-oriented.

The result was a remarkably bonded team, with players sticking together through the rough patches of the season and celebrating each other's successes "like a family," to use running back Aaron Jones' phrase.

The leadership lesson for the rest of us: In the hiring process, value humility and character. That means selecting employees who, among other qualities, have the maturity to set aside their egos for the benefit of the team.

2: Model personal responsibility, especially when things go wrong

Two years ago, in sharing lessons for personal growth from the Packers, I noted that Coach LaFleur shares credit broadly while focusing accountability on himself first. As he said last week, "You're always going to look at yourself first and be critical on yourself."

This season, LaFleur's emphasis on personal responsibility for himself was evident in the players' culture. When quarterback Jordan Love was asked after the 49ers game about this ill-advised, intercepted throw into triple coverage, for example, he owned the mistake immediately: "[I] forced it across the middle, late, which is a mortal sin and it cost us."

The lesson for leaders: To create a culture of personal responsibility, model it. If someone in your chain of command is underperforming, for instance, look at yourself first. Did you provide them with enough training and clear direction? How can you do your job better in ways that will help them?

3. Invest in the development of young employees

The Packers had a great group of rookies this year, plus a first-year starter in Love, and it was up to LaFleur and his fellow coaches to develop them. Their work paid off.

For leaders outside of sports, how can you invest in employee development, including making sure your team has the "coaches" they need to succeed, whether that's actual employee coaches or other more informal forms of personal support?

4. Emphasize incremental, consistent progress to goals

How do you achieve big goals as an organization? LaFleur's mantra was consistent: You come to work every day with a great attitude, give your best effort and figure out how to get a little better each day.

Successful leaders set clear goals so everyone knows what success looks like while helping their employees take practical, incremental steps toward that success.

5. Celebrate resiliency. You will experience obstacles, disappointments.

LaFleur continually emphasized and celebrated the value of resiliency, both for the team and for the individuals in it. “Whether it’s football or in life,” he noted, “sometimes you go through some hardship and you're better for it.”

Leaders can help their employees to avoid getting hung up on failures or setbacks but to learn from them, bounce back and move on.

This Packers season was inspiring and entertaining, but it was also a gold mine — a green and gold mine — for insights about leadership. By learning from the Packers to improve your leadership skills, you’ll be adopting a core philosophy of the team: Every day and every situation is an opportunity to learn and grow.

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