

Transformation Practice

Worst to first: What it takes to build or remake a world-class team

The winningest coaches, athletic directors, and administrators follow a few core principles to set uncompromising standards and build elite organizations. Here's how C-suite leaders can do the same.

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Building a team is hard; building a winning team is even harder. For every organization that manages to achieve the right mix of talent, culture, and performance expectations, many more find themselves lacking in one area or another. Consider the following cautionary tales. One team of “superstars” in a large technology organization failed to gel simply because they could not agree on working norms. Another high-performing group underachieved because the executive team and line managers had very different views of their roles: Executives were frustrated by line managers’ hesitancy to make and own critical decisions, while the line managers were afraid to be labeled as failures by these same executives if their moves deviated too far from the status quo. Both sides pointed fingers at each other when outcomes failed to meet expectations.

What does it take to avoid these traps? What differentiates the teams that are operating at the pinnacle in their fields from those that are lagging behind? What skills, mindsets, and behaviors do high-performing teams have that others don’t? How do these high-performing teams stay in sync? And how do they sustain their collective focus over time, even when the work is hard?

We set out to answer these and other questions by turning to what some business leaders might consider an unconventional source: more than 25 of the most ambitious and successful administrators, coaches, and players at athletic programs across the United States, both at the professional and Division I college levels (see sidebar, “Conversations with coaches and others”).

Conversations with coaches and others

Between February and July 2025, we reached out to more than 25 athletes, coaches, general managers, trainers, and other critical contributors to successful professional and Division I sports programs. They shared perspectives on how to set and maintain the right standards for teams and organizations, engender diversity in both personnel and thought, create a clear and compelling operating playbook, and embed resilience in teams and organizations. We’d like to thank the following athletes and leaders in particular for their insights:

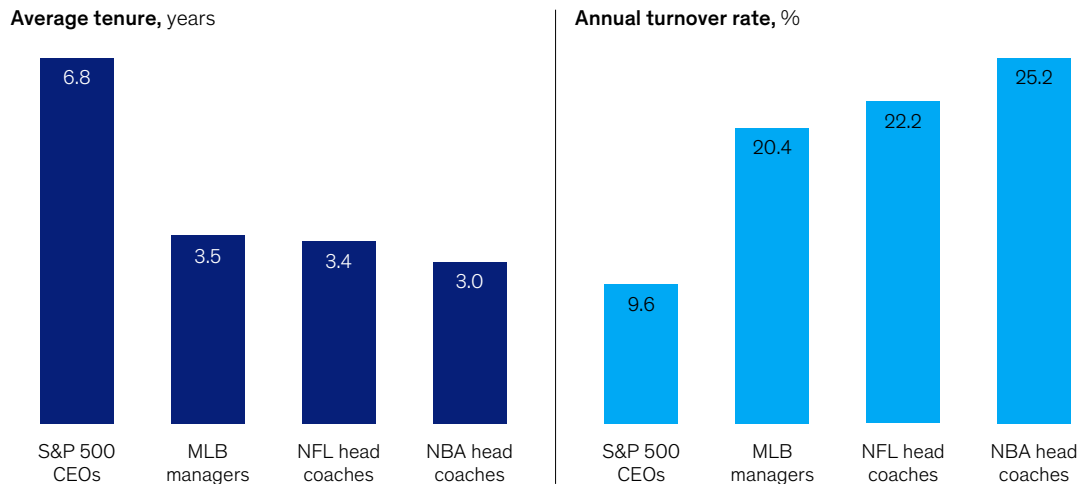
- Amir Carlisle, director of player development, University of Notre Dame (football)
- Amy Trask, former president and CEO, 1997–2013, Oakland Raiders
- Brian Wright, general manager, San Antonio Spurs
- Carlos Knox, director of player development, University of Notre Dame (women’s basketball); former interim head coach and assistant coach, Indiana Fever
- Dan Bartholomae, vice president and director of athletics, Western Michigan University
- Donaven Tennyson, wide receiver, 2016–18, Vanderbilt University (football)
- Dylan Devezin, running back, 2022–present, University of Notre Dame (football)
- Ella Sandt, setter, 2024, University of Notre Dame (women’s volleyball); 2020–23, Saint Mary’s College of California (women’s volleyball)
- James Rendell, punter, 2024–present, University of Notre Dame (football)
- Junior Tuihalamaka, defensive lineman, 2022–present, University of Notre Dame (football)
- Kevin Sullivan, director of track and field and cross country (men’s distance), University of Michigan
- Kobi Onyike, defensive lineman, 2023–24, University of Notre Dame (football)
- Pat Eilers, founder and Managing Partner, Transition Equity Partners; former safety in the National Football League (NFL) and at the University of Notre Dame (football)
- Tom Carter, cornerback, University of Notre Dame, 1990–95, and in the NFL, 1993–2002; former director of player affairs for the NFL Players’ Association, 2006–21
- Tom Sandt, 1989–93, Northwestern University (baseball)
- Tosh Baker, offensive lineman, 2020–24, University of Notre Dame (football)
- Zach Novoselsky, offensive lineman, 2014–18, Western Michigan University (football)

These leaders operate in an environment in which the margins for error are razor thin and “success” often lasts less than a year. Indeed, a look at the three major professional sports leagues in the United States—Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the National Football League (NFL)—shows that, over the past 15 years, about 330 new head coaches or managers walked into locker rooms aiming to make their franchises champions. Thirty-eight percent of these leaders experienced relatively high success early in their tenures. But the increased expectations that come with that success, and the challenge of sustaining performance in the wake of salary caps, sponsorships, and other factors, mean only about 23 percent of head coaches in these leagues make it beyond their fourth season—well below the average tenure for S&P 500 CEOs of just under seven years (exhibit).

Exhibit 1

The three major North American sports leagues retain leaders for less time and experience more turnover than corporations.

Average leadership tenure and turnover rate, 2009–24¹



¹CEOs, n = 815; Major League Baseball (MLB) managers, n = 98; National Football League (NFL) head coaches, n = 114; National Basketball Association (NBA) head coaches, n = 121.

Source: “2024 CEO transitions: The measure of the market,” Spencer Stuart, February 2025; McKinsey analysis

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Despite those challenges, however, many of the sports leaders we spoke with seem to have found a winning formula for building and, when needed, reinventing their teams. Four themes emerge from our interviews that underscore how these leaders significantly changed the trajectory of their programs:

- *Set a standard for the program that clearly establishes the team's objectives.* These leaders strongly emphasize creating a culture that everyone buys into, where each teammate “walks the talk” each day, even when no one is watching.
- *Build a team with a diverse set of leadership skills and functional capabilities.* These sports leaders are not simply looking for the *best* players, but the *right* players who will help them win.
- *Create a playbook for optimizing team performance.* These leaders clearly and purposefully codify how the work gets done and emphasize consistency in operations—from day-to-day routines (in the weight room and on the playing field) all the way to annual planning cycles.
- *Establish an edge and the confidence that sets the team apart.* These leaders explore every possible angle to elevate the confidence and skills of everyone in the program—from the athletes and the coaching staff to the strength and conditioning team to the nutritionists to the groundskeepers. As Brian Wright, the general manager (GM) of the San Antonio Spurs, tells us, “Everyone on the team has a critical role to play in ensuring the success of the group. We win by engaging everyone, not just our star players.”

In this article, we explore these four themes and suggest ways that corporate leaders can incorporate [best practices in team building from the world of sports](#) into their own organizations. The comparisons across domains aren't perfect, and [context certainly matters](#): Some of these themes may end up being more or less resonant for a football team, a rowing team, a golf team, or a financial-planning or software development team.¹ But there are enough strong similarities to suggest that these four principles can help leaders in Fortune 500 organizations build successful teams, turn around low performers, and ultimately create more value for their companies over the long term.

Set a new standard for the program

A big challenge for businesses seeking to build new teams or reinvent existing ones is getting everyone moving in the same direction and pursuing the same overarching objectives. Organizations often fall short in this area because the shared mission isn't well developed, consistently communicated, or effectively incorporated into daily routines. As a result, teams don't know what they don't know, and they remain unclear about how their respective contributions further the team's goals.

In the world of sports, the outcomes are more finite than they are in business—either you win or you lose. Yet for most of the sports leaders we spoke with, clarifying their teams' objectives and setting a new standard and culture for their programs—whether that meant reiterating existing mindsets or behaviors or replacing them with entirely new ones—was the very first step toward realizing success. “Each day here looks and feels the same in terms of expectations,

¹ [“Go, teams: When teams get healthier, the whole organization benefits,” McKinsey Quarterly](#), October 31, 2024.

communication, and resources,” explains the Spurs’ Wright. “Outcomes take care of themselves when the standard is in place.”

Upon taking the job, the sports leaders we spoke with engaged in deep-listening exercises as they examined recent performance, quantified their organizations’ full potential, and assessed the overall health of the programs they were taking over. They scheduled focus groups and office tours and used the data collected from these events to chart a path forward for their programs.

This was the approach taken by Dan Bartholomae, vice president and athletic director at Western Michigan University, a Division I program: “I set out to create a plan for athletics, and I engaged a lot of external stakeholders to get it right. We redefined what ‘The Western Way’ would be moving forward.”

At the time he was hired, in 2022, the performance of the university’s sports teams was trending downward, falling from an average fifth-place finish in the Mid-American Conference (MAC) between 2014 and 2017 to an average ninth-place finish when he arrived on campus. There were some successes—an occasional bowl game or appearance in end-of-season tournaments—but there was no overarching “theory of winning” across Western Michigan’s sports teams.

Bartholomae wanted to establish a new standard for the athletic program, where it was no longer simply a collection of independent sports teams but a fully integrated program that could energize student athletes, the campus, and the broader Kalamazoo community. At first, there was some skepticism. “I had people leave the program within my first six months, because they didn’t believe,” says Bartholomae. “I also had people I didn’t think would make it who are now some of our highest performers.”

Among his initial actions, Bartholomae sought out existing leadership and attended operating meetings on campus to gather input from a range of important internal and external stakeholders and to educate them about what it would take to run a distinctive and fully integrated Division I athletic program. Through this outreach, Bartholomae was able to change the tone of conversations, break down barriers across teams, and foster more collaboration within the program.

He prioritized creating more access across teams, within levels of the organization, and even to himself. Bartholomae’s office door was always open. He and several of the other leaders we spoke with emphasize the importance of humility in team building—“solving for we, rather than me”—as well as the willingness to challenge everything.

The efforts to create a new standard have paid off: Western Michigan’s athletic program has risen from an average ranking of ninth in MAC conference play to fourth over the past three years. The university’s hockey team reached the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA’s) Frozen Four for the first time in the program’s history and won the national championship in the spring of 2025. In fact, all five fall sports teams at Western Michigan reached the NCAA postseason, an unprecedented accomplishment in the conference.

Build a distinctive team—not just the best players, but the right players

Once a standard has been set, leaders must build a world-class team with complementary attributes to deliver on it—a task that is easier said than done for a lot of businesses.

Talent management is a perennial challenge for leaders in most Fortune 500 organizations for a variety of reasons, including hierarchical thinking—“Only certain [top team] roles matter!”—the complexities of attracting, hiring, and retaining employees across increasingly distributed workforces; the vagaries of performance management systems; and the inevitable shortages in the most in-demand talent areas.

To build an elite team, business leaders must take [a disciplined look](#) at where the organization creates value and how top talent contributes to that process, an approach taken by almost all the sports leaders we interviewed. They stress the importance of not managing this process by gut instinct or emotion (although [some successful sport leaders](#) have relied on their intuition to win championships), but rather by using a systematic approach to determine which types of players would be required to achieve greatness.

Indeed, [analytics has become a central element](#) in many athletic organizations' talent attraction and development practices. The sports leaders we spoke with routinely conduct comprehensive reviews of a team's or program's strengths and weaknesses—using, for instance, wins and losses, advanced analytics, and salary cap data—and pair them with ongoing research on emerging talent classes as well as league or industry trends.

These leaders also recognize that high performers can come from anywhere, at any time. Pat Eilers, a member of the 1988 national championship team at the University of Notre Dame, recalled how Coach Lou Holtz led the university's football program. “Everybody was important to him regardless of position,” says Eilers. “Walk-ons earning scholarships, student managers—they were respected and appreciated by everyone as much as the star players, including our Heisman Trophy winner.”

The most successful sports leaders also recognize that, as in the business world, potential team members typically come to the table with different needs and motivations. Former championship-winning NBA player and current Golden State Warriors Coach Steve Kerr, in a 2020 Harvard Business School case study, pointed to the importance of carefully managing team composition: “You want to have the right mix of veterans and players still trying to establish themselves. Younger guys are often fighting—to prove themselves, to climb the ladder, to get bigger contracts, to put up impressive personal statistics. Older guys tend to be calmer, more secure, more complacent, even. But they know what it takes to make it, so they can be the glue, so to speak. Having too many of either can lead to trouble.”² Another former NBA player and Hall of Famer agrees: “Being on a high-performing team required us to learn how to win together but also how to lose together.”

² Francesca Gino and Jeff Huizinga, “Steve Kerr: Coaching the Golden State Warriors to joy, compassion, competition, and mindfulness,” Harvard Business School Case 921-001, July 2020.

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Our research shows that MLB, NBA, and NFL teams will, on average, turn over between 20 and 40 percent of their rosters each year, and roughly half of that activity is due to trades, injury, and free agency. Therefore, it becomes imperative for sports leaders to build superior scouting, training, and communication capabilities to remain competitive.

What’s notable, however, is that despite ever present pressures to “win now,” none of the sports leaders we spoke with started with the premise that building a great team involves immediately firing people. “Talent selection is not about chopping heads; it’s about making people successful,” Western Michigan’s Bartholomae notes.

These sports leaders emphasize the importance of holding plenty of one-on-one discussions with team members to ensure that individuals understand not just their discrete roles but how those roles fit into the overarching team structure. Such dialogues are critical for establishing accountability. Kevin Sullivan, director of track and field and cross country at the University of Michigan, and a three-time Olympian for Canada, notes that a lot of his time is spent “talking with the athletes and reassuring them of the plan that we had in place to make them successful.” Young athletes especially need a lot of communication; you must reinforce messages repeatedly, he says.

Many of the sports leaders also mention the importance of giving team members real-time feedback—and having tough but constructive conversations when necessary. Former Notre Dame volleyball player Ella Sandt reiterates this point: “One-on-one meetings are super helpful, but they need to be genuinely open, unfiltered conversations, where both sides are willing to challenge one another.”

Tom Carter, former NFL cornerback and former director of player affairs for the NFL Players Association, underscores the importance of mentorship, affirmations, and supportive words when attracting, developing, and retaining top talent in teams: “[Leaders need to] take care of their people and treat them well. Ninety percent of people leave their jobs not because they don’t like their jobs but because they don’t like their managers.” People want to feel like leadership has their backs. “If you feel like you have cover, you will run through a brick wall for your leaders,” Carter adds.

Write and share the operating playbook for how work gets done

Even when companies establish a compelling standard for teams and draw a collection of high performers into their midst, they can *still* fall short on performance. As we've observed from thousands of company turnarounds over the past decade, real change demands [a clear set of rules, expectations, and behaviors](#) associated with execution. Without it, teams can be left confused, stalled, and uninspired.

Sports leaders are no strangers to playbooks that outline schemes and strategies for beating an opponent. In our conversations, they similarly put a strong emphasis on *operating playbooks* for the organization that outline behaviors, skills, and performance expectations at all levels and for all roles. In the case of one NFL football team, for instance, the playbook contained detailed descriptions of the required practice regimen, strength routine, meal plans and nutrition, media training sessions, and rest cycles for players, as well as equivalent routines for colleagues in marketing, ticketing, security, and other functional areas.

Having such an operating playbook, at both the program and individual levels, is critical, according to Amy Trask, former president and CEO of the Oakland Raiders. When she was appointed chief executive in 1997, she introduced a four-part operating model centered on communication, cooperation, collaboration, and coordination. “These tenets applied on and off the field in various ways,” she says, and they informed the behaviors that Trask exhibited and instilled within her teams.

Trask tells us she viewed the Raiders organization as more of a circle than a pyramid: Everyone played a role, “whether that’s taking the call that could make a difference to the marketing organization, or a groundskeeper’s ability to spot a divot that could hurt a player’s performance.”

That’s where having the operating playbook mattered most, Trask says, because “the business is football, and football is the business. There are not multiple sides.” The business side of the organization effectively funded football activities. If tickets, advertising, and merchandise were not sold, the team could not pursue free agent signings and facility improvements. And, of course, when the team performed well on the field, the business side flourished.

“We needed a central perspective on what we were doing, why it mattered, and how everyone needed to engage,” Trask notes. Trask herself served as a role model for these performance expectations, making it easier for employees to understand, adapt, and engage in their work and in the team’s overarching objectives in ways they may not have before.

In her earliest days, Trask was very hands-on. “My job wasn’t done if everyone’s job wasn’t done,” she recalls. If ticket envelopes needed to be stuffed or a charity event was going on, she didn’t go home. “Getting involved and being willing to get your hands dirty [is important]. Why would you demand something different from the athletes [or team] that you wouldn’t demand from yourself?” It took some time, but eventually walls between functions came down, and communication and collaboration within and across the team improved dramatically.

Establish an edge and level of confidence that sets the team apart

To work together effectively, teams need [a strong leader \(or set of leaders\)](#) to engender trust and belief among team members and ensure their sustained performance. In the corporate context, the CEO is the obvious go-to influencer and decision-maker, but this strong leadership can also extend to others in the C-suite, to middle and frontline managers, or to anyone else who has a direct influence on outcomes. In fact, McKinsey's [organizational health data](#) shows companies that actively [listen and act on recommendations from frontline employees](#) are 80 percent more likely than their peers to implement new and better ways of doing things.³

In the sports context, leadership is perhaps even more distributed than in the corporate world. In our conversations, more than one sports leader referred to themselves as “a leader of leaders,” given the degree to which they rely on assistant coaches, trainers, scouts, groundskeepers, and other core professionals in the athletics ecosystem. In this environment, they say, titles are less important for success than competence, consistency, and creativity. In one situation, for instance, a walk-on athlete helped set the standard for a Division I program, outworking his teammates in the weight room, film room, and on the scout team that helped elevate the program to the next level.

“At the end of the day, it is about me creating an environment where coaches and athletes feel confident and can perform at their best,” says University of Michigan’s Sullivan. He and other sports leaders say they consider it critical to spend time identifying and then leveraging the strengths of their assistant coaches—for instance, instituting regular check-ins and problem-solving sessions with junior team members; delegating certain responsibilities such as film study and scouting research to help team members develop their own coaching capabilities; and, ultimately, leaning on them for game-time decisions.

Transforming a team to achieve a high level of performance cannot begin and end with a bold statement from the head coach, GM, or CEO. Leaders at all levels, in coordination with the CEO, need to help define the organization’s North Star—that is, an unambiguous team goal such as aiming for a national championship or making the playoffs for the first time in 15 years.

Leaders must also establish and enforce a shared language and belief system when it comes to performance so that everyone can be held accountable. One athlete notes that, from day one, “our coach has framed each task as beneficial and necessary to the overall mission. He emphasizes the phrase ‘team glory’—that the achievements of one are the achievements of all. There is no hierarchy within the program, but rather we are a trained and coordinated unit who all believe in something greater than ourselves.”

Leaders at all levels can help [foster resilience](#) by jointly and publicly celebrating the achievements of stars and role players alike and by acknowledging failures and quickly learning from them—for instance, through reviewing game film, making in-game adjustments, or running teams through basic tackling drills or footwork exercises. In this way, leaders can empower team members to, in some respects, manage themselves, defining and redefining their roles (if the context requires) to personally influence the direction of the organization.

As Ella Sandt notes, everyone on the team should be able to draw a straight line between the new program standard and the sense of trust they experience: “The great teams that I have been on, it’s all about trust and accountability, with everyone working toward a common goal.”

³ [“Going all in: Why employee ‘will’ can make or break transformations,”](#) McKinsey, September 6, 2024.

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Any athlete or executive on a well-functioning team will agree on one thing: Winning is hard. Injuries, economics, competitors' strengths or weaknesses, and a range of other predictable and unpredictable factors can all prevent championship-level performance.

Our interviews reveal, however, that a winning team—in both sports and business—requires a strong leader who can establish a clear standard for what good looks like, a collection of complementary talent that can subsume egos and individual motivations for the sake of the whole, and a clear and comprehensive operating playbook that helps instill consistency, routine, and muscle memory among team members.

With these elements in place, teams can not only deliver on their day-to-day tasks but also raise their game when uncertainty strikes, as it inevitably will. They will be better able to channel the mantra of Marcus Freeman, current head football coach at the venerable University of Notre Dame: "Choose 'hard' . . . and know that the rewards from choosing hard every single day can't be found anywhere else."⁴

⁴ William Salvi, "Why Notre Dame's football coach tells his team to 'choose hard,'" *Entrepreneur*, March 18, 2024.

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