

The Redskins Could Learn From Business

Sudden Strategic Change Can Be Tricky

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It was a move with a ton of promise: The Redskins hired Al Saunders away from the Kansas City Chiefs to be the associate head coach.

He was going to dazzle the world. There was talk of the Super Bowl and awe of his 700-page playbook. But now, despite a grand salary and lots of hype, Saunders is seen as contributing to a lack of postgame celebrations.

The team went 10-6 last year in the regular season; this season, Washington is 2-4.

The same scenario plays out in the workplace: The big bosses bring in a leader whose history at the helm and enthusiasm make him seem like the Second Coming.

Then in the anointed comes with new ideas, energy and determination to change things.

But if the new superstar does not take the company's history or culture into account before he turns the organization's identity upside-down, it could be disastrous: low morale, shattered expectations, and grumblings that this new guy's grand ideas are a bunch of overblown hype.

The Redskins players seemed to believe in Saunders at first. He told them to pretend they were remodeling a house. They would smash up the old abode and come back with something completely new.

But now those same players are heard saying he hasn't let them hang on to the good they established last year. (How about Clinton Portis running the ball?)

The team wasn't entirely broken. And though change can be good, maybe the coach needs to keep some of the culture that worked.

The Redskins' press office said Saunders was too busy to be interviewed for this column, but the city is filled with armchair consultants. They are ready to tell Joe Gibbs what to do with this new Saunders hotshot, the supposed offensive wizard whose fancy playbook left fans holding their breath -- and now has them exhaling in disgust as the team marches to a potentially disastrous season.

Sure, Saunders created a buzz when it was announced he would be coaching the offense. And that's normal when a high-profile person comes in, said Mary Jane Reed, regional vice president of the Leader's Edge, a leadership development and consulting company in McLean. "There's a normal honeymoon period," she said. "They are excited because of the person's credentials and think this person's going to be the savior."

If there is a sense that the new person has the vision the organization wanted, the honeymoon lasts longer. But if this person treats other team members with disdain or doesn't let some of the stars do what they are used to doing, Reed said, "I've seen honeymoons end very quickly." (Enter: Portis and Saunders, who have been having low-level arguments in the news about what Portis should be doing.)

What Saunders wants really might be the right decision. But if a corporate leader doesn't get the team on board, the right decision can fail.

Clay Parcells experienced that firsthand when he hired someone to turn around a division in an insurance company in Texas years ago.

Parcells could tell something wasn't going well after the man started. After listening to some of the employees, Parcells realized his new manager didn't sit down with the team "and talk about what was going well -- he just said, 'This is my show now,' " Parcells said. "That's what superstars tend to do: 'I've been successful my way and this is the way it's going to be.' "

The new division head listened to Parcells and started over with the employees. He turned the division around, said Parcells, now a vice president with Right Management Consultants.

So is there anything going *right* for the Redskins now? Parcells thinks Gibbs is doing what every chief executive should.

"The great thing about Gibbs is that he lets his coaches coach," Parcells said. The thing to watch is if and when he pulls Saunders back at all. "Maybe he needs to have a tighter rein."

Perhaps people just need to give Saunders a little more time, said hopeful Redskins fan Reed.

"When you're in the middle of change, it always looks like failure," she said. "It takes a lot of willpower from upper management to stick with someone."

This happens particularly when the new leader walks into an organization in desperate need of change and filled with disgruntled employees. They aren't sure change will work, and if things don't turn around immediately, people assume they never will. "If they really are trying to make a significant change, you just have to wait it out a wee bit

longer," Reed said. She added of the Redskins: "Of course, you couldn't really say they were a broken team last year."

Nancy McCarthy, a Business and Sales Coach with DC Rainmakers LLC, said some of the advice she gives bosses would work with the Redskins:

- First, something every football coach loves: Brainstorm on the whiteboard. (No X's and O's necessary.) List specific goals and the steps it will take to achieve them. (Goal No. 1: Super Bowl. How? Run the ball.) Then list the skills and abilities needed in each position to reach those goals. (See Portis run. Run, Portis, run!)

Figure out what is missing in each position and make sure not too many people on a team have the same skills. "Like the business saying, 'If two people on a team are always agreeing, you have one person on the team too many,' " she said.

- Look for skills and abilities not used in someone's current position and consider moving that person. Sure, it may throw off some fans at first, but if we're taking lessons from the business world, do as successful managers do.

- If everyone on the team has the skills and abilities needed, look at the attitude, emotions and the game inside their heads. Is everyone's mind in a winning place? (I think anyone who has read or watched any Redskins coverage lately is pretty sure that's not the case.) We all know we can make mistakes because of our mental outlook.

- Evaluate if everyone is pulling together as part of the team or if some team members are more focused on being individual superstars. (Ahem. Fill in the blank on this one, sports fans.)

Finally, McCarthy said, the most important thing is to coach, motivate and encourage the positive, not the negative. This is often hard for managers and the big bosses, but a little positive reinforcement goes a long way. How can a company or team expect an employee or player to keep doing what he's doing well if he isn't praised for it?

It's important to emphasize what the team has done well in the past so it can emulate that to lead to one more great outcome, McCarthy said.

So what else can help the Redskins as they walk into a game against the Colts this afternoon?

Perhaps a little cheering from outside consultants, or, um, fans. As McCarthy said: "Go 'Skins!"