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Building A Winning NFL Roster: Best Practices For Sustained Success

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: John Eldred

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Abstract

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Keywords

National Football League, NFL, NFL Draft, NFL Roster, Leadership, Organizational Culture

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Comments

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BEST PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINED SUCCESS

by

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BUILDING A WINNING NFL ROSTER
BEST PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINED SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this capstone is to identify and analyze the factors that contribute to team success in the National Football League through a review of relevant literature, a survey of league personnel, and firsthand experience as a football administrator. This project first studies quantitative data regarding player acquisition, specifically the data behind the NFL entry draft. Next, the current literature regarding off the field processes such as leadership, organizational culture and engagement were reviewed and finally, a two-step Delphi method survey was distributed to a panel of current league professionals. This paper aims to find the most efficient and effective way for teams to acquire players and several ways to optimize that talent based on the best practices researched in organizational culture and leadership.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since a very young age, my long-term career goal has been to work for a team in the National Football League. As I grew up and became fascinated with the game of football, I continuously consumed all sorts of football books, magazines, TV shows and movies. The more that I read, the more I became interested in the ideas behind building and leading a successful team. Since those childhood aspirations, I've worked to make that career a reality. I spent four years as a student assistant with the University of Michigan Wolverines football team during my undergraduate years, one year with the Fordham University Rams football team as a coaching assistant, three years with the University of Pennsylvania Quakers football team as assistant director of football operations and three more years since being promoted to director of football operations at the University of Pennsylvania. I will use this capstone project to inform my beliefs as I develop my young career. This paper will analyze the different ways that NFL teams acquire players and develop that talent. By looking at past trends with the subsequent results, the hopeful end goal of this project is to advise myself on a philosophy and preferred general strategy for acquiring players through the collegiate draft and the professional free agent market.

In this chapter, I will present the topic by first reviewing the history of the NFL and will aim to put the enormous magnitude of the current state of the league into perspective. I will then discuss various features of the National Football League which are relevant to the teambuilding process such as the current roster structure, the league-wide salary cap and the various methods of player acquisition. At the conclusion of the

first chapter, I will introduce the term equifinality – the idea that success can be achieved through many different methods. In the next section, the paper will review the traditional literature related to team building theory, organizational culture and leadership.

History and Magnitude of the National Football League

On September 17, 1920, a group of men assembled in Canton, Ohio to add rules, regulations and structure to their football games. The result of this meeting was the formation of the American Professional Football Association and in 1922 this league was renamed the National Football League (NFL), ("Pro Football Hall of Fame", 2020). Approximately 100 years later, a 2017 Brookings Institution survey reported that 52% of American citizens aged 18-69 regularly follow the NFL and 74% of the same responding group reported regularly following the Super Bowl each year. With one out of every two Americans following the league, the NFL has been able to cash in on television broadcast rights, merchandise sales and gate revenue to bring in immense amounts of money. On the same Spring 2017 survey by the Brookings Institution, 135.4 million people reported watching an NFL event on television within the year and 23.12 million people reported listening to an NFL event on the radio within the same time.   Most notably, a Forbes 2017 release provided enterprise valuations for all thirty-two NFL organizations. The Buffalo Bills organization, the league's least valuable franchise, was valued at $1.6 billion. Six organizations (Dallas Cowboys, New England Patriots, New York Giants, Washington Redskins, San Francisco 49ers, and the Los Angeles Rams) were valued at over $3 billion each and the most valuable, the Dallas Cowboys, were valued at an enormous 4.8 billion dollars (Ozanian, 2015). Although Real Madrid Football Club ($3.26 billion), the New York Yankees ($3.2 billion) and FC Barcelona ($3.16 billion)

made the top-five of all sport franchises in the world, the NFL is unique because every organization in their league is highly lucrative. One explanation for this profitability is the television broadcast dominance (Payne, 2015). In 2017, Major League Baseball brought in $1.1 billion of broadcast revenue and the National Basketball Association brought in $974 million of the same; the NFL's media broadcast revenue dwarfed them all at $4.4 billion (Ozanian, 2015). While it is easy to show the financial strength of the league from the top-earning and highest-performing teams, a better judge of league strength is looking at the less successful teams and those located in small-market cities. The Buffalo Bills, a team lacking on-field success since the early 1990s, recently sold for over $1 billion. Furthermore, the Cleveland Browns who have decades of winless streaks, grew in valuation by nearly 86% over the last 20 years (Ozanian, 2015). Even the weakest of NFL teams have a region of the United States filled with citizens fanatically following their breaking news and constantly buying and re-buying their merchandise.

Currently in Southern California, the Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers are working together to build and share a new stadium as the main attraction in an entirely new entertainment district in Hollywood Park. Expected to cost over $2.5 billion and cover 300 acres, the monumental complex will include the 70,000-seat stadium in addition to office space, retail space, full-time residences, hotel rooms, public parks, and a 6,000 square-foot concert-venue ("SoFi Stadium", 2020). While this complex will be in the center of the entertainment capital of the world, the magnitude of NFL thirst is what is pushing this project forward, in addition to footing the bill. To prove this phenomenon further, the Green Bay Packers recently created their Titletown

District. Green Bay, Wisconsin, socially speaking, is about as far away from Hollywood,
California as you can get. However, the Titletown District, a new Packers-centric
complex with restaurants, stores and other attractions was constructed to capitalize on the
historic franchise's fanatic supporters. While Green Bay, Wisconsin was historically an
autumn-only destination for football fans, the creation of Titletown has brought a year-
round dose of visitors and tourism dollars to both the franchise and the city. ("Green Bay
Packers", 2017). The immensity of these numbers, both financial and social, show the
true magnitude of the NFL and how much earning potential that all teams have.

Project Scope

Through my experience in the Organizational Dynamics program at the
University of Pennsylvania, I have worked to use the relevant material from each course
in my professional life as a football administrator. With this project, my goal is to
combine those lessons with empirical research to create a guide for acquiring and
developing players in the National Football League. This capstone will first outline the
current NFL organizations' systems while reviewing the different ways that the teams can
acquire new players. The second chapter will be a literature review, exploring what's
currently accepted in the field and identifying gaps in the current research.   In the third
section, I will discuss my survey methodology and in the fourth chapter, I will compile
and organize my relevant first-hand experience as a football administrator with common
themes found in a two-part survey. The fifth and final chapter will be a summary of the
project and conclusions found. The goal of this chapter is to come away with an
informed general guide of efficient ways to build and optimize a roster of players in the
NFL.

<u>Intended Audience</u>

The intended audience for this project is first, and foremost, myself. I intend to take this project with me, and I plan to update and add to it over time to use as a guide throughout my career. Becoming a teambuilding executive in the National Football League has been a long-term career goal of mine for many years. This project will be a compilation of my first-hand experiential learnings and the subject literature combined with analyzed data and findings from surveying league personnel. I am hopeful that I will be able to reference this guide for years to come.

In addition to the practical use that I will get from this thesis, I plan to publish and distribute the paper to teambuilders and sport executives who will be able to take the lessons learned and apply them to their own sport organizations. As originally offered, I will send the final copy to all who participated in my study. Due to the randomness of sport outcomes at all levels of play and the fact that the NFL is very specifically designed to create leaguewide parity, understanding how to maximize efficiency and set their team on the right course will have great benefits for professional team administrators but also for novices and lower-level employees who may be forming their own philosophies as I am. I am happy to make this project public for all who choose to broaden their perspective.

<u>Current NFL Roster Structure</u>

According to the official National Football League website, each team in the league is allowed a roster of 53 active players with 46 of those able to dress and participate on game day. In addition to the active 53-man-roster, a team can sign ten more

players to their "practice squad" – a group of players who practice alongside the active roster during the week but are ineligible to play in games. To be signed to a team's practice squad, a player must fit certain criteria. First, they must be a free agent without a contract and second, they must have accrued less than two years of NFL service time. Furthermore, player can only be on a practice squad for three total seasons in their career. ("NFL Rulebook", 2018) The addition of the practice squad gave teams an opportunity to develop young players in a low-stress environment. It has proven valuable for teams and players alike. As an interesting wrinkle to the practice squads roster status, any team in the league can claim another team's practice-squad player at any time if the player is being added to their new team's 53-man active roster. ("NFL Rulebook", 2018)

Salary Cap

A key component in building and managing a team's roster is the NFL's leaguewide salary cap. Calculated based on a percentage of total league revenue, each team has a simple cap on the total amount of money they can spend on player salaries. In the 2018 season, the NFL salary cap was $177.2 million per team. As opposed to soft salary caps in other sports in which teams can exceed the cap with only minor financial penalties, the NFL has a "hard cap" which means teams cannot spend more than that number without facing harsh monetary and structural penalties.

Player Acquisition

In the NFL, a team can acquire new players in several different ways. The first way to add players is to sign a "free agent", of which there are multiple types. The first designation is called an "unrestricted free agent" (UFA). An UFA is "a player with an

expired contract who has completed four or more accrued seasons of league service."

("NFL Rulebook", 2018) When a player who meets these criteria has an expired contract, they are free to sign with any team they can agree to a contract with. The second type of free agent is called a "restricted free agent" (RFA). According to the 2019 NFL rulebook, a RFA is

> "a player who has accrued three seasons of service and whose contract
> is expired. RFAs have received qualifying offers from their old clubs
> but are free to negotiate with any club until a deadline at which time
> their rights revert to their original club. If a player accepts an offer
> from a new club, the old club will have the right to match the offer and
> retain the player."

In this situation, younger players can negotiate with other teams to test their true market value, but the original club has the option to match the terms of any new deal and retain the player. The restricted free agent designation was added to allow players to receive their true market value but also to aid smaller market teams in keeping their star players who hit free agency. When free agency was first imposed, there was fear of smaller market teams losing their top players to the big cities where they would have a greater opportunity to maximize their potential earnings through marketing and endorsements.

Another, and perhaps the most widely known way that teams acquire new players is through the NFL Draft in which all players who are three years removed from high school graduation are eligible to enter for consideration. The teams' selection order is based simply on each team's win-loss record in the previous season. Teams that did not reach the playoffs are placed in order with the worst performing teams picking first. After the twenty non-playoff teams select, the final twelve are ordered by their success in the playoffs. The Super Bowl champion picks 32nd out of the thirty-two teams, the Super

Bowl runner-up selects 31st and so on. This order then holds true for the full seven rounds of the draft. For example, when the team with the worst record is awarded the first overall pick of the draft, that team would also have the first pick in the second round, the third round, the fourth round, the fifth round, the sixth round and the seventh round. Additionally, teams can trade any combination of their draft slots and active players for any combination of another team's draft slots and/or active players. Trading "picks" is a great way for teams to rebuild their rosters to better position themselves for the future. For example, if a weak team has a star player who is on the final year of their contract, then the team faces the risk of that player choosing not to re-sign with that team when the contact expires in which case the player would become a free agent. In that situation, the team would lose the player and receive no compensation. To receive any level of compensation, that team may choose to trade the player to a strong championship contending team for one or multiple of their draft picks. This trade would be worth it for both teams as the contender would strengthen their chances for a championship that year by adding a top player to their team and the weaker team could receive several younger developmental players and/or draft picks to select one or multiple top players entering the league. Another common strategy with trading draft picks is for a team to trade a top draft slot for a bundle of middle to lower round picks. Some teams value picking at the top of the draft to get the most talented players with the highest ceiling while others like to draft a higher number of players to increase the likelihood that one or more are successful. In this case, a team may be willing to trade their first-round slot for three third-round slots. Another benefit that comes as a result of the NFL draft is the enthusiasm and anticipation from each teams' fan base. The draft is an event that all fans

look forward to and even losing teams get a jolt of excitement and momentum from the thought of their team getting a top available player. After the draft, prospects who were not selected in any of the seven rounds become "undrafted free agents" and are free to sign with any team who offers them a contract.

Finally, and as alluded to above, teams can acquire players via player trades. According to the NFL rulebook,

> "any NFL player, regardless of experience, may have his contract assigned to another club via a trade at any point, unless he or his agent has negotiated a no-trade clause into the special provision portion of a standard player contract. A club wishing to exercise a trade involving a player with no trade provision must get the player's permission to waive his provision in order to execute the trade. These provisions may cover any type of trade or trades only made to certain clubs."

In this case, a team may have a surplus of talent at a specific position with a decided lack of talent at another position. It would be wise here for the team to trade a capable backup for a player who would start at a position of need.

NFL League Parity

In 2018, there were 774 colleges and universities who provided football programs between the NCAA's division I, division II, division III and the NAIA. For these 774 programs, each team typically has 85 to 100 players or more, all within the age range of approximately 18 – 23 years old. In contrast, the NFL has only 32 teams with only 53-players on each roster. Furthermore, the players' ages range from approximately 21 to over 40-years old in some cases. The 2018 NFL league year included players such as Drew Brees (41-years-old), Sebastian Janikowski (40-years-old), Tom Brady (41-years-old), Matt Bryant (43-years-old), Phil Dawson (44-years-old), and Adam Vinatieri (46-

years-old). According to the NCAA's official website, 1.6% of college football players make it to an NFL roster and much fewer than that ever earn a second contract. For the scope of this paper, an important assumption is that the NFL is made up of only the cream of the crop of available football players. Every player in the league is supremely talented.

In all that's outlined above: the reverse order draft, restricted free agency, the fact that any team can sign any team's practice squad player, the improbable odds of ever making it to the NFL, etc. the common theme is that this league is very purposely designed for parity. Using the data that shows how improbable it is to make the NFL as a player, it is reasonable to extrapolate and generally conclude that all teams have "talented" players.

Equifinality

In business, the term equifinality implies that a desired end state could be achieved in many ways. It's applied here as the notion that teams in the NFL can be successful while employing a range of different competencies. Throughout my years as a football administrator, I have observed the variety and wide range of football schemes, strategies and philosophies across the most successful high school, college, and NFL teams. From 2016 - 2018, the New England Patriots led the league by winning 79.1% of their games. In those seasons, the Patriots chose passing plays on only 54.91% of their plays, a passing percentage which ranks 26th out of 32 teams. Conversely, the Kansas City Chiefs had the second-best winning percentage over the same three seasons winning 70.1% of their games but they chose passing plays on 61.46% of their plays which ranked 7th out of the 32 teams in passing percentage. ("ESPN Stats and Information", 2019).

In addition to the observation above that teams in the NFL can win by relying more heavily on both run plays or pass plays, there are teams who are successful relying on their defense as well as other teams who are successful while relying on their offense. There are a myriad of philosophies, styles and schemes used inside the intricate nuances of the run game and the pass game in football. Some teams like to have many wide receivers – this spreads the defense horizontally which allows the offense to create space in between each defender so that the offense can isolate specific players and take advantage of favorable one-on-one matchups. Other teams like to have big offensive linemen and tight-ends and very tight formations which brings the defense close together into the center of the field. This allows the offense to have speedy runners who can get around the outside edge or vertically down the field behind the defensive backfield players.

Earlier in the paper, we established that the NFL is systematically designed for parity by implementing several structures which aid the weaker teams and handicap the stronger teams. The National Football League has a salary cap that prevents large market, wealthy teams like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles from offering the most money, in turn signing the most desired players. Furthermore, the low percentage of NFL spots available compared to the much larger number of college players ensures that there is always a talent surplus which allows every team to fill a roster of talented players. It's my own professional observation that there are enough players who are physically able to do what's required and who would be able to flourish in a proper, healthy environment. The wide variety of schemes and strategies have no observed no correlation to winning percentage. With all the league's features outlined above, the question that remains is

how can a football team in the National Football League set itself apart? This paper aims to answer that question by diving into the best practices in player acquisition and roster management by looking at past trends and a survey of NFL personnel. The goal is to find a preferred strategy with regards to the collegiate draft and free agency systems.

As mentioned above, this paper includes a two-part survey with league personnel that helps to diagnose the current practices in the league. Those responses were aimed to source and compile those experts' ideas and personal philosophies. This paper also includes a literature review of past studies which have looked at the relevant topic. The analysis of that literature includes a summary of accepted ideas and aims to identify and gaps in the research and the general dearth of literature specifically related to NFL organizations.

When competing in an environment like the NFL, where there's an even playing field for all, teams can experience short-term success by taking advantage of and riding once-in-a-generation, top athletes but this project aims to find a long term strategy that allows for sustained success no matter which players are in the program. The compiled research in this paper can act as a guide for years to come.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will present published literature relevant to leading a team in the National Football League. It is my hope that this section will provide background context and begin to compile a list of best practices for how a team could most efficiently acquire players and make the most of their available but limited resources. When conducting the research below, a surprising find was the scarcity of literature specific to player acquisition in the National Football League. The colossal magnitude and high stakes of the league led to an assumption that plenty of prior research would be available. The dearth of literature specifically related to NFL organizations affords me the opportunity to fill a gap in available research but makes this section less substantial. I combined those available articles related to player acquisition with traditional concepts such as organizational culture, leadership and team building to create a framework specifically related to football organizations.

<u>On the Field Processes</u>

<u>Draft Picks as a Predictor of Team Success</u>

"Deconstructing the Draft: An evaluation of the NFL Draft as a predictor of team success" is a research study by Zachary Reynolds, Traci Bonds, Steele Thompson and Carrie LeCrom which was published in the Journal of Applied Sport Management in the Fall of 2015. This study compared team success with the number of draft picks a team made each year. The group of researchers start off their paper by discussing the value of NFL draft picks and assert that they are mostly overvalued based on the NFL's Trade

Value Chart which estimates the first overall pick is worth the same as nearly five players selected with the last pick of the first round. ("ESPN Trade Value Chart", 2013) The methodology of this study involved analyzing draft results from 2000 – 2010 and searching for correlations between number of draft picks and the change in a team's winning percentage. Their explicit goal was to measure the success of the NFL draft and their data shows that the reverse-order NFL draft, where the worst teams pick first, is successful in maintaining its main objective: helping the weaker teams improve. (Reynolds et al, Table 3, pg. 13). Furthermore, the data asserts "an increase in the number of total picks in a draft year can significantly predict making the playoffs three years later." (Reynolds et al, pg. 13). This is encouraging for struggling teams who know that if they make wise choices with their early picks, they have a very reasonable chance of increasing their winning percentage at a faster rate than a team with an already high winning percentage. As shown in Table 1 below which was produced by Over the Cap in 2018, over the time period from 1994 until 2015, there was an observed positive correlation between winning percentage and the number of draft picks that team had averaged each year.

Table 1. Draft Picks from 1994 – 2015; Ranked by Avg Number of Picks (Over

The Cap, 2018)

Draft Picks from 1994-2015; Ranked by Avg Number of Picks				
Rank	Team	# of Picks	Avg # of Picks	Winning %
1	Patriots	201	8.74	0.685
2	Packers	197	8.57	0.643
3	Titans	194	8.43	0.483
4	Rams	193	8.39	0.415
5	Eagles	192	8.35	0.551
6	Steelers	188	8.17	0.629
7	Bills	185	8.04	0.452
8	Bengals	184	8.00	0.446
9	49ers	183	7.96	0.536
10	Dolphins	180	7.83	0.500
11	Texans (15)	117	7.80	0.433
12	Seahawks	179	7.78	0.534
13	Ravens (21)	162	7.71	0.542
14	Vikings	177	7.70	0.531
15	Cowboys	177	7.70	0.528
16	Bears	176	7.65	0.477
17	Jaguars	176	7.65	0.452
18	Cardinals	176	7.65	0.432
19	Browns (20)	153	7.65	0.339
20	Broncos	173	7.52	0.611
21	Chiefs	173	7.52	0.511
22	Buccaneers	173	7.52	0.455
23	Raiders	170	7.39	0.398
24	Colts	169	7.35	0.605
25	Falcons	169	7.35	0.496
26	Panthers (22)	161	7.32	0.472
27	Chargers	165	7.17	0.497
28	Lions	163	7.09	0.378
29	Jets	162	7.04	0.472
30	Giants	162	7.04	0.513
31	Redskins	157	6.83	0.425
32	Saints	148	6.43	0.486
The top 10 teams had a combined winning percentage of .534. The middle 12 had a winning percentage of .487. The bottom 10 had a winning percentage of .474. The top half had a winning percentage of .520, while the bottom half had a winning percentage of .470.				

Selecting Quarterbacks in the NFL Draft

In their 2011 article entitled "Catching a draft: on the process of selecting

quarterbacks in the National Football League amateur draft", David J. Berri and Rob

Simmons use two previous studies to get to the bottom of draft strategy. Years of easy-to-

observe hits and misses show that the art of selecting the graduating college football

players each year is far from perfected. Projecting professional success in football is a

very inexact science with a mid-to-low success rate for even the league's most

experienced scouts and teambuilding executives. The first study that was reviewed by

Berri and Simmons was by Cade Massey and Richard Thaler (2005). Massey and Thaler looked at the surplus value of a draft pick which they describe as "the difference between expected economic value of the pick and the player's compensation cost" (Berri and Simmons, 2011, p. 38). Massey and Thaler's research concluded that first round picks are overvalued by NFL decision makers as opposed to picks later in the draft and on a performance per dollar spent basis, players selected in the second round have the best value. (Berri and Simmons, 2011, p. 38) Players selected in the first round were found to contribute the most but are disproportionally more expensive.

In their 2003 paper, Hendricks et al argued that draft slots are "based on the level of uncertainty regarding future productivity" (Berri and Simmons, 2011, p. 39). From looking at past draft results, the research group found that when two collegiate prospects have similar evaluations, the tiebreaker typically went to the player who played at a higher level of college football – the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) rather than the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), Division II or Division III tiers. They argued that this was because risk-averse decision makers view players who succeeded against a higher level of competition as having a higher degree of certainty than players who also succeeded but against weaker competition. An interesting conclusion found by this research, is that the later you go in the draft, that trend reverses. Later in the draft, lower level collegiate players are valued higher than the FBS players (Berri and Simmons, 2011, p. 39). The explanation offered by the researchers is that there is only upside in that situation. The relatively low risk scenario of that player, an inexpensive late-round draft pick, failing to ever contribute and released from the team like so many others, is worth the potential high reward of finding a diamond in the rough.

In order to shape their own research, Berri and Simmons point out several flaws in the two studies mentioned above. First, Massey and Thaler used very specific metrics to rate the success of a player. These statistics included total games played, total games started, and Pro Bowls played in. The Pro Bowl is the NFL's version of an all-star game with two lineups of the league's supposed best players chosen through a public fan vote. On page 39 of their study, Berri and Simmons point out a concern that these papers used peoples' subjective decisions to evaluate other peoples' subjective decisions. They write "the problem with each of these metrics is that they are really statements from decision-makers about who is better or worse". Further along on page 39, Berri and Simmons point out another flaw in the study by Hendricks et al. This one, regarding the inclusion of all football positions in the same study. Berri and Simmons argue that evaluating quarterbacks and evaluating running backs are different sciences and are essentially evaluating for different sports. First-hand experience scouting players as a football administrator corroborates that perspective. Each position has a unique set of physical and mental requisites that an evaluator would look for. For example, running backs and wide receivers need to be fast enough to run away from people. There are premiums on acceleration, explosion and quick change of direction skills. Alternatively, although arm strength and great footwork that's connected to the brain and arm are certainly necessary for one to succeed as a quarterback, that position has much more importance placed on cerebral qualities such as fast processing skills, decision making, staying calm under pressure and having a personality that others can rally around.

With this information, Berri and Simmons looked at all quarterbacks drafted from 1970 – 2007, who played in at least one NFL game. The stats they analyzed were

quarterback (QB) rating, QB score, net points per play, and wins produced. The first, QB rating is a commonly known statistic that incorporates pass completion percentage, passing yards per passing attempt, touchdown passes per passing attempt and interceptions thrown per passing attempt. Each of those sub-metrics are uniquely weighted and multiplied together before being divided by the number of total passing attempts to produce a QB rating score. The highest possible QB rating value is 158.3 points. QB score is a simple calculation of (total yards (passing and rushing) – 3) x (total number of plays – 30) x (total number of turnovers). Their methodology here is to account for the fact that some quarterbacks' value is derived from more than just their passing. They surmise that each play is worth about three yards and each turnover cost approximately thirty.

In addition to QB rating, their study used the model of Berri et al (2006) and Berri (2007) which accounted for a quarterback's contribution to both scoring, net points and wins produced. Berri and Simmons first used these numbers to find positive correlations between college statistics, NFL draft combine statistics, draft slot, race and future NFL on-field success. As mentioned above, this study used NFL combine statistics including prospects' measured height, weight, 40-yard-dash time and Wonderlic test score (a 12-minute IQ test given annually to all scouted players). Their comparison shows a definite correlation between aggregate performance at the scouting combine and the players' draft slots. (Berri and Simmons, 2011, p. 47) Those players who are drafted earlier were found to record a greater number of total plays in their NFL career which makes sense because more expensive players, picked earlier in the draft will be given a longer leash and more opportunities to pan out. However, on page 48 of the same study, Berri and Simmons

conclude that "on a per play performance, the relationship between production and draft position was quite weak". In summary, quarterbacks drafted earlier are given a longer leash and more of an opportunity to prove themselves but ultimately do not perform any better than those drafted later do. Another interesting conclusion showed by this research is that combine statistics influenced where a quarterback prospect was drafted more than their college on-field production did. (Berri and Simmons, 2011, p. 45, Table 5). This is unsurprising because of the large variance of competition in college football. Comparing the quarterback from the University of Alabama with the quarterback from the University of Pennsylvania requires adjusted analytics. The University of Alabama plays against the best defensive units in the nation while Penn does not. Football is the ultimate team game and the NFL scouting combine is one of the few opportunities to isolate a single player's raw physical ability. Therefore, it's sensible that these measurements would be weighed heavily for teams that need to decide between similar prospects. However, although these quarterback prospects who perform the best at the NFL combine *are* drafted earlier, they do not perform any better than their peers do throughout their professional careers.

Effectiveness of the NFL Draft

The two studies discussed above make the claims that the NFL draft is an effective way to improve a struggling team and also illustrates that predicting the future success of prospects is a very difficult task. Although both research methods and papers were enlightening and backed by numbers, the game of football is too instinctive and emotional for these lessons to be applied too blindly. There are many intangible qualities that determine a player's makeup and probability of success. Grit, situational intelligence, and perseverance are very hard to measure even when allowed to interview the prospect

and all his peers, supervisors, coaches and support staff at length. Being able to run fast, jump high and lift heavy weights does not mean that the player will be poised in high-pressure, stressful situations and being able to catch a ball most of the time does not mean that they can be counted on in the face of adversity. Despite the flaws regarding the application of these studies, the analyzed data does paint a clear picture of the preferred draft-strategy: if your team is struggling, drafting wisely can improve your team quickly. For that reason, it may be wise for bad teams to trade an overvalued top pick away for a bundle of mid round 2nd – 4th round selections. Both studies found that picks at the top of the first round are the most expensive and the most overvalued; Berri and Simmons concluded that the peak of draft pick value is found in the second of the seven rounds. If a team can identify those crucial intangible qualities, they could perhaps have multiple stars rather than putting their eggs in one basket. When combined, these papers show that trading the top pick as a struggling team and acquiring multiple picks in the second and/or third round will diversify the risk and could give a team a greater chance of improving their winning percentage than if they used their resources on a single player with a shown disproportionate amount of risk to upside.

The Rookie Wage Scale

As tension between the NFL owners and players increased heading into the collective bargaining negotiations in 2010, a key focus area was rookie salaries. Per the 2011 signed agreement between the owners and the players association, a rookie wage scale was eventually agreed upon and implemented which dramatically lowered the total amount of money paid to first-year players by almost $300 million. (Forbes, 2011). In 2008, Jake Long, an offensive tackle from the University of Michigan was the first

overall pick in the NFL draft was given a five-year contract worth $57.75 million dollars from the Miami Dolphins before ever playing in an NFL game. In 2009 and 2010, Matthew Stafford and Sam Bradford, both quarterbacks from the University of Georgia and the University of Oklahoma respectively were selected first overall in the draft and each given six-year contracts worth $72 million (Stafford in 2009 with the Detroit Lions) and $78 million (Bradford in 2010 with the St. Louis Rams) before either of them had ever even taken part in an NFL practice. It was a problem to owners, coaches and veteran players that rookies selected at the top of the draft were coming into the fragile team environment immediately as one of the top couple highest paid players on the team. Additionally, the financial risk of giving such a high percentage of the team's salary limit on unproven entities was troublesome for owners and general managers. After the contracts discussed above were executed, the group of NFL owners made it clear that they would not continue to pay first-year players such exorbitant salaries. By eating up more of the available salary cap space, these rookie contracts made money for veteran players scarcer and the owners group used that point to argue for a greater share of league revenue in the 2010 collective bargaining negotiations. The owners said that by taking a higher percent of the total revenue, the money would, in turn, go back to the players through higher salaries for veterans. Based on records from the Green Bay Packers (USA Today, 2019), the league's only publicly owned franchise with available records, the team received $274.3 million from the NFL – therefore estimating the total amount give to all 32 teams at approximately $8.7 billion. Combining this data with known revenue in the publicly available 2011 collective bargaining agreement, the National Football League's total revenue in 2019 is accepted to be approximately $15 billion. In that signed

2011 agreement, the owners were successful in lowering the players' split of that revenue from 53% to 48%. In 2019, that 5% change was valued at approximately $750 million.

Table 2. Primary Starters by Round, 2010-2015 Drafts (Over The Cap, 2015)

Primary Starters by Round, 2010-2015 Drafts

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6	Round 7
# of Players	192	190	206	220	219	231	275
Pr. Starters	159	122	101	66	50	34	29
In %	83%	62%	49%	30%	23%	15%	11%

In Table 2 above, produced and made available by Over the Cap, a respected online source for all NFL player contract and team salary cap information, it's interesting to see the high percentage of players drafted from 2010 – 2015 in the early rounds who were deemed a success. (Over The Cap, 2015) For this study, success was designated based on the percentage of players who became "primary starters" – those who started at least eight games during the season. Their data shows that those drafted in the first two to three rounds can contribute to your team immediately and it's reasonable to expect that. Provided that your team's scouting department is capable of properly evaluating prospects and has the team selecting the good 62% in round two and the good 49% in round three, the clear strategy is to use these early picks on positions of need and not for developmental long-term purposes. If there are several positions that need to be improved on your roster, it shows further that it could be a good idea to trade a first-round pick for a combination of second or third round picks. Through my research, it became evident that the collegiate draft is a place to be safe and conservative. My interviews with NFL personnel informed me that some general managers believe in picking the best player available at the time of their selection with significant disregard to their position. Those

teams want to build a roster of the most talented and physically capable players. After looking into this topic in depth, I believe that situations will come up when great players may need to be skipped over. This data shows me that it would be a waste of a pick to select a player who plays a position that your team already feels good about – even if it would make a strong position group much stronger. If a majority of the players selected in these rounds are going on to become primary starters in their rookie seasons, then it seems obvious that a team should select one of these players at a position of need as opposed to drafting a high ceiling but raw prospect who the team thinks may be able to develop into a superstar down the line. Per the data compiled by Over the Cap above, the later rounds have a low success rate of turning players into immediate contributors so it makes sense to draft developmental projects here who you think can be great with the a few years of coaching and physical development.

Positional WAR

In their 2015 study for the Journal of Sports Economics entitled "Positional WAR in the National Football League", Andrew Hughes, Corey Koedel and Joshua Price, looked at a commonly known baseball statistic, wins above replacement, and adjusted it to make it work in the football context. Wins Above Replacement (WAR) was developed to sum up the number of additional wins a baseball player adds to their team when compared to the expected number of team wins if that player were switched with a replacement-level player: widely accepted to be "a player who may be added to the team for minimal cost and effort." (Sports-Reference, 2012). A common problem that Hughes et al worked to solve is the fact that individual success in football is very dependent on a teammates' individual success. On page 598 of their paper, they bring up the example of

a running back scoring a one-yard touchdown after a teammate's 80-yard punt return. Or the example of a 5-yard pass by a quarterback to a wide receiver who then runs for sixty more yards for a touchdown. Who is responsible for those scores? To bypass this issue, they developed a metric called Positional WAR that looks at each position as opposed to the individual players at that position. By measuring the value of players by position, they can weigh each position in terms of generating wins.

For this study, the research group looked at all 32 teams projected starting lineups over the 2008, 2010 and 2012 seasons. Based on salaries, depth charts, known coach scheme and public off-season analysis, the lineups used were based on the ideal situation where all rostered players are healthy and active heading into the first game. They then looked at how many games each of those players missed due to injury and/or suspension and then calculated the change in win percentage based on who else was playing in that game. Unsurprisingly, they found quarterbacks "were the most valuable position by a wide margin". (Hughes, Koedel and Price, 2015 p. 599) Slightly more surprisingly, their research found significant positive WAR values associated with the wide receiver, tight end and offensive tackle positions. Very surprisingly, an unexpected discovery was that no position on the defensive side of the ball had any significant Positional WAR value. On page 600 they write "on average, teams do not suffer in terms of wins when defensive starters miss games due to injury and/or suspension. This suggests that relative to their replacements, defensive starters on average are not as valuable as offensive starters at several positions." (Hughes, Koedel and Price, 2015)

Table 3. Estimated Effects on Total Wins of Games Missed Due to Injury/

Suspension, by position. (Hughes, Koedel and Price, 2015)

Table 2. Estimated Effects on Total Wins of Games Missed Due to Injury/Suspension, by Position.

	Full Model	Restricted Model
Predicted wins (Vegas line)	0.47 (0.16)**	—
Offense		
Quarterback	−5.19 (1.28)**	−5.63 (1.39)**
Running back	0.14 (1.54)	1.04 (1.82)
Tight end/fullback	−4.27 (1.47)**	−4.61 (1.42)**
Wide receiver	−4.75 (1.89)*	−5.97 (2.04)**
Interior offensive line	−0.24 (1.64)	−0.026 (1.65)
Exterior offensive line	−3.58 (1.53)*	−4.10 (1.75)*
Defense		
Cornerback	−0.02 (2.04)	−0.88 (1.79)
Safety	−0.22 (2.03)	0.88 (1.94)
Linebacker	−1.07 (2.20)	−1.35 (2.45)
Defensive line	−0.58 (3.19)	−1.01 (3.30)
R^2	0.399	0.341
N	96	96

Note. Standard errors clustered at the team level are in given parentheses.
**Indicates statistical significance at the 1% level. *Indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

This study concluded that games missed by starting quarterbacks are "by far the most important in terms of affecting win totals and that games missed by starting wide receivers, tight ends and exterior offensive lineman are significant. Games missed by starters at all other positions do not affect wins, on average." (Hughes, Koedel and Price, 2015, p. 608).

At this point, the relevant discussion is to explore the various reasons why a position would score well in the Positional WAR metric. The first potential explanation for the significant drop off in production at some positions vs. others could be the fact a scarcity of top players at that given position. First-hand professional experience informs me that that scarcity could be a reason why the offensive tackle position rated as significantly valuable when the starter misses games. Pass blocking at the NFL level

requires elite athleticism to pedal backwards while staying light on their feet to quickly change direction and stay in front of charging defensive players. They must also be strong enough and powerful enough to stop the charging defensive player and have a unique body type with the necessary body mass, height and arm length. In the run game, they must be powerful road graders with immense strength to move other very strong people to a place those people don't want to go. Because it is such a difficult position to play with rare, specific physical requirements, there is often a noticeable change in the comfort level of the quarterback when a change is made at offensive tackle. In some situations, the offensive coordinator would even modify the game plan and play-calling to compensate for that change in personnel on the offensive line.

A second explanation for this disparity in the significance of different positions could be the positions' reliance on timing and chemistry. For that reason, it's unsurprising that the wide receiver and tight end positions were significantly valuable. Modern trends in the football passing game require pass catchers to read defensive coverage schemes on the fly and modify their route to find the gaps in the defense. The chemistry between the quarterback and those pass catching positions is imperative and worked on for years. When replacement players enter the game with limited experience, even the best quarterbacks in the world could have trouble making accurate throws if the wide receiver runs their route too deep or too shallow.

From this data, it appears that quarterback, wide receiver, tight end and offensive tackles are positions where ironman type traits should be valued. We learned from this study by Hughes, Koedel, and Price that those positions hurt the team most when turned over more frequently so even if a prospect is slightly more physically gifted in terms of

combine measurements, it may be wiser to pass on them if reliability and injury history present any concerns. I've often heard from other industry professionals that physical on-field football talent is more binary than most people believe it to be. Those people accept that if a player is physically able to do what's required then that box is checked off and at that point, it's his character, work ethic, intelligence and toughness that would determine the player's true productivity and ceiling. This research shows teams drafting those select positions (quarterback, wide receiver, tight end, offensive tackle) to value the players with clean injury reports, the prospects who haven't missed many games throughout their college careers, and the prospects who have proven the ability to play well through minor injuries. At those positions, the best ability is availability, and, in those spots, teams should value players who are durable, reliable and available even if that means sacrificing a negligible amount of size, speed or strength.

Management Secrets of the New England Patriots

In "Management Secrets of the New England Patriots", author James Lavin took a deep dive into the long term success of the New England Patriots. A key lesson from that book is the importance the Patriots front office places on the mutual fit between the team and the player being evaluated. They believe that team personnel (players, coaches and staff) must match specific roles within the organization. Longtime Patriots' assistant general manager Scott Pioli said,

> "history and experience has taught us that chasing and pursuing high-profile names isn't necessarily the way to go. We're going after players that fit our system and our overall philosophy: some people term that second tier or next level. We don't see them as that type of player. Just because a player has made a Pro Bowl or has a marquee name because of his salary doesn't mean the player is necessarily a good football player…sometimes perception and reality are two

completely different things."

This philosophy from one of the greatest dynasties in the history of sports corroborates earlier findings that erring on the side of caution with regards to signing players is reasonable. The opportunity cost of missing on a top draft pick or allocating big money to a free agent who doesn't pan out is too great when there are so many players out there who can succeed. Missing in the top part of the first round or spending money on a player who doesn't contribute can set a team back for years.

<u>No Swiss Army Knives</u>

In "Management Secrets of the New England Patriots", the analogy of a Swiss Army knife is used. The author illustrates the concept that buying an expensive Swiss Army multi-tool is wasteful when all you need is a can opener. Versatility has always been a highly sought-after trait in scouting. One guy who could do multiple jobs sounds exciting and efficient. Rather than looking for those versatile players who can do it all however, Bill Belichick, the Patriots' head coach and general manager since 2000 chooses to invest his resources in those who can specialize and do one thing that the team needs very well. Instead of a multi-tool that has an average can opener, an average knife, an average screwdriver and an average toothpick, the Patriots have decided to buy the best can opener separately from the best knife, the best screwdriver, and the best toothpick. (Lavin, 2005)

Throughout their historic run, Patriots scouts and coaches have done a tremendous job focusing on the strengths of their players and incorporating what their players do well into the game plan. The old-school scouting mentality asks scouts to look for the

deficiencies and limitations and to point out the reasons why a prospect can't be successful. The Patriots have consciously flipped that on its head and have found players who are exceptional in a narrow area and then asked them to do exactly that at the professional level. Seemingly every year, Patriots fans beg their decision makers to draft a physically dominant wide receiver in the first round. Yet every draft, the Patriots select wide receivers in the second round and later. When looking back, many of the receivers who thrived in New England had perceived weaknesses and deficiencies heading into their professional careers. Most of them were very similar to each other which implies that the Patriots knew exactly what they were looking for. Moreover, many of these players were thought to have insufficient height, strength and/or speed ie. Julian Edelman, Danny Amendola, Wes Welker and Danny Woodhead. However, the lesson for aspiring team builders is that the New England Patriots' know what their offensive coordinator's preferred scheme and philosophy is relies on a multitude of tough, intelligent receivers with good acceleration and change of direction skills. These receivers are able read the defense and connect with Tom Brady on a mental level. The Patriots' coaches trust these receivers to read the coverage and find the open spots and then the team relied on Tom Brady to find the open receiver to throw the ball to. Instead of reaching for an ideal specimen of a receiver with off-the-charts measurements in the first round, the Patriots showed us that even though a player may be marginally better at running, jumping and catching, better overall fits for what that particular team is looking for can be found later in the draft.

Like the matching principle illustrated above, the Patriots also have showed the football world they are not afraid to value past production over traditional metrics such as

size, speed, and strength. For a specific example, many elite college defensive linemen

are still available in the mid to late rounds of the NFL draft because they lack the ideal

measurements. Whether they're "too short" or "too light" to play in the NFL, teams don't

select them despite their college production and skillset. Reviewed in the book, author

James Lavin shines a light on the Patriots tremendous ability to find such players and

move them to new positions. The Patriots say that they value production in the college

game and back up their words through their actions. They have often found success with

super-productive college players who lack "ideal measurements". The shining example

of this is Tom Brady, their leader and starting quarterback for the past two decades. The

Patriots' sixth round draft selection in 2000, Brady was the seventh quarterback chosen in

the draft and by most credible scouts, lacked the desired arm strength and athleticism.

According to "Management Secrets of the New England Patriots", the team's scouting

manual advises their scouts that quarterbacks should be able to "take a big hit and then

walk into the huddle and call the next play". Furthermore, quarterbacks in their program

must be able "to handle pressure and scrutiny to which NFL quarterbacks are subjected."

(Lavin, 2005).   With this information, the reader can deduce that the New England

Patriots drafted Tom Brady because he is tough as nails and grounded in his beliefs.

Scouts recognized that his work ethic would never waiver despite his level of success and

that he is cool under pressure and his heartbeat was always steady. Most importantly, the

Patriots scouts recognized these traits because they were instructed to look for it. Scott

Pioli, the Patriots' Vice President of Player Personnel from 2000 – 2008 explained that

"Bill [Belichick] and I aren't numbers guys. We don't get hung up on height-weight-

speed. We want football players, because, come Sunday at 1-o'clock, football players

play football. What they did in the 40-yard-dash one day in shorts, or in the vertical jump, is not what the fans pay to see and not what we're asking them to do." (Lavin, 2005). As mentioned above, they've had major successes with Danny Woodhead (undrafted), Julian Edelman (seventh round), Wes Welker (undrafted) and Troy Brown (eighth round). A major part of what makes the Patriots great is that they maximize the bottom end of their roster because they know exactly what traits to look for in the guys who are less sought after because of non-essential measurements.

<u>Diversifying Risk at Key Positions</u>

Another key factor which contributed to the successful run of the New England Patriots is that they were able to diversify risk at the riskiest positions. At running back, the Patriots have been able to use their Swiss Army knife philosophy by successfully employing a committee of guys. As a resulting benefit, they were able to pay lower salaries to two role players rather than a big contract to one "great" player at one of the most injured positions. Also, widely under the radar was that New England measured all players' "production" comprehensively. For running backs, they valued a lot more than just their number of yards gained and specifically valued pass protection, their ability to hold onto the football and not fumble, their receiving ability to catch the ball out of the backfield, etc. Every team searches for a great running back who can carry the ball forty times per game but the Patriots are able to get good value for a fraction of the price by utilizing multiple complementary role players. Recently, they've had success with Sony Michel, Rex Burkhead and James White all running backs with very different competencies rather than one expensive player who carries higher risk through less diversification.

In summary of the first section, an NFL team that finds itself at the bottom of the standings can effectively and quickly improve their winning percentage through the NFL Draft. The several studies and books reviewed inform me of the following preferred strategy. Be conservative, safe and risk averse. In the first three rounds, you must find high floor prospects who will be able to contribute to the team most immediately – not the attractive but underdeveloped prospect who could become a star years down the line. Depending on the team's positions of need, it could often be wise to trade back in the draft especially if a team has several different areas in critical condition. Although the raw talent of first rounders is tempting, there is a considerable opportunity to improve your team fast by being able to add multiple starters who can plug in and contribute immediately. An additional benefit of building the core of the roster through the collegiate draft as opposed to free agency is that you get four years of a starter at a limited cost because of the implemented rookie wage scale. That gives teams freedom to spend remaining capital in free agency to fill in holes and reinforce certain positions with veterans. As a general free agency philosophy, it's important not to overpay and get into bidding wars. It's very rare that a top of the line superstar hits the true free agent market. Many veteran free agents have some sort of deficiency whether they're aging, coming off an injury, a down year or they just reached the point where the amount of money they can command is greater than what their current team is willing to spend on them. Teams should use the free agent market for bargain deals, perhaps for a successful player coming off an injury at a reduced price. Free agency should also be used to build key depth by adding backups at specific positions, especially quarterback, wide receiver, tight

end, and offensive tackle where there is a proven significant drop off in team winning percentage after experiencing turnover at those positions.

The next section will include an analysis of off the field concepts including leadership, organizational culture, teambuilding and motivation. The goal of this section is to zoom out and show the full scope of the teambuilding process. Choosing the most talented players with the most potential to become stars is obviously the goal of scouting but developing, motivating and providing an environment in which those players can grow and optimize is equally as important. These sections combined will provide a 360 degree perspective of the ideal situation: talented and likeminded players in a healthy championship environment.

Off the Field Processes

As explained above, these sections combined will provide a complete perspective of the ideal situation: talented and likeminded players in a healthy championship environment. The coming pages will highlight several ways to optimize talent across the organization with the hope to provide a clear picture of what that looks like.

Team Effectiveness Model

Before analyzing what makes a team operate at a high level, it's important to dive into the traditional teambuilding literature to properly define what a team even is. In their book entitled "Teamwork: What Must Go Right/What Can Go Wrong" (1989), authors Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto defined a team as "two or more people that have a specific performance objective or recognizable goal to be attained; and coordination of activity among the members of the team is required for the attainment of team goal or

objective." (Larson and LaFasto, 1989, pg. 19) In 2001, after closely observing more than 600 teams throughout their careers, they proposed a model called the Five Dynamics of Teamwork and Collaboration which identified and broke down the five factors that they observed across teams: the team member, team relationships, team problem solving, team leadership and the organizational environment (Larson and LaFasto, 2001). To explain further, the first essential dynamic are the team members. The authors explain that for a team to succeed, it's imperative that the group is first comprised of effective and capable individuals. The best first step is to select the right team members for all levels by focusing on candidates who are intelligent, inherently motivated, experienced in problem solving and open to failure.

Next, Larson and LaFasto's model looks to the team relationships. Healthy communication and trusting each other is supremely important. The authors argue that respect, friendly interactions and an enjoyable environment allow for great work to be done by eliminating politics and non-essential distractions. A large piece of this dynamic is having appropriate channels for feedback. Constructive criticism that's not taken personally affords the group the opportunity for the best ideas to come to the top. Diversity of thought is crucially important when the resulting conflict is respectful and productive.

After interpersonal relationships, Larson and LaFasto look to the team's ability to problem solve as a group by working together. If the objective is clear and everybody in the building trusts that all parties are trying their best to help the group reach that goal, then a safe space for open and honest communication will help tremendously.

The fourth factor that Larson and LaFasto consistently observed in successful teams was competent leadership. From their analysis, the best leaders focused on the goal at hand and outwardly encouraged collaboration. Furthermore, the researchers reported that leaders of the most successful organizations developed a sense of responsibility for everybody in the company. They saw developing, building confidence and taking care of each team member as one of their central responsibilities. Furthermore, these leaders genuinely solicited feedback with the intent to use that information to get better. The best leaders consistently listened to their teams and actively looked for ways for the entire team to improve.

Finally, Larson and LaFasto concluded that the last crucial factor in building successful teams was an organizational environment where team members felt like they were being taken care of and put in a position to succeed. Leaders and executives can help themselves here by hiring employees whose values and personalities match the team culture. When the climate of the organization allows for positive interactions and people to be themselves then the mission will always be clear. Unhealthy office politics and negative competition that pits employees against each other bring out too many different motives and ultimately, who to trust becomes distracting. (Larson and LaFasto, 2001)

The Character of Leadership

Published in the May/June 2007 Ivey Business Journal, Brian Cooper, James Sarros, and Joseph Santora researched "the character of leadership" and found three main tenets most commonly found in the leaders of the most successful organizations. The first, universalism, "represents an understanding, appreciation, and tolerance for the welfare of people generally, and is a macro perspective approach to work and life." The

second, transformation, "is consistent with the concept of transformational leadership as an activity that inspires others in the achievement of long-term, visionary goals." Finally, the third tenet, benevolence, "is a micro approach to work, and focuses on concern for the welfare of others through one's daily interactions." (Cooper, B., Sarros, J., & Santora, J., 2007). To them, the characteristics of the optimal leader(s) included good listening skills, sensitivity, trust and ownership. Being able to sense things that are happening in the organization and truly listening to what people are saying is key to making sure that the leader is spending his time doing meaningful work.

<u>Diversity in Executive Teams</u>

A two-part McKinsey & Company Report conducted in 2015 and 2018 found tangible benefits associated with diversity in executive leadership teams. The report found "companies with leadership in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have financial returns above their industry median" and that "companies with leadership in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry median." (Hunt, V., Layton, D. & Prince, S., 2015) In 2018, McKinsey & Company followed up on their 2015 research by looking at over 1,000 companies in various industries across twelve countries and found again that "companies with executive teams in the bottom quartile for both gender diversity and racial and ethnic diversity were 29% less likely to achieve above-average profitability. (Hunt. V., Yee, L., Prince, S., & Dixon-Fyle, S., 2018) This data establishes a correlation between successful initiatives and prioritizing diversity in leadership. They also present a clear penalty for companies that don't intentionally prioritize diversity among their leadership team.

Furthermore, the 2018 McKinsey follow up report underlined three tangible benefits to increasing both racial and gender diversity in your leadership team. First, "diverse teams produce better solutions to complex problems." This part of their research points to a book by University of Michigan professor Scott E. Page entitled "The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies" in which Page "found more diverse groups that display a range of perspectives consistently outperform likeminded experts on complex tasks". An interesting explanation put forth is that more diverse groups are more immune to the groupthink phenomenon which Irving Janis originally researched in 1971 based on language in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Janis' research found that groups that place greater importance on harmony and conformity as opposed to accurate analysis and critical evaluation are more at risk to succumb to groupthink. The second benefit that McKinsey & Company attributed to a diverse executive committee is an increased retention of diverse staff. They found that a one of the most common reasons that professionals leave their jobs was due to direct or indirect signals that there is no opportunity for growth or advancement. McKinsey researchers write "having diversity in leadership communicates to staff, especially diverse staff, that there is a pathway to leadership and shows them a concrete example of what it looks like." (Hunt. V., Yee, L., Prince, S., & Dixon-Fyle, S., 2018) Per the United States Census, minority populations are growing and by 2040, the expected demographic makeup of our country will be greater than 51% people of color. In addition, players of color represent 70% of all players in the NFL (NFL, 2019) Contrarily, there is an observed disproportionate number of white coaches, general managers, owners, executives and broadcasters. McKinsey's

research leads the reader to believe that lower-level workers who can see people like them in executive roles would lead them to stay with the company with greater motivation to climb the corporate ladder.

Similarly, the third explicit benefit of a diverse leadership team is that "diverse leaders can serve as mentors and sponsors to diverse professionals and others and build multi-cultural competencies within the organization". (Hunt. V., Yee, L., Prince, S., & Dixon-Fyle, S., 2018) The authors of this study go on to acknowledge that informal mentor / mentee relationships happen naturally between people who share a commonality. In HR, the 70-20-10 is a commonly known philosophy which states that 70% of a person's learning and development comes from day to day experiences, 20% comes from a mentoring relationship and 10% comes from the classroom. In the current state of many lagging companies, women and people of color could face difficulties forming these important relationships with those in power. Affording your company's workers with greater opportunity to be mentored by a higher-level manager with the bonus of that person looking like them and potentially having a similar background and come up in the industry as they did.

The Workers Power the Ship

Although leaders in an organization set the climate of the office, drive the culture and help set the stage for success, it's the workers in the company who must drive the team forward. A common sailing analogy and metaphor used in sports is that coaches and administrators can only control the rudder and cannot control the motor. Those leaders can point the ship in the right direction, and they can certainly point the boat in the wrong direction, but they cannot move the ship forward. Dan Pink, author of "Drive: The

Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us", argues that companies today are motivating their employees incorrectly. Moreover, he points to a study entitled "Large Stakes and Big Mistakes" conducted by Dan Ariely, Uri Gneezy, George Lowenstein and Nina Mazar for The Review of Economic Studies in 2008 in which they found "higher pay and bonuses resulted in better performance only if the task consisted of basic, mechanical skills. According to the research group, it worked for "problems with a defined set of steps and a single answer." However, if the task involved complex, intellectual skills and/or creativity, higher pay did not result in higher performance. Of course, if you don't pay your workers enough, they will not be motivated. Pink suggests that to be successful, leaders should "pay enough to take the issue of money off the table" and then motivate with other incentives. (Pink, 2009) After the point of workers feeling as if their basic needs are met, additional pay will not directly motivate a staff.

Increasing Engagement

To motivate employees in complex arenas, Pink advises leaders to create an environment that maximizes autonomy (they design their own work), mastery (they aim to get better in their work and design how they practice) and purpose (doing things as part of a group bigger than themselves). In the football context, autonomy is difficult because coaches create strict structures and call the plays for the players to run during practices and games. In his Ted Talk, Daniel Pink says that "in the 20th century, we came up with this idea of management. Management did not emanate from nature. Management is not a tree, it's a television set. Somebody invented it." (Pink, 2009)

Transcribed from Pink's Ted Talk, he details the autonomy piece further:

"Atlassian is an Australian software company. And they do something incredibly cool. A few times a year they tell their engineers, "Go for the next 24 hours and work on anything you want, as long as it's not part of your regular job. Work on anything you want." Engineers use this time to come up with a cool patch for code, come up with an elegant hack. Then they present all the stuff that they've developed to their teammates, to the rest of the company, in this wild and woolly all-hands meeting at the end of the day. Being Australians, everybody has a beer.

They call them FedEx Days. Why? Because you have to deliver something overnight. It's a huge trademark violation, but it's pretty clever.

That one day of intense autonomy has produced a whole array of software fixes that might never have existed.

It's worked so well that Atlassian has taken it to the next level with 20% time -- done, famously, at Google -- where engineers can spend 20% of their time working on anything they want. They have autonomy over their time, their task, their team, their technique. Radical amounts of autonomy. And at Google, as many of you know, about half of the new products in a typical year are birthed during that 20% time: things like Gmail, Orkut, Google News."

In the football context, mastery and purpose are each defined clearly. For the former, it's important to re-acknowledge that the talent pool in the NFL is the cream of the crop of available football players. Therefore, the system is set up so that players already must, in Pink's terms, urge to get better skills. With the massive turnover rate, players can only survive in the league if they constantly work to improve their skills and do not last long if they don't. Addressing "purpose" in the sport context, the demographic makeup of the league gives many players a built-in purpose greater than winning games. Football is the ultimate team game and teaches players and coaches so many life lessons related to selflessness, teamwork, facing adversity, etc. NFL players have an acute understanding of where they came from and the lifestyle of youth in their hometown. For

that reason, there is an intentional importance placed by the league office on players being positive role models and working within their hometowns and their teams' communities. These experiences motivate players and increases their engagement by showing them how captivated fans of the NFL are and how happy it makes people when the players of a winning team are available to interact with.

With the NFL system scoring well with the first two of Dan Pink's three pillars, the question that remains is how team executives could maximize the amount of autonomy at the workplace. Perhaps the players were responsible for the creation, education, implementation and enforcement of all team rules or maybe the players at each position were required to manage their own substitutions in the game. Who starts, who plays the most, how often to sub so that the best players stay fresh would require immense amounts of cooperation and selflessness between players who are all talented. Surely all players believe they should be playing more than they do. In addition to increasing the autonomy for players, another important factor in increasing player engagement is to increase the players' sense of ownership over the final product. That empowerment leads to greater engagement which leads to an inviting place for everybody to come to work each day. A disengaged company is a company of zombies! Managers must create an environment where their workers want to work hard each day and Daniel Pink's research shows that maximizing their autonomy, mastery and purpose is what can move the ship forward.

No Role is Too Small

A relevant anecdote discussed in Professor Stephen Hart's course DYNM 629: Strategic Approaches to Human Capital Management: and its Implications for Leaders

which illustrates good management using this framework is that of Ben Bernanke arriving at an emergency meeting at four o'clock in the morning as the Chair of the Federal Reserve. This meeting was literally to save the entire economy of the United States of America and when Bernanke arrived at the office, the lights were on, the floors were polished, coffee was made, and they were able to conduct the meeting. Ben Bernanke had a realization that night and later made a speech to 25,000 people who worked for the Federal Reserve nationwide. Bernanke allegedly told the employees to never underestimate that what you do is important to the national economy. That sentiment gives the janitors purpose! That idea excites the janitor and allows them to come in every morning before dawn excited to clean the spaces and prepare the office for great work to be done because they are contributing to the national economy. A similar example of successful leadership creating increased engagement, purpose and empowerment is that of President John F. Kennedy when touring the NASA space center in 1962. When introduced to the janitor of that building, President Kennedy asked him what he did at the space center and the janitor responded, "I'm helping put a man on the moon." (Nemo, 2013) Great progress can be made when, no matter how small their role, people believe they are contributing to something much larger than themselves.

Leadership teams can learn from these anecdotes by forming compelling visions with a tangible goal that everybody in the building can rally behind. In their Harvard Business Review article entitled Inner Work Life: Understanding the Subtext of Business Performance, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer define a worker's inner work life as that worker's "positive perceptions, intrinsic motivation and pleasant emotions." (Amabile, T. and Kramer, S.J., 2007). Additionally, the number one driver of inner work

life was found to be workers making progress in meaningful work. In a discussion with

Dr. Michael Brenner in DYNM 629: Strategic Approaches to Human Capital

Management and its Implications for Leaders taught by Stephen Hart for the

Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Brenner used a

simple exercise to demonstrate this principle. Each one of seven people had a plastic rod

that when hit, produced one of the seven musical notes. When the group was challenged

to play the commonly known song, "row, row, row your boat", it took a few minutes for

the group to find the first few notes. As the group practiced, they slowly were able to

string together the first three then four then five then ten notes. In this example, progress

was easy to observe because the group knew when the next note "clicked" and sounded

correct. Everybody knew the tune, so it was clear when the next note was "unlocked". Dr.

Brenner, playing the role of the manager, made sure to explicitly compliment the group

with each instance of making progress and each time, the group's participants reported a

noticeable growing excitement. Although completing "row, row, row the boat" with

plastic rods isn't necessarily meaningful work, the exercise clearly showed how making

progress increases engagement. Managers can do good for their companies by celebrating

small wins and pointing them out to the full team.

<u>Summary</u>

In the first part of this chapter, I reviewed quantitative data regarding on the field

factors which included roster building techniques and best practices based on athletic

variables and the rules and processes specific to the NFL. The research in this section

showed that teams in the National Football League can effectively improve through the

annual reverse order draft. Over the past ten years, there is a shown correlation between

winning percentage and the total number of selections in the draft. If weaker performing teams execute the data-proven preferred draft strategy by increasing the amount of mid round picks, then they have a chance to improve in a hurry if they also shop wisely in the free agent market. The observed best practices here is to target depth at quarterback, wide receiver, tight end, and offensive tackle. These positions were selected based on the significant drop in winning percentage when teams experience turnover due injury or suspension at those spots.

In the second part of the chapter, I reviewed the best practices for NFL organizations' off the field processes. Research in these areas show tangible benefits to companies with diverse executive teams by creating good conflict. Furthermore, increased diversity motivates the office by allowing connections between people with a wider range of backgrounds, philosophies and ideas. The most successful leaders are shown to be good listeners, sensitive to their organization's happenings and can use provided intel to see the ship through the eyes of the crew. From a player standpoint, the key to improving in an environment with a theoretical universal parity is to increase engagement by giving each person a sense of purpose, meaning and ownership over their jobs. Executive teams achieve this by creating a captivating vision with a clear goal that everybody can work together towards – more than winning games and more than winning the Super Bowl. When people have a common, tangible goal to rally around, managers can give the workers autonomy to reach that goal how they see fit and should look for opportunities to do so in addition to initiatives that empower their employees. Giving workers a say in what decisions are made forces them to increase their involvement as well as their empowerment resulting culpability in failure and pride in success.

In the next chapter, I'll aim to find opportunities to implement these principles in the NFL landscape through a two-part Delphi method survey of league personnel. In this survey, I asked teambuilding executives where they thought the greatest opportunities to increase player involvement lie. As mentioned earlier, by increasing player involvement, you could increase their engagement, their inner work life and therefore their motivation, dedication and production.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter will attempt to find viable areas to implement the principles studied in the previous chapter. A survey was distributed to professional executives at all thirty-two NFL franchises which aimed to diagnose these opportunities to increase player involvement, engagement and ownership. This capstone project at large aims to compile the best practices for building and managing a team in the National Football League. The paper's hypothesis and assumption is that many of the organizations in today's NFL operate with an old-school model. Those who follow the business of sport in America have observed advanced analytics make its way into Major League Baseball (MLB) as well as the National Basketball Association (NBA). In some examples such as the MLB's Houston Astros and NBA's Houston Rockets, teams have implemented a complete shift in their scouting mindset and now almost exclusively rely on numbers and advanced analytical models to inform their decision making on prospects. (Wladawsky-Berger, 2018)

Unlike baseball, football executives have shown a greater reluctance to rely too heavily on advanced statistics and have made the slowest shift of the four major American sports. An educated assumption based on research and first-hand professional experience is that football scouts still rely on their eye because of the emotional factor of football. In baseball and basketball, variability is a factor but for the most part, prospect success is somewhat predictable based on known probabilities. In baseball, a given player

hit a fastball however many times on average over thousands of at bats. In football, it's much less cut and dry. As observed with the New England Patriots, so many different emotional and intangible traits are heavily involved and must be highly valued. The problem is that these traits are very difficult to diagnose. With intricate schemes and more teamwork required, mental mistakes are more of a factor in football than in other sports and players' successes and failures are more largely a product of the players around them. For these reasons, it's difficult predict future success.

Earlier in this paper, we established that in the NFL model, talent across teams should be theoretically approximately equal. The question that remained to explore further is how teams can set themselves apart and actively improve their chance of success? The research showed that teams can optimize their draft strategy by maximizing their number of selections and by targeting specific traits and certain positions on the field. After building the foundation of the team through the draft, teambuilders should use free agency efficiently by building depth at key positions – not by giving out lucrative contracts to middle-aged players whose own teams are letting them go.

However, a small competitive advantage is not enough to sustain success for the long term. The second part of the literature review proposed several methods and leadership philosophies to ultimately increase player engagement. Two similar themes that came to light in this section of the research were the ideas of coproduction and shared ownership. Traditionally, front office executives selected the players on the roster, the coaches coached the players who were given to them and the players executed the game plan set by the coaching staff. Involving players and coaches in other areas of the

organization would empower players to be responsible for the final on-field product for everybody. As an important side note, psychological safety and ease of mind is a major piece to this puzzle. The inevitable conflict between players, coaches and front office must be healthy, respectful, and non-personal and all participants must be free to try ideas knowing and trusting that they will not be humiliated for anything brought forward that's not implemented. Trust in the vision, trust in the process and trust in each other are vital when increasing the diversity of thought among the group.

To diagnose where these themes could be inserted into the current NFL landscape, I conducted a two-part Delphi survey of NFL team executives. The Delphi method survey "assumes that group judgements are more valid than individual judgements" (Linstone, H. and Turoff, M., 1975). Essentially, it's an effective way to solicit expert opinion by collecting a range of individual feedback and then surveying that feedback among the full panel of experts.

Survey of League Personnel - Distribution and Limitations

I sent my two-part survey to each member of the front office and coaching staff at all 32 organizations and had 76 responses out of 500 that were sent out. Because of the competitive nature of the NFL, granting anonymity was critical to securing participation. For this reason, I am unsure of the team affiliations, ages and backgrounds of those who responded. Unfortunately, asking which team they were employed by would have drastically lowered the response rate and the reliability as anonymity is a key component to an accurate Delphi method survey. This ensures that those who respond do so in a free, safe, openminded way. What is known, however, is that all respondents are full-time employees, either high-level executives, scouts or coaches at various NFL clubs.

Delphi Method Survey – Round One

Using the Qualtrics program, I created an anonymous survey to ask eleven questions to industry professionals. The first question asked them to identify their current role by picking one of six general categories and the next nine questions were three separate, three-question series each about a different area of the football operation. The first question in each of these three series asked to rate on a scale from one (not involved at all) to ten (completely involved), how much influence players in their organization have over: the roster and personnel decisions (question one), team rules and/or core values (question five), on-field strategy each week (question eight). For each of those series, I then asked the responder to list three ideas that they have that could involve the players in the process behind the roster and personnel decisions (question three), team rules and/or core values (question six), on-field strategy each week (question nine). For the third question of each series, I asked a clear question with a yes/no answer: does your current team do any of the ideas you've shared? The final question was an open-ended short answer asking responders to identify, in their opinion, the number one reason for any given team's success in the NFL. This question was used to form my hypothesis but also provided tremendous personal insight to what the professionals value most.

Delphi Method Survey – Round Two

In round two of the Delphi method survey, I compiled the answers from the first round's questions three, six and nine where I asked NFL team employees to list ideas that they may have to insert the idea of coproduction into the NFL context. For each of those questions in round one, I compiled the most common answers and re-sent those lists to the full original listing of 500 NFL staff members. In this round, I asked each person to

rank their personal top three choices for what they would implement if in a power to do so. Finally, I left the responders with the following paragraph and posed the final question:

> The idea for this survey was to study the concept of coproduction and more specifically, to identify opportunities, large or small, for a football team to incorporate those concepts into the NFL landscape.
>
> Through research methods, it was learned that when lower-level workers have a hand in creating the system with the management and leadership team, it leads to higher levels of engagement (desire to be in the building, to do more and to be involved) and also an increase in their inner-work life (positive perception, intrinsic motivation, pleasant emotions).
>
> This phenomenon occurs because those who are involved in the creation of something feel a greater sense of ownership over that product and therefore, essentially just care more.
>
> For the final question, I'd be very interested in hearing any thoughts you may have regarding this concept.

My assumption for the final question is that many people would scoff at the notion. I expect most of the answers to be a variation of "people need to just do their job" or "I've been a scout for thirty years; other people don't know what they're talking about" or "coaches coach and players play". However, I am interested to see what answers are given. I'm hopeful that there will be a subset of people in the league who understand the need to evolve and improve processes. For many years, the professional football model has largely remained the same (other than adding modern technology) and in the survey responses, there was a noticeable stubbornness and reluctance to change that was found but there's nothing in the NFL rulebook or collective bargaining agreement that prevents progressive innovation and outside the box thinking.

CHAPTER 4

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Round One

Survey Question One

After distributing and collecting round one of the surveys, I first reviewed the opening question asking for their general job title. The results are found in table 4 below.

Table 4. Demographics of Delphi Survey Respondents

What is your current role?	
Area Scout / Pro Scout	40 (52.6%)
Director or Assistant Director	18 (23.7%)
Coach	6 (7.9%)
Scouting Assistants	5 (6.6)
General Managers	4 (5.3%)
Assistant General Manager	3(3.9%)
TOTAL	**76**

The resulting data from this question was not surprising. General managers, assistant general managers and coaches are on the high end of the organizations. Not only are they busier and less likely to respond to an emailed survey, there's a low number of them which explains the lower numbers of responders in those roles. Similarly, each team has only one or two scouting assistants who are typically young, aspiring scouts. Director, assistant director and scouting positions make up most of the front office positions so it makes sense that there will be a higher number from those groups responding.

In the first section of round one, I asked each question specifically about roster and personnel decisions ie. signing players from other teams, releasing players from your own team, trading players, drafting rookies, etc.

Survey Question Two

Table 5. Rating player influence in Roster and Personnel Decisions

On a scale from 1-10, please rate how much influence players in your organization have over the roster and personnel decisions?
76 answers - Average answer = 2.78

Shown in table 5, it's clear that most respondents do not believe that players in their organization have much influence over the roster and personnel decisions. This is another piece of data towards corroborating my earlier assumption that most teams use the same model of scouts find players, coaches coach those players, and those players, like pawns, are only supposed to do what the coaches say without input.

Survey Questions Three and Four

Next, I asked each person to list three ideas that they have for how we could involve players into the process of the teams' roster and personnel decisions (question three) and then I simply asked each person if their team did any of their three suggestions (question four). For the fourth question, the data is shown below in table 6.

Table 6. Diagnosis of current implementation

Does your organization do any of these?		
Yes	36	47.40%
No	40	52.60%

It's clear that some teams do employ potentially progressive initiatives to involve their players. With the necessary anonymity, a limitation of the survey is that I am unsure how

many different teams were represented. It's possible that all thirty-six 'yeses' were from people employed by the same team. It's also unclear whether one or multiple of their ideas were done once, several times or is constantly on going and reiterated by the executive team. Regardless, more than half of the submitted responses were 'nos' which implies that people have innovative ideas that are not being implemented by their teams. That shows an opportunity to get players more involved in this area of football. Since the goal is to introduce the idea of coproduction and empower players, this is one area to potentially look further into.

For question three, the ten most frequent responses heard are shown below in table 7.

Table 7. List of most frequent responses from Survey Question Three

Survey team for best / worst locker room guys
Have college teammates help with character / background before draft
Ask the most talented guys for input
Have players suggest free agents that they'd like to play with
Allow appointed leadership council to give roster feedback
Ask starters about depth at their position
Ask top players about free agent counterparts on opposite side of ball
Involve players and organize permissible recruiting pitches during free agency
Appoint leadership group of returning players to discuss potential additions / subtractions
Have players evaluate the other guys in their position room

Survey Question Five

For the next series, the same three questions were asked but rather than roster

management and personnel decisions, about their teams' practices regarding creating the

team rules, standards and core values.

Table 8. Rating Player Influence over Team Standards, Rules and Values

On a scale from 1-10, please rate how much influence players in your organization have over team standards, team rules and/or core values.
76 answers - Average answer = 5.77

Shown in table 8, it's certainly clear that more is being done in this area than in the

previous section. Because football "locker rooms" are mostly player-only spaces, it

makes sense that this is an area where players can seamlessly take more control and hold

each other accountable.

Survey Questions Six and Seven

The same sequence as above was followed again by asking each respondent to

list three ideas that they have for how they could involve players into the process of

creating and enforcing, team rules and team standards (question six). Duplicated from

above, each respondent was then asked if their team did any of the three ideas they

suggested (question seven). For the that question, the data is shown below in table 9.

Table 9. Diagnosis of current implementation

Does your organization do any of these?		
Yes	61	80.30%
No	15	19.70%

For this one, it was quite lopsided with greater than 80% of responses

indicating that yes, they're organization does use some or all the ideas above. Although

it's encouraging to see that management give their players the autonomy needed in this area, this may not be a fruitful opportunity to increase the overall level of autonomy.

After compiling the submissions for question six, the ten most frequently given ideas are shown below in table 10.

Table 10. List of most frequent responses from Survey Question Six

Team decides core values
Appoint Leadership Committee (outside of normal captains)
Player led fines / punishments for violating rules
Give a platform to guys who are perfect in practice
Veterans take the lead and handle issues
Give actual autonomy to team captains
Appoint position captains to hold their own room accountable
Communicate concerns / ideas with the Head Coach
In team meetings, call out teammates who do not adhere to rules
Regular player only meetings

Survey Question Eight

Table 11. Rating player influence over football strategy

On a scale from 1-10, please rate how much influence players in your organization have over the game plan and coaching on-field strategy each week?
76 answers - Average answer = 4.94

The final facet of the football operation that I inquired about was regarding football strategy and game planning. With an average answer of 4.94 shown in table 11, it's clear that the players have influence over the game plan, but it also implies that there's room to give more.

Survey Questions Nine and Ten

Table 12. Diagnosis of current implementation

Does your organization do any of these? (Strategy Game Plan)		
Yes	66	86.80%
No	10	13.20%

Once more, the survey asked if their organizations currently employ any of their three proposed ideas. Like the team standards and team rules section, there was a massive disparity with 87% of responses indicating that yes, they're organization does use one, two or three of the given ideas. For question ten, the following eight ideas shown in table 13, separated themselves as the most frequent.

Table 13. List of most frequent responses from Survey Question Ten

Have conversations with players regarding various schemes and ideas
Instruct coaches to solicit and listen to player feedback on game day
Have players prepare advance scouting reports
Allow players to sit in with staff on off days early in the week
Have coordinators sit with players to put together call sheet or opening plays
Give autonomy to QB room to select plays they like
Give autonomy to starters at any position to select plays they like
Give autonomy to veteran or smarter players

Survey Question Eleven

For the final question, a brief overview of the project was provided before respondents were asked for their subjective opinions on what leads to success in the National Football League. This survey was a unique opportunity to ask established professionals their opinion and I look forward to using these answers to shape my own philosophy. For this response, fifteen people responded with the following words of wisdom.

1. "An open line of communication between all departments of an organization along with all departments working towards a common goal day in & day out."

2. "Cohesion and clarity. If everyone is on the same page and focused on the same goals with the same plan for execution, then things will always go smoother and more successful."

3. "Communication, balance and cohesiveness."

4. "Great players, good coaching and patience."

5. "Having a core set of beliefs, standards and having an idea of what type of player you want to draft and free agents you want to bring into your organization."

6. "It's not any one reason, it is an accumulation of things. Health provides stability of the core group of players and allows them to work to improve each week. As the year goes, matchups can work in your favor if your core group remains on the field and depth is not relied upon. Coaching and strategy as well as intelligence with the preparation to play smart pre-snap and post-snap to execute the game plan and have answers in-game to make adjustments. Matchups are critical and tie directly into play-calling and strategy. Players who have talent and work at their craft to develop their skill and refine it often make the difference and those with that dedication are less prone to self-inflicted mistakes and dumb penalties that can get you beat."

7. "It's people, not just the players but the overall culture that is present or that can be created with new staff/personnel."

8. "Setting a standard and culture within their organization and sticking to it."

9. "Strategy and game management. Every team has talented players, a well-disciplined and organized team will always have more success if they execute what is being asked of them. Penalties and blown assignments constantly cost teams games."

10. "Strong culture of cohesion and everyone working together."

11. "Talented players."

12. "The number one thing I feel is stability in the front office and coaching staff. Bring in great character people that enjoy working together and keeping real and understanding that it's a team game. Another big factor is staying healthy!"

13. "The organization has a clear vision and philosophical alignment in ownership, head coach, general manager that directs the coaches, staff and players they select reflect their values and standards.   Everybody knows what they are and what they believe in and are disciplined toward that identity."

14. "There are many requirements. Good coaching, good quarterback, continuity of scheme, organizational culture."

15. "Trust."

16. "Having a core set of beliefs, standards and having an idea of what type of player you want to draft and free agents you want to bring into your organization."

At this point in the research, several of the answers given were underwhelming. Answers related to 'talented players' or 'the people in the building' were unimpressive. What specifically does that mean? One comment that was enlightening was "health

provides stability of the core group of players and allows them to work to improve each week. As the year goes, matchups can work in your favor if your core group remains on the field and depth is not relied upon." Late in the season, injuries are common as players' bodies get worn down. Staying healthy can be a key factor if your best players were playing against the opponent's reserves. The answers that aligned most with the previous research are the ones that acknowledge the parity across the league. For example, one responder wrote "…Every team has talented players, a well-disciplined and organized team will always have more success if they execute what is being asked of them. Penalties and blown assignments constantly cost teams games." Another common theme found above that supports the prior research is the idea of stability and patience. With the ever-increasing magnitude of professional football, there is a rush to fire people when success is slow to come. According to data from Five Thirty Eight, team decision makers in the NFL are getting more impatient. In this study, author Tyler Schalter designated any coach who was fired or quits before their third season would be classified as a "failed hire". Contrary, any coach who stayed employed for three seasons or more with more wins than losses was labeled a "successful hire". Schalter does note that evaluating this trend is difficult because each franchise, owner and general manager have different situations and different standards. He notes "Marvin Lewis held on to the Cincinnati Bengals' head coaching job for 16 years by winning slightly more often than he lost (131-122 win-loss record). Meanwhile, John Fox was fired from the Denver Broncos after four years with a 46-18 win-loss record and making the playoffs all four years." However, it was still easy to see the trend. Over the past ten seasons, NFL teams made 68 total hires for their head coach positions. Of those, only 18 (26.4%) were

"successful" hires. Moreover, most teams that pulled the cord on failed tenures, didn't do much better the next time. Only seven coaching failures were followed by successful tenures. (Schalter, 2020) This shows that hiring is difficult, and it teaches that patience is key. Two more common themes from the answers above that go hand in hand with patience, is stability and cohesiveness. When looking at the research as a whole, the consensus is that it would be sensible for teams to hire a head coach who has the same philosophy as both the owner and general manager. After the match, the general manager, owner and head coach should prioritize the working relationship, communicate freely, trust each other, be patient, and stick it out to build a program together.

Round Two

For round two of the survey, I compiled all the proposed ideas from the panel of experts and re-sent the full list to the full group. This time, I asked each respondent to rank their top three choices in order by placing a '1' next to what they think is the best idea of the list, a '2' next to what they think would be the second best choice and a '3' next to their third choice. They were instructed to then leave all other choices blank. For round two, there were forty responses received back and the round was closed after a week passed without any new submissions.

Roster Management and Personnel Decisions

In the first section, I surveyed the group on the topic of roster management and personnel moves. From the forty responses, the breakdown of votes is shown in table 14 below.

Table 14. Tally of votes from Survey Round Two, Question One

Appoint a leadership group of returning players to discuss potential additions / subtractions			
Ranked 1st Choice: 1	Ranked 2nd Choice: 3	Ranked 3rd Choice: 2	Did Not Select: 34
Have college teammates help with character / background checks before draft			
Ranked 1st Choice: 13	Ranked 2nd Choice: 5	Ranked 3rd Choice: 8	Did Not Select: 14
Ask the most talented guys for their input			
Ranked 1st Choice: 2	Ranked 2nd Choice: 2	Ranked 3rd Choice: 0	Did Not Select: 36
Have own players suggest free agents that they'd like to play with			
Ranked 1st Choice: 0	Ranked 2nd Choice: 2	Ranked 3rd Choice: 2	Did Not Select: 36
Involve players and organize permissible recruiting pitches to free agents during negotiations			
Ranked 1st Choice: 7	Ranked 2nd Choice: 7	Ranked 3rd Choice: 7	Did Not Select: 19
Ask own players about free agents at their own position			
Ranked 1st Choice: 2	Ranked 2nd Choice: 0	Ranked 3rd Choice: 3	Did Not Select: 35
Allow appointed leadership council to give roster feedback and use that information			
Ranked 1st Choice: 7	Ranked 2nd Choice: 4	Ranked 3rd Choice: 7	Did Not Select: 22
Ask top players about free agent counterparts on opposite side of ball			
Ranked 1st Choice: 4	Ranked 2nd Choice: 8	Ranked 3rd Choice: 6	Did Not Select: 22
Survey own team for best and worst locker room character guys			
Ranked 1st Choice: 4	Ranked 2nd Choice: 4	Ranked 3rd Choice: 5	Did Not Select: 27
Have players evaluate the other guys in their position room			
Ranked 1st Choice: 0	Ranked 2nd Choice: 5	Ranked 3rd Choice: 0	Did Not Select: 35

After tallying each idea's number of first place votes, number of second place votes and number of third place votes, a weighted point system was used which gave three points to a first-place tally, two points for a second-place tally and one point for a third-place tally. The weighted system was used to make sure the best ideas came to the front and to account for the scenario that the best idea of the bunch was almost everybody's second choice but few people's first. The final score is copied below in table 15.

Table 15. Weighted Point Totals from Survey Round Two, Question One

How Could Players Be More Involved in the Roster Management of Teams	**Points**
Have college teammates help with character / background checks before draft	57

Involve players and organize permissible recruiting pitches to free agents during negotiations	42
Allow appointed leadership council to give roster feedback and use that information	36
Ask top players about free agent counterparts on opposite side of ball	34
Survey own team for best and worst locker room character guys	25
Appoint a leadership group of returning players to discuss potential additions / subtractions	11
Ask the most talented guys for their input	10
Have players evaluate the other guys in their position room	10
Ask own players about free agents at their own position	9
Have own players suggest free agents that they'd like to play with	6

In this section, the number one response to involve players into this process is to "have college teammates help with character and background checks before the draft." This is logical because there's nobody who knows a prospect more than his former teammates. Although it's common practice for NFL teams to interview a prospect's coaches and support staff to judge their character, a good addition could be to call guys on your own team who may have played with them in college or have friends who did. Additionally, trustworthy players could easily reach out to people that they know in the league to get the full scoop on that prospect's mental makeup and character. The second highest vote getter in this section was "involve players and organize permissible recruiting pitches to free agents during negotiations." The benefits of this idea are two-fold. First, it gives those players some ownership and culpability if those players decide to sign or not sign with their team. Second, it forces those players to think about a pitch for their team which reinforces and reminds that group of core players of the benefits of playing in that city for that team.

<u>Team Rules and Team Standards</u>

For the next series, I sent the compiled ideas regarding the formation of team

rules and team standards. That breakdown of votes is shown below in table 16.

Table 16. Tally of votes from Survey Round Two, Question Two

Appoint Leadership Committee (outside of normal captains)			
Ranked 1st Choice: 11	Ranked 2nd Choice: 7	Ranked 3rd Choice: 4	Did Not Select: 18
Communicate concerns / ideas with the Head Coach			
Ranked 1st Choice: 8	Ranked 2nd Choice: 10	Ranked 3rd Choice: 7	Did Not Select: 15
Veterans take the lead and handle issues			
Ranked 1st Choice: 7	Ranked 2nd Choice: 5	Ranked 3rd Choice: 4	Did Not Select: 24
In team meetings, call out teammates who do not adhere to rules			
Ranked 1st Choice: 2	Ranked 2nd Choice: 3	Ranked 3rd Choice: 4	Did Not Select: 31
Give actual autonomy to team captains			
Ranked 1st Choice: 0	Ranked 2nd Choice: 2	Ranked 3rd Choice: 0	Did Not Select: 38
Regular player only meetings			
Ranked 1st Choice: 1	Ranked 2nd Choice: 0	Ranked 3rd Choice: 4	Did Not Select: 35
Team decides core values			
Ranked 1st Choice: 6	Ranked 2nd Choice: 4	Ranked 3rd Choice: 3	Did Not Select: 27
Player led fines / punishments for violating rules			
Ranked 1st Choice: 0	Ranked 2nd Choice: 5	Ranked 3rd Choice: 2	Did Not Select: 33
Appoint position captains to hold their own room accountable			
Ranked 1st Choice: 5	Ranked 2nd Choice: 3	Ranked 3rd Choice: 11	Did Not Select: 21
Give a platform to guys who are perfect in practice			
Ranked 1st Choice: 0	Ranked 2nd Choice: 1	Ranked 3rd Choice: 1	Did Not Select: 38

When adding the weighted point system, the following results are shown in table

17.

Table 17. Weighted Point Totals from Survey Round Two, Question Two

Idea	Points
Appoint Leadership Committee (outside of normal captains)	51
Communicate concerns / ideas with the Head Coach	51
Veterans take the lead and handle issues	35
Appoint position captains to hold their own room accountable	32
Team decides core values	29
In team meetings, call out teammates who do not adhere to rules	16
Player led fines / punishments for violating rules	12
Regular player only meetings	7
Give actual autonomy to team captains	4
Give a platform to guys who are perfect in practice	3

The bottom of table 17 is surprising. First, implementing regular player-only meetings was expected to receive a higher number of votes. When you compare that tally with that of 'give actual autonomy to team captains' it shows that there is still a hesitance to give control to the players. The results at the top of the chart show that it could be beneficial to appoint a leadership council of veteran players and give them a direct line to the head coach, general manager and ownership. If those players can effectively communicate to management that a decision was not well-received or could be implemented in a better fashion, and the management allows that feedback, then no harm can be done. At the very least, there would be a beneficial conversation about why those decisions were made. At that point, the leadership group can then relay the message to the rest of the team in a way that the other players could understand. At this point as well, the least amount of action would still result in positive communication. Because some managers don't speak the "same language" as some players, being sensitive to issues and "seeing the ship through the eyes of the crew" are positive leadership traits are outlined earlier in the paper. In this scenario, it's the responsibility of good leadership to relay messages in a

way the players would understand. A leadership council of veteran players can be an effective way to bridge that gap.

Game Planning and Football Strategy

Finally, the third area of football operations that was looked at was in game planning and football strategy. The voting results are shown in table 18 and the compiled point totals are shown below that in table 19.

Table 18. Tally of votes from Survey Round Two, Question Three

Give autonomy to QB room to select plays they like			
Ranked 1st Choice: 4	Ranked 2nd Choice: 3	Ranked 3rd Choice: 3	Did Not Select: 30
Give autonomy to starters at any position to select plays they like			
Ranked 1st Choice: 3	Ranked 2nd Choice: 0	Ranked 3rd Choice: 0	Did Not Select: 37
Give autonomy to veteran or smarter players			
Ranked 1st Choice: 0	Ranked 2nd Choice: 3	Ranked 3rd Choice: 0	Did Not Select: 37
Allow players to sit in with staff on off days early in the week			
Ranked 1st Choice: 4	Ranked 2nd Choice: 5	Ranked 3rd Choice: 11	Did Not Select: 20
Instruct coaches to solicit and listen to player feedback on game day			
Ranked 1st Choice: 6	Ranked 2nd Choice: 9	Ranked 3rd Choice: 5	Did Not Select: 20
Have coordinators sit with players to put together call sheet or opening plays			
Ranked 1st Choice: 4	Ranked 2nd Choice: 6	Ranked 3rd Choice: 5	Did Not Select: 25
Have players prepare advance scouting reports			
Ranked 1st Choice: 7	Ranked 2nd Choice: 7	Ranked 3rd Choice: 4	Did Not Select: 22
Have conversations with players regarding various schemes and ideas			
Ranked 1st Choice: 12	Ranked 2nd Choice: 7	Ranked 3rd Choice: 12	Did Not Select: 9

Table 19. Weighted Point Totals from Survey Round Two, Question Three

Idea	Points
Have conversations with players regarding various schemes and ideas	62
Instruct coaches to solicit and listen to player feedback on game day	41
Have players prepare advance scouting reports	39
Allow players to sit in with staff on off days early in the week	33
Have coordinators sit with players to put together call sheet or opening plays	29
Give autonomy to QB room to select plays they like	21
Give autonomy to starters at any position to select plays they like	9
Give autonomy to veteran or smarter players	6

From the results in table 19, you can see a clear favor towards open lines of communication which feeds into the earlier findings that trust and cohesiveness matter to this group of expert professionals. The number one response was to discuss schemes and ideas with players. Rather than have the staff go through the brainstorming process and then selling the final product to the players, the notion here is that it would be beneficial to involve them in the process. Perhaps on a weekly basis, they can have Monday meetings to discuss the next opponent. Maybe coaches could assign players to watch film on a specific game situation and those players could then present their findings to the team and staff. The second highest response in this section was to instruct coaches to first solicit, but then actually listen to and use player feedback on game day. In the military, if there are ever conflicting intel reports, the group sides with the people on the ground because those people know what's happening as opposed to what ought to be happening. If assistant coaches were instructed to not only ask for the players' opinion but then truly listen and implement those ideas, then it stays consistent with the theme of empowering players. Additionally, it would make them play with more confidence and more focus so that they can be aware and knowingly report accurate information. When looking at the next few highest-scoring proposals, the same theme continues: allow players to sit in on staff meetings early in the week, have coordinators sit with players when putting their call-sheet together, and allow quarterbacks to select the plays that they like most all revolve around open lines of communication, increased transparency and an increased level of teamwork and cooperation. However, one specific answer's high score was surprising. The proposal with the third highest-amount of points in this section was to have players prepare advanced scouting reports. This is interesting because it's very

different than the traditional model. Typically, teams have advance scouts go to their team's next opponent each week. Those scouts are constantly a week ahead of the team so that when the game is over on Sunday, the scouting report's first draft is ready for the coaching staff and players on Monday morning. If teams found an appropriate way to involve players in this process it could bring cooperation and coproduction to a new level.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This capstone's aim was to compile a list of best practices relevant to building a successful organization in the National Football League. As a football administrator, the goal was to combine first-hand experience with both quantitative and qualitative data using a two-part Delphi method survey of professional experts and available research literature regarding both on and off the field processes.

To begin with the on the field functions of a football team, one of the key methods for building a successful team is through the entry draft where each team, in reverse-standings order select players for seven rounds. The benefit of building through the draft is that a team can get top-level players at a bargain due to the rookie wage scale. Several peer-reviewed journal articles concluded that an increase in the number of draft picks directly correlates to an increase in winning percentage three years later. Additionally, those studies also found that first-round picks are overvalued. Although they contribute the most to their teams of each draft round, they are disproportionally more expensive than second and third rounders who are shown to have greater value. After the early first round selections, the salary slots drop very quickly. Furthermore, the literature confirmed what was previously assumed: drafting quarterbacks is very difficult. There are almost no metrics that correlate to success in the NFL and even success at the college level does not correlate to winning at the professional level. The lesson learned regarding picking quarterbacks is to not get distracted by exceptional size, speed or arm strength. The data shows that teams should qualify the talent and certainly make sure those key areas aren't deficient but then once that top group is formed, select the player

with the best character who's tough, smart, disciplined and motivated to work hard. Another conclusion found by this capstone study goes against the popular philosophy of picking the best player available. Teambuilders and media members often remark that weak teams aren't good enough to be picky and should not select a guy at a specific position if there's a better overall player at a different position available. This research shows that it's entirely realistic to draft players who contribute immediately. The fastest way to improve a roster is to plug glaring holes and then allow that core to work together to improve. The research also shows that the collegiate draft is a time to be conservative and safe. It's an opportunity to raise the floor of your team rather than raise the potential ceiling.

Next, this paper analyzed a 2015 journal study by Hughes, Koedel and Price that converted a popular baseball statistic called Wins Above Replacement (WAR) to the football context. According to MLB.com, WAR measures a player's value in all facets of the game by deciphering how many more wins they're worth than a replacement-level player at the same position (e.g., a Minor League replacement or a readily available fill-in free agent)." (MLB, 2020) Essentially, WAR measures a player's value by evaluating the difference in win percentage when that player is replaced by a bottom level replacement. By converting to football and creating a metric called "Positional WAR", Hughes, Koedel and Price were able to observe the change in winning percentage when a starter at each position was removed from the lineup due to injury or suspension. Not surprisingly, the quarterback position was found to be the most valuable by a significant margin. In addition to the quarterback, other positions who had significant WAR scores were wide receiver, tight end and offensive tackle in that order. When starters at these positions miss

games, their teams face a significant drop in winning percentage. Although there were numerous plausible explanations provided in the study, it shows teambuilding executives to value durability at these spots. An interesting tidbit that was found in the research was that defensive players had a very low WAR score. The results showed that a team would not want to miss a starting linebacker, defensive lineman, safety or cornerback in that order, but none of the values were statistically significant which means that on average, teams do not suffer when defensive starters miss games. (Hughes, Koedel, and Price, 2015)

Off the field and outside of the Xs and Os of football strategy, just as much improvement to the organization can be made. Throughout this research, the desired leadership traits that came to the forefront were being a good listener, trust in both their staff and the direction of the organization, sensitivity and ownership. The best leaders have their boots on the ground and lead by walking around. The best leaders can see the ship through the eyes of the crew and must be able to connect with people first. A leader could have the best ideas and greatest solutions but if nobody is following them, then they're just walking alone in a field preaching to nobody. The first step of good leadership is to meet people where they are, and then take them to where they need to go.

Additionally, this research found several major benefits to having a diverse upper management level. When an organization has a diverse group of executives, general manager, head coach, and coordinators, the first benefit is that that group is proven to be better at solving complex problems. Avoiding groupthink should be a top priority of management teams and the resulting good conflict is healthy. If that conflict is respectful and nonpersonal and everybody trusts that each other has the best interests of the team at

heart, then the best ideas will find their way to the top. Secondly, there is an abundance of research that shows the benefits of mentor / mentee relationships. Players and lower level staff members should feel represented by and connected to top managers. Giving each person a chance to be mentored by somebody above them in the organization who may look like them or be from where they're from will increase the number of people being actively developed.

Another way to increase engagement is to increase autonomy and give everybody in the organization a purpose. NASA has a great culture when the janitor goes to work each and every day believing that he is working towards putting a man on the moon. Another way to increase engagement is to increase an employee's inner work-life i.e.. their positive perceptions of their job, their intrinsic motivation to work hard and their pleasant emotions in the workplace. A disengaged company is a company of zombies! An engaged company has happy people who are excited to be in the office and motivated on their own to work hard and do great work. This research found the best way to increase inner work life is to make meaningful progress. When people feel themselves getting better and moving towards a goal, the energy and motivation compounds like a snowball rolling downhill. Leaders should not be afraid to celebrate small wins or to let people know they're doing a great job and should constantly look to for ways to illustrate how things are getting better and becoming more successful.

Reflection and Next Steps

Conducting this study was a tremendous learning experience. In addition to corresponding with many professionals who I respect and aim to emulate, analyzing the technical aspects of leading an NFL team was enjoyable and enlightening. This project

was an opportunity to pull back the curtain and look at years of compiled data to find what's consistent between successful organizations. It was my hope that by digging deep and stripping away layer by layer, what's truly important would come to light.

As I continue my career as a football executive, I hope to use this project as a guide and plan to edit and add to it over time. By publishing and sharing this study, I hope that both established and aspiring football executives will find the information useful and grounding. It's refreshing to be reminded that success on the football field doesn't lie in the hands of only a few great athletes and that team success won't dissipate as those players age. Leaders can make a difference by selecting and hiring hard-working, intelligent and motivated people, by including them in the process and by making their work environment enjoyable, productive and a positive place to learn and grow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper confirms that there is no one fix that magically creates a successful organization in the NFL. While once in a generation talent can help a team win games in the short term, sustaining success is not the result of major one-time initiatives. The research in this paper shines a spotlight on several things that teams can do to position themselves for success by managing risk and increasing the chance of developing successful players. However, the most important learning of this project is that building great organizations happens through everyday words and actions, by everybody being on the same page and by creating an environment where all people in all roles at all levels of the organization are excited to work hard each and every day for something bigger than themselves.

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