



By Christopher Manganaro

Coaching a football team and leading a military unit have a lot in common. Both require an understanding of the “game,” practicing multiple plays for different scenarios, and building a quality bench of “players.” Whether it’s scoring more touchdowns than your opponent, or seizing a key piece of terrain for follow-on-forces, success and failure could come down to your indirect leadership choices. Like coaches, military leaders at the field grade level and above will have to lead their teams from the sidelines, and no longer have direct leadership over the actual “plays” in the game.

There are countless books and articles written by some of the most famous football coaches on how to lead a team to success. Names like Lombardi, Parcells, and Ditka are icons in the game and led their teams to victory time after time. Like military units, football teams can take on the personality of their leader. There is the dictator who will tell you exactly what to do to be successful as long as you follow the “my way or the highway” attitude. There is the appeaser who will look to the senior members of the team to carry most of the burden and

be there to settle any disputes. Somewhere in between the dictator and the appeaser is the leader who can adjust their style based on the team they have to work with. Either way, there are some indirect leadership characteristics from a football coach that military leaders can apply to lead their organizations to victory.

Understanding the game

A prerequisite to having a winning season is a strong understanding of the game. To be victorious at the game of football coaches must know their team, the opposing team, and the rules that govern the gridiron. War is no different. Leaders must know their Soldiers, know their enemy, and have an understanding of both the nature and character of war and warfare.

Coaches use a variety of methods that we can apply to the military to better understand our team. Tough practices that simulate game conditions, and the weekly team dinner are just a few of the methods many coaches leverage to better understand their team and evaluate the physical, mental, and emotional state of the players. Similarly, we can gain a clearer picture of the strengths and weaknesses of our subordinates by creating tough realistic training exercises and by bringing members of our unit together over breakfast at the dining facility or a beer call for great discussion.

Additionally, successful coaches study their opponents through watching game film, analyzing statistics, and looking for weaknesses that they can exploit. Successful military leaders are no different. For example, General Patton once said, "I have studied the Germans all my life. I have read the memoirs of their general officers and political leaders. I have even read their philosophers...I have studied in detail the accounts of every damned one of their battles. I know exactly how he will react under any given set of circumstances...Therefore, when the day comes, I'm going to whip the hell out of him!"

Finally, the only way we can understand the “rules of the gridiron” in war is to study its nature and character. One such approach is to study war in width, depth, and context. I highly recommend leaders read the [*Use and Abuse of Military History*](#) by Sir Michael Howard to better grasp this technique. Once leaders have met these perquisites they are ready to build their “mental playbooks.”

Play calling

Coaches have a responsibility to call the right play at the right time. They also must look 2-3 plays ahead to see what they will do. Run on first down, or throw? Will my field goal kicker be able to make it from the right hash mark or should I run a play to the left hash mark to set him up? The old saying, “the first casualty in combat is the plan” cannot be more true. Similarly, the opposing football team can cause you to throw out your plan based on how they array their defense, injure one of your players, or use the weather (snow, rain, wind, etc.) to their advantage. What separates good coaches from great coaches is their ability to call the right plays when the situation rapidly changes.

Coaches develop the ability to call the difficult plays by making practice harder than the game. Using multiple scenarios and imposing restrictions on your team helps develop the ability to notice changes in the defense or offense call audibles during the game. Would you shut down the power to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) to practice your staffs ability to operate on full analog? How about simulating an injury to one of your battle captains to see how the TOC would respond without them being around to bark orders?

Many military units suffer from the inability to audible their plan when faced with the enemy’s first contact. Decision point tactics is something that the Opposing Force (OPFOR) at the National Training Center are masters of and inflict heavy damage on units that are not able to adjust their plan. Just like a football coach plans their first few plays of the game, military leaders need to understand that their plan will need to change and need to practice

audibles and decision point tactics during training to build the trust and repetitions within the unit.

Building the bench

Vince Lombardi once said, “The achievements of an organization are the combined efforts of each individual.” It’s a tried and true statement that successful teams have a deep bench. The starting lineup at the beginning of the season, is not the same at the end. In order to maintain success on the field, a coach needs to develop his second and third string players.

It will happen to every team and every military unit whether they like it or not. People will come and go, but the mission must continue. During the Army Force Generation Model we built units based off patch charts and ensured that for the most part they stayed together. Like an ARFORGEN unit, football teams normally rely on everyone to be on the team for the entire season. Inevitably, you will have to go to your bench. Have you set the conditions to fill the gap when someone gets injured or moves away? Like any process, building your bench needs to be a deliberate act for leaders.

We all know the strong non-commissioned officer or junior officer in the TOC who carry the weight of others. What are you doing to share that load and develop your second string? Simple things like, having your staff cross train on each other’s tasks, using a sharepoint site to display information, and leading by example and delegating your own tasks where necessary. Pete Carroll, coach of the Superbowl XLVIII Champions loved to keep the mood light in the locker room and would occasionally put younger and more inexperienced players in games against tougher opponents to build their confidence. Are you doing the same? How about letting that young sergeant brief the concept of the operation to the battalion commander, while also ensuring he practiced a few times with you and the staff? People will surprise you when you give them the confidence and feeling that at any time they can be called upon to “hit the field.”

Organizational leadership and coaching are more similar than you would believe. Unlike sports, a mistake on the field of battle can cost someone their life. However, leaders at the organizational level and above must recognize that although they are no longer the players on the field, they play a critical role in the outcome of the game from the sidelines.

Christopher Manganaro is an Army Officer who has served at the tactical, operational and strategic levels of the military. He believes that leader development and mentoring the next generation of leaders are paramount to our military's success at current and future conflicts.

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