



by Sean Finnan

The comparisons between sports and leadership are countless. There are so many parallels that apply to both: know your role, cheer on your teammates, be coachable, sacrifice individual glory for the betterment of the team, discipline pays off, practice, practice, practice, and numerous others. As someone who played sports all my life, I think I've naturally applied many of those concepts in my organizational interactions.

But one sports concept sticks with me the most. In one of our college football meeting rooms, someone hung a sign that read:

Consistent Execution of Aggressive Fundamentals

Such a simple string of five words, but oh so powerful. In a football sense, of course it referred to blocking, tackling, and the like. Even the greatest players in the world show up to training camp each year and work the basics of footwork, ball handling, and hand

placement. Major League Baseball players report to spring training and practice hitting off a tee and throwing from one knee in order to ensure their form is correct. The lesson is simple and aptly summarized by the great Michael Jordan - "Get the fundamentals down and the level of everything you do will rise."

And that simplicity applies to more than sports. Whether you are building a deck, baking a cake, flying an airplane, or leading a large organization, there are certain fundamentals that you have to get right. Brilliance in the basics naturally leads to success in more complex tasks. Conversely, when things get hectic and crazy and everyone seems to be going in multiple different directions, a refocus to the core tenants of your organizational mission often enables a more manageable workload.

While I was commanding an Air Force squadron, I communicated these concepts in the following way: our guiding principles were the Consistent Execution of Aggressive Fundamentals...with Fundamentals F.I.R.S.T.

Because the fundamentals form the foundation on which everything else is built, I identified five key organizational ideas to anchor us:

(F) Family: Always think and act with "family" in mind. Do not separate the qualities that make us good spouses/parents/sons/daughters/friends from the qualities that make us good Airmen. To do that, we must be role models, we must help out, care, praise, discipline, empathize, communicate, and plan.

(I) Integrity: Do the right thing...always. Be the definition of character. Our teammates, our users, and the American public must trust us completely and we must show them that we are acting in their best interest.

(R) Respect: Live the golden rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you).

Respect for each other is absolutely essential to this organization and the Air Force. There are no superiors or subordinates in this squadron; rank and position do not make anyone “better” than anyone else. While there is certainly a chain of command, we do not work *for* people. We work *with* people.

(S) Service: Remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Service is important - to our teammates, to the squadron, to the Air Force, and to the country. What we do matters. Be proud of that.

(T) Total Fitness: Commit daily to moral, mental, and physical excellence. These are the three aspects of self, the three effects of military power, and the three domains of war. Positively building our moral character, mental complexity, and physical health is a never-ending endeavor.

Simply establishing the anchoring concepts is not enough. They must be applied.

Aggressive: These fundamentals must be aggressive. This does not mean being brash or forceful. Rather, it implies being deliberate and controlled. Think about what we are going to do, consider the consequences of that act, and then deliberately take action.

Execution: Key to these aggressive fundamentals is actually executing them. We must actively and overtly live them.

Consistent: Lastly, we must perform over time. Steady and regular execution builds confidence, molds positive behaviors, and establishes the conditions for achievement.

The simplicity of this approach worked very well for me. While the mnemonic bordered on cheesy, it was certainly easy to remember and offered a simple concept to always fall back on. Furthermore, while I identified our organizational fundamentals, the idea offered a nice opportunity to discuss more job-specific fundamentals as well. It challenged folks to really

boil down their jobs into the most elemental parts. With landing an airplane, maybe the fundamentals are aimpoint and airspeed. With small unit tactics, maybe they are shoot-move-communicate. With program management, maybe they are cost-schedule-performance. In each case, the progressive dissection allows us to identify the basic required skill-set and therefore work on that skill to improve the more complex undertaking. Everything we do can be simplified into a handful of key concepts fundamental to success in the more complex tasks you take on everyday.

Vince Lombardi said, "Excellence is achieved by the mastery of the fundamentals."

Therefore, two questions become clear:

1. What are your organization's fundamentals?
2. How will you consistently and aggressively execute them?

If and when you answer these questions accurately, I'm confident your organization will achieve excellence.

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