

# Punt, Pass or Kick?

We're five weeks into the 2006 football season and the contenders are beginning to separate themselves from the pretenders.

How will you and your team finish the season?

Ten of the NFL's 32 football teams have new coaches this season – a turnover rate of nearly 30 percent. Meanwhile, a Booz Allen Hamilton study shows that a record number of CEOs were punted off the team in 2005, with nearly half of the departures the result of mergers or poor performance.

You can argue that CEOs have less time than ever to satisfy impatient investors and customers, but the harsh reality is that CEOs are paid to increase the value of the organizations they lead. They must find a way to make their organization number one in the minds of investors and customers. A head football coach, likewise, must get grown men to do things they don't want to do in order to achieve something they all desperately want: win a championship.

So as leadership teams begin to assess the 2006 performance of people, programs and processes and start 2007 planning, it's appropriate to examine the steps to developing a winning game plan and the characteristics of the most effective coaches and their winning teams.

## Six steps to developing a winning game plan

There are six essential steps to developing a winning game plan. Here are two:

**1. Assess reality.** What do your customers think about your products or services? How's the morale of your employees? Where are your competitors vulnerable? Our firm helps organizations answer these questions. Objective. Impartial. No sugar-coating. "Find out where their weak side is and then go for it," said Notre Dame coach Knute Rockne.

**2. Leverage your competitive advantage.** Third-party research will help you uncover or confirm what your customers value most. Armed with this information, develop a game plan that capitalizes on what you do best that your customers value most. This is how you win. Heading into a championship game, Texas coach Darrell Royal was asked if he planned to open up his run-based offense and pass more often. "We're going to dance with who brung us," Royal famously replied – recognition of his team's competitive advantage.

## Characteristics of winning teams

An examination of winning professional football teams over the 40 years since the Super Bowl was first played reveals a remarkably short list of characteristics that championship teams share. Here are two:

**1. Take time to plan.** Bill Belichick has guided New England to three Super Bowl championships and developed the defensive game plan that helped the New

York Giants win two Super Bowls, including an upset of the Buffalo Bills in Super Bowl XXV. This game plan is preserved in the Football Hall of Fame. It's no surprise that Belichick places a premium on planning. He uses preparation to neutralize opponents' strengths and exploit their weaknesses. "It is better to be prepared and never have the opportunity than to have the opportunity and not be prepared," says Belichick.

Do you and your organization take time to plan?

**2. Consistently high levels of execution.** After the objectives have been set, the strategies selected and the team engaged, it all comes down to execution. Cliff Harris, a four-time All-Pro as the star safety on the Dallas Cowboys Super Bowl-winning teams, tells a story about Coach Tom Landry's approach to winning football games. Harris couldn't wait to hear Landry's thoughts as the team prepared for its first game that season. Harris was on the front row waiting for Landry to deliver a pep talk like he'd never heard before. Landry stepped to the front of the room and said, "You're a great team. You've got a good game plan that you've studied. You've practiced hard. Let's go execute." That was it. No "Win-one-for-the-Gipper" speech. No yelling. No emotion. "Coach Landry brought a business-like approach to the game of football, and that's one of the reasons he was such a winner," says Harris. There's no question that Tom Landry was an inspiration to his team and had other ways of motivating players. All great coaches and, for that matter, business leaders do. But Coach Landry's belief – built on selecting talented players, studying and practicing hard and developing a thoughtful game plan – was that it's ultimately consistent execution that wins football games.

Perform or perish. Are you tracking performance? Have you established consequences to reward success and penalize mediocrity?

## "Winning is not a sometime thing"

"Running a football team," said legendary Green Bay Packers coach, "is no different than running any other kind of organization: an army, a political party or a business. The principles are the same. The object is to win – to beat the other guy. Maybe that sounds hard or cruel. I don't think it is. Winning is not a sometime thing. It's an all time thing. You don't win once in a while. You don't do things right once in a while. You do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing."

Do you have what it takes to win? As you enter 2007, will you be punting away time, money and opportunities, or kicking the extra points that follow game-changing touchdowns? ■