



Ever-Successful vs. Never-Successful: What the NFL Has to Teach Us About Managing Agile Enterprises, Part I

Description

A few days ago, I responded to a post on LinkedIn about how Google seems to always find a way to keep ahead of the pack, even when someone of importance leaves the company. It occurred to me that NFL teams have to adapt and remake themselves from season to season, as players and coaches come and go, and on a weekly basis during the season to prepare for each opponent. Some teams always seem to be competitive, and others never are. Why is that? I think that NFL teams demonstrate a number of characteristics that enterprise managements should consider.

In the NFL game success has been attributed to **players**, **scheme** and **execution**. You need to have enough skilled players (it's impossible to have an entire team of all-stars but you need enough of them in critical positions,) a good game plan and good execution to win. These correlate well with Agile 2 Academy's focus on **leadership**, **culture**, **knowledge** and **behavior**. Think of your leaders and knowledgeable workers as your skilled players, your enterprise strategy, organization structure and practices as your scheme and your culture as a seminal contributor to your execution.

Just as there's no one way to be successful in the NFL, there is more than one way to succeed at business. It's a team game and a superstar or two will not make you a winner if the rest of the team cannot contribute at the level required. Each team starts the season with a roster of players and coaches, defines and refines their schemes over the course of the season and teaches and motivates the players to execute them. The balance among these things is different for each team but there are some things that teams that demonstrate sustained success do. It's the same for companies.

Ever-Successful

Let's look at a couple of perennially successful teams that seem to have overcome potentially disruptive changes to remain highly competitive this year.

The Kansas City Chiefs have one of the true stars of the game in their quarterback. In the league for only five years, Patrick Mahomes has already been to two Superbowls, won one and been the league

MVP. For his first four years as starter, he had Tyreek Hill, maybe the fastest player in the league and one of the top two or three receivers in the game, to throw to and it was a prolific collaboration. At the end of last season, Tyreek left, and the pundits predicted that the Chiefs would regress without him. Coach Andy Reid, Patrick and the team remade their scheme to diversify the offense. They emphasized the contributions of other backs and receivers, and they are *even better* now than they were last year.

The San Francisco 49ers lost their starting QB and then his backup but are now winning convincingly with their third-string rookie QB, selected with the last pick in last year's college draft. For this, Brock Purdy earned the title "Mr. Irrelevant." He's won the last five regular-season games and then his first playoff game. Most pundits believe that he can continue to win in the playoffs, at least for a while more.

Never-Successful

On the other hand, a number of teams seem to be unable to achieve any sustainable success.

The Arizona Cardinals drafted QB Josh Rosen in the first round a few years ago, then the following year traded Rosen, replaced their coach with Kliff Kingsbury and drafted Kyler Murray, the Heisman-winning QB that Kingsbury had coached in college, to replace him. Thus, they spent their immensely valuable first-round draft pick on a QB *in two successive years*. Since then, they traded valuable draft picks for a top five receiver and an aging future hall of fame defensive lineman from Houston, also acquiring other notable skill players through trades with other teams.

After an embarrassing public negotiation this past year, the team extended Murray's contract, inserting a clause (which they've since voided) that mandated minimum study time each week. If I'm paying someone \$40 Million plus to QB my team, I don't expect to need to tell him that he has to spend time preparing, much less compel him contractually to do so. Not surprisingly, the team has had a disastrous season, the general manager and the coach are now gone, and the team is looking for replacements for them.

The Cleveland Browns have had a merry-go-round of coaches over the past few years, fumbled the development of and just traded away their Heisman-award-winning, number-one draft pick QB from four years ago and acquired at great cost a highly-regarded but troubled QB that was facing lawsuits and a lengthy suspension for more than 20 sexual assaults as a foundational building block. He was suspended by the league for the first 11 games this season. Not unsurprisingly, they too have had a disastrous year. In spite of the fact that they have and have had any number of top-tier players, they have never been to the Superbowl and rarely make the playoffs.

Ever vs. Never

So, what are the differences between Ever-Successful and Never-Successful teams?

Ever-Successful Teams

- Acquire or develop the right leadership and culture and install them in their organizations from top to bottom,
- Articulate clearly what success looks like,
- Have flat structures in which executives and managers participate with their teams in routine sense- and decision-making,
- Don't hesitate to transform when they need to; they are willing to change strategy when circumstances change, which they will with increasing frequency,
- Experiment with new ways of doing things, learn from failure and try again,
- Don't succumb to the sunk cost fallacy and
- Tailor their approaches to make the best use of the resources and people they have available to enable each of them to maximize their contribution.

Never-Successful teams

- Fail to look at themselves analytically to identify what they are doing that isn't working—they persist in the management approaches, processes and practices that repeatedly don't produce good results,
- Reach for expensive moon-shot answers—they look for stars who they hope can pull the organization to success in their wake, discounting the contributions that will be required from the rest of the staff,
- Refuse to experiment or take the risks required to achieve actual change and
- Rely on people they know even when it's clear that they are not the ones who will steer them to success.

Implications for Agile Enterprise Management

- Culture and Leadership are crucial. Without the right types of leadership, you can never install the culture that you will need to achieve the agility that will make you sustainable. We seem to hear about dissention among team members of both the Cardinals and Browns regularly, though exactly how this has manifested itself on the field is open to interpretation.
- Maintaining a command-and-control management structure and expecting the teams operating the enterprise to adopt constructive agile practices is wishful thinking. Leadership, culture and commitment must flow from the top down.
- You must adopt an experimental approach to the evolution of the business. You cannot wait until you can assume that you have the answer to every challenge before undertaking to address it and you must account for learning that you will do in planning how you will execute and manage initiatives. The Chiefs and 49ers are also good examples of constant experimentation and innovation. They both seem to come up with a new wrinkle for every game.
- You must be willing to change whenever it is necessary, or any time you identify an opportunity to improve. You must not be risk-averse to the point of stasis. The Chiefs and 49ers are also good examples of this. When players left the team or became injured, they were able to respond and thrive.
- You're going to have to transform your enterprise again and again. In addition to executing transformations, you must use your experience in doing it to develop and refine this ability. Companies that are unafraid and capable of change will dominate their less capable competitors.

This is something that Ever-Successful teams seem to be able to do that Never-Successful teams struggle with.

In the following article, we will look at some teams that have reversed course, two perennial losers that have started winning and two perennial winners that have lost their way.

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