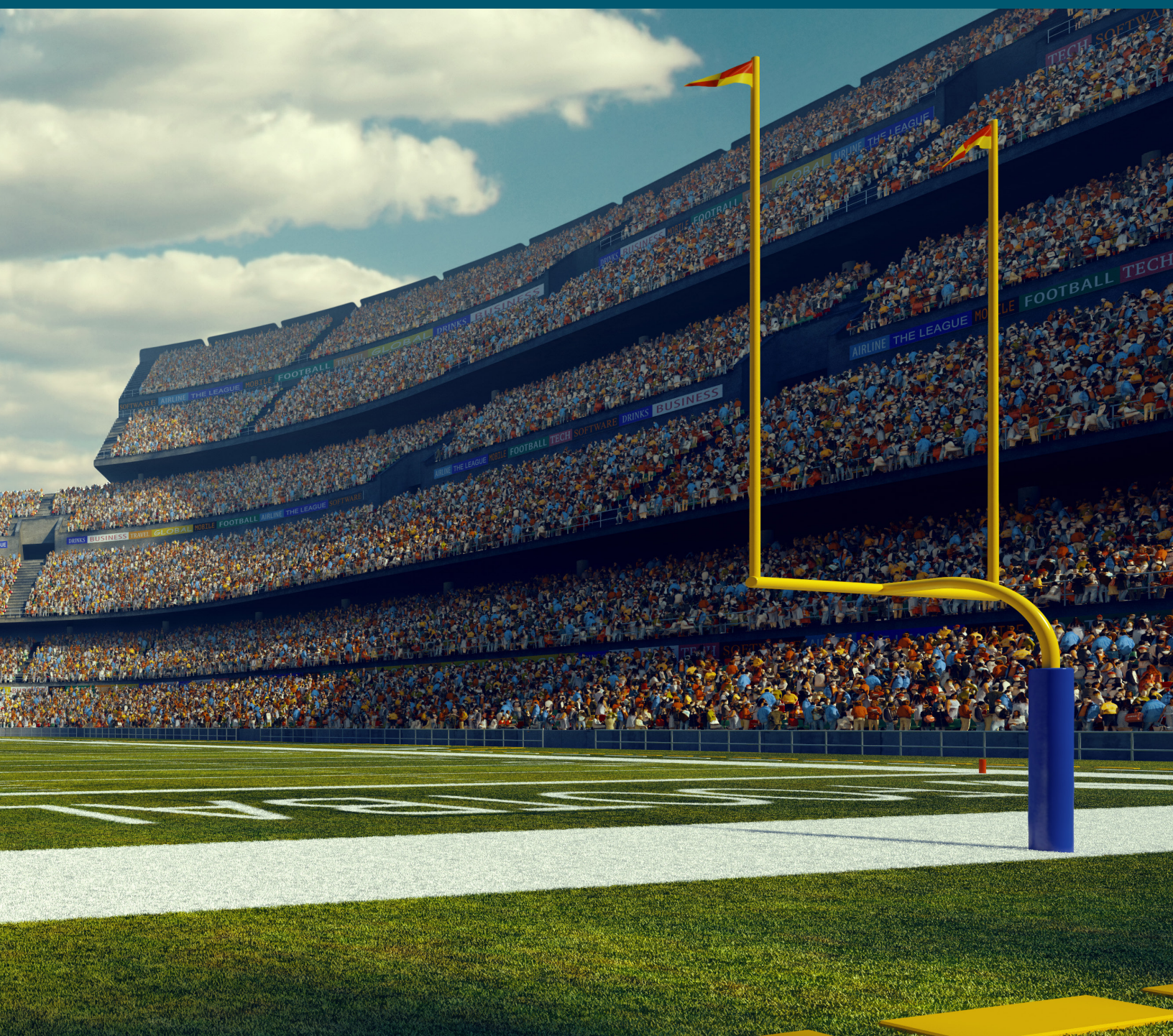


The first-year challenge:

A game plan for new general managers
and new coaches.



A first year fraught with risk—and potential.

Taking the reins as a general manager or coach of a professional or Power Five intercollegiate sports organization is a dream job that can quickly become a nightmare. In sports, more than in most other professions, decision-making and the resulting outcomes are highly visible and incessantly debated. In today's sports market, where the stakes are high, the media spotlight harsh and bright, and the average tenure short, the challenge for a first-time leader can be daunting. To achieve sustainable success, the new general manager or coach must quickly set an agenda, make impactful decisions, create a culture, build highly complex and symbiotic relationships with stakeholders, and oversee the building of the systems and processes that will lead to victory. Coaches and general managers must demonstrate shrewd leadership prowess and operate in a hyper-competitive landscape where every eye is on the same prize.

The allure of big-time sports is addictive, and the winners reap bountiful financial and emotional rewards. But the field is littered with casualties. Transformation into a successful team is rare, and most new general managers or coaches are hired because their predecessors have left the team with a challenging turnaround situation. Sports is an industry where patience is preached, but not always afforded. Average tenure numbers are bleak. Over the last five years, National Hockey League head coaches averaged 2.4 years in their jobs. That's slightly better than the 2.3 years for National Basketball Association coaches but less than the 3.6 years for National Football League head coaches and 3.8 years for Major League Baseball managers. Of the top 25 general managers in sports, as chosen by Forbes magazine in 2007, only five remain in their jobs in 2016. In recent years, the average turnover rate among Football Bowl Subdivision coaches was nearly 25%. In this report, we will focus on what steps a new general manager or coach must take to enhance their effectiveness and give them a chance to surpass those bleak tenure numbers.

Entering a new situation is double-edged: There is much to be said for starting with a clean slate and bringing fresh perspective to a situation, but platitudes fade quickly. The new leader must start at a sprint, simultaneously processing the recruitment of staff, coaches, and players while learning the landscape to begin developing a strategic vision to move the team and organization forward. Every initial meeting with a new member of the organization or media creates that all-important first impression in establishing credibility. It is, in essence, an interview every moment with little or no sleep during that first season.

"I go in and work, compete, think out decisions, and do what's right for the team."

*Jim Harbaugh,
second-year
Head Football
Coach
for the
University of
Michigan*

We asked a group of general managers and coaches to share their insights about the challenging and all-important first year in a job. What emerged was a list of essentials that determine how the first season will unfold. Among the most difficult challenges:

- Developing a new culture
- Assessing current and future talent
- Establishing communication and trust
- Building a high-level staff
- Creating stakeholder alignment

Masai Ujiri, who became president and general manager of the Toronto Raptors in 2013, has experienced the first-year challenges that general managers confront. He received a daunting mandate to turn around a moribund NBA franchise that had no identity, dispirited fans, and few winning seasons. A native Nigerian who honed his skills through scouting and player development throughout Europe and Africa, Ujiri displayed his basketball acumen in Denver and moved quickly through the ranks. As the de facto general manager of the Nuggets, he assembled a team without superstars that nevertheless succeeded and foreshadowed current NBA offensive models of play. For his work, he was named the NBA's 2013 Executive of the Year. In just a few seasons, Ujiri has turned the Raptors, which had a dismal 34-48 record in 2012-13, into a perennial contender in the NBA's Eastern Conference with a rabid and growing fan base. Under his guidance as one of the NBA's brightest executives, the Raptors have rebuilt, averaging 51 wins per season without the benefit of dominant superstars and developing a hard-working, gritty team identity under an emblem "We the North," behind which fans have rallied.

Ever modest, Ujiri attributes much of his success to luck. But the challenges of taking over in Toronto required far more than serendipity. He agreed to take the job only after deep thought. "You need to study whatever the team is, and whatever it is you will need to do," Ujiri said. "What will ownership allow you to do and not do? What can you do with staffing? What is the coaching situation? What will you be able to change? What can you do with the roster? Perhaps most important, what is the overall culture?"

Values provide the linkage and compass necessary to build the culture for a championship caliber organization. They are the foundation on which a team grounds its philosophy, direction, and decision-making and projects its identity to the public. When entering a new job, a general manager or coach must decide on and work to implement a new culture for the organization. It is important to take into account what worked under the previous regime and to develop a set of shared values that link the existing staff with the new philosophy and talent. Culture is not built overnight or in a meeting.

Developing a new culture.

It can take months or even years to develop, and it requires constant, uncompromising adherence to the stated values.

“There is no sexy way to do it,” said Mark Shapiro, the former Cleveland Indians general manager and current president and CEO of the Toronto Blue Jays, “There is no one big motivational speech. It takes consistent effort over a period of time.” Articulation, clarification, and the consistent communication of values are crucial to the transition period. The path to a new culture with the right set of shared values begins with a comprehensive assessment of where the organization stands, including current challenges and circumstances.

“You want to make sure that how you are structured is aligned. And what your systems are that directly tie into attacking the challenges that exist,” said Shapiro, who was named Sporting News Executive of the Year after the 2005 and 2007 seasons. “At the same time, you need to do a deep dive culturally. Talk to people and get a good assessment on how they feel.” Shapiro is a proponent of SWOT analysis—the effort to identify an organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats—for multiple levels of an organization. In looking for the best data to develop an aligned culture for his clubs, he has found that questionnaires and individual meetings with upper- and mid-level management produce vital information.

On the coaching front, NFL veteran Head Coach Andy Reid of the Kansas City Chiefs has proven how to build a consistent and stable organization. When it comes to building culture, he said, “you need to have a plan and that plan is going to be tested. You can’t waiver from it. If the players see you waiver from it, from your beliefs, then you have a problem.” Reid preaches the importance of sending a consistent message to the team, one the entire organization can ultimately embody. Even in the face of tribulation and adversity, a strong culture and a consistent message that the organization believes in are critical to long-term success.

The fundamentals are not clichés; they are bedrock tenets built into the culture of an organization from the lowest person to the top executives and owners. “Everything starts with your fundamentals and your players,” said Tom Thibodeau, 2011 NBA Coach of the Year with the Chicago Bulls and now in his first season with the Minnesota Timberwolves. “More important, it starts by establishing your culture with your attitude and your approach and how you’re going to go about your business each day. You have to have an understanding and commitment made by everyone—players, coaches, management, ownership—to put everything you have into each day. And if we’re doing the right thing, the results will take care of themselves.”

FOUR PILLARS TO BUILD AROUND.

- Assess where the organization stands
- Build structure around the challenges
- Analyze quantitatively to see if changes have taken hold and are succeeding
- Commit to hard work and continued communication

On the collegiate front, Shaka Smart took over the University of Texas basketball program in 2015, tasked with returning the Longhorns to an elite level. In terms of culture, Smart preaches that “whatever we are trying to do as a group, we will not do unless there is a genuine level of care and concern for one another.” Smart believes that it is unity, as an overarching characteristic, that will help Texas achieve its goals. Since moving to Texas from Virginia Commonwealth University, he has worked tirelessly to “create a dynamic where the people who make up your organization, starting with the adults and following up with the players, are working with a genuine level of care, concern, appreciation, and love for one another so that we can overcome a national culture that tends to lead to narcissism.” In basketball, where there can be more intimacy because of the relatively few players on each team, the cultural values that Smart and other coaches embrace go a long way toward unifying an organization from bottom to top.

As the Raptors’ Ujiri said: “You build a culture where everyone is working hard, so when there is failure, people understand. When you win, or try to win, the right way, people see it. It galvanizes people. And you play hard, work hard and you build a culture around that. Leaders have to be that way. We must win on and off the court.”

When it comes to building culture, second-year head coach Dan Quinn of the Atlanta Falcons understands that it is not an overnight process. Coming from a strong Seahawks organization that had gone through a similar cultural transformation, Quinn has seen that, given ample time, commitment, and the relay of a consistent message to an organization, a strong transition in culture is possible. Quinn notes

ADVICE FROM THE TOP: IDEAS FOR GMS, COACHES.

- Make impactful decision starting on Day One.
- Demonstrate, ensure humility on an individual and organizational level.
- Begin with a focus on personnel management, organizational culture, communications, and hiring the right people.
- Clarify the values that link existing staff with the new infusion of talent.
- In ambiguous situations, determine how to dig deeper to get better information to make timely decisions.
- Adhere to the organization’s key values. Ensure these are non-negotiable when new staff, players join.
- Reinforce your message through your actions to build a consistent culture.
- Watch tape with your staff. Be specific in your evaluations, so the front office and coaches are completely aligned in finding the talent that works in your system.
- Understand the past but challenge the status quo.
- Do not be afraid to hire smart people who think outside the box.
- Be aware that there will always be skepticism and resistance to change.
- Develop meaningful relationships by spending quality time together.
- Manage your time efficiently: Things quickly will get overwhelming with the number of people who need your attention. Get assistance working with the media.

that one of the toughest obstacles he and other new executives face is the “this is how we’ve always done it” mentality, and he admitted that learning to manage it took longer than he had anticipated. In professional sports, it can be hard to overcome the old, pervasive mentalities in some organizations. Infusing new talent with different, positive, and respected ideologies is the first step an organization can take when undergoing a culture shift. Quinn said he believes that in “trying to create the culture you want, it’s something you need to articulate a lot. It is ever-evolving and it is better now than when I first started.”

Assessing current, future talent.

First-year general managers and coaches must be adept at judging and maneuvering current and future players. Professional and intercollegiate sports are highly competitive businesses, and the quest to build a winning lineup is affected by a number of issues: finances, market size, team history, recruiting acumen, and other less tangible factors. In this era of free agency, players usually opt for the biggest contracts, but sometimes they will leave money on the table to play for a highly respected coach, front office, or team.

College recruiting is different but no less intense than the pros in its quest to get the best athletes. When it comes to recruiting, Shaka Smart of Texas insists, “the best way to develop a relationship is to spend time together, being around the guys and helping them grow, showing that you care about them beyond what they can do with a basketball.” As a coach, Smart has shown an uncanny ability to develop deep and meaningful relationships with his players. That goes hand in hand with the unity and togetherness he preaches for his team’s culture. The other element of assessing talent when it comes to recruiting is finding players who share the passion and desire for the sport: the love of the game.

Jim Harbaugh, the head football coach at the University of Michigan, his alma mater, knows about passion. The former NFL quarterback has transitioned to collegiate and pro ranks as a head coach with tremendous success. When he arrived at The Big House, Michigan’s stadium, before the 2015 season, he took over an elite program that had fallen into mediocrity and irrelevance in the national picture. With the insight and experience of building a winning team at every level of the game, Harbaugh was surprised at how far the talent had dropped at his school, especially in the attitudes of some student athletes.

“It was shocking to see how many student athletes were here that weren’t dedicated to playing the sport of football the way it needed to be,” Harbaugh said. “This was major college football, but the players just did not want to get serious. There was a whole group of them, an ungodly amount of them, who wanted to find any excuse to get out of something, both academically and athletically.” Known for his toughness as a player and his no-nonsense style as a coach, Harbaugh was shocked at the aversion to any form of adversity. “They signed up to go to college, get the gear, and have the appearance of playing big-time college football. They’d say ‘People tell me I’m good, and girls like me, but I did not sign up for having to work.’ ”

Disgusted by this poor attitude, Harbaugh rebuilt Big Blue’s recruiting strategy. He and his coaches focused on “the tough guys, the guys who were warriors, not excuse makers.” Harbaugh sought out the players who shared his enthusiasm for football and who truly had a passion for competing. Over time, he decided to spend less time getting frustrated and instead spent his time with good players who also had good energy—“the guys who wanted to be there.”

“The best way to develop a relationship is to spend time together, being around the guys and helping them grow.”

*Shaka Smart
Head Basketball
Coach,
University
of Texas
Longhorns*

In recruiting the right players, Harbaugh used a model he developed as head coach at Stanford. There, he had encountered the challenge of building a winning program at a school with tough, intractable academic standards. He found the players, 25 in all, who both had the right mindset and could make the grade academically. They became the focal points to build around. Harbaugh instituted a hard and fast rule for his staff, punishable by firing, that no one in the program could talk about the players who couldn't get in. "You never talk about the guy you didn't get, because it diminishes the guys you do get," he said. "That eliminated the negative attitude toward academics."

Harbaugh harnessed his competitive nature and attacked the recruiting trail. He redefined recruiting boundaries through innovation, hosting countless "satellite camps" at which he taught football and shared his passion for the game that has given him so much. Although encroaching on his competitors' turf disgruntled many of them, Harbaugh pushed forward, and it paid dividends in his most recent recruiting class. He used this process to bring in student athletes who were talented, bright, willing to learn, and accountable in upholding and adding to the culture of Michigan football. That helped Harbaugh quickly reestablish the success of the team; in his first season, Michigan unexpectedly went 10-3. It is ranked among the nation's top five teams in the 2016 season through mid-October.

When Quinn became head coach of the Falcons in 2015, he faced an early challenge getting a "real understanding of what your team's needs are because you weren't there as part of it" during the previous season. He had a vision for the team but didn't know the personnel. "The best thing, honestly, is to spend as much time together with your staff as you can," he advised. "Watch tapes together, and that way there is no 'Well I thought, well you thought.' You just spend the time it takes to build the relationships, to know you're building a team together." Besides assessing the in-house talent, this process enhances communication among members of the front office staff.

Hue Jackson, first-year head coach of the Cleveland Browns, said he believes that players need to see and feel something totally different when they walk into the building. "You need to win off the field before you can ever win on the field," Jackson said. "I started by watching tapes of our players, by evaluating the guys on our team, those who people say 'are the stars' and those who are 'not the stars.' It's tedious, but it's worth it because you have to know and truly understand who is on your football team."

Assessing talent is critical to learning the inside of a new organization. It is vital to avoid taking shortcuts and relying on word of mouth. A full, comprehensive assessment of an organization can prove extremely helpful in analyzing talent and developing a long-term plan.

Establishing communication, trust.

When it comes to professional and intercollegiate sports, communication is paramount, whether it be player to player, coach to player, or within the front office. Having open and transparent lines of communication helps establish trust within an organization. The key to a winning strategy, the Raptors' Ujiri said, is communication: "It's important for everyone involved to know the plan. Some parts of your plan are going to be bad news to some people and good news to others. Some people will get shifted; others will be let go." Change is inevitable. But how new general managers or coaches message that change—whether in an open, transparent, and accountable manner—can speak to how successful they will be.

Given that there are so many factors in professional sports that are out of a general manager's control, "you have to prepare people's minds the best you can," Ujiri added. In sports, the ultimate goal for every executive and coach is to win.

The Chiefs' Reid echoes Ujiri's sentiment. After a long and successful tenure in Philadelphia, where he went 224-130 over 14 seasons with the Eagles, Reid took over the Chiefs in 2013 and established a winning culture almost immediately. He arrived in Kansas City with a reputation, in contrast with his first year in Philadelphia, when no one knew who he was. In Kansas City, working alongside general manager John Dorsey, Reid said the only way to build a successful culture is through inclusivity. "We tried to include everybody," he said, "whether it was the marketing department, public relations, whatever it was, to make them a part of what we were trying to get done. We try to include and make sure everyone has a part in this, an important part."

Reid also is adamant about open lines of communication between his players and coaching staff. "There should be an open-door feeling wherever you go to create comfort for the players to come to you and you to go to the player. The coaches should be walking through the locker room and talking to the players, and the players should feel free to come up and sit with the coach and talk to the coach. We try to keep that open air and flow going." Reid has harped

CHECKLIST FOR NEW COACHES.

- Your first impressions need to be memorable and impactful.
- The past is the past: This is a new beginning for everyone.
- You are at the seat of judgement, and you must come motivated each day with the right type of energy to do this job.
- Work, compete, think out decisions, and do what is right for the team.
- Regardless of the change in leadership, players still must take accountability for themselves and their teams; no excuses.
- Present a consistent demeanor on how you respond to wins and losses.
- Find a "truth teller"—someone on your staff who will not be afraid to tell you what is wrong.
- Focus on the players who are tough, team-oriented, teachable, and want to win. They will be your warriors.
- Remember that to accomplish goals as a team, you must make each other better and have a genuine level of care and concern for one another.

on respect and on building genuine relationships with his players. Establishing this level of trust helps build culture and foster a sense of unity that is often reflected in a team's work ethic and performance on the field.

In Cleveland, Jackson brings an additional important piece of advice: "The number one thing is being a great listener. It's important to really listen, even to things you don't want to hear, because it's important to hear them. You need to know exactly what's going on within the organization so you can do the best job that you can do."

Soft tasks, though crucial, are not simple to execute. David Stearns, the young general manager of the Milwaukee Brewers, immediately discovered the importance of time management. "I've always prided myself on being a good communicator and getting to know people who work for me on a very personal level," Stearns said. "I was surprised at the front end how challenging that became just due to the sheer volume of people you need to know very quickly. So developing those personal relationships and managing the time to develop those personal relationships became an immediate challenge and something I wasn't completely prepared for on day one." Critical to any leadership position, he added, is investing in your relationships with existing internal staffers. "Trying to figure out a way to have impactful conversations with your staff when you don't have as much time as you once did is definitely a struggle," he said.

Getting acclimated has its challenges, but avoiding shortcuts is critical. Establishing and building trust and genuine relationships with new colleagues can make the job mandate more manageable. Coming into a new organization as a general manager or head coach can be overwhelming, but proper communication and a culture that promotes transparency can increase the likelihood of organizational continuity and success.

TOUGH, CRITICAL FIRST-STEP QUESTIONS TO ASK.

- What do you value and want to preserve about the organization?
- What are some of the challenges that you will face?
- Who are the key constituents, internally and externally?
- What barriers exist and how do you think we should remedy these?
- How would you define success? Remember that to accomplish goals as a team, you must make each other better and have a genuine level of care and concern for one another.

Building a high-level staff.

After taking over a new organization, building an effective and high-level staff is among the top priorities for a general manager or coach. It must be done quickly but carefully to bring on people who can fully articulate the new vision and compensate for any gaps in the new leader's arsenal. Filling out a staff must be a hands-on and highly personal task. Leaders must follow league rules and avoid tampering issues. Coaches and staff executives under contract with other teams may be hesitant to put their name in the ring, let alone talk during the season. Waiting for someone whose team is in the playoffs creates the risk of losing other active candidates. In intercollegiate athletics, assistant coaches are out recruiting during the off-season. As the new leader, you must have a large Rolodex, be respected, and have a compelling vision for what you are attempting to do.

Building a staff must be strategic. That strategy must be properly articulated in a process that surrounds the organization with the best people who fit the new culture. Character and the ability to work together as a cohesive and synergistic unit are important in a highly competitive and stressful environment. If the goal is always to hire the best people for the job, getting their input about potential hires and talent acquisition is critical. It is important to measure candidates' soft skills, as well as their expertise, to see if they fit the rest of the team and the culture that the leader aims to build.

For Minnesota's Thibodeau, the task begins with analysis: "You begin by meeting with people individually, then collectively as a group. You study what has transpired, you build your plan, you hire your staff."

He said that this should be accomplished within the first 30 days and that it "requires a lot of work. You need to be honest and confront the facts, and you need everyone to commit to closing the gap in areas where you might be short. Getting everything off the ground in those first 30 days is critical."

HOW SAVVY GMS GET STARTED.

- Develop a strategy, make the necessary moves, and understand the resources needed to maximize talent or future flexibility on the major league level. Resist the temptation for quick fixes.
- Besides hiring a staff and getting to know the executive team, it is crucial to immerse yourself in the organization as quickly as possible.
- Timing forces you to choose your priorities, execute them, and then stay true to them.
- Make the owner and the head coach-manager your first-week priority.
- Have formal interviews with the staff, starting immediately with the functional leaders.
- As you evaluate the staff, determine their willingness or unwillingness to buy in and if a philosophical difference exists.
- Demonstrate a sense of urgency about building the vital systems and processes that will sustain long-term success by providing quality information.

The same holds true for front office personnel. When Stearns, a Harvard graduate, took over the front office with the Brewers during the 2016 season, he was just 30, the youngest general manager in MLB. Among his first tasks was to assess the roster to decide whom to retain, whom to develop, and whom to cut loose.

"I'm still going through that process," Stearns acknowledged toward the end of his first season. "It is not an easy process to go through. It takes time. Some of it is based on knowledge of a particular philosophy coming into the organization, and a lot of it is based on getting to know people over time and determining whether there is a philosophical alignment. If there isn't, is there a willingness to adjust and change? It's an ongoing process."

For the Raptors' Ujiri, part of the key to building a great staff is ensuring everyone has a purpose on the team. "You have to give them the ability to do their jobs well," he said. "That's important." The key one-on-one relationship with the head coach must be handled with care and dexterity.

"I don't try to do what the coaches are doing," he said. "His voice is the primary voice in terms of team performance, and he and I are in constant communication. You need that, but you also must allow him to do his work and lead the players with the right messages."

For the Blue Jays' Shapiro, the most challenging aspect of starting anew is "earning respect and trust and understanding that, regardless of what you've done elsewhere or accomplished in the past, leading people still necessitates the time it takes to ensure they know you're out for the best collective interest of the organization. You must make sure that people know you are ensuring that values are aligned and that when there is a necessary shift in strategy, you make sure people understand that it's not about one person's opinion or philosophy but it's about the best strategy for collective success," he added.

Michigan's Harbaugh grew up in the game of football. As the son of Jack Harbaugh, a longtime college coach, he had constant exposure to coaches, and he knows exactly what he wants when it comes to hiring a staff: "All I've ever known are coaches. All my dad's friends were coaches, and they were the main people I knew and respected." Being around coaches from childhood, Harbaugh had always known the competencies he wanted to see in his staff. "Playing pro for 15 years, you know the good ones and the ones who aren't. It comes down to the simple thing: Anyone can tell you what you did right and what you did wrong, but a good coach can give you a tip, a coaching point, a piece of advice that you can use as a tool to improve, get better, and fix." At the highest level of sport, all coaches have a command of the fundamentals, but few roll up their sleeves as Harbaugh does and few work tirelessly to help their players get better. "Those are coaches I feel are the elite ones, and I try to surround myself with [them]," he said.

"Getting everything off the ground in those first 30 days is critical."

*Tom Thibodeau;
President and
Head Coach,
NBA Minnesota
Timberwolves*

Creating stakeholder alignment.

Stakeholders come in many forms, not just owners, their partners, and families. On the intercollegiate front, there are university presidents, alumni, and influential donors who have stakes in programs' progress. Many times, they are involved before the general manager or coach is hired. During recruitment, it is important that a process is in place so that all stakeholders know and agree on the objectives and attributes they are seeking in a new leader. On the other hand, candidates have the responsibility to ensure that they understand as much as they can about the organization and what they will have to work with. The interview process should be a frank and honest discussion of the timeframe, resources available, and where the authority for final decision-making lies.

Ownership groups vary in their involvement. Some are very hands-on, and they will want to meet formally every day; others may pop in and out of the facilities regularly. Still others won't even be in the same city but will check in by phone. Collegiate presidents are similar, with too many responsibilities for day-to-day matters to concentrate on athletics but ever-present during games, when there are opportunities to build relationships with alumni and donors. It is up to coaches or general managers to take up the task of building that relationship, because if they wait until problems arise, the leash is shorter and the response is much less charitable.

When Quinn was recruited by the Falcons, he got to know Arthur Blank, the active team owner, of whom Quinn asked early on, "What exactly are you looking for from your head coach in terms of back-and-forth communication?" Quinn followed up by asking how best to stay in contact—email, texts, or phone calls—realizing that navigating their relationship was crucial to success. "If the owner is someone who wants involvement, then you should include him in lots of discussions," Quinn said. "If the owner's needs aren't being met, that won't ever be a good thing."

For a new general manager, communication and compatibility with the owner are even more critical. Most owners are fans of the game, and the general manager is their conduit into the inner workings of the front office and the organization. General managers must know what they can and cannot do, what the current economics are, what to expect moving forward, and what the owner's expectations are. Ujiri, for example, realized early on in Toronto that the Raptors needed a new practice facility, so he made the owners aware. "You have to be able to interact with your ownership," he stated. "It's all part of the need for communication."

Understanding the dynamic of the ownership group is paramount. Some teams are family businesses that pass on the team from generation to generation. It is important to foster genuine relationships with all stakeholders associated with the organization, especially with the possibility of change of control. There is also the chance for new family members to step up to play bigger roles. Teams owned by

"You have to be able to interact with your ownership. It's all part of the need for communication."

*Masai Ujiri
President of
Basketball
Operations, NBA
Toronto Raptors*

corporate entities can carry completely different challenges. When he joined the Blue Jays, Shapiro encountered corporate ownership in Rogers Communications, with more stakeholders and more ambiguity than he had experienced in Cleveland. “For me, it takes patience, which is something I have the least of, and reminding yourself to take the time to understand the landscape, where the different interests lie, and how you can best satisfy both the interests and concerns of the stakeholders,” Shapiro said. In that way, the general manager can address the challenges and the resource needs and fill in the gaps in structure, technology, personnel, and process. “That’s where ownership can help,” he said.

With the Brewers, Stearns has found a more traditional owner in Mark Attanasio, who also loves baseball. When accepting the job, Stearns understood the importance of developing a strong relationship with the most influential stakeholder. “Working in constant communication with the owner, with the manager, and, in my case, the field staff in general became my priority that first week,” Stearns said. Through active relationship building and communication, Stearns has consistently gathered input on important issues facing the club. He has been a unifying presence in the front office when it comes to bridging the gap between ownership and the on-field leadership.

Alignment is essential for success in professional and intercollegiate sports. Nevertheless, it also can be one of the most overlooked components of a sports organization, with its intense drive for talent and wins. A core focus on transparency and open lines of communication from leadership are the first steps in building a culture in which everyone collectively buys into the crucial factors of alignment. Gain trust and build consensus, and it will not be difficult to develop the kind of foundational synergies that make the attainment of success achievable and even probable.

Conclusion

The first-year leader, whether in a corporation, political office, or locker room, faces daunting challenges. There are minefields everywhere, ready to blow up the best-laid plans and sabotage even the best-intentioned efforts. Unless prepared with a well-thought-out vision and strategy, new leaders will not succeed. Few other professions operate under such a glaring spotlight as new general managers and coaches do, and the line between success and failure is often a key base hit, an overtime goal, a freak injury to a star player, or a miracle catch on the goal line. Franchises with sagging fortunes want quick results and, in this era of social media, fantasy sports, and billions of dollars in revenues at stake, expectations grow higher each year.

Consider the situation of Andrew Friedman, the long-time general manager of the Tampa Bay Rays who joined the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2014 as president of baseball operations. He had a mandate to overhaul what was already MLB's highest-payroll team and to build a winner. "Moving into the Dodger organization, the expectations and environment were very different," Friedman said. "We had to win immediately, so we had to staff ourselves very differently. We didn't have time to organically grow our people. So we reached out and brought in people with tremendous experience in a variety of disciplines. Because we were so far behind, we felt the best way to be competitive was to bring in people who had done it before. so we could close the gap and get competitive as quickly as possible."

A lot of ulcers and sleepless nights might be expected for those who choose this route. But most echo the Raptors' Ujiri, who takes a different view. "We are just so blessed to have jobs like this," he said. "There are only so many jobs in the NBA, and I feel like I have the best job in the world in Toronto. That's how special sports is!"

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Shaka Smart; Head Basketball Coach, University of Texas Longhorns

David Stearns; General Manager, MLB Milwaukee Brewers

Tom Thibodeau; President and Head Coach, NBA Minnesota Timberwolves

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