

A Leadership Homerun!

A Team Oriented Approach to Strategic Leadership

John Schuerholz, General Manager of the Atlanta Braves, is a model of sustainable leadership success. The baseball ritual of my youth involved a hopeful spring as we would optimistically follow the Braves and their Spring Training progress. Over time, our youthful optimism would degenerate into a bleak summer of losing streaks and last place finishes. But for my son, thanks in part to John Schuerholz, the experience has been a complete reversal. Now each spring, we look at the new faces with skepticism and pessimistically predict that this will be the team to end the championship streak. Fifteen years in a row, this springtime skepticism has given way to summer and fall excitement as the Braves climb their way to the top of the standings to win another divisional championship. Since Schuerholz joined the Braves in 1991, not a single National League team has a winning record against the Braves. In the leadership box score, Schuerholz is an All-Star homerun hitter.

What does it take to hit a leadership homerun? Simply stated, *a leadership homerun hitter periodically and intentionally disconnects from the tactical to focus on the strategic.* This strategic snapshot requires that you touch the four leadership bases of strategic leadership.

1. First Base – Vision Clarity
2. Second Base – Engagement and Morale
3. Third Base – Intentional Learning
4. Home Plate – Expectations and Accountability

First Base – Vision Clarity

Vision clarity is evaluated by doing a “quick check” of four strategic considerations.

1. *Are any of our core values under attack or at risk?* This is a very important question. Leaders must stay alert to small issues that over time can have a significant undermining impact on core values. Recently, I toured a client’s new warehouse and was struck by a couple of small issues that were clearly inconsistent with the stated values of the company. Excellence, though stated as a core value, was not shaping the way the warehouse was being maintained. Unless your leadership team periodically stops to take an objective look at the organization, small deviations will erode core values.
2. *Is the team clear on where we are going?* Take time to remind yourself of your destination. Does everyone else know where we are going? Are there any course corrections that are needed? I am traveling as I write. Our destination is Hilton Head, South Carolina. Two hours ago we were on course. Fortunately, our navigator is exceeding expectations and we have remained on course. But if corrections were needed, it is better to know after only a few miles down the wrong highway. Directionally remaining on course is better assessed periodically than annually.
3. *What is happening in the marketplace?* Are any changes or developments or market conditions having an impact on our customer base? What are our competitors doing differently from us? Are any new opportunities emerging requiring immediate response? Then, we should ask, “Are we hearing any

- recurring themes from our leadership, our employees, our customers or our competition?” Occasionally, these themes grow to become new products or services. At other times, these themes reshape and improve our marketing messages.
4. How are we performing versus our agreed-upon metrics? A simple dashboard that allows the leadership team to quickly assess performance according to critical success factors is particularly useful in the strategic assessment process. Being in Charlotte, North Carolina, we are NASCAR conscious. As the drivers circle the track at 200 mph, there is little time to take their eyes off the road. The information they can see on their dashboard is critical: the driver can quickly assess oil pressure, RPM’s, and engine temperatures and determine the relative performance of the racecar. A Critical Success Factors Dashboard will serve the drivers of your organization in much the same way.

Second Base – Engagement and Morale

Engagement and morale is equivalent to the temperature of the organization. Is the team enthusiastic, optimistic and engaged or are they discouraged and distracted? This assessment can be done objectively or subjectively. Without question, an objective assessment of employee enthusiasm and commitment should at least be conducted on an annual basis. In between these formal assessments, a subjective evaluation can be conducted by asking the leadership team for anecdotes that capture their perception of the current emotional state of the organization.

Once you have taken the temperature of the organization, the team must discuss the issues affecting morale. We often find that there one or two small issues are having a big impact on employee morale. Do your employees find it easy to want to work for you? Is there anything that requires immediate attention or action? For example, is there an employee that is having a particularly disruptive impact on the team? Does everyone have what they need to do quality work? Has the departure of a popular employee created concerns for those who remain? Periodic assessments allow you to deal with the issues while they are small and before they become entrenched in the culture of the organization – and before they create a legacy of doubt about your commitment to your employees.

Third Base – Intentional Learning

Rounding second, a periodic strategic assessment must evaluate the organization's ability to learn quickly. This is accomplished by an objective critique of successes and failures. Identify recent successes AND failures and ask some obvious, but profound questions:

1. *What went well?* This question is asked of both successes and failures. Even in a blown sales presentation, some positive takeaway's can be identified.
2. *What could have been improved?* Take the time to identify the things that could have been done better before rushing to conclusions. A problem properly defined can lead to a much more useful solution.
3. *What can we do differently in the future?* Cash in on the lessons learned or ideas generated from these “interpreted experiences.” There is much to be salvaged from both successes and failures that you can use to build future successes.

Savvy leaders interpret their experiences to take advantage of these learning opportunities.

Along with evaluated experience, learning organizations constantly ask, “What can we do better?” Strategic assessment affords your leadership team an opportunity to identify areas of expertise that can be improved or must be developed. Is a competitor doing something that we need to learn how to do? Are we continuing to improve in every area of our operation – even those that are already considered “top of their class?” Do we need to expose our team to new learning opportunities - books we should read, people we should talk to, or training we should take advantage of?

Home Plate – Expectations and Accountability

Making it home, to complete our baseball analogy, requires an evaluation of progress made in light of the priorities that were established at the last strategic leadership meeting along with the identification of the immediate priorities for the coming month or quarter. Strategic leaders carefully nurture a culture of accountability by establishing clear incremental expectations for everyone on the team, and then following up to insure their completion. The meeting ends with two very important questions – and the answers need to be recorded and published:

1. Where are we with regard to our current priorities?
2. If we don't accomplish anything else in the next 30-60-90 days, what must we get done in light of our highest strategic priorities?

This is the key moment of the strategic meeting. As a leader, if you make your way to home plate, you will help your team maintain a disciplined focus on the organization's highest strategic priorities.

The Strategic Leadership Meeting (SLM)

This SLM is a crucial for growing small and mid-size organizations. Each SLM should be scheduled and on the calendar for the entire year. The appropriate interval for these meetings will be monthly for some and quarterly for most. Crucially the SLM will have a clear agenda and a time limit. In most cases, 2-4 hours will provide adequate time to work your way around the bases.

John Schuerholz isn't guaranteed to win the next Division Title. But every competitor would like to match his success. His focus, discipline and strategic thinking turned a perennial looser into the perennial team to beat.