

Book Excerpt

There Are No Do-Overs

By Tom Raffio, Barbara McLaughlin & Dave Cowens

Find the Right Players for the Right Positions

Long before I was awarded a four-year basketball scholarship to Florida State University in 1966, my high school coach told me if I was five feet away from the basket with the ball, I should pass it out to a guard and not shoot. When I advanced to the Celtics, I was lucky to play alongside Larry Bird. Larry was an offensive genius and as competitive and dedicated to his coach as any athlete has ever been. His ability to control games was on a level enjoyed by only a few others. So, if someone passed me the ball to shoot, I would pass and defer to Bird; Bird only had God to pass to who would have a higher chance of making the winning shot.

Perhaps I didn't have the best shot, but I was fortunate to be born with a certain amount of athleticism, and what I recognized early on in my formative years was my ability to jump, rebound, and play with an unbridled source of energy. I didn't need to have the best shot — at least not at first. In the beginning, corralling missed shots was my ticket to success. I worked with that to develop myself into a stronger, more reliable, and more resilient overall athlete. I became adept in finding ways to capitalize on the combination of physical abilities given to me through birth and the energy and hard work of honing my skill level to excel.

My playing career at Florida State University was highlighted by three years of continual improvement as a player and as a part of a team. I was the MVP of the team all three varsity years. My rebounding records still stand because today's style of play doesn't produce enough missed shots that lead to rebounds.

During my senior year, we played in Dayton, Ohio against the Dayton Flyers. I heard there were a few

NBA scouts in attendance, most notably Red Auerbach of the Celtics. I have heard the story that he made a big show of leaving early and shaking his head in disgust to show the other scouts there that he did not think any player in the game was a potential NBA pick, knowing full well he wanted me. He selected me as the fourth pick in the first round a month or so later during the annual NBA draft. Only Pete Maravich, Bob Lanier and Rudy Tomjanovich were selected before me.

It seems to me that the sooner a person realizes what his or her true strengths are, the sooner he or she can concentrate on perfecting that trait to the point that other talents can be developed to complement his or her primary strength.

Know yourself with an objective mindset. Constant self-analysis is a healthy exercise.

— *Dave Cowens*

Book cover image courtesy of Curran Pendleton Press.

Big Red figured out what he could do better than anyone else on the basketball court. It is the same with business. Those at the helm of companies have to determine how to develop an environment where employees understand what they do better than anyone else in the company. As the famous author Jim Collins conveys in his widely acclaimed book, *Good to Great*, having the right people in the right seats on the bus is one of the keys to an organization's success. This mantra goes back to Teddy Roosevelt who said, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men [and women] to do what he wants done, and self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

Everyone has an important position in the company, be it in the mailroom, executive management, marketing department or boardroom. And while every position is significant, it is important to recognize that every position is different, and for a good reason and purpose. Going back to Collins' bus analogy, the leader of an organization must make sure that everybody is truly on board with the organization's mission or purpose, and more importantly, each person on the bus is sitting in the right seat.

My own example that parallels Dave's occurred in 1995, when I was recruited at age thirty-eight to come to Northeast Delta Dental (NEDD) as its CEO. I asked an insurance colleague, Al Breitman, what he thought. He said something I have never forgotten, "Don't consider a new position until you are ready and have the skills for the position." As it turns out, they offered me the job at NEDD as I was driving back to Massachusetts from my interview (they called me on my mobile phone, then an analog bag phone in my car). I accepted and soon learned NEDD was a perfect fit for my executive skill set — the willingness to go out in the community and make a difference, the ability to provide an inspirational "total quality" boost to a solid company, and the persuasive ability to transition the culture to encourage employee empowerment.

Everyone has an important position in the company, be it in the mailroom...or the boardroom.

The crux of my management style is that the leadership team and all our teammates do a self-analysis to understand their abilities. This helps make it clear what job contribution each member is most qualified to do: the job that one employee can do better than anyone else. For example, if I am an extroverted salesperson who could sell ice in Antarctica, I need to make it clear to my boss, and my boss needs to understand and accept, that the one thing I do better than anyone else is sell. This is my job and my best fit for maximum contribution. The exemplary superstar salesperson must feel comfortable that he or she is best suited to sales, and the management team can acknowledge that fact and reward the salesperson for being the best salesperson.

Promoting the salesperson as a reward to a position that is not what that person does best may be moving him or her to the wrong seat on the bus. Management and employees must be

willing to have honest, ongoing dialogue and mutual trust, so promotions occur that benefit both the employee and the company. If the manager promotes that salesperson to a job that no longer fits that person's capabilities, it will be to the detriment of the employee, the employee's colleagues and the company.

It is first important to hire the right person in order to get the right people on the bus. Under the leadership of our award-winning Vice President of Human Resources, Connie Roy-Czyzowski, we have developed an elaborate hiring process that takes into consideration three critical success factors:

- Is the potential candidate a critical thinker?
- Does he or she have interpersonal communication skills to be an effective team player?
- Does that person have the self-integrity to know and ask for the position that is the best fit?

If a company hires the right people and has the right rules and policies, there is no need to micro-manage them. Once they are trained, understand their goals, have a good idea as to what is expected of them and feel comfortable, only then do employees become truly empowered. They make the right decisions as they see them, and they make these decisions with the confidence that they have the support of management and other employees. The only exception might be in an emergency or a company-changing situation, such as a major IT systems conversion or a crisis, when employees quickly look to expert leaders for direction.

Like Northeast Delta Dental, your company can create a culture where skilled and trained employees are able to enhance their work by sharing their best ideas on how to improve things. This can happen when:

- Employees believe they are well qualified because of the intrinsic
- You create idea-sharing systems that encourage employees to share their best ideas on ways to improve the company.

It is interesting that the right employees with the right skills are willing to propose improvement ideas, even if it means employees may "idea" themselves out of a job. They feel comfortable doing this because they know the company recognizes their skills and will move them to other positions where they can contribute.

This works because the best companies have employees who trust management. Risk-taking employees understand ideas better the company and may create new opportunities for themselves within another department or a new job that takes advantage of their expertise.

In his book, *Ideas Are Free*, Dr. Alan G. Robinson's overarching point is that the company must have a culture where ideas flow freely in order for the company to perform as well as possible. At Northeast Delta Dental, our idea program flourishes because those who do the work submit their suggestions for improvements. Management quickly responds back to the idea person either with approval for implementation of the idea, a reward or an explanation why we cannot implement the idea (for example, until the NEDD Board provides approval for an expenditure related to the idea). Sometimes we simply cannot implement an idea, but the submitter receives an explanation as to why not. The keys are that employees know we want ideas to flow freely and that we know and trust them to do their jobs. The parallel to sports is that companies with the right players in the right positions have men and women who are confident enough to be team players.

Every human being wants to be the best he or she can be. The responsibility of your organization is to be sure that each person is filling a position for which he or she is qualified and for which he or she has passion. If leadership is committed to the notion that every position is equally important and slots employees in the right seat on the bus, the organization will flourish. It is also the responsibility of the employees to recognize what they can do better than anyone else can and to leverage those unique skill sets. As employees, we have to figure out how are we unique. What sets us apart? As the company, we have to create a culture where employees are poised for success by developing opportunities in which they share a stake in the outcome.

It is impossible for any one person in the company to do every job in the company, just as it was impossible for Dave Cowens or Larry Bird to play all five positions on the basketball team. But Dave's or Larry's coach, like a CEO or management team, should be able to bring out the best in their individual players by fostering a team culture. Keeping this type of person on your sports team or in your corporation is paramount to establishing a winning team that will sustain its winning record. ■



THE BIG RED FACTOR

As a business leader, I have learned it is better to have no one in the job than to have the wrong person in the job. As Jim Collins discovered when researching his book *Good to Great*, “when in doubt, don’t hire – keep looking.” We look for people with the skills we need, and we prepare them to be able to offer their best performance. We want them to want to come to work every day. We want them to enjoy their positions and make use of their strengths with confidence. We want them to feel that they are an important part of a winning team. And we want them to feel comfortable enough to offer ideas for how the team can become even stronger.

