



Management Lessons from Pop Culture Icons: Super Bowl XXXVIII and The Apprentice

By

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If New England Patriots' kicker Adam Vinatieri had been a contestant on *The Apprentice* his teammates would have openly turned against him early in the game, and at halftime Bill Belichick would have bellowed, "You're fired!" Fortunately, he plays for a real team, and although sports metaphors have been used in business to the point of trivialization, this year's Super Bowl provided some of the most profound lessons ever.

There's No "I" in Team

Super Bowl XXXVIII and the champions—from both teams—that played this exciting game remind us all what it takes to be successful. In every sense of the word, New England and Carolina define *team*. Their wholes are greater than their sums. And the 20 and 30-something-year-old players not only understand their roles, they delight in playing them.

Now, let's consider the 20 and 30-something-year-old players vying for attention each week on *The Apprentice*. Although it is called a team, the participants operate in silos of dysfunction that has become a plague of far too many businesses. Individual thoughts, opinions, styles, and preferences command the day. In defeat the Carolina Panthers show us more about winning in business than the weekly *Apprentice* challenge victors do.

Triumph of Professionalism

Although exciting, this year's Super Bowl was dominated by some ugly play; lots of penalties, players slipping on an apparently inadequate turf, miserable special teams play, huge breakdowns in both defenses, and inconsistent offense throughout the evening. Yet neither team ever showed any panic, and both executed their best plays right as the game looked bleakest.

In a business environment that treats every quarter as the be all and end all, just imagine how the frantic *Apprentice* participants would respond to a dip in sales numbers or a rise in operating expenses. Given what we've see thus far, the Super Bowl example this group would likely follow is more Janet Jackson than Tom Brady.

Leadership

Unlike the ever-present image of a menacing Donald Trump, New England's Bill Belichick and Carolina's John Fox allowed their teams to overcome adversity by the way they managed the game. An image I won't soon forget is John Fox, pounding his chest to open the 4th quarter, exhorting his defense to show heart. This unit had been manhandled most of the game, and they were about to give up yet another touchdown, yet their coach was appealing to their best instincts—not by pandering, but by reaching them on a level true professionals understand.

It is more than fitting each *Apprentice* episode ends with its leader uttering the unfortunately-now-popular phrase “You're fired!” and a trip to one of his special fabulous places to treat the weekly challenge victor collection (I cannot, in good conscience, call them a team). Regrettably, style now dominates substance in far too many instances with leaders making themselves “the story.” It should not escape notice that neither Belichick nor Fox spoke to sideline reporters during the game. Their teams' professionalism is a direct extension of theirs. Successful business leaders may have charisma, but their success is founded on substance.

Driving Results

Can you name New England's starting offensive line? This year's Super Bowl outcome was determined by this unit, playing in relative obscurity but performing as the true game MVP. Certainly these five men understood the Patriots' game plan strategy, but more importantly they executed. As the game went on, as the stakes got higher, their performance only got better. It wasn't one single player or one heroic block that distinguished New England's offensive line as the game's star, it was their consistent level of play.

The breakdown in corporate culture, ultimately in results, is on weekly display every Thursday evening on NBC. In Trump's game, the prize is more valued than the experience, thereby rendering execution and consistency to irrelevance. As the challenge stakes get higher the more likely each participant is to look to become a hero, going off in their own direction. Some might consider it taking the initiative, but the way each apprentice carries it out more likely resembles anarchy. Indeed, it's a function of “my sum is greater than the corporate whole” syndrome that has hurt companies in virtually every industry sector.

Humility

There is nothing more painful for me—a dyed-in-green-New York Jets fan—than to extol the virtues of the New England Patriots. A coaching staff of former Jet coaches and a roster with former Jet players has now won 2 of the last 3 Super Bowls, while my team hasn't made the game since 1969. So while this pains me, I also know that giving the devil his due is part of perfecting one's craft.

From the show's theme on down, *The Apprentice* treats humility as a quaint little notion, perhaps reserved only for losers. Ego and being heard—emphasizing opinions over true ideas—are more prized than thoughtful analysis, planning, and achieving true success. In business, those who do not know enough to ask for help or to learn lessons from others are incapable of engineering or sustaining very much success.

Final Take-Away

Perhaps it's my Jets green showing here, but to me the best TV commercial of the night was Bill Parcells, Jerry Jones, and a host of players from teams not in this year's Super Bowl singing "Tomorrow." They understand that as of this very moment, every team has the same 0-0 record, and the quest for next year's Super Bowl championship begins.

Now, I understand *The Apprentice* is just a TV show. I just don't know if the participants—or if the viewing audience—understands that's all it is...and a pretty bad one with absolutely zero business value at that!

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