

# Talent Lessons from the NFL

By Patrick Lencioni

Okay, I admit it. I'm a "draftnik."

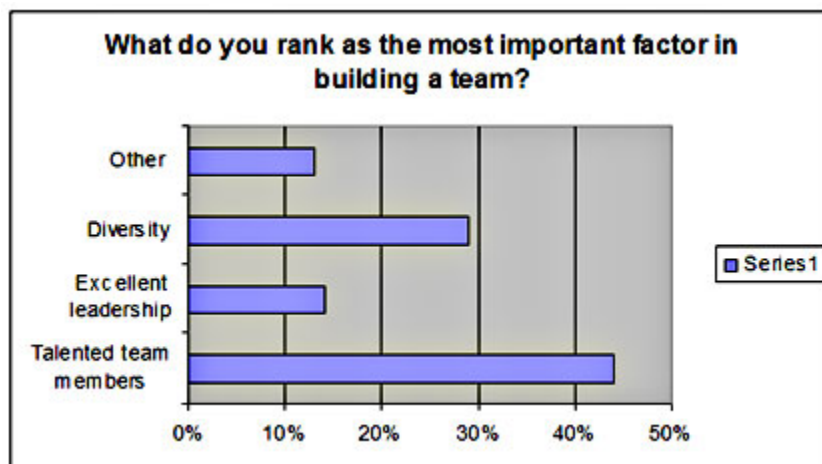
For those who don't know, that means I have a bizarre fascination with the NFL draft, the annual process by which professional football teams go about selecting college players for their rosters. And while my passion for the draft certainly must be rooted in my lifelong interest in sports, there is something else, something more subtle and important, that explains my obsession. I call it talent management strategy.

The NFL draft is like a career fair on steroids (on second thought, maybe that's not such a good analogy). For two days in April, thirty two teams spend an entire weekend in an auditorium, selecting players one at a time. And they do it all publicly.

If you're not yet convinced that this sounds interesting, think about it this way. Imagine sitting in a room with all the competitors in your industry, taking turns making choices from a common pool of candidates, while shareholders, industry analysts, the media, and your employees evaluate and critique your decisions. Sound interesting now? I think so too.

At this point, you're probably pretty glad that you're not an NFL coach or general manager, and that hiring in professional football is completely different from what it is in the world of business. Well, as it turns out, there are some similarities between the two, one of which provides a particularly relevant lesson for anyone who calls themselves a hiring manager.

We asked *Performance & Profits* readers to rank the most important factors in building teams at work, and here's what they said:



## **Skill versus Attitude**

What I'm referring to is the classic "skill versus attitude" question. You might prefer phrases like "technical competency" or "measurables" for skill, and "fit" or "intangibles" for attitude. Whatever you call the pairing, it remains one of the most common challenges that hiring managers, and NFL coaches, face.

Every year in football, a surprisingly high number of players drafted in the first round prove to be relatively average performers in their careers, while a number of guys drafted later in the process—or never drafted at all—turn out to be gems. And while this is not exactly the norm, it remains a mystery that after all the preparation that goes into the event, the end result is ultimately something of a crap shoot.

Coaches and GMs will tell you that the reason for this is that it's not a perfect science, that it's impossible to predict how a player is going to adjust to the difference between college football and the bigger, faster pro game, and so on. And while that is certainly true, it doesn't seem to be an adequate explanation.

## **Information Overload**

After all, there is no lack of information available to teams before they draft a player. They have months to watch try-outs, talk to former coaches, review game film and poke and prod players in every which way. There is little information which is not available to them.

Most managers in the business world, wisely or not, would love to have that kind of information. Many of them complain that their data is limited to a resume, a few formal interviews, and, because of legal restrictions and social paranoia, fuzzy information gleaned from cryptic phone references and background checks.

Ironically, the real culprit that prevents head coaches—and even managers in business—from making better hiring decisions has to do with an overreliance on information, and more important, an unconscious underutilization of the best tool they have: instinctual, qualitative judgment. And the best way to inform that judgment, something that is clearly more predictive and helpful than reviewing a resume or a stat sheet, is what most teams and managers do poorly: interviewing.

Yes, I know that there are stacks of books and articles out there about how to conduct interviews. There are personality tests (the NFL uses something called the Wonderlic) and logic games and tricky questions and body language cues, all of which are meant to subtly extract the right kind of information that will help a clever manager evaluate a candidate. But those ploys usually only add to the overabundance of information that must be sorted through to make a decision.

## **Establish a Profile**

Like so many aspects of life, a simpler approach is often the more effective one. And the first step is all about figuring out up front what you want in terms of behavior or cultural fit.

For instance, many NFL teams say they're looking for players with "good character." But because they don't really know what that means, they make it easy to fall in love with a guy's speed or strength or college stats, and then justify his brushes with the law or the rumors they hear about his divisive locker room behavior. They convince themselves that they can help him change his attitude, without a realistic understanding of how difficult that will be once the season begins. I don't have to cite the players in today's NFL who, year after year, prove that they're not really capable of changing their attitude.

The truth is, one person's—or organization's—definition of character is different from another's. And without a clear behavioral understanding, character becomes just another buzzword open to interpretation. Know what you mean by "team player" or "winning attitude" or "character" before you go into an interview, and you'll be exponentially more prepared to effectively take the next step.

### **Abandon the Routine**

When it comes time to actually meet players, don't do typical interviews, the kind where you sit down with candidates across a table and ask them questions about themselves. Instead, take them out of the office and do something that requires a more natural interaction.

I've heard people say that if you can go on a business trip with a person, you'll know whether you will like working with him or her or not. While that's probably not possible for a hiring manager or football coach to do, much of the same kind of information can be gleaned from a trip to the Home Depot or the post office.

Yes, that may sound odd. But the point of an interview should be to discern who candidates really are, and how they deal with people in real life situations. So, while you're looking for sandpaper or waiting to buy stamps, ask specific questions about what they've done, especially the mistakes they've made. Listen for answers that indicate whether they are a fit for what you've already decided you're looking for.

### **Beyond the Background Check**

Finally, when you do a background check, be creative. Asking a player's college coach (or a candidate's previous manager) for information can be helpful, but too often that coach has a vested interest in promoting his players. In a corporate setting even the worst employees often get decent references from former supervisors who fear a lawsuit if they say anything negative. Instead of talking only to managers, ask their teammates, their professors, their former subordinates, and the equipment guy who saw them in the locker room every day. And ask the receptionist who welcomed them into the building when they came for an interview what she thought.

What about game films, résumés, technical competencies, strength and speed statistics? By all means use them all! Use them before interviews to narrow the list of candidates you will choose to meet individually. And afterward, use them to make difficult decisions between two candidates who you already know are a good fit for your team. But whatever you do, don't let the measurables, the data, and the statistics lead you down a path where you ignore the sense that God gave you.

Otherwise, you'll end up with a linebacker who can run and tackle and lift weights, but who can't stay out of jail or get along with his teammates in the huddle. Or an accountant who knows debits and credits backward and forward, but who no one — including you — wants to accompany on a business trip.

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