

### Why focus and strategy?

Have you ever observed a really good team in action? Whether it's sport, business, military, or even politics, there are two things that set a good team apart from 'the rest':

- they have a **'focus'** (i.e. they know what must be achieved), and
- they have a **'strategy'** (i.e. they know how they will achieve it).

I started this Post while on my sojourn to the Adelaide Clipsal 500 V8 Supercars motor race weekend, which is Australia's largest domestic motorsport event. While I enjoy the racing, I also like to look at the teamwork that is on display. Not all of this is at the racetrack, as catching an early morning breakfast before heading to the track also provided some interesting observations of teamwork. This year I decided to look at how **focus and strategy** affect teamwork.

### Successful teamwork at Big Table

Probably the best example of successful teamwork that I noted during the whole weekend was not at the racetrack. Rather, it was at a café stall in the Adelaide Market – **Big Table**. Famous for its breakfasts, I try to make this my first stop whenever I visit Adelaide (as I have for the past six Clipsal 500 events). As I sat up at the café bench bar at about 7:30 a.m. for my Friday and Saturday breakfasts, I was able to observe the staff going about their work in the tiny space of the stall. With a constant stream of customers, orders for meals, coffees, snacks and other drinks are prepared and served on a continuous basis.

Everyone in the team clearly knew what was going on. As the pace of morning business increased, more staff arrived to begin their shifts – at one stage I counted 12 people working in a tiny floor space of

less than 10 square metres. Some were preparing food; some were taking orders and filling them; some were delivering orders to tables; a barista worked the coffee machine frantically; the chef was controlling hotplates, microwaves, toasters, thermal ovens; and the kitchen hand was cleaning and washing utensils. No one was stressing, but everyone was busy – like a well-oiled machine.



The bench bar at Big Table – 7:30 am and the team is in action with a busy day ahead. Up to 12 people work in the tiny space of the stall, preparing and serving meals, coffees, snacks, and other drinks continuously - a real test of teamwork.

At one stage, the manager/owner engaged a couple of staff in a discussion that took them out of the 'production line'. As quick as a flash, the chef appeared with a piece of paper, handing it to the manager and saying something like *"here's a list of the produce I need for the rest of the day"*. The conversation stopped, and away went the manager. Seeing that I was watching her, chef looked at me, winked, and said *"that will keep him out of our hair for a while!"*. *"Well done chef"*, I said, *"that's called managing up!"*

### Everyone plays their part

That started a conversation with a fellow customer, who was seated next to me. He told me that he had been a regular patron at Big Table for over 15 years – *"I'm here every Saturday morning for my coffee and toast"*. He went on to say that *"Angelo and Fotina really know how to look after their regulars"*. His next comment revealed that Fotina was the chef – which gave a new meaning to the little exchange that I had witnessed. Clearly, there was no doubt over who was the real 'leader' of this team.

When I reflected later about how smoothly the team at Big Table operated, it was apparent that they were all very much focussed on playing their part in satisfying their customers' orders. Their overall goal may have been something like *ensure all customers receive great coffee and service, and good food*. And their *strategy* to achieve this was to organise their production processes so that everyone knew how to play their part, with the least disruption to everyone else – which meant not using any more floor space than was absolutely necessary.

Somehow I suspect that Fotina and Angelo would be rather surprised to find that they were at the centre of my little study on teamwork. The point is that while teamwork is needed in all manner of situations, really great teamwork (such as I observed at Big Table) is not always apparent. What makes Big Table really notable, *imho*, is that it has been operating for over 20 years, and it has loyal customers who have been coming back for 15 years or more. Even in the market café business, that is a long time.

### Teams must have focus and strategy

When I reflect on my own experiences of good and great teams, the best business teams that I have been associated with have always had a very clear

*focus* on what they needed to achieve – e.g. a financial/sales target, a product launch date, a subscription metric, a customer loyalty score, whatever. They knew what their goals were, and they had definite plans about how they were going to achieve them. They also often had short-term objectives (and strategies) that helped them monitor their progress towards the end goal.

The same goes for good sports teams. A good sports team takes the court or the field not just with the intention to compete for the win, but also with a clear *strategy* of how they are going to do that. Sometimes the *strategy* is built around key players, or it may be about neutralising an opposition key player. If they know that victory is unlikely, either before or during a game, the team goal may become to minimise the opposition's ability to score, and the *strategy* will reflect that. Just like a military *strategy* for battle, it is about knowing your strengths and weaknesses – and also those of the opposition.

### Focus and strategy come first

Apart from *focus and strategy*, there are a number of other features or characteristics that make up a good team – things like trust, collaboration, commitment, communication, confidence, etc. While these do all form part of the 'success recipe' for a team, *imho*, *focus and strategy* are the foundations, ahead of everything else. As an analogy, *focus* can be likened to 'knowing where we are going', and *strategy* is about 'knowing how to get there'. The *focus* should provide the team with a clear and unambiguous understanding of what they must achieve.

Aspects of the *focus* may be set for the team, e.g. in business the *focus* may be derived from goals and targets; in the military it can be taken from the mission and tasks; in politics it may be based on party policies. In sport however, the *focus* for a

game (or competition) is usually decided by the coach. Having the correct *focus* for the team is absolutely essential; an incorrect *focus* will inevitably lead to a flawed *strategy*, which will not achieve the desired result. For example, there is an important difference between *increasing customer numbers* and *increasing the number of high-value customers*. A *strategy* designed to achieve one is unlikely to be particularly successful towards the other.

### Teams and leadership

It could be argued that *focus and strategy* are also hallmarks of effective leadership – and I would not contest that. After all, a leader needs 'followers' (otherwise, who are they 'leading'?) – and the best type of followers for a successful leader to have would be a good team (or, better still, a 'great' team). It is not unusual for the 'leadership' of a team to determine the *strategy* the team will adopt. Whether that leadership is from an individual, or from a group within the team, this is about knowing *how* to achieve the *focus*. A leadership that cannot explain this to its followers is unlikely to last for very long - there are more than a few political leaders (or hopefuls) who have suffered such a fate.

There is an obvious linkage between effective leadership and successful teamwork. Without effective leadership, a team is unlikely to be successful (however, this is not an absolute – a strong team can carry a weak leader, but this is only likely to be a short-term solution). Conversely, the leader of an *unsuccessful* team can hardly be considered to be effective. In sport, business, military and politics, the most successful teams are inevitably those that have effective leaders. With effective leadership, an 'average' team can develop to become 'good' or even 'great'.

### Note:

- **team:** a group that come together for a shared purpose
- **leader:** a person who is followed by their supporters

### Leaders and focus

The culture and 'modus operandi' of a team will often be related to the experience and competence of the team members. The more experience and competence that team members have, the more autonomy they may have to influence and execute *strategy* (execution of *strategy* involves tactics – i.e. the 'doing' actions). However, the responsibility for deciding the *focus* should always remain with the leadership – there is little room for democracy when it comes to deciding direction.

Returning to my observations from Big Table. I have no doubt the secret behind the successful ongoing operation of the café stall, including the examples of teamwork that I observed, lies in the effective leadership of Fotina and Angelo. And their case can be an example for anyone who is leading a team, whether big or small, whether sport or business or military or politics, make sure that:

- you have a **focus** (i.e. you know where you are going), and
- you have a **strategy** to achieve that *focus* (i.e. you know how to get there).

### A closing thought:

- a leader without a **focus** is lost;
- a team without a **strategy** will get lost.

### Coming next:

The art of asking GREAT questions

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