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A Game of Inches

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The corporate world is a very competitive place and, fair or not, every little bit of advantage is important.

Regular readers of *The Stepping Stone* may recall that in the October 2007 issue, I wrote an article entitled “Right Fielders of Actuarial Science.” In that article, I likened the coach’s need to find the best positions for players on a Little League team to the corporate manager’s need to find the most productive positions for the actuaries on staff.

Well, as I write this, it’s Little League season again and, better yet, All Star season—the time when we coaches get to see the best players effectively execute the plays that ultimately separate the winning teams from the also-rans. Sometimes the players do such a good job in that execution

that the difference between winning and losing is obvious. But other times, the difference between the “W” and the “L” can be remarkably subtle and nearly impossible to distinguish. Often, in fact, it is the tiniest of margins that makes the difference.

Case in point: In our Little League District, only two teams of five in each

bracket can advance after round robin play to compete in the next round. In one bracket, three of the five teams finished with identical three-and-one records. And so it went to a tiebreaker. Rules specify that head-to-head results or, in this case, head-to-head-to-head results should determine the winner. But a quick look at that yielded a one-and-one record for each of the three teams since A beat B, B beat C and C beat A. When that happens and, apparently, it happens enough that there is a second tiebreaker, a defensive runs per inning statistic is used.

Interestingly, in our tourney, all three teams had given up the same amount of runs (18) during the course of their four games each. But one of the teams did that in 20 innings, another in 21 innings and the third in 23 innings. Since most of you who are reading this are mathematicians, I’ll spare you detailed reading on the calculations that followed, but suffice it to say that the difference between making the next round and not making the next round was, for the most part, infinitesimal. Well, it was small, anyway, with ratios of .78, .86 and .90 used to pick the winners. In fact, the truth be told, it was even more complicated than that, because the rules also mandated that once that .78 team was selected as the first choice, the tiebreaker would revert to head-to-head for the remaining two and, there, the .86 team (i.e. the team with the better statistic) had lost to the team with the .90 statistic. Not fair, perhaps, that that .86 team should not advance but, hey, the rules are the rules.

What in the world does all this baseball have to do with corporate America, you ask? Simple. The corporate world is a very competitive place and, fair or not, every little bit of advantage is important. And, just as in Little League, the tiebreakers in business come into play all the time. For example:

- Who will get the job at your company amongst all those very capable candidates, all of whom have successfully completed two actuarial exams and have a summer internship on their resume?
- Who will get the promotion to VP and run your pricing and product development operation amongst all those hard-working and dedicated staff on your actuarial team?
- Whose health or life insurance policy will your potential customers opt to purchase when the choices come down to minute differences, perhaps in credited interest rates, surrender values, deductibles or co-payments on generic prescription drugs?



Do I need to continue? Or do you agree? The difference these days between choice A and choice B is not usually all that big. More often than not, it is going to come down to something very small. Yet the outcome can be incredibly dramatic. “HONEY, I GOT THE JOB! WE DON’T HAVE TO MOVE!” or “KIDS, I GOT THAT PROMOTION! WE’RE GOING TO DISNEY WORLD!” or “I’m sorry. It was a hard decision, but we’ve decided to go with another carrier.”

So what does it take to win those tiebreakers? Perfection? That, of course, would help but, realistically, it’s hard to do—especially over the long term. Rather, I would argue, it requires everyday focus, like thinking ahead about what could go wrong, and putting yourself in the place of your customer or potential boss and trying to figure out what they might want. It requires energy and a willingness to work a little extra or, in some cases, a lot extra. It requires that thank-you notes be sent, that spelling mistakes be found prior to sharing your memos and that you make sure columns total correctly before providing that report to anyone. It means that numbers need to be checked and rechecked and, often, checked yet again. Winning tiebreakers means dressing appropriately and practicing your presentation in front of a mirror, listening to those around you, and it means doing your homework, knowing when to chime in at meetings and knowing when to shut up. It means being nice, to all people, at all times. None of this is, of course, all that hard. But often it isn’t done the way it should be.

Same thing, I’d say, with all those Little Leaguers. It isn’t all that hard to look the ball into the glove at short or watch the ball hit the bat as it crosses the plate, but how often have you seen that ball go through the wickets or the umpire indicate strike three? It’s more often than not the lack of focus or the lack of sufficient caring or the unwillingness to use one’s energy that gets in the way. It’s not that people can’t; it’s more that people don’t. And maybe that’s the way it ought to be when it

comes to winning and losing. The team that works the hardest and focuses the most should win. The candidates that want the jobs the most should get them, and the companies and their employees that put the most effort into securing the business of the customer should be the ones that gain that loyalty and generate the most profit.

Will hard work always win out? Unfortunately, no. There are no guarantees. But, as actuaries, we deal in probabilities and, clearly, the probabilities for success will be increased. So the question then becomes, not who are you now, not what inherent talents do you have, not what is so good about me or my company but, rather, who do you want to be and how hard are you willing to work to get there?

Do you want to be a winner, and are you willing to do what it takes? Or do you want to take the easier, sometimes lazier, way out and, likely, come up short? It’s not about perfection. Even the major leaguers, the World Series Champs in fact, make errors. It’s about taking the skills, talents and knowledge that you already have or can develop and doing the best you can with them—100 percent of the time. It’s about commitment right down to the last detail. That is the tiebreaking difference in life, in career and in baseball.

Coach Braunstein

P.S. We’ve got a big Little League game coming up tomorrow. I think I’ll read this to the team. ●



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