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# The Miracle of Competitive Collaboration

By Jamie Shallow

**// Goal line! ...{whistle ... players skate on ice to goal line and back} ... think you can win on talent alone? ... you don't have enough talent to win on talent alone! ... again {whistle... players skate on ice to goal line and back} ... you better think about something else, each and every one of you—when you pull on that jersey, you represent yourself and your teammates, and the name on the front is a h\*\*\* of a lot more important than the name on the back! Get that through your head! ... again ... win, lose or tie you're gonna play like champions ... again ... again ... you keep playing this way you won't even beat anyone good, let alone great ... again ... again ... again ... {players continue to skate, totally exhausted} ... again {finally, a player shouts—Michael Eruzione, Winthrop, Massachusetts!} ... who do you play for? ... {I play for the United States of America!} ... that's all gentlemen.”<sup>1</sup>**

This scene, from what has been dubbed the top sports moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was taken from the movie *Miracle*, where Kurt Russell portrays coach Herb Brooks who transforms a group of young amateur hockey players into Olympic champions. It's the well-known story of the 1980 Men's U.S. Olympic Hockey Team—“*Do you believe in Miracles?! YES!*”

Many can probably hear the voice of Al Michaels in their head right now. Question is, do we believe in miracles? Do we believe in the miracle of the ability to tap into the human spirit where people can achieve beyond their individual limits? In a profession of highly talented, self-driven individuals, do we really even care to?

If we genuinely embrace the role of leader, how can we not desire to help each person we lead to reach their full potential—for their sake, for the company's sake, for the profession's sake, and even for our own sake? Coach Brooks knew the art of creating what is called team synergy. Synergy—the state where a team achieves greater output than the sum of the individual outputs. I call this a miracle, because it's where  $1+1+1+1 = 7$ . That's what happened in 1980 in Lake Placid, N.Y. It's also what happened in the 1960s in my town of Green Bay, Wis., under coach Vince Lombardi.

## STRONG BONDS—THE NAME ON THE FRONT

One lesson we learn from Coach Herb is that the name on the front of the jersey is more important than the name on the back. What does he mean by this? Well, notice that he made the team skate gassers\* on the ice until they showed him they caught on to this message. It was the acknowledgment that they were Team USA. The name on the back is the player's individual name, but it's Team USA on the front.

In some regard, it's developing a wolf pack mentality. Not in the sense of the hierarchy, with alpha, beta and omega roles on the team. But, rather, in the sense of the strong bond to the pack that wolves exhibit. “*A pack mentality of extreme loyalty and devotion to the group binds the wolves together as a unit, despite times of scarce prey or violence.*”<sup>2</sup>

But how do we, as leaders, create this type of team bond? Well, can you just see me having my team of actuarial analysts running up and down the stairwells to the point of exhaustion until someone finally yells out their name, followed by “UnitedHealthcare?!” Hey, that's an idea!



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### FOOTNOTE

\* For a definition, see [www.crossfitfootball.com/page/index.php?menu=faq&page=exercises](http://www.crossfitfootball.com/page/index.php?menu=faq&page=exercises).

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**We tend to reward individuals for standing out from their peers, which really encourages our teams to compete against each other and show off their self value.**

Seriously, though, some companies send their teams to various team-building retreats. I believe there is some value in this, but when I look back at what have been serious bonding moments in my life, they are all a bit more genuine. I developed some very close friendships during my college days by times spent in some less than desirable working conditions.

I spent a number of summers working with some friends and relatives restoring an old farmhouse along the Oconto River in northeastern Wisconsin. We spent challenging times removing old walls with plaster dust, cobwebs, bat dung, and occasionally the bat itself falling on us, often in very hot and humid conditions. There were times of planning, demolishing, building, sweating, playing, arguing, etc. Yet, through the experience we developed a connection that persists to today, much like the camaraderie of soldiers or tight-knit sporting teams.

*“Team-bonding isn’t the result of elegant experiences in hotel conference rooms, solving imaginary, simulated problems designed to diagnose team members, swinging from vines, or falling (filled with trust) into the open arms of others. Team-bonding is something more fundamental—and more boring ... and it occurs right within the cadence of the work being done. Team-bonding occurs when people: Decide together; Look forward together; Accomplish together ... Working together. Sweating together. Worrying together. Making things happen together.”<sup>3</sup>*

## **MIRACLE—COMPETITIVE COLLABORATION**

Another lesson that we can take away from Coach Herb is that although each individual is required to compete to earn a spot on the team, the team absolutely needs collaboration. Sure, a little competition does the team good. You can see this in most competitive sporting teams. For example, an NFL running back may perform better because another one of the team’s running backs is playing so well. Each player pushes each other to do a little better, simply by performing their best. However, it’s also clear that too much competition can destroy collaboration.

Consider the culture you are establishing with your team. What do you reward: competition or collaboration? Do you reward those who have acquired knowledge that others haven’t (subject matter experts—SMEs), since they have a valuable and unique knowledge base? Seems logical, yet this encourages destructive competition. This promotes hoarding of information. What is more valuable to the company, an SME who hoards information or a team player who acquires knowledge and has developed the communication skills to pass it on to other team members? The former stands out as an elite talent; the latter tends to blend in with the rest of the team. Which do we reward?

If we truly stop to think about it, most of our cultures are rather corporate. We tend to reward individuals for standing out from their peers, which really encourages our teams to compete against each other and show off their self value. This results in the “dog-eat-dog” mentality of putting others down to lift ourselves up. In your culture, would you help advance your career by helping a co-worker, or would you be better off to put them down to lift yourself up and increase your value? Something to consider at performance review time.

In addition to encouraging and rewarding a more selfless approach from our teams, in order to build collaboration that makes for a stronger team, we should also consider our own method as a leader. In a recent article for CBS News, former CEO and mentor of CEOs, Margaret Heffernan, wrote about a trend that is developing in leadership that we can learn from:

*“...the executives who underestimate themselves perform more highly than those who overestimate themselves.*

*“In other words, a certain modesty, humility or even perhaps anxiety makes better leaders.... Executives who appreciate that there are others in the world who are better, smarter, sharper than they are may be, as leaders, more appreciative and better able to draw in the complementary talents they need.”<sup>4</sup>*

## LIFT THEM UP

This thought helps to clarify a common misconception about leadership. Many seem to view it as the leader's role to be more knowledgeable in all areas than the people they lead. Being a great leader is not being a "know-it-all," but rather it is having the ability to draw out the potential of not just the individuals on a team, but the potential of the team as a unit—in other words, to create team synergy that exceeds the sum of the individual potentials.

As leaders in our profession and industry, we need to lift up those we serve, and also build cultures that reward others for doing the same. If we do, we just might experience our own miracle moment.

*"I've often been asked in the years since Lake Placid, what was the best moment for me ... the sight of 20 young men with such differing backgrounds now standing as one."<sup>5</sup> —Coach Herb Brooks ●*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> O'Connor, G. (Director). 2004. Miracle [Motion Picture].
- <sup>2</sup> Conger, C. 2013. What Is a Wolf Pack Mentality? Retrieved from animal.discovery.com.
- <sup>3</sup> Giulioni, J.W. 2013. From Team Building to Team Bonding. Nov. 14. Retrieved from www.smartblogs.com/leadership.
- <sup>4</sup> Heffernan, M. 2013.. Great Leaders Aren't Smug. May 2. Retrieved from www.cbsnews.com.
- <sup>5</sup> O'Connor, G. (Director). 2004. Miracle [Motion Picture].

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