

Creating Corporate *Dream Teams*

by Tom Lombardi

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Do you remember the shot? It was taken at the anticipated entrance of some of the hottest, young stars in basketball—LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony, Allen Iverson, Tim Duncan.

They entered the Olympic arena that hot August night aloof, cocky, above it all. After all, they were the returning American *Dream Team*. It was a free trip to Athens, and a sure shot at Olympic Gold.

But there were the shots that followed—as in, missed and dropped. The Americans barely took Bronze. Fans worldwide cried foul: How could this happen? Who or what was to blame?



These final photos at the awards ceremony say it all. Can you say shock, shame, disbelief?

These days, on the corporate playing field, star “players” and their “coaches” have come under fire. Here, super-talented, well-trained, highly paid individuals compete on teams, to win. In addition, senior business teams look more and more like their Olympic counterparts: short time frames to build trust and coordination, team leaders under stress due to constant transition, and limited resources for team building.

The irony is that we have never been in a greater position to see the dreams of founders, investors, and stakeholders, realized, faster. High tech communication tools, access to global markets, and availability of a worldwide pool of the best and brightest, should produce lay-ups for teams and those who invest in them.

So, what can be learned from the American Dream Team? What are the critical, underlying needs of teams today, operating in turbulent times? Here are two elements that jump up.

- 1. A winning team must attach itself to a clear purpose and mission, larger than the individual aspirations of its members.**

Huge salaries and big egos are easy targets when explaining the downfall of team effectiveness in the sports and business worlds. But, how do you explain the success of the original 1992 Dream Team,

perhaps the greatest collection of players in basketball history (and not lacking for ego or wealth)? The team played and won with grace, humility and style.

The reason is clear. Player after player talked about the pride they felt in representing their country. They were competing for an ideal, a way of life. The mission was real, palpable. The true culprit for many teams is lack of a shared, compelling purpose for their existence. Teams function best when each player gives 100% on the field, and that happens when winning represents more than just a personal victory.

2. A team is a social system, where trust and teamwork is built organically.

Much was made of the immaturity of the US Olympic team and the conflicts that dominated practices and preparation. In fact, trust is built through the successful resolution of conflict. Teams of individuals who will constructively, collectively, and regularly confront the most uncomfortable issues will emerge the stronger for it. Remember, the biggest threats to a team are internal, not external.

Trust is also built when team members observe each other make and keep commitments to performance, on and off the playing field. Accountability is the opportunity for team members to support each other in their mutual pursuit of personal excellence. Blaming others, making others wrong, or playing the victim is anathema to team members building a culture of trust.

Notice the above elements are ego-busters. As Jim Collins pointed out in his research of the most successful companies and their leaders, individuals who play at the highest levels must constantly check their personal agendas and ego needs at the door. In word and in practice, *the success of the team and its mission must come first.*

The fuel for mission accomplishment and trust building is honest, authentic communication and the establishment of productive feedback loops. And this includes feedback about a player's "being" as well as their "doing". All must seek this feedback, starting with the team leader. Further, living the values of integrity, self-discipline, honesty, self-control, creates a leadership effect that inspires and motivates all team members.

Looking back at photos of these ball players at the Athens Opening Ceremonies, you can see defeat written all over their faces. But before we judge them, let's consider how we are playing on our own teams. When there are leaders that step up, corporate dream teams can be a regular occurrence, rather than rare phenomenon.