

## What I Learned from My Favorite Team

### University of Michigan Football: A Program In Transition

In 1969 – at the ripe old age of twelve – I became a lifelong fan of The University of Michigan football team. On a crisp autumn day, Bo Schembechler’s Wolverines shocked the world by upsetting the previously undefeated and number one ranked Ohio State Buckeyes. Now fifty-two in age, I’ve enjoyed watching the Wolverines remain a consistent team, with 33 straight bowl appearances, 21 conference championships, and 1 national championship since that day in 1969.

In 2008 a major change happened to the powerful Michigan Wolverine football system: head coach Lloyd Carr retired, and the University hired Rich Rodriguez as the new coach. The 2008 season was a time of great transition. With the hire of a new coach came a new style of play: the spread offense.

The season was a disaster, ending with a (3-9) record. The process of converting and recruiting players to fit the new game plan and playbook was difficult. By the beginning of the next season, ten players had left the team for other programs. They cited a new system, a new coaching style, and a new culture for leaving.

I began to ask myself a question: what impact does system and culture change have on the success of a team? The situations that Mr. Rodriguez and Mr. Schembechler faced have some striking similarities. Both were outside men coming to a rich tradition of football. Both faced athletes leaving the program because of the change in coaching style and culture. I still remember the sign Schembechler posted in U of M locker room back in the spring of 1969: “Those who stay will become champions,” and how the athletes leaving the team wrote on it “those who don’t will be doctors and lawyers.”

Why then did Bo Schembecher enjoy success (8-2) with a win over number one ranked Ohio State compared to Rich Rodriguez (3-9) in their first years at the helm?

The question really began to bother me: why did one have an easier transition than the other? After further investigation, it soon became clear that three major elements differentiated the transitions of Schembechler and Rodriguez: the **personality of the Coach**, the **composition of the players**, and the **relative continuity of the system of play**.

In looking at the personality of the coach, there is no specific indicator of why one excelled while the other has started with difficulty. The coaches’ personalities are certainly different. Throughout its history, Michigan has had no coaches with the personality of Bo Schembechler. He was very much a hands-on task master, with a fiery personality and a pervasive passion to compete and win. By comparison, Rich Rodriguez exhibits the more traditional Michigan coaching style, with a more “laid back” personality. Nevertheless, both coaching styles have proven valid in the Michigan Wolverine

system.

What of the composition of the players? The 1969 Wolverines were primarily upperclassmen with playing experience and a history of winning games together. While they did not reach the championship level, they did finish in the middle of the standings or slightly higher. By comparison the 2008 Wolverines, after being decimated by graduation, were an inexperienced team with underclassmen at nearly every position. The 2007 Wolverines won games and had a winning season, but lost more games than expected. They essentially left a hollow core for Rodriguez to lead. This suggests that during periods of change, organizational memory can be far more important than individual leadership.

The major tactical difference between the two coaches, however, is found in the continuity of the system of play. It is interesting to note that Coach Schembechler was not a “Michigan man” when he was hired. The fact that he had coached under Woody Hayes at rival Ohio State made his transition somewhat difficult. But Schembechler knew and idolized the history and tradition of Michigan football, and was able to utilize members of the Wolverine system to support his style and approach. The offensive and defensive schemes were similar in the transition from his predecessor Bump Elliott to Schembechler. This history and continuity allowed him to gain the support of program insiders, who in turn spread his message and supported his personality.

By comparison, Rodriguez brought a style of play drastically different from his predecessor Lloyd Carr. And Rodriguez’s limited knowledge of Michigan football history put him at a disadvantage: without strong organizational memory, he unknowingly changed many traditional practices. Pulled in different directions, with no coherent leadership or message, the entire program faltered.

### Business Implications

Few of us must endure the ongoing public scrutiny faced by those selecting a new head coach. But our business struggles are no less daunting, whether we are adding a manager to our organization, launching a new product launch, or simply dealing with the issues that affect our everyday routines. How does the Michigan football situation relate to the business world, and what common tactical approaches to process change can be used to build a successful organization?

In business, leaders need to be cognizant of the same three factors of personality, players, and continuity of the system of play. Our research shows that companies who understand and manage these factors continually outperform those who do not.

The first element, the general personality or leadership style, can be best broken into two main categories: leaders with a transactional or reactive personality, and those with a methodical

personality. While a transactional approach can provide excellent shorter term results, the methodical approach tends to facilitate longer term success.

The root cause is straightforward: those with a methodical approach view change as a natural occurrence inside their organization. Unlike their reactive counterparts who view changing scenarios as a hindrance in implementing their objectives, the methodical leader tends to remain calm. When new challenges emerge, these leaders tend to look first at their business plan for guidance. They determine if the plan is still relevant, and then use the plan's goals and objectives to frame out strategic and tactical needs. Only after they have determined the desired future state do they proceed.

Our research shows that this activity, often overlooked, is one of the most critical determinants of success or failure in business. Successful firms incorporate into their decision making the potential gain and risks of major tactical alternatives, the costs and benefits of adapting the organization, and the competitive response expected by the broader marketplace. This methodical system of leadership provides a baseline for long term success.

The methodical approach to leadership tends to flow from the executive suite down through the organization. Managers following this approach often utilize simple problem solving techniques, from routine gap analysis to more advanced control planning and FMEA, as a basis for defining organizational needs and key outcomes required. These techniques create a basis of shared language, communication style, and pacing which transcends functional discipline. Organizational emulation of this style of leadership creates a more repeatable level of implementation than that of the transactional or reactive personality style.

Our analysis shows that the composition of players holds an equally important role in determining successful adaptation and change in a business environment. Companies with a history of longer term staff and management employment experience a great deal of organizational memory. This can be helpful during times of metered improvement, but can also limit the propensity for radical change.

What is interesting is that few organizations tend to utilize the needed continuity (or discontinuity) inherent in their staff to influence tactical outcomes. As expected, firms with a more methodical approach to management and leadership tend to outperform in this area. They use gap analysis and other basic problem solving techniques to prioritize needs and to identify quick wins – pilot projects with little cost and high reward – as a means to an end. Small projects allow for minimal individual or departmental risk. Firms needing to provide continuity tend then to partner experience with youthful energy, whereas those requiring radical change tend to staff these projects with either outsiders or those with less of an attachment to the status quo.

In either case, the use of pilot projects inside the organization creates the opportunity to lever the

existing composition of players to spread awareness and acceptance of needed change. And by using pilot projects, these organizations create a forum in which “the cream rises to the top.” Individuals who participate in successful projects can become the de-facto influencers in the company long before they are managers. This in turn reinforces the dominant culture of the methodical leader.

Both of these two prior elements lead to the third: the continuity of systems. Top performing companies go to great lengths to leverage this factor. They tend to outspend their competition in the ongoing education of their staff. This isn’t to say that their teams have higher levels of outside training, but instead is evidenced by the great pains these companies take to explain how ongoing development ties back to or deviates from the current commercial or operational approach.

The ability to place change into context allows for easier acceptance and implementation. As key processes and outcomes are identified and related back to daily functions – the game plan – firms find a greater level of decision making accuracy from line managers and staff. Results then tend to improve, as critical details are managed not by senior executives but instead by those tasked with implementation.

Business leaders routinely make decisions that affect corporate culture. The lessons learned from University of Michigan are straightforward and thankfully simple. Firms mindful of these three elements for success find that managing organizational change is decidedly less strenuous than for their counterparts who neglect them.

The University of Michigan football program is ingrained in my soul. I will have my flag out every week and hope for victory. I want to wish Coach Rodriguez, his staff, and the athletes at the University Michigan all of the success possible and many Big Ten championships, with many victories over Ohio State.

Oh, and one more thing. GO BLUE !

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#### About The Author

Senior Practitioner Jack Lasley brings a critical eye that only three decades of manufacturing experience can provide. From his background in the automotive industry Lasley expanded his studies into material and systems quality, organizational development, and operational efficiency. Jack currently leads the Simplicity Tactics health care working group, and is launching a statewide manufacturing program in Michigan later this year.

#### About The Firm

Simplicity Tactics provides hands-on problem solving and support to manufacturing companies, governmental and non-governmental entities, and service firms. Offering expertise in areas as varied as commercial development, operational effectiveness and efficiency, and labor relations, the firm offers discrete counsel for firms in transition.

