

Thinking Out Loud... Teamwork

"That's the reason we (the New England Patriots) won; because we played the game as a team."

—Bill Belichick, New England Patriots Head Coach, upon winning Super Bowl XXXVI

Until the day of Super Bowl XXXVI—at approximately 6:15 p.m. EST, when the two competing teams were introduced to the crowd in New Orleans and to television viewers worldwide—the recurring theme of Thinking Out Loud was the pragmatic implications of episodic versus chronic care, a topic that has dogged my mind for several months. This topic changed when the New England Patriots bolted from the inflatable tunnel onto the football field to the raucous cheers of their fans as a team—not individually, as is standard protocol. Going against all precedent, they raced out to face the blinding stadium lights as a unit, not as individual stars who unabashedly absorb their energy from the crowd.

The New England Patriots—including the benchwarmers and the starters, the support staff and the coaching staff—ran onto the field as a *team*, each member of which energized the other into a single entity bent on winning the game. The force of the team was with them.

At that moment, I felt that the Patriots would win Super Bowl XXXVI, despite the fact that the odds were overwhelmingly on the side of the St. Louis Rams, who were a 14-point favorite to win this most prestigious of all football games. Also at that moment, I knew that the next installment of Thinking out Loud would be about teamwork, a virtual reality that is so critical to success in business and in healthcare.

The Hallmarks of Teamwork

Knowing what to do, when to do it, and how to do it... these are the hallmarks of teamwork. During Super Bowl XXXVI, the St.

Louis Rams—who ended up losing the contest—seemed to have these qualities rolled-up ceremoniously into their superstars, leaving the rest of the team to fend for themselves. In so many ways, the game was, in fact, between the Rams superstars and the Patriots *team*. Here's what happened:

For the first 50 minutes of the 60-minute game, the Rams, who had one of the highest-rated offenses in professional football, were overwhelmed by the Patriots, who had one of the poorest-rated defenses in professional football. To the surprise of most viewers, the Patriots were not at all playing as if they were the underdogs who, on any given day, would be expected to lose to the Rams by at least 14 to 21 points.

Confronted with what could only be described as a determined Patriots team, the Rams turned the ball over three times, which allowed the Patriots to take advantage of good field position and score 17 points. But, remarkably, with only 90 seconds left in the game, the Rams offense began to click, and they came from behind to tie the score. Overtime was almost a certainty. In fact, virtually no one watching the game—especially none of the broadcast commentators—expected the Patriots to do anything more than just let the clock run out and then try to win in overtime. The Patriots, however, had other thoughts.

With television producers and directors, broadcast commentators, and spectators throughout the world all gearing up for overtime, the Patriots set a series of well-practiced, well-synchronized moves into action. With no timeouts remaining, the Patriots executed a number of rapid-fire plays that not only moved the ball downfield, but successfully controlled

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the clock along the way, allowing them to get into field goal range.

With only 7 seconds left, the field goal unit sprinted to the line of scrimmage, the field goal kicker let loose with a 48-yard attempt, and the ball cleared the uprights... with no time left on the clock. In a brilliant display of what can only be described as teamwork, the New England Patriots won Super Bowl XXXVI.

Vesting Ownership in Those Who Do the Work

Teamwork, of course, also applies in business and healthcare. Our business and healthcare teams can only win when they know what to do, when to do it, and how to do it—a combination of practiced action packets leveraged by discipline and enabled by information technology. The question is whether we will practice our moves as well as the Patriots did theirs.

An acknowledged way to achieve this kind of teamwork is to clearly define one's processes in a standard format using the ISO9000 (International Standards Organization) guidelines. These processes relate to every aspect of a business—from executive suites to dialysis facilities to mailrooms. Their definition ultimately enables a virtual leadership that energizes the actions of each team member, similar to the plays the Patriots executed during the last 90 seconds of Super Bowl XXXVI.

Within a clinical context, these processes encompass the patient and the patient's family... pivotal individuals within the continuum of care because they control so much of what is accomplished. Phrased differently, the facts were previously on the side of the care team—until they focused on the patient, who then became pivotal to the outcome. On any given day, the care team had all the facts. Now, the patient has them, too, and uses them according to a collabora-

tive, well-defined, and well-understood process. The patient and the patient's family have become part of the care team process, and the team is controlling the clock.

Let's Be Practical, and Dream

Consider going beyond the ISO9000 guidelines and adopting the "Six Sigma" way. In spite of the fact that its ultimate objective is to limit a product's defects to only 3.4 per million opportunities, it is not a glass-tower theory. It proposes to define "specific methods to recreate the process so that defects and errors never arise in the first place."¹ Its methods are concrete and include eight stages: recognition, definition, measurement, analysis, improvement, control, standardization, and integration.

As of this writing, the Six Sigma way is in the early stages of being applied to our own businesses (AMI and HMG). It can also be applied to the healthcare setting. The processes undertaken by the caregiver, the renal nurse, the patient and the patient's family, the dietitian, and the social worker—all are eligible for Six Sigma scrutiny.

"The reason we're not celebrating is that we made too many mistakes," said Rams quarterback Kurt Warner, following the Rams' loss in Super Bowl XXXVI.

On the other hand, said New England Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick, "That's the reason we (the New England Patriots) won; because we played the game as a team."

Rams superstar Warner had three turnovers. His unheralded opponent, Tom Brady, had none. Which team played Super Bowl XXXVI the Six Sigma way? How should we execute our team plays as businesses and healthcare providers?

Reference

1. *Six Sigma: The Breakthrough Management Strategy Revolutionizing the World's Top Corporations*, by Mikel Harry, PhD, and Richard Schroeder. New York: Doubleday, 2000, p vii. **D&T**