



The Secret Ingredients of Winning Teams

#4 – Vulnerability

How a group of people become a team is something we find fascinating, and with our 4th installment of "The Secret Ingredients of Winning Teams" our attention turns to **vulnerability**.

What does being vulnerable have to do with winning, you ask? Aren't winners tough and angry, and how does it make sense to show weakness? Won't the other **wolves just feast on you for being soft**? Maybe not.

We have noticed the teams that can share with each other areas of personal weakness are taking trust to a new level, and trust is vital for group success. How and when a leader or coach introduces the element of being vulnerable to each

other is important. A

newly formed group seldom is ready to reveal where they are weak to each other. It takes time and shared experiences to build the bonds of trust. Practices, projects, games, and presentations are all needed to lay the foundation for the setting to start talking and sharing.

Once the team is at the right point in the season, **introducing the element of vulnerability can have an immediate impact on the level of engagement and focus that people will have towards the common goals.**



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Introducing vulnerability at the right time is key. You want it to be after the team has been through a few events together. These can be practices or games.

Once the players are talking about each other with reference the glue forms in the relationships and this is when vulnerability can be a magic tonic.

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Teams that are vulnerable to each other build a solidarity that lasts a lifetime. Coaches and managers need to get the timing right, and it is more effective when it is player driven. We offer a few examples below.

On May 30th the North Carolina Men's Lacrosse team won the NCAA Division 1 title in overtime against an excellent Maryland team. Players on both teams were playing their hearts out, and the competition was fierce. Even so, the Carolina team appeared to have an edge in a developing narrative as they came out of the NCAA regional game in Columbus Ohio played a week prior.

North Carolina was not a seeded team in the tournament and was playing 3rd seeded Notre Dame for a shot to go to the final four. 12 years earlier, Carolina coach Joe Breschi had been the coach at Ohio State, and had lost his son in a car accident at the age of three. After the game as the TV cameras and reporters interviewed Breschi and the players, it became known that the captains of the team had held a meeting where they dedicated their play to the memory of Breschi's son. Those players took the chance to be vulnerable to each other and to their coach. **Breschi in return clearly expressed to his team how much he needed and loved them.**

The bonds that are formed between people when they start to express and treat each other with this type of respect are almost impossible to break. **If you are seeking to build a committed team out of a group of people, seek adverse and challenging conditions. Help your**

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When building a committed team out of a group of people, seek adverse conditions, help your team through them and then enable the team to talk to each other about how they felt during the experience.

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team through it, and then enable them to talk to each other about how they felt during the experience. You will have a completely different group afterwards, and your ability to grow and accomplish things will shock you and others.

[This YouTube video clip](#) expresses what North Carolina and Joe Breschi were about as they sought the national title, and the players on that team will be brothers for life. These types of stories are what draw people to the sports narrative as they seek to raise their children to be healthy contributors to our society. Wouldn't you want your team at work or school to be like this?

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Nurturing your teams ability to talk about how they feel about the team and where they might be weak will not work with every team.

When it does show up, the leader can rest assured that the team will go the extra mile for each other and in a close race it can make all the difference.

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Another example of how vulnerability may have been the deciding difference between two highly competent teams was the NBA's western conference finals between Oklahoma City Thunder and the Golden State Warriors. Prior to the series Charles Barkley stated that OKC had more talent, and specifically had the length that was going to be a very difficult match up for the defending champion Warriors. He picked OKC to win and then every night as the series unfolded he chided the stars for OKC - Brian Westbrook and Kevin Durant - for playing "hero ball." The ever-insightful Barkley was on to something. Even when they were winning Barkley kept making his point.

As the series developed and the Warriors caught fire and came back, the hot spotlight of the NBA playoffs and the microphones picked up all the truth that the post-game press conferences can't hide. OKC was going to push themselves and get a win through execution and pressure. Golden State, on the other hand, had a very patient manner to all their communication. Coaches were sharing with players during the game to "lock in", and "keep moving the ball." The differences were subtle, but in a series that was this tight, something had to be the difference maker. In the last three games the lack of trust between the two stars at OKC and the rest of the team showed.

Reggie Miller was calling the game for TNT and he commented on the tension building between the OKC players. The cameras were able to confirm his observation when an assistant coach attempted to keep Durant in line as he chided a fellow player. Durant dismissed the coach with his hands and his words. He was beyond his breaking point, and his attitude was a culture killing toxin. OKC couldn't make it through the cauldron of pressure as a unit. The Warriors have built a culture of accountability and vulnerability with each other and it holds them together even when on the brink of elimination.



As a manager or coach, we encourage you to seek your own way to add an element of vulnerability to your teams' communication with each other. Be patient with your people, don't force them into a "hey why aren't we talking about this now" conversation. It will backfire on you. Instead, see if you can tease it out through the natural course of the events you face together. It is the adversity that will allow the communication leaders on your team to start the process of sharing their worries and fears, and how they need everyone on the team to reach the goal. Once you have this type of dialog on your team, keep it inside the team and honor the players that are willing to put it on the line. All of you are now a part of something special that you have jointly built. **A tight team.**