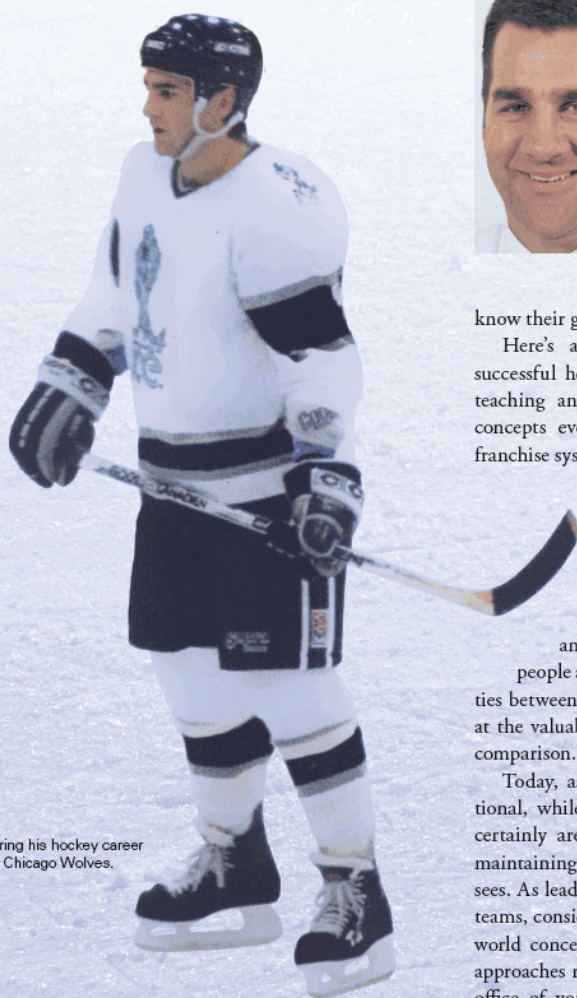


# Winning Hockey Teams: Parallels Between Competitive Sports and Franchising

Building a successful team takes strong leadership skills, be it a sports team or a Fortune 500 company.

BY ALEX ROBERTS, CFE



Alex Roberts during his hockey career with the Chicago Wolves.



**C**ertainly the headline begs the question: “What? How could hockey and franchising have anything in common?” Before dismissing the idea completely, think about this: Winning hockey teams always have great leadership, accountability, discipline and a strategy to

know their game plan and their competition.

Here’s another thought to consider: Creating a successful hockey team involves recruiting, developing, teaching and leading. Sound familiar? Any of those concepts ever come into play in building a thriving franchise system?

After a 14-year career as a hockey player and coach, peers in franchising are always interested to hear how skills acquired on the ice have transferred to the franchising arena. Once they get past the immediate images of roughing, fights and body checks associated with the sport, most people are surprised—not only at the many similarities between the competitive sport and franchising—but at the valuable lessons they take away from making the comparison.

Today, as the president of Mr. Handyman International, while there may not be a puck involved, there certainly are goals, including growing the system and maintaining robust unit economic growth for franchisees. As leaders or head coaches of your own franchising teams, consider applying the following hockey and sports world concepts to your overall strategy. Many of these approaches refer to your role as a leader at the corporate office of your franchise organization, but also can be applied at the unit level by your franchisees:

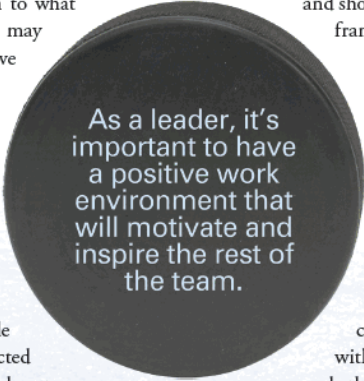
**Build an environment that inspires.**

Building a successful team takes strong leadership skills, be it a sports team or a Fortune 500 company. As a leader, it's important to have a positive work environment that will motivate and inspire the rest of the team. Maintain strong relationships with every single member of your team, and always listen to what they have to say. You may not agree, but always have an open door and open ears.

**Create a positive vibe.** Maintaining a positive attitude can ignite the success of a sports team—likewise, it can ignite the success of your franchise brand. While the economy has affected everyone, it's up to leaders to stay positive about the future of your franchise system. Find the right people and work through it. Your attitude can affect your game and everyone else's. A positive attitude can have a domino affect and spread through your franchise organization.

**Accountability counts.** As one person on a team of many, it's important for everyone in your franchise organization to not only be a team player, but to have a firm grasp on his specific role and be held accountable for this areas of responsibility. Just like on a sports team, if you are part of a franchise, it's important that everyone clearly knows his or her spot on the team and has set measurable objectives. They may not be a starter—maybe they are on the third line— but they are always needed to help the team where they can and should be held to their goals just like anyone else.

**Build a "championship culture."** Hockey and other competitive sports are valuable outlets for honing business acumen, largely because they help people to understand the value of morale as it relates to success. At some point in sports, people are going to be associated with both winning teams and losing teams, but the one main area that separates



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winning teams from the rest of the pack is a "championship culture." In that culture, everyone is pulling in the same direction. Everyone cares for each other as if each one is a member of the same family. Everyone knows the vision and goals which are communicated so there is no guesswork on what is expected. This culture can and should be a part of every franchise organization.

**Good recruiting is all about the player.** The golden rule of any good recruiter is to recruit with the player's goals in mind, not your own. As a hockey coach, there are constant meetings with prospective players and their families to talk about how joining those teams can help them meet their goals. In the franchise development world, it's very much the same approach: meeting with the displaced corporate executive or aspiring entrepreneurs to point out how starting a franchise can help them meet their personal objectives of business ownership, lifestyle and financial rewards.

**Discipline wins the game.** If being in sports teaches one anything, it's the importance of discipline. There are hours upon hours of practice. There are clear cut rules to the game and penalties for breaking them. There's no tolerance for being late or missing a practice, and there is lots of sacrificing in the name of your team. All of these concepts apply to running a franchise organization, especially given that there is a multitude of people and franchisees who are counting on the leader's discipline to maintain the franchise brand.

**Know your opposing team.** There's a reason coaches religiously study the videos of other teams in the league that they are up against. How could they effectively compete on the ice without being able to anticipate the opposition's potential moves and strategies? The world of franchising is big and keeps growing. Competition is fierce in every category. Make it

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a point to be familiar with what those in your space are doing, but don't get so obsessed that focus is lost on your own organization. Good coaches are familiar with their opposing teams, but they know their own teams and players even better and how to utilize their strong points at game time.

**Have a game plan.** A coach in hockey develops a strategy on how he wants the team to play. Good coaches take a look at the team's strengths and how to capitalize on them. Conversely, they look at their weaknesses and how to improve upon them. They ask questions, such as, "How are we going to create scoring chances offensively, and how will we defend in our defensive zone?" Just as a hockey team works on and develops tactics to implement these strategies, franchise organizations must continually look at their brands and do a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to determine their strategic initiatives. Franchisors need to consistently examine how they're going to generate more leads for their franchisees,

how they will increase revenues and decrease expenses, how to improve and execute their training and support programs and how to recruit more of the right franchisees. Just like a coach, for all of these objectives, franchisors must develop tactics to go after all of these strategic initiatives.

The following are the key parallels in approaches for winning sports teams and winning franchise brands:

- Positive attitudes are contagious within a team.
- Every team member must be held accountable.
- Leaders should build relationships with every member of the team.
- Maintain discipline in your organization and lead by example.
- Know your competitors.
- Winning teams have a playbook.

Of course, there are worlds of differences between hockey and franchising. For one thing, in a franchise organization, one can't drop his gloves and duke it out when frustration hits. Leaders have to learn the art of patience and take a political and sensitive approach to certain situations.

Still, the similarities are striking and boil down to one key conclusion: A successful team is made up of strong leaders and team players who all work together, simultaneously, toward the same goal—winning the game. Whether it's winning the Stanley Cup Championship or hitting double-digit same-store sales for consecutive years, the same rules come into play. ■

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Hockey and other competitive sports help people to understand the value of morale as it relates to success.

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