Drafting the Ideal Team: Risk Lessons from the NFL



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Next week is my favorite event of the pro football *offseason*, the NFL Draft. During the draft, the General Manager of each franchise often leads the selection of the team's "draft picks." Each prospective team member is carefully screened before the GM decides which players will be targeted as new players for the coming season. Every draft pick has the potential to be a star player, a solid contributor, or in some cases, a poor fit.

So how do the NFL's most successful teams choose their draft picks, and what can nonprofit leaders learn from the process?

- **Study the Tapes, But Save Time for Candid Conversations**
  In the NFL, studying tapes of a player's past performance is the beginning, but never the end of the screening process. In the new film *Draft Day*, the fictional GM of the Cleveland Browns has an opportunity to choose a Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback. But rather than basing his decision solely on the tapes and trophy, the GM calls other scouts and the quarterback's college coach to learn more. The time spent talking to people who know a prospective employee is incredibly valuable. Keep in mind that a prospective employee is motivated to tell you what they think you want to hear. References are an opportunity to hear about the prospect's skills, talents and weaknesses from another source. Don't be cynical about reference checks! Always allot sufficient time in your screening process to talk to people who truly know your top candidates.
- **Consider Culture and Rhythm**
  Throughout the screening process it's essential to remember that every new hire needs to fit your culture, and also the rhythm of your nonprofit. In *Draft Day*, the GM constantly asks prospects what's most important to them. While some players understandably reply, "winning," the GM's clear preference is for players who put family and loyalty over winning ball games. As you design your screening process for key positions, make certain you are screening for culture and rhythm mismatches. Recognize the human tendency to look for information that confirms your initial impressions about a candidate (the confirmation bias), rather than tuning in to information that suggests a mismatch.
- **Get Your Draft Picks on the Field without Delay**
  When asked in 2013 whether he hoped to find immediate starters in the crop of draft picks, Denver Broncos GM John Elway replied, "That's always the goal, to find these guys and get them on the field as fast as we can." (Source: The Denver Post.) Venture capitalist and author Ben Horowitz echoes this idea in his book, "The Hard Thing About Hard Things." Horowitz urges leaders to "aggressively integrate" new executives after hire. His tips include:

- providing monthly, weekly and even daily objectives to help the new hire produce “immediately,”
- insisting that new leaders get up to speed fast, and
- providing opportunities for interaction with peers by providing a “list of people they need to know and learn from.”

Horowitz is a proponent of a 30-day window for new executives, writing that “If in thirty days you don’t feel that they are coming up to speed, definitely fire them.”

Screening and selecting new hires for your mission-focused organization may not seem as glamorous as making draft picks in the NFL. But the consequences are just as vital to the people and communities you serve. By exercising care as you “draft” new team players, you have the best opportunity to fortify your mission for the long term, and add dedicated teammates to your cause.

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