

Team Spirit

September 2012 – College football season. My favorite time of the year!

Growing up in LA, I cut my teeth on USC football. As a boy, I could not think of a better way to spend a fall afternoon than rooting for the gridiron men uniformed in cardinal and gold.

Pregame is almost as invigorating as the game itself. The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum rocks to the rhythm of 80,000 diehard fans. The USC Marching Band blasts out “Conquest” as life-loyal alumni flash the victory sign. Tommy Trojan, parked high atop Traveler, gallops full speed down the sidelines with his sword piercing the autumn skies in triumph.

And then comes the best part.

Exploding out of the long and storied Coliseum tunnel that connects the locker room to the football field, the Trojan squad steps on center stage. But just before the team sprints to the sidelines and preps for the opening kickoff, all 70 players form a huge, pulsating huddle. This huddle, steeped in decades of tradition, serves as the emotional crescendo for the grassy war that will soon rage. With wild and unleashed enthusiasm, teammates pound shoulder pads and smack helmets while screaming words of encouragement and challenge!

This mammoth huddle of wide-bodied undergrads pictures something more than players anticipating a sporting contest. It is a portrait of people pulling together. People dedicated to a common destiny. People with locked arms because of a common cause. “This is my team and I’m proud to belong!”

Friends, we are talking about TEAM SPIRIT.

Team spirit is one of those concepts that is easier to describe than define. And it’s even easier to identify. If you have it, you know it. You may not smack helmets or slap high-fives, but team spirit is telegraphed in attitudes, communicated in words, and fleshed out in actions.

So here’s the question: As a leader in the home or in the marketplace or in the community or in the church, how do you build team spirit?

From my seat, I believe that the best way to chase down this question is to think about team spirit as an outcome, a by-product. In its essence, team spirit is not something hyped in a pep rally, but rather it is an outgrowth of the time, attention, and care invested by the leader in each member of the team.

Let me explore a few “things-you-can-do-today” avenues of how to invest in the members of your team.

- **Fill the airwaves with affirmation.** Your business card may say you are the big dog of the enterprise, but in reality you are not a team leader unless you have honed the fine art of affirmation. Whether in person or in writing, the leader delivers tailor-made words of encouragement—and does so both in private and in public.
- **Pursue team members as people, not producers.** Team leaders relate to people on a friendship basis, not on the basis of what they can do to advance their agenda. They exhibit interest and concern and support for the personal affairs of others. Their interest is communicated through the questions asked and the attention given to the responses.
- **Share the credit.** A wise team leader recognizes that the stock market of team spirit soars off the charts as he broadcasts that any success is the result of a collective effort. Management mogul Peter Drucker captured it best when he said: *The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say “I.” And that’s not because they have trained themselves not to say “I.” They don’t think “I.” They think “we”, they think “team.” They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept the responsibility and don’t sidestep it, but “we” get the credit.*
- **Open the pipeline of information.** One of the leading factors in the breakdown of a team is poor communication. Withholding information, whether intentional or not, not only limits effectiveness, but it can create a dark cloud of confusion and distrust. A wise leader develops the discipline of constantly passing along not only everyday information, but more importantly, constantly rehearsing the big picture pieces of vision and values.
- **Pray with and for each team member.** Team spirit is built as the team leader spends time in prayer both with and for his teammates. Besides the potent benefits of upholding a teammate in prayer, a strong bond of love and encouragement forms as two people seek the Lord together. Petitioning God for the success of a team member’s ministry communicates that being on the team is more than the meeting of goals and timelines; it is about the dependency and confidence in a wholly sufficient God.

While there is a lot more that could be said about building team spirit (which will be the subject of future newsletters), allow this initial list to get your juices flowing. Specifically, identify one practical step that you can take TODAY that will contribute to boosting the camaraderie of your team.

You won’t regret it.

Lord, fashion and shape us not just to be leaders, but TEAM LEADERS—people who get more satisfaction out of someone else's success than our own.

[Portions of this month's newsletter was originally published in an article entitled "The Value of a Team" that Chuck Olson wrote for the *Great Commission Research Journal*]