



A Miracle in Retail

By Rich Kizer and Georganne Bender

How a hockey coach can
teach you all you need to know
about building a great team

Twenty three years ago something happened that no one banked on. In a small New York ice house, with no live television coverage, the United States Olympic hockey team beat the team from the Soviet Union 4-3 in a hockey semi-final. Those same 20 kids from different colleges went on to beat the team from Finland 4-2 to win the gold medal. It was a miracle. A Miracle on Ice.

At the time, that single event galvanized our country. We screamed. We cheered. We applauded. We felt proud to be American – no one predicted we'd beat the Russian team – The Big Red Machine; guys who may have been listed on the Olympic roster as students but were, in fact, pros who were widely accepted as the world's best. Everyone on the planet thought we didn't stand a chance.

Guess they all thought wrong. Those who wrote off the American hockey team had horribly underestimated the American spirit and a man named Herb Brooks.

Herb Brooks was the coach of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. The fact that he managed to build that phenomenal team from a group of young men who had never

met before, let alone played hockey together, has been a continuing inspiration to us. As coach, Brooks' leadership and motivational skills set the culture.

In your store, you set the culture. You face competitive threats every day; your talent as a leader lies in how you handle them, how you prepare your team, and, most importantly, what principles and beliefs you instill in them.

Team building must be an everyday activity. It's not just something you can talk about at an occasional meeting or at review time. You have to live it. And you cannot just put a bunch of people together and call them a team. Team building takes vision, dedication, and work. Here are some things to help you get started.

FORGET ABOUT MVPs

Even in team settings, sports is a good example, we tend to fall in love with one person whose individual talents get all of the attention. The Most Valuable Player. And while it's necessary to recognize talent, it's important to make sure

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that the rest of the team isn’t overshadowed.

At the 1980 medal ceremony, the U.S. hockey team captain, Mike Eruzione, stood alone on the gold medal pedestal during *The Star Spangled Banner*, but as soon as it was finished, the entire team joined him. Somehow, all 20 guys managed to fit on that pedestal built for one.

These guys thought of themselves first and foremost as a team. Do you think of your people as a team? They won’t if you don’t. Make a point to reward team performance as well as individual achievements. And let them shine! If you watched the broadcast of the game against the Russians, then you may remember what Herb Brooks did right after we won the game – he waved at his team and then headed for the locker room. “This is their night,” he was quoted as saying, “not mine.”

SET TEAM GOALS

If you’re going to build a strong team, then you have to let your people be a part of the planning process. It’s impossible to dictate goals. If you’ve ever worked in a place where goals

were handed down from the top, then you already know that.

If you have already gone through a formal goal-setting process and you have your goals written on paper (if they aren’t on paper, they’re not goals; they’re dreams) then schedule a meeting to share them with your team.

If you don’t have formal goals, then hold a brain-storming session with your team, and come up with a set of goals together. This will work to your advantage – when you make your associates an active part of goal setting, they’ll better understand the direction you want to move in, and they’ll understand how critical their role is to the overall success of the store.

REINFORCE EFFORTS

Once you’ve got your associates thinking as a team, it’s time to put their talents to work. A successful coach we know does this by creating teams of in-store outlaws who are charged with continually asking all associates key questions, then reporting back at store meetings. The questions include:

“How can we do X better?”

“What do you need to do your job

better?”

“What are you hearing on the sales floor? What are customers asking for?”

“Tell us your victory stories.”

“Tell us your disaster stories.”

And our personal favorite, “What would you do if you owned this joint?”

Challenge your outlaws to come up with solutions to the problems and opportunities that they uncover, then post their findings and ideas on the lunchroom bulletin board, and discuss their progress at each store meeting.

GIVE A IT A CHANCE

Another key element in team building is trust. Your team has to have the tools to do a good job, and one of those tools is their own good judgment.

Like Herb, our friend Bill Wygal has exercised his coaching skills to great success. Bill, owner of several Ace Hardware stores in California, has always encouraged his team to do whatever it takes to satisfy a customer.

The problem, and it’s a common one for many coaches, was that they didn’t always believe him. To show that he was serious, Bill implemented a store-wide Customer Satisfaction

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Program that empowered team members to use their judgment when faced with customer decisions. The program made it no longer necessary to call a manager to fix a problem.

We know what you're thinking because we thought it, too. What happens if a team member goes too far? Couldn't they end up giving away the store?

Bill says it's just the opposite, "We've only had two problems in five years. One associate discounted a broken ladder. Selling a broken ladder is never a good idea. We talked about it, and I know it won't happen again.

"Another sold a \$200 brass faucet set for \$25. At first that sounded bad, but when I questioned the associate, I found that it had missing parts that could not be replaced, so it was a good decision after all."

Why not adopt a Customer Satisfaction Program of your own? Share your guidelines with your team, and if you ever feel a team member has gone too far to satisfy a customer, talk about it. Suggest what he or she might do differently the next time, making sure they understand that you trust them enough to ensure that there will be a next time.

MOTIVATE YOUR TEAM

If you think running a business is tough, try spending all of your time on the front lines, face to face with customers. It's a stressful job, making sure that customers are well taken care of, so make sure that your team is taken care of as well. Take time to celebrate the victories.

You may already have an associate of the month program that recognizes good individual effort. Maybe you choose the winner. Why not turn it into a team event and let the associates

nominate their peers and then vote on who wins?

At the end of the year have the associates choose the Associate of the Year from the 12 monthly winners. If you have smaller teams in your store (perhaps each department is a team) then why not have a Team of the Month along with a Team of the Year? Make the rewards things the winning team can do together. Drop us an e-mail (info@kizerandbender.com) and we'll send you lots of great motivational ideas for both individual and team rewards.

A FEW MORE THINGS

- Instead of relying on yearly performance evaluations, consider evaluating your team members each month. Your team will have a clearer vision of how they are doing, and you will be able to reward, change, and encourage new behaviors as needed. Everyone will be on the same page in the same book – all year long.

- You will be better equipped to promote from within if you have team members update their resumes each year. Ask them to list their accomplishments, classes, and seminars attended, as well as their personal goals. We asked a client to try this and she was delighted to find that the office manager she'd been searching for was already on her team – a part-time cashier had just received her associates degree in accounting. You'll never know who you have on your team until you ask!

- Are you brave enough to turn the tables and ask your team to evaluate you? The 360 Degree Assessment allows each associate to do a performance evaluation on you. Tell them it's perfectly okay to be objective and say what's on their minds. In order to

grow as a leader, every coach needs to learn how their team perceives them, and that includes hearing the bad along with the good.

- Give everyone business cards that are printed with their name and title. If a team member isn't worth the 20 bucks it takes to print 500 business cards, then he shouldn't be working in your store. Remember, they won't feel important unless you make them feel important.

Herb Brooks died on August 11, 2003, in a one-car accident, but his legacy of leadership will live forever. In his farewell, Mike Eruzione drew upon the virtues his former coach left him some 20 years ago. "As a coach," he said, Herb encouraged his players to believe in themselves, to use their gifts, to pursue their passions, and to live without regret."

Our retail world is never static, so it's not likely that your team members will be with you forever. Some will move away, some will retire, others will try their hand at a new career. A few will leave to check out the greener grass at one of your competitors. As your team grows and changes over the years, the question is: how will they remember you? ♦

