

## CHAPTER 2

# *Define Your Destination*

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*NEVER LOOK WHERE YOU'RE GOING. Always look  
where you want to go.*

— BOB ERNST  
ROWING COACH, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

### **THE COACH'S LESSON**

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The Detroit Rockies were getting ready to move into their last year at the Bantam age level, (roughly 12–14 years old). The team had mediocre success the previous season and was expecting to fare much better in the coming season. I decided early on to set my sights high with the hockey team. I knew that the odds were stacked against us, so I decided that I wanted to best prepare them to play at the highest level of competition. After talking it over with my assistant coaches, George and Alex, we all agreed that we should move the team up to the Midget age level one year early, in order to spend three full years playing at that level. The age of the boys allowed us to do that, and the fear of losing wasn't going to keep us away from the valuable lessons we could gain at a higher level.

The parents of the Rockies' players thought we were crazy to move the team up to a higher level. They considered this move somewhat premature.

## ***The Difference Between Winning and Just Surviving***

Successful coaches make no mistake about who the competition is. There is a big difference between “wanting to be able to compete” and “wanting to be the competition.” It is what differentiates a winning attitude from a survivalist one.

Often, when a new professional coach is hired, the media does much to anticipate and publicize the coach’s plans. The desire and vision of the new leader gets a great deal of attention early on. Some people are surprised to hear the new coach of a struggling, last place team talking about competing for the championship. Critics are quick to challenge that line of thinking as unrealistic. “Surely he can’t be serious,” they often say.

As impractical as this championship talk may sound at the time, there is no better time for a coach to establish a winning attitude than on day one. These are coaches that understand the power of setting ambitious goals. Players want to know that the coach has the same purpose. Players, who all too often are faced with the mortality of their careers, also want to know that their coach’s desire is as ambitious as their own. While coaches *do* want to win, saying so publicly can be part of a calculated effort to rev up the players.

It cannot be overstressed that the visualization of a future state must be shared with the team members. Players must “own” the vision, agreeing in their desire for it and believing that it’s possible. While they may not be involved by the coach in setting the overall vision, goals, or even objectives, they must internalize them. This necessitates the coach spending time sharing these with the players in a way that brings the possibilities to life. Coaches may use visualization exercises and hypothetical discussion that ask “What do you think it will be like when we are finally able to...” Others may ask players to develop their own answers to compare against what has already been defined. Regardless of method, if the coach can turn the players into believers, then the development can begin.

Of course, there should be no false conception that there will be some magical consensus reached throughout this. It may not be possible to get all players to believe, let alone agree. That should not deter the exercise or the attempt to get as many players as possible on board the attitude train before it leaves the station. Detractors normally exist on all teams. The coach’s main concern should be to galvanize enough support from a critical mass to jump-start the learning cycle.

This first step—creating the top levels of the pyramid—may be one of the most important in creating the game plan, since it defines the direction, pace, and ultimate feedback for all that the team will do. Everything that cascades through the game plan down to the players will be aimed at this high point. It must be well-defined, clear, and understood by all. There should be left no questions in the minds of players as to what the ultimate purpose is.

### ***Lesson from a Legend: Vince Lombardi***



In 1959, Vince Lombardi accepted the head coaching job of the NFL's Green Bay Packers. With much fanfare, he took the helm of a team that had just finished a horrible 1-10-1 season. In fact, the Packers' losing ways had made a mockery of football in Wisconsin as they managed to lose more than *twice* as many games as they had won in the 1950s. Lombardi had no intentions of continuing that bad habit. While being photographed as he left for Wisconsin, Lombardi was asked by a reporter about taking on a losing team. He replied, "I have never been associated with a loser, and I don't expect to be now."

Upon arriving at the Green Bay Packers' team offices, he immediately gave the building a makeover. He called the offices "a disgrace" and went about destroying any visual reminders of a losing organization. Gone was the worn out furniture, drab pictures, and peeling paint on the walls. It was replaced by a new professional look that included new wallpaper on walls, accompanied by fresh furniture and decorations. Startled staff members could only look on in disbelief as their environment was torn apart.

The look and feel of the office décor was less important than the message Lombardi was delivering. "We're not just going to start with a clean slate," he said, "we're going to throw the old slate away." From day one, Lombardi let the Packers know that they were going to settle for nothing less than success.