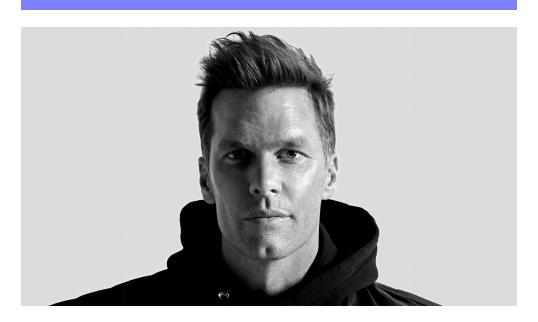Collaboration and Teams

Tom Brady on the Art of Leading Teammates

The NFL great explains how he motivated himself and fellow players.
by Tom Brady and Nitin Nohria

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When our society talks about success, we tend to focus on individual success. We obsess about who is the "greatest of all time," who is most responsible for a win, or what players or coaches a team might add next season to become even better.

What can get lost in this way of thinking is that leaders don't accomplish anything by themselves. In fact, nothing of significance in life is achieved alone. To do great things, we rely on teammates. And to win,

team leaders must find ways to draw the best physical, mental, and emotional performance from the players working with them.

Since retiring from football, Tom has been reflecting on what he brought to the teams he played on. Naturally, most people focus on his role as a quarterback. But we believe that another set of behaviors—how he helped the people around him perform better—was a vital part of why those teams won so much.

As part of Tom's exploration of this topic, he reached out to Nitin, who has been studying and teaching leadership for nearly four decades. He's also a football fan—a Patriots season ticket holder—who has followed Tom's career closely. Together, we began to sort through Tom's experiences to identify the leadership principles that people can use to maximize performance from their teammates.

In this article, we've distilled this work into a set of seven behaviors. We've written the rest of the piece in Tom's voice because these ideas are based on his experiences, but what follows is a collaborative effort. Although Tom's experiences took place mostly in sports, we believe that many of the techniques he used can be applied in any organization.

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A Team-Focused Philosophy

Leadership comes down to two things: Do you care about your teammates and their role on the team? And do you care about winning, which is what you're ultimately trying to do together? Leadership requires trust, and trust usually comes from deeply caring about one

another and the belief that winning is about the team. You must feel passionate about both.

I've always tried to be an ideal teammate. Much of my approach came from being born into an amazing family and having a strong upbringing, and this orientation deepened when I was in high school and college. Playing football at the University of Michigan, we had a team-centric philosophy that became central to who I am today. There's an old saying in sports: Do you want to be a star, or do you want to be a champion? At Michigan, I was focused on our team goals—on winning games and championships for our school, and on being a great teammate rather than achieving individual goals. That attitude stayed with me throughout my NFL career.

If you spent time in professional sports locker rooms, you might be surprised that players don't always behave that way. Some players take all the credit when things go right, but when things go wrong, they make excuses and place the blame on everyone else, including referees, teammates, and coaches. They focus too much on individual statistics or records or awards. They are self-serving, and their teammates recognize it. When I see players like that, who seem to care more about themselves than the team, I can also see how that makes the people around them less motivated to give their best effort. In a way, I was lucky those behaviors are so pervasive, because if they weren't, many of the teams I played against would have been more difficult to beat.

So what exactly do great team leaders do? I believe there are seven key things.

Brady in a huddle with his offense during the 2015 AFC championship game Damon Winter/The New York Times/Redux

Put the team first, always, even when facing personal adversity. That was one of the first lessons I learned about leadership. In college, I "red-shirted" as a freshman, and I didn't get to play much during my second year. In my third year, I thought I had a good shot at being the starting quarterback, but I was beaten out (fair and square) by a great leader and quarterback named Brian Griese, who went on to play many successful years in the NFL. My job was to support and push Brian in practice to help him get better. Though I was disappointed, I wasn't pissed off that he beat me, and I never tried to bring him down. That year, we went undefeated and won the national championship, and although I wasn't on the field much, I was very happy with the role that I played.

In my fourth year, I started every game, and we finished with an electrifying victory in the Citrus Bowl against a great Arkansas team. In my fifth year, the team named me captain, and I thought I'd earned the right to again be the starting quarterback. But Michigan had recruited

a top prospect named Drew Hensen. The coaches were adamant that he would play, and I began to doubt whether they wanted me to be the starter. Our coach decided that an alternating rotation, which rarely happens in football, was the way our team would go forward. We split time at quarterback for most of the year, even though at times I thought I outplayed Drew. But I refused to sulk or complain—which I had done my share of when I was younger—because I wanted to be focused on the team's success.

In our third game of the year, against Syracuse, Drew threw a long touchdown pass to end the second quarter. At halftime the coaches chose Drew to play the entire second half while I watched from the sideline. It felt like a gut punch. We won the game, and Michigan has an awesome tradition: In the locker room after a win, the captains stand on chairs and lead the team in singing the fight song. I was crushed that I hadn't played in the second half, but I stood up on that chair and I screamed those lyrics out as loud as I could. I'm sure people knew I was disappointed, but I wanted to show everyone that I supported Drew and the team. I felt like that really endeared me to my teammates. A few games later, the coach chose me to become the permanent quarterback. We won the rest of our games, including a dramatic overtime win in my last college game, in the Orange Bowl.

The way I handled myself during the first few games of that season, when things didn't go the way I wanted them to, was very important in my development as a leader. I continued to work hard, I put the team first, and I always supported my teammates, even as I tried to prove that I was the right person to play quarterback. This fundamental change in attitude set the tone for the rest of my athletic career.

Show appreciation for unsung colleagues. At Michigan, we had a great fullback named Chris Floyd. On running plays, his primary job was to

block the linebackers and create holes for the running back with the ball. It's hard work. It's very physical and taxing on your body, not to mention that there's not a lot of glory in it. In football, the camera follows the ball carrier, and blockers tend to go unrecognized. But Brian Griese made a point to tell people: "There's nobody I'd rather have in the backfield with me than Chris Floyd." The recognition meant everything to Chris. After hearing that, he walked around like he was 10 feet tall. That made a huge impression on me. I began making a habit of giving credit to players in those underappreciated roles—not just because they deserved it but also to point out to others that no player should go unnoticed.

This is an important part of team leadership. In football, the best examples of underrecognized players are the offensive linemen. When I was with the Patriots, I would go into their meeting room all the time and tell them there was no way we could be successful without them. (And we couldn't.) I would show them appreciation and affection in different ways, sometimes taking them out to dinner, sometimes giving small gifts, always finding opportunities to show them recognition.

When I joined Tampa Bay, in 2020, the team was running a lot of screen passes, but we weren't getting much yardage because the offensive line was missing too many blocks too often. I told the offensive linemen that every time we ran a screen play that gained more than 15 yards, I'd pay each of them $1,000. On Mondays, we'd watch game film, and they'd line up with smiles on their faces and their hands out when we accomplished our goal. These were athletes making a lot of money, so $1,000 wasn't that much to them. But the fact that I was paying them out of my own pocket meant something and motivated them to do better.

Good team leaders go further and find ways of recognizing those who don't play on the field yet support us in less visible ways. Football teams have big support staffs—trainers, the people who prepare our meals and clean the locker room and wash our uniforms, among others. I found that a simple high five or word of appreciation means so much. To be a great team, everyone needs to feel valued—and it's up to the leaders of the team to make sure that happens.

Set the standard and create a culture of 100% effort. During my early seasons with the Patriots, I was part of a group of players called the "Edgers." We were constantly competing to get the edge on one another: who could get to the weight room earlier, watch more game film, do more extra practice—even something as silly as who could drink the most water. People assume that the coaches made sure we were putting in the work, but in this culture, we were holding ourselves to a higher level of accountability. I remember practices where the coach would tell us we needed to run 20 wind sprints, each under seven seconds, with a 30-second break after each one. I'd stand up and say, "No, guys, we're doing 24 sprints, six seconds each, with 15-second breaks in between." (Remember, I was the slowest guy on the team.) Some of the players would start arguing and yelling. I'd tell them: "I don't give a f— what the coach says." We needed to work harder because it mattered to us, not just give enough effort to satisfy the coach.

In the NFL, every player thinks he's giving 100% effort. Judging from what I saw, a lot of them are playing at only 70% or 80% of their true ability. They may not realize it, but they've been conditioned to do that. Putting in less than 100% effort is particularly common for players on teams that don't win very often. Imagine being a star running back on a bad team. Your team loses most of its games, and soon you find yourself giving less than your full effort. But because you're the best player, you're rewarded with a huge contract. In theory the money should

motivate you to work harder, but often players see it as affirmation that they're already working hard enough—if they weren't, why would the owner pay them $10 million a year? And because it's a team sport, an individual player can give 100% and the team still may be terrible, which creates disincentives to keep trying so hard. The only hope of breaking this cycle is for the people on the team to push one another to do better.

I wish I had a foolproof method for going into any situation where a player is giving 70% and finding a way to squeeze out that remaining 30%. I'm not sure I ever was able to do that. But by modeling team-focused behavior and creating higher expectations and accountability, I could reliably get another 5% or 10% out of players—and that often made a big difference.

Sometimes the pacesetting wasn't about working harder physically. It was about communicating expectations more candidly. Because my teammates knew that I was invested in them, I was able to offer criticism without making them feel attacked. "Hey, do you want me to lie to you and tell you what you want to hear?" I'd say. "Or do you want me to tell you the truth? You were not prepared today, so you weren't at your best. We need you to be better." As a society, we've moved away from having those frank conversations. As I've gotten older, I've come to recognize that when people give me tough love and tell me the truth, it's often the best sign that they really care about me.

Recognize teammates' individual psychology and the best ways to motivate them. Every NFL player is unique. Some are motivated by money and contracts. Some are motivated by recognition, like making the All-Pro team. Some are motivated by what the media is writing about them. Some are motivated by winning championships, while others are just trying to avoid losing their job. Great leaders

recognize these things instinctively and are able to find each person's motivational levers. It's almost like love languages—the idea that different people express and receive love differently in relationships—and it's an essential skill that leaders must learn.
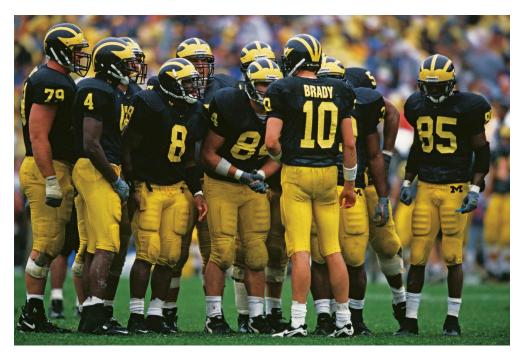
Let me give you some examples. During the middle part of my career at the Patriots, I played with two wide receivers, Julian Edelman and Randy Moss. If you wanted Julian, who had incredible mental toughness, to play his best, the way to do it was to tick him off. I would say something like "Jules, wow, you look really sluggish today." He'd glare at me and be so angry, but I knew he'd channel that energy to prove me wrong and go out and play great. Randy, who's a Hall of Fame receiver, responded better to validation: "Man, Randy, you look amazing out there." Even in practice, if I went too long without throwing the ball to him, I'd go over and say how much I valued him and remind him that I was always looking for him on every play. I wanted to make sure he never slowed down.

Whether you're a coach or a team captain, you learn that you spend 90% of your time working with the 10% of players who are the most challenging. I had one particular teammate who was a naturally gifted offensive player. But he had faced many adversities during his childhood and young adult life. I spent a lot of time with him, and I felt that he had unhealed traumas that led to insecurities. It was difficult for him to trust anyone or control his emotions. He didn't recognize that his behaviors were self-destructive and distracting to his teammates. I wish he'd found some professional support that could have shown him a way to take advantage of the opportunities he had in his career. It's very difficult to see people struggle like that, but you have to keep trying to figure out what might work to motivate them and try to help them achieve their potential. The time spent managing challenging teammates is worth it because you're not just bringing

up their performance, you're also keeping them from bringing down everyone else's. People don't always appreciate this work, but it's what leaders must do.

I sometimes talk about inputs and outputs, and although that is mostly about putting in the preparation and practice (inputs) to get a win (output), it also refers to team composition. If you add the wrong players to the mix—people who are undisciplined or self-centered—that's a negative input, and it will lead to negative outputs. By working with those players to help them manage their emotions, leaders help to improve both the inputs and the outputs.

Understand and complement the style of the formal leader. I spent most of my career playing for Bill Belichick. He's the greatest coach in the history of the NFL, and many fans are familiar with his coaching style. He's very intense and matter-of-fact. He grew up as the son of a coach at the Naval Academy, and that's where he learned his coaching style. He is a product of that rigorous military environment. The focus was on discipline and accountability, not on empathy or compassion. No matter how we played, Coach Belichick's coaching style was to motivate the team by looking for weaknesses and areas to improve. There's an argument that players need that. Pro athletes have a lot of people in our lives—families, girlfriends, wives, agents, fans—telling us how great we are. Coach Belichick always wanted to keep us from buying into those narratives and becoming complacent. We all felt fortunate to play for him, and there were many benefits to his approach, but his motivational style—often based on fear—was sometimes difficult. So as a team leader, I tried to complement that approach by being a bit more upbeat.

Brady with offensive players at the University of Michigan, in 1999 Harry How/Getty Images

In his leadership style, Coach Belichick never got too close to his players. He wasn't one to mingle and form personal relationships with players or coaches, because it's difficult to do that when you know you'll have to trade, cut, or fire most of them at some point down the road. So I often took the opposite approach: I tried to get to know my teammates deeply and show that I cared about them personally. I asked about their families and the things going on in their lives off the field. I made it clear that if we connected as teammates, they'd be my teammates for life, and I've tried to live up to that. My relationships are the most important thing in my life. I like to think my style complemented Coach Belichick's. I was lucky to play for a coach who was so smart, hardworking, and focused on discipline—a coach who relentlessly held people accountable for doing their job. He was fortunate to have someone like me who could recognize where the team was at emotionally, rally the troops, and pull people together.

Our other team leaders used different leadership styles. Willie McGinest, a great linebacker during my early years with the Patriots, was six-foot-five and 270 pounds. He used his physical presence and voice as a leadership tool. When Willie said something, people stood up straight and said: "Yes, Willie, we'll do whatever you ask us to do." Matthew Slater, who I played with in the 2010s, became a leader by example because of how hard he played on our special teams unit. The dedication and work he put into his job endeared him to his teammates.

Assistant coaches played important leadership roles, too. Dante Scarnecchia, who coached our offensive line, combined the tough discipline that Belichick exuded with a deep personal caring for people. He got every ounce of effort out of his players, every day. At the Patriots we talked about leaders as "culture drivers," and in any given season there were probably a dozen players who held that role, each complementing the others with his own style.

Recognize and counteract the external forces that can cause selfish behavior. Leaders need to realize that powerful external forces push people to focus on themselves instead of the team. In professional sports, agents can be one example. In a perfect world, I'd have three great receivers who didn't care which one I threw the ball to, as long as we won the game. In reality, if receiver A has a great day, receivers B and C may be happy we won, but then they may hear rumblings about their performance from their agents, their family and friends, or the media. If the pattern continues, their individual stats will go down, and their agents will start warning them that not getting the ball is going to affect the value of their next contract. They start to worry that they may lose the affection and admiration of their fan base. As a leader, I needed to understand that even if everyone agreed that our goal was to win championships as a team, players would face pressure from people in their lives to behave in more self-serving ways.

The same is probably true for corporate employees—they have a spouse or parents asking when they're going to get promoted, or if they got the raise they deserved. We all have vulnerabilities that can make us act in more self-centered ways, and everybody is surrounded by people who can either amplify those instincts or help manage them. Team leaders must recognize outside pressures and continually reinforce the team-first message.

Create opportunities to connect as people outside the office. This fall I'm starting work as a broadcaster. In May, our broadcast team went to the Bahamas together. We played games on the beach, shared meals, and got to know one another. We were creating a shared experience outside the environment that we're used to, and we saw new parts of everyone's personalities. The camaraderie we built and the better understanding we gained of one another as individuals will help us perform better as a group this fall.

Some people criticize corporate offsites or team-building events as wasteful junkets. That is enormously short-sighted. Leadership is about improving the quality of teammates' relationships and building trust, and that comes from shared experiences. Those experiences should not be limited to the office—in fact, they often deepen more easily away from work. When I played football, my teammates and I regularly spent time together in the offseason. We texted. We FaceTimed. We'd hang out at my place in Montana, or we'd have fun at the Kentucky Derby. Sometimes we just went bowling. We loved being together. People focus on the physical attributes and skills that we as athletes brought to competition, but so much of our success was built on our emotions and how they helped us perform better. The more we were interested in and concerned about one another as teammates, and didn't want to let one another down, the more motivated we were to do our absolute best, every day.

What Helps—and What Gets in the Way

The leadership behaviors I've just described can help any individual improve a team's performance. But there are also some pretty strong forces that can work for or against you and influence how much better a team can get.

The emotions and behaviors that define individuals are formed early. My experience working with hundreds of teammates has taught me that the core behaviors that make any of us a good teammate—unselfishness, discipline, humility—are wired into us when we're very young. If your childhood experiences taught you that people aren't trustworthy or don't follow through on promises, it can be tough to convince you otherwise when you become a pro athlete in your twenties. That's a real challenge. As a society, we should begin more systematically teaching behaviors around teamwork when kids are in kindergarten—and even then, there's no guarantee that those lessons will make a difference, especially for children who have unstable family lives. As members of organizations, whether sports teams or companies, we need to start focusing on teaching team-centric behaviors to young people coming up in the ranks. I'm now a part owner of a British soccer team and a women's professional basketball team, and I'm trying to become a part owner of the NFL's Las Vegas Raiders. In these roles, I'm doing all I can to transfer some of the leadership lessons I learned in my athletic career to the next generation of players. But again, that can be difficult, because by the time athletes reach the professional ranks, many of their values and their ability to adapt and manage emotions are fully formed. That's why scouts and general managers talk so much about "character" during the draft.

Leaders work within a system. When football fans look back on the Patriots' success from 2001 to 2019, they spend a lot of energy trying to divide up the credit. Who was responsible for it? Was it the coach?

The owner? The quarterback? The truth is that we won championships because of all three of us—along with dozens of other contributing factors. As a team, we talked about "people, processes, and protocols." For example, a foundational culture of toughness and discipline had emerged just as I was arriving, built by players such as Tedy Bruschi, Matt Light, Kevin Faulk, Logan Mankins, and Rodney Harrison (to name just a few). We also developed a way of using the calendar to create a cadence and a rhythm. We learned to relax and recharge just enough in March and April without getting out of shape. By May, we were completely focused on identifying our deficiencies from the prior year and improving. Maybe most of all, we mastered the ability (goaded on by Coach Belichick) to convince ourselves that a Wednesday practice in July was actually the fourth quarter of a playoff game in January. That got us used to the feeling of performing under pressure so that we were able to handle ourselves when the pressure was no longer pretend. By the time the season started in September, we were just so far ahead of other teams.

Damon Winter/The New York Times/Redux

Everyone at the Patriots was shaped by that system of intense preparation. We tried to anticipate everything we might encounter in a game and then practiced until we perfected how we would respond. We developed the mental flexibility to be fully present in the moment and to problem solve and react instinctively as a game unfolded. Finally, we focused after each game on the lessons to be learned from it so that we could keep things in perspective and never get too up or too down on ourselves. We blocked out the noise that constantly surrounded us and focused on getting better to win the next game.

Toyota is known for having developed a system for "winning" in the car industry in the 1970s. Experts have studied its system ever since and have concluded that there is no magic ingredient; it's made up of dozens of interlocking principles that have evolved over many years. The lack of a simple formula is why competitors haven't been able to replicate what Toyota does. I see similarities in what observers called "the Patriot Way," which was also a complex system that evolved over time. Having

been part of such a system, I have a strong sense of humility about my —or any individual player's—ability to influence team performance. As the Patriots' quarterback and captain, I could have perfectly carried out every one of the seven behaviors I just described, but without the other elements of our system, we might have had far less success.

It can be hard for individual team leaders to influence change across large organizations. A pro football team has 53 players, 20 or so coaches, and 20 or so key support staff, so call it about 100 people. One or two peer leaders can have an influence on a group that size. Compare that with Delta Air Lines, where I'm now a strategic adviser. It has 100,000 employees. Delta is a great company, and many of its employees feel a sense of ownership and pride. But creating a culture where people care about one another in a company that big is challenging. Assessing individual performance can be more difficult too.

A leader's style and influence will take time to evolve. It can take years for a leader's style to become natural and effective. During my first season in the NFL, I was a third-string quarterback. No one outside the Patriots thought of me as a team leader. But inside the locker room, I was showing leadership in small ways. For example, I regularly pulled younger guys aside after practice to run extra plays. "The starters are playing more than we are, so we need to do more to keep up and to get better," I'd tell them. Within my small group—the offensive players who weren't starters—I was taking charge. I also focused on showing confidence so that more-experienced teammates would trust me when I began playing in games. By the time I was in my 40s, I was leading in a much different style. Some younger players who'd grown up watching me on TV felt intimidated by me, so I worked on being approachable and showing humility. And by that point, I didn't have to try to appear confident because I had developed real confidence.

This kind of evolution also happens away from sports. At age 19, Mark Zuckerberg led Facebook differently than he does now, at age 40. But even when his entire team could fit in his dorm room, he was still acting like a leader, and that's important. Even the youngest people in an organization are capable of leadership. If they work intentionally toward that goal, they'll get better at it over time. Especially as I grew older, I worked to improve as a leader as much as I did at throwing a football.

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Despite the challenges, I remain optimistic about the potential for more people to become better teammates and team leaders. There is a huge upside here, not only for sports teams but for any other organization. If the corporate world creates more skilled team leaders, companies will produce better results and employees will have more fun doing it. Bad bosses, toxic coworkers, and "quiet quitting" will become far less common. As much as I loved winning Super Bowls, I recognize that the impact of helping organizations achieve success through teamwork could be far-reaching. That's why I'm so excited about embracing this challenge in the next stage of my career.

Let's go.

A version of this article appeared in the September–October 2024 issue of Harvard Business Review.

Tom Brady achieved great success in his 23-year NFL career, winning seven world championships. He is also an entrepreneur, a *New York Times* best-selling author, and a business adviser.

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