



SPORTS LINGO SCORES IN BUSINESS

Want to get to the C-suite or sit on a corporate board? Then you best know the meaning of these common business phrases: “tee it up,” “out of bounds,” “long shot,” “punt,” “end run,” “home run,” “the gloves are off,” “go to the mat,” “go to bat for,” “block and tackle,” “sticky wicket,” “sideline,” “play it as it lies,” and “get a first down.”

The competitive language of sports is ubiquitous in business conversations. But there are pros and cons.

Ask many seasoned CEOs and board members and they’ll tell you how important sports has been to their own success. The ability to withstand failure, to work with people you don’t like, to persist in the face of obstacles. And, if you never participated in sports, you at least need to know the lingo, they’ll say, if you want to be able to talk with a majority of males in the workplace.

When a focus on competition is needed, sports idioms can get people to “move down the field” and “make

the plays” to get “across the goal line.” Sports language mimics the excitement of sports and is motivating. And since not all sports are alike — some are team sports, others are solo performances, like golf — there are many phrases to choose from.

But how appropriate is sports as a metaphor for real-life business situations? Sports events have a specific beginning and end. There’s a known set of rules designed to be uniformly applied. And the roles for players are usually clearly defined. Many business situations, however, are much more fluid. Organizations operate under “rules of the game” defined by ever-shifting laws and competitive conditions that differ from country to country. Skills required to succeed change rapidly. And in business, there is no one victorious end point. That’s why business is often analogized to a “marathon” rather than a “sprint.”

It’s not clear that all sports promote

sportsmanship. In some sports, like U.S. football, if you see your teammate commit an infraction but the referee doesn’t notice, it’s considered advantageous. As a player, you know not to “blow the whistle” or quit the field in protest. Could it be that some sports actually encourage laxity in business ethics? And a mindset that only the score matters?

Of course, there are downsides to any analogy or metaphor. People come from different life experiences and “inside baseball” can divide rather than connect people as it should.

In recent years, there have been a number of books arguing that the orchestra is a more apt comparison for business. Frank Barrett, jazz pianist and author of *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz*, says one of the most important lessons from jazz is listening to others.

Whether we liken business to sports or the arts, one thing’s for sure: choosing what we imitate matters.

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