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The Science of Winning

**Wherein we observe coach Paul “Bear” Bryant build a winning team—
but not the way he said he did.**

By Thomas F. Gilbert and Marilyn B. Gilbert

Paul “Bear” Bryant of the University of Alabama was a college football coach of legendary methods and unequalled success, especially when athletic success is measured in wins. In ways that were less well known, even to himself, he was also ahead of his time in HPT. Marilyn B. Gilbert and the late Thomas F. (“Tom”) Gilbert knew Bear Bryant when Tom Gilbert was a professor at the University of Alabama, and they watched Bryant in action. This article about their observations and conclusions was first published in *Training* magazine, August 1988. It appears here courtesy of Marilyn B. Gilbert.

As productivity in American business continues its dogged decline, managers persist in drawing their favorite remedies from athletics. There is much talk of “winning.” And the way to win, we hear, is to select the right people for the job, inspire them, and provide them with leadership to make sure they give their all (“hard work,” it’s called). Above all, be a good listener. And, oh yes, don’t forget the Hawthorne Effect.

You know what that’s supposed to be: Show your people you care about them, and they’ll work like hell for you.

Really?

We’re going to tell you about the late Paul W. Bryant, better known as the “Bear” for once having wrestled one in a carnival. Bear Bryant was the most successful coach in the history of major college football. In his 25 years at the University of Alabama, he won

six national championships. His lifetime record of 323 victories is 35 percent higher than that of his runner-up, Woody Hayes of Ohio State. Managers wishing to emulate athletic winners will have to grant Bryant a spot at the top of their lists. And indeed, they could well use him as a model — provided they lay aside all their preconceptions about what probably made him a winner.



You see, there is a simple explanation why all those athletic themes that so enrapture managers have no impact whatsoever on their organizations' productivity. Here it is: In order to learn something useful from Bear Bryant, you'd have to *watch* him do his job. It would be virtually useless — even counterproductive — simply to *ask* him about his winning formula, to invite him to make a speech about it, to read some book he might have written in which he explained the secrets of his success.

We knew Bryant in his heyday, and we listened to him very carefully. But he also let us observe him closely as he worked at Denny Field with what he called his "good ol' boys." In the process, we learned a great deal about how he kept turning out winning teams year after year.

Before we proceed, though, stop a moment and sympathize with the marketing problem we run into when we try to teach managers about the unglamorous science of productivity. Our message fails to rivet attention. For years we've preached the vital importance of observing exemplary performers instead of just interviewing them (science observes, it does not rely on hearsay), so that we can pass on

their key secrets to average performers and make them exemplary too. We have demonstrated that exemplary performers differ very little from average ones, but that the differences are enormously valuable. And at the risk of sounding pretentious, we say "exemplary" performers rather than "top" performers for a good reason: People may be "tops" because they cheat, work 80 hours a week, butter up the boss, or happen to be geniuses. They obviously are not good exemplars for the rest of us.

Our market is falling asleep. But we persist. As eyelids droop, we preach that the most effective tools for making dramatic changes in productivity are:

- *Information improvements.* ("Tell me what you want me to accomplish and to what standards; then tell me how well I did it.")
 - *Observation-based training.* ("Show us that you have observed the differences between the way exemplary performers and the others do it.")
 - *Paying for performance.* ("Keep the praise and give us a raise.")
- When it comes to paying for performance, American business practices the amateur, small-town, high-school football method: Bumpers are carried by the top people. Substandard

performers get a bonus while exemplars subsidize them. No? Then what do you call it when top performers characteristically accomplish two or more times what the substandard people achieve, yet get paid only about three percent more?

We tell managers that the least effective thing they can do is spend a lot of time selecting, motivating, and showing people that they "care." We remind them that the Hawthorne Effect has been roundly discredited.*

* See Thomas F. Gilbert, *Human Competence (ISPI Tribute Edition, 1996)*. Also see H.M. Parsons, "What Happened at Hawthorne?" *Science*, March 1974. Parsons reviewed the original data from the famous studies conducted in the 1920s and 30s at Western Electric's Hawthorne Works in Chicago. Those studies reported that the performance of relay assemblers *always* improved when they were placed in an "experimental group" and thus felt that management was paying attention to them.) Parsons' review showed that the experimental groups' performance actually differed from the control groups' because people in the experimental groups received continuous feedback and got paid on the basis of performance. Whenever the counting system broke down, the experimental groups were neither informed nor paid differently. On these occasions, the experimental groups performed no better than the control groups.

But by this time, our audience is nodding off. The exemplary performers we cite as models are too drab; they seem to violate the image expected of them. They're often lowly mortals like Viola, an unattractive, poorly educated woman with a lisp and a habit of staring at the ground rather than into her clients' eyes. She just happens to sell three times as much advertising space as the average rep with whom she competes. Then there's Toni, an elderly, working-class woman with a mustache, whose only outstanding virtue seems to be that she sells four times as much fashion merchandise as her betters.

Managers don't want to hear this. They spend far more time in seminars devoted to listening skills, body language, inspiration, leadership, sensitivity, assertiveness, and all that hokum than they ever spend observing exemplary performers — or observing much else, for that matter. Better to come back from some workshop and practice their self-awareness skills on one another.

No, the managers we preach to want to hear those sports analogies. And football is their favorite. "Go out and get the best good ol' boys (updated to 'best ol' boys and gals'),

inspire them to fight like hell, give them great leadership, and always show them how much you care! That's how Vince Lombardi did it! That's how Bear Bryant did it!"

So, football it shall be. And this much is true: That's pretty much how Bryant and other legendary coaches *said* they did it! But Bryant is going to help us demonstrate that a very low — even negative — correlation exists between what exemplary performers say and the key things they actually do. As it turns out, Bryant serves nicely as an exemplar. He was one of the finest practitioners of the science of productivity that we have ever observed. His "secrets" can be studied; his success can be emulated. One can learn a lot about managing all kinds of things by attending to the Bear.

What We Heard — and Saw

Bryant had a local TV and radio show in Tuscaloosa, and he was interviewed all the time by the national press. He was frequently heard to say — indeed it was his favorite theme — that the way you create a great football team is to pick out the best good ol' boys and motivate them. He told his audiences how painstakingly he selected

his players and how he had so inspired them with the desire to win that they didn't *have* to be as big as those ol' boys at Oklahoma and Nebraska. ("My boys will outquick 'em," he was fond of saying.)

He also talked a lot about the time he spent showing his players how much he cared for them. "I love my boys, and they know it," he said. Listening to him, you got the impression that they came to him constantly for his fatherly counsel. The image was of the Bear with his arm wrapped about a champion's huge shoulders, gazing up at the young giant with all the warmth of summer.

He expressed deep concern for the academic progress of his scholar-athletes. The way he drawled on about education could make even a college professor weep. Sometimes his own eyes would tear up as he spoke.

Bryant was not putting us on. Like all the exemplary performers we have observed, he genuinely believed in what he said — most of the time, at least. (At one cocktail party, after he'd had a few bourbons, we suggested that studies of learning in pigeons had turned up some findings that might be useful to him. "Oh, no," he muttered sadly. "My boys are dumber than pigeons.")

But despite his fundamental sincerity, if you tried to build a college football team based on what you learned from interviews with Bear Bryant, you'd never win a game. In fact, one reason for his success may have been that many of his opponents — the losers against whom he racked up his winning record — actually accepted all this malarkey at face value. To understand what Bryant was really talking about, you had to look before you listened.

On a number of occasions, Bryant let us come with him to Denny Field. He always seemed to have time for us — partly because he didn't swallow the ubiquitous babble about hard work and partly because no one else had ever asked to *observe* him up in his tower above the practice field. People stood in line to interview him and hear him repeat the same nonsense *ad nauseum*, but nobody ever went to watch him work.

It's the same way in the business world. Nobody ever asks to observe exemplary performers. If you discount hearsay — all those shabby interviews — their work is the most unnecessarily mysterious process in industry. More than anyone else we've found, exemplary performers love to be observed

at work. Alas, they're also happy to *talk* about how they do things — and you take your chances when you listen out of the context of observation.

Eagerly, we accompanied Bryant to his tower, where he quickly proceeded to validate the principle, "Look before you listen." We looked carefully. And from his platform high above Denny Field, Bryant looked too, observing his performers, as we observed him, our performer.

Here are some things we *never* observed. We never saw Bryant with his arm around a player's shoulders, inspiring the youth to high purpose. We never saw him making any displays of "leadership" or "communication." Forget it. About the only thing we saw him communicate was a snarl when an assistant coach or a camera was repeatedly out of position.

It soon became obvious why we couldn't catch Bryant doing any of the things he talked about on the radio. It was because he didn't do them.

What did we see him do? First, we saw him making sure that his boys were well-trained. Extremely well-trained. Nobody else at the University of Alabama got that kind of training, and it is rare in industry for anyone to receive anything close to its quality.

Bryant practiced what we call observation-based training. He had reliable observations of exactly how his exemplary performers did their jobs, and he established that performance as an objective to be reached by players at every position. He had cameras and specialists viewing each position, gathering detailed information. For example, the expert on right defensive guards observed the feet of right defensive guards, which, Bryant assured us, moved in the opposite direction from those of left defensive guards. He didn't want his players watching their own feet, so he had specialists do it for them.

Cameras filled the field. Did Bryant place them there to inspire his boys or to let them see how much he cared? No. He was gathering data. When a boy consistently moved his feet wrong, Bryant had him on film. To make him feel bad so he'd promise to do better next time? No. A player saw the films only when he was unable to correct his mistakes. Bryant didn't want to confuse his boys with a lot of unnecessary data; he used the films only to distill useful information. He never forgot that his boys were just like he was: dumber than the pigeons.

How did he get his players to adjust? He showed them films of exemplary players at their positions. To inspire them? No, to provide them with exact modes of what he wanted. They could see, in slow motion, precisely how a great offensive center placed his hands on the ball, how he positioned his feet and hips, and how he moved his knees on particular kinds of plays.

Observation-based training. It's that rarest of practices that capitalizes on the tiny but precious differences between exemplary performers and the rest of us bumblers. Bear Bryant was an exquisite practitioner of it.

Here's something else we saw him do. He provided his players with regular and frequent feedback — just as positive as he could structure it. "I focus on their progress, not their failures," Bryant would say in his usual grumpy tone. Why? Because he was a kindly father figure and loved his boys? No, because he wanted to reinforce progress instead of failure. The worst thing he could have done was to get them concentrating on what they had done wrong, rather on what they were doing right.

Hardly an hour went by that the assistant coaches weren't showing the boys where and how they stood. But we saw nobody berating them if they

did badly or hugging them if they did well. Exemplary managers don't need to engage in this kind of superstitious nonsense. Bryant's coaches treated the players almost exactly as if they were sensible, adult human beings. They told the boys where they stood, how much they were improving, and what they could do to improve further. And they left it at that. All the hugging and hollering was saved until after a victory, when the press could see it.

To Bear Bryant, training consisted of about 1 percent talk, 20 percent observation of exemplary performers on video, and the remainder doing the job with a lot of feedback and coaching.

Please don't mistake our enthusiasm for the way Bryant used video as a sweeping endorsement of visual media. Just showing people how experts perform on the screen won't help much unless you have identified the *significant* differences between the experts and your trainees. Most video-based training in the business world is oblivious to those tiny but weighty differences. Observation and analysis, not the media we're using, must determine what and how we teach. Sometimes we can convey those vital differences as effectively with a few words on paper as we can with video or computer-based training.

Selection and the Scholar-Athlete

How did Bryant do his famed recruiting? Far differently than they do in business — although you wouldn't have guessed that from listening to him talk. Instinctively, he knew that fancy behavioral profiles, no matter how many Ph.D.s stood behind them, simply could not predict success with any high degree of accuracy. So Bryant resorted to using performance as his selection principle. He would take on any kid willing to have his brains knocked about. He knew what the science of productivity teaches: The only valid predictor of future performance is past performance. He would not have needed us to trot out Toni and Viola to make the point that these exemplars would never have made it past a so-called "rigorous behavioral and psychological screening process" for job candidates.

And what of Bryant's touching commitment to the education his players received within the hallowed halls of Tuscaloosa? "I don't want my boys to be one-sided," he often said.

This commitment was genuine . . . in a way. While we were Bear-watching, Joe Harless, now a respected figure in the training business, was a student at Alabama — an "A+" psychology student

of ours and a fourth-string guard for Bryant. Harless wanted very much to play on the first string, but life is not so kind; Billy Bob, the first-string right guard, was an All-American. So Harless aimed for second string.

As he played for Bryant, Harless tried to observe him too. And he finally got to see the great man for a full 30 seconds. Bryant didn't really spend a lot of time Hawthorning around with his good ol' boys, but one day an assistant coach appeared and hollered, "Harless! Coach wants to see you. On the double!"

As Harless tells it, he felt then that the right hand of God had reached out to touch him. The Bear had noted his effort and his growing skills. The Bear was about to make him the second-string right guard. No doubt the Bear would throw his arm over Harless' big shoulders and inspire him to even more dizzying heights. It would be just like the scenarios in those management books he was beginning to read.

"Harless," said Bryant, "Billy Bob is flunking English. From now on, you're his tutor."

Notice how observation helps you understand Bryant's quite genuine concern for the well-rounded education of his boys. Harless' single

30-second view was worth more than a thousand hours of interviews.

But here is another important lesson. How did Bryant *know* that Billy Bob was flunking English and that Harless was an "A" student? Because he believed in active listening and in managing by walking around? No. Even if the sources of information these practices draw upon were reliable, which they aren't, he would still miss too much. Bryant had a thorough system for filing vital data. He did not rely on hearsay for his information any more than for his training or his recruiting.

Observation

It's no wonder productivity in America is slipping. Until managers start managing the way Bryant did — instead of the way Bryant *said* he did — they cannot become winners. We estimate that the average season record in industry is one win, one loss, and 10 ties. Maybe the so-called "excellent" companies are going 2-1-9. Managers talk about winning so much that they confuse a standoff with a victory. Bryant hated a draw so much that he once gave up a sure tie for the national championship by gambling for a win.

Certainly we should interview the performers we study as well as observe them. In fact, we gleaned an especially good lesson from Bryant as we were interviewing him *while* observing him. "You sure use a lot of cameras," we noted. "Care to comment?"

Bryant stared down at Denny Field until we thought he hadn't heard the question. Then, thoughtfully, he drawled, "If I were coaching a boxer, every inch would count. If he develops a habit of throwing his left jab an inch too high or an inch too low, he's going to get battered. To prevent that, I'd have to observe him carefully, since he has no way of knowing. It's the same with my team, except that there are 11 of them throwing a left jab all at once. So we have to observe them, inform them, and train them. And you can't do this sloppily. The winning coach is the one who does these things extremely well."

"But, coach," we protested, "what about all that talk of leadership and inspiration being your keys to success?"

"Aw, people like to hear that shit," Bryant replied. "*Winning* inspires my boys."

Anyone still interested in management by athletic analogy?