Editor's Notebook: Super Coach - Superbowl

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Bill Belichick has taken the New England Patriots to three Superbowl championships in the last four years, a feat never accomplished in the history of the National Football League. Belichick is considered a football genius; a workaholic who always has his team prepared for games and possesses an innate ability to attack the weaknesses of the opposition with offensive and defensive “schemes” that translate into victory. When he leaves football, Belichick will be remembered in the same breath as Vince Lombardi, Tom Landry, and Don Shula.

But besides being a fan of Bill Belichick, I am a political scientist who in recent years has taught courses in executive decision-making and political leadership. What I have found is that governmental officials and political leaders can learn much from the way Bill Belichick runs the Patriots and wins Superbowls. Although Belichick likely thinks of himself only as a football coach, he is a superb model for studying decision-making and leadership.

First and foremost, Belichick is an excellent judge of talent, a critical ingredient in effective decision-making and leadership. Successful presidential administrations have usually been ones that attracted the best and brightest and knew when to change the political “players” when necessity dictated. Belichick not only has the ability to make astute decisions about drafting young men fresh out of the college game, but he also has a keen insight into when veteran players have lost the physical and mental skills to keep their jobs on the team. He may surprise some football pundits with his personnel picks and he may appear ruthless when he sends a veteran on his way, but it is clear that he knows how to build a winning team and more importantly sustain a winning team.

Secondly, Belichick has brought a kind of scientific approach to coaching professional football, an approach that too often is missing from governmental decision-making. Unlike Belichick, politicians are captives of ideology and partisanship, rather than rational analysis and self-criticism. Belichick, on the other hand, has been shown to be a devotee of a mathematical prognostication system called sabermetrics, which seeks to predict the most effective choice of options to achieve an objective, in this case determining when to run for a first down, deciding when to kick a field goal, and planning how to properly break down an opponents game plan. Like most coaches, Belichick spends hours going over game films to acquaint himself with the opposing team, but he views the footage in a matter akin to a math instructor or economist (his major in college), developing a predictive model that he employs during the game. Belichick values the importance of not making on field decisions that are the product of hunches or the latest fads within the coaching profession. Rather, Belichick meticulously studies the odds of calling a particular play based on mathematical models that show what works best under set conditions.

Finally, Belichick sees football as a team sport, not a collection of egos bent on advancing their own careers and enhancing their capacity to cash in on lucrative endorsements. Politicians and governmental officials could learn a great deal from Belichick’s team approach where everyone is on the same page; there are no mavericks to break down unity and weaken focus; and the goal is always clear and concise with few extraneous diversions to take the collective eye off the prize. Belichick’s Patriots are not flashy, just a bunch of excellent role players who perform their jobs with efficiency and dedication. When the Patriots won their first Superbowl in 2002, after the nation was reeling from the 9/11 tragedy, the team came out on the field as one unit, not as individual players. Limiting the excesses of ego, being flexible and innovative and accenting the importance of people working together toward a common goal are key components of Bill Belichick’s approach to football.

Winning the Superbowl is certainly not the same thing as running a country or a state, and football, despite the numerous military analogies, is not even close to waging a real war. I am sure that Bill Belichick has no interest in being a president or governor, but presidents and governors should look to Bill Belichick as one of the premier decision-makers and leaders of our time.