Winning teams are inspired by a sense of purpose and work toward a goal that has meaning for them.

Many of the best players operate with a clear, meaningful goal. Many of the best teams invest a great deal of time and energy shaping a purpose and belief that everyone can own.

Healthy people have a natural desire to excel. They want to succeed; they are motivated to contribute to and be a part of something great or something of value. Winning teams present a meaningful opportunity and challenge to their members. Whether it’s to win the championship, to be the best, to provide a quality product or a valuable service, or to make a better world, the members of winning teams tend to share a belief that what they do and what they are striving for has meaning or value.

Research has shown that when a person believes he or she is engaged in a meaningful pursuit, it’s both energizing and sustaining. A strong sense of purpose generates a kind of “soul power” that nurtures drive and success. Bottom line: people who have a meaningful goal are willing to work harder, persist longer, and endure more . . . and all of these qualities lead to success.
The origins of the word *goal* can be traced back to two Old English roots. The word *gal* suggests the end point of the race. And the word *gaele*n refers to an obstacle, barrier, or hindrance. All of us are performers and many of us have to overcome obstacles and barriers to reach our goals in the competitive world in which we perform.

Winning teams have clear goals and the realization of these goals is payoff. For individual team members the payoff can be anything from a deep sense of accomplishment and the satisfaction of being a part of the best, to fame, fortune, or all of the above. Sitting in the dressing room immediately before an NFL playoff game between the Rams and the Cowboys, some of the Rams players attempted to fire up their teammates by making comments referring to team pride, toughness, and superiority. Then one player pressed another motivational button. He said, “Hey, guys, remember; this game is for forty grand.”

I have worked with professional teams where player salaries were in the millions and bonuses for winning were in the tens of thousands—and with elite amateur sport teams where team members received less than a thousandth of that amount for playing, and no bonus at all for winning. A universal driver, with or without monetary reward, is the pride and satisfaction of achievement.

Goals are basic to individual and team success. One of Stephen Covey’s seven habits of highly successful people is “Begin with the end in mind.” That end goal becomes even more powerful and attainable when it is charged with meaning. People will invest heart and soul in a process they care about. Care is a word of the heart (*coeur* is “heart” in French) and love is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. Love gives and reflects meaning. People who love what they are doing, who love the game, and love the challenge are energized and face the task at hand with more power.
As socially conscious beings, many of us look for an opportunity to dedicate our efforts to something with perceived significance. Working with others towards something we believe in is motivating. When that same opportunity is seen as relatively insignificant and meaningless, enthusiasm and energy diminish, and performance suffers.

I had a phone call from a veteran professional athlete late in the season. His team had just been eliminated from the playoffs and they were playing out the final games of their schedule. During the season he had been plagued by a series of nagging injuries but now that his team was “out of the running,” he complained about overwhelming fatigue and pain. “I just don’t have the energy or enthusiasm to give 100 percent any more,” he said. “I even have trouble concentrating.”

I explained that fatigue can sap concentration and enthusiasm. However, it was clear that what he was referring to was more than simply fatigue. The lack of consequence, his perception of the meaninglessness of the remaining games, made it much more difficult for him to “get up”—to perform and do it well.

Since feelings affect thinking and attitude, I worked with his breathing, then with his imagery and self-talk, to help him create a more powerful, positive, relaxed feeling. I then had him recall games when he really excelled. As he reflected on those experiences, I suggested he acknowledge himself for being the consummate professional he was. He felt stronger, more positive, and better able to compete; however, the absence of purpose, of a really meaningful goal, was depleting and limiting.

In contrast, I have observed clients faced with big-money challenges (e.g., making the playoffs, or the Olympics, hitting important targets and deadlines), who tune out fatigue, unresolved personal issues, or
illness and injuries and excel, because of the meaningful challenge they are facing.

While working with one of the top-ranked teams in the country, I met with Jerrid, a new addition to the team, and a player who had recently been acquired from another organization that had been struggling. When I asked him how he was adjusting to being a part of this new team, he said, “It’s way better. I really like it here.”

“How is it better?” I asked. “What’s different about being here?”

Without hesitating, Jerrid replied, “Here there’s a genuine sense of purpose and possibility. People believe in what we’re doing. We’re playing for something that counts, something attainable. And I really want to be a part of that.”

Healthy people want to excel. They want to feel that what they do and what they are a part of has meaning and makes a difference. Winning teams provide that opportunity. Conversely, when there is a sense that your performance doesn’t matter, energy and enthusiasm fade.

John was an inspired, hard-working executive on a fast track up in a successful and rapidly growing banking organization. He saw himself as a highly competent, 100 percent team player. However, he was given a reprimand and moved a step backwards in the corporate hierarchy when a superior perceived him to be too aggressive and overstepping his authority. When we met, it was apparent that the dressing down had caused a shift in John’s perception and attitude. He felt unappreciated and treated unfairly by an organization to which he had given everything. The thought that he would no longer be able to realize his goal of being a leader in the company caused him to lose heart and energy. “My assistant manager asked me the other day if I was okay. She said it looked to her like I was just going through the motions. Well, I do my job, but it’s hard to give it 100 percent when you feel like you’re blocked from above.”
I responded to John very much the same way I had to the injured athlete, that as a highly competent professional he was committed to two goals. One was personal: to be the best he could be. And two was to serve the team to the best of his ability. I explained, “That attitude has led to your success to date—and that’s the attitude that will ultimately lead to your success in the future. John, that’s who you are, and you cannot allow a bump in the road to divert you from your goal.” I continued with something I believe to be a core success philosophy: “If your goal is genuinely to be the best you can be, then whatever comes up, you have to use it. If you don’t use it, it’ll use you.” I explained to John that he was letting this recent setback use him and erode his sense of purpose.

Whether someone has a strong internal drive to succeed, or is sparked to action by the team’s leadership or by its history of past accomplishment, people motivated to excel by a meaningful goal will invest more of themselves in achieving it.

A few years ago one of the professional sport teams on the West Coast was underachieving, and a reporter asked the head coach if he was doing enough to motivate the team. The coach’s reply was, “It’s not my job to motivate the team.” Not surprisingly, his response raised a few eyebrows. As a prominent sport psychologist in the area, I was asked by the media to comment on the coach’s remark. The coach was old school and I understood his frustration with high-priced talent that needed to be enticed, pushed and prodded to perform. However, I strongly disagreed with the idea that it is not the coach’s job to motivate the team. The coach is a leader who sets the standard and the stage for the team’s performance. And, as I told reporters, “Whether it’s in the locker room or the board room, it is the coach’s job to inspire and motivate the players.” Specifically, a coach, as leader, has the authority and the “response-ability” to open a window of opportunity to
what is possible in the mind of the team. He or she must provide the vision to inspire them, to make their challenge meaningful, and to be the best they can be.

As environmental issues become more relevant and social values evolve, many corporate teams are gaining appreciation for both the significance and collective buy-in of their mission or purpose. Some teams are defining meaning with more than a single financial bottom line. A senior executive of a natural food company explained, “There are three things we work towards in this organization. One is profitability. The second is social responsibility. The third is environmental sustainability.” He continued, “Winning for us means operating our business so we succeed with regard to all three of these meaningful goals. A great deal more effort and energy is required to make this happen but it’s what we believe in and our belief makes the extra effort worthwhile. People want to work here and are prepared to give more of themselves whenever it’s required.”

Sometimes the challenge facing the group is charged with meaning to all the players involved. Everybody “gets it” and it doesn’t take much more to motivate team members as to the importance of what they are working towards. Sometimes the value of the mission is more obscure and it becomes incumbent on management and leadership to define the challenge in a meaningful way and inspire the troops. Indeed, I have been asked on occasion to help management define a meaningful message of purpose that enrolls the rank and file. However, the meaningfulness of the message is not simply something defined by management. Ultimately, it must be heartfelt by the members of the team. Winning teams feel it.

One team I have worked with for several years is the Medicine Hat Tigers of the Western Hockey League. The WHL is arguably the best junior hockey league in the world. And at the time of writing, the Tigers have had one of the best records in the league over the past
five years. One of the many reasons for the team’s success is the way the head coach, Will Desjardins, communicates meaningful goals to the players. Will believes “You’ve got to have a dream.” At the start of each season, he clearly defines two goals for the team and for the players. One is that they win the championship. And two is that the players sign a professional contract and go on to play professional hockey.

He explains to the players that the more success the team has, the more exposure they will have to the professional scouts, the more attractive they will be as winners, and the more likely it is that they will be signed to a professional contract. These are very meaningful goals to young men who play to win and aspire to become successful professional athletes. And the buy-in is evident in the players’ enthusiasm and the team’s performance.

Hockey historian and author Dick Irvin mentioned that during the 1970s when the Montreal Canadiens were the winningest team in all of professional sport, Ken Dryden, their goalie at the time, told Irvin that the team didn’t start thinking about first place and winning the Stanley Cup half way through the season, like most teams. Instead, the Canadiens’ championship focus started the first day of training camp. Glen Sather, the coach of the legendary Edmonton Oilers (and more recently general manager of the New York Rangers) related a similar account. Sather, who played briefly for Montreal in the mid-seventies, told Irvin how impressed he was when the GM and coach both made first place and winning the Cup the subject of their opening talks at training camp. He said he had never heard anything like that with the other teams he had played for, and it was something he took with him to Edmonton when he kick-started the Oilers on their championship run. He related that the goal he instilled from the very start of the season was to win the championship. With a clear sense of direction and talent the Oilers went on to win five Stanley Cups.
Mitch, a marketing executive who has played a part in several organizations, commented, “In business it is often harder to define the meaningfulness of one’s role and their contribution to the team’s success than it is in sport. In the corporate world there is often not a clear definition of winning that individual players can relate to and affect.” He added, “When I worked for Compaq, I asked myself, can I really change or impact a $40 billion company? How can I contribute?” Mitch continued, “To help people feel relevant and involved we have to create separate and relevant mission statements for our smaller corporate teams.” That task of creating these unit goals, linking them to the grand corporate scheme, and enrolling the team, falls to management.

A major brewery asked me to help their warehousing managers improve the coaching of the rank and file, and assist in transforming the team from one of the poorest performing teams to the “best of class.” One challenge in working with the unionized group was a restraint that limited us providing work crews with performance-based incentives. We began by looking at the organization’s mission statement, which like many corporate mission statements was simply too complex and conceptual to inspire most of the workers. After some discussion we narrowed the mission statement down to two elements the team said they could truly embrace: first, kaizen, a Japanese term meaning a commitment to continuous improvement, and second, respect, specifically treating others as you would want to be treated. We related both concepts to specific challenges the team was facing. Kaizen and respect for people (employees, customers, and suppliers) has been the cornerstone of The Toyota Way and has contributed to Toyota’s becoming one of the world’s most successful organizations. Personally, I’ve found a philosophy of kaizen and respect to be a dynamic and inspiring directive applicable to a wide range of teams in business and sport.
Why do we push ourselves to excel? What does being the best mean to you? Notre Dame football coach Charlie Weis relates, “Each of the four Super Bowl rings I have is a symbol that I was part of the best of the best. Why would you set your goals any lower than that? I’m shooting for a national championship every year. Is that realistic? Probably not to anyone except me.”

“Having a dream” . . . having a clear sense of purpose and a meaningful goal can help individuals and teams weather the inevitable ups and downs, the road blocks, storms, and disappointments encountered along the way, and remain positive and productive.

It’s been said, “It’s hard to stop a man who knows what he wants and just keeps coming.” The slogan, attributed to the early lawmen of the Wild West, can equally describe an individual or team charged with the significance of their mission. In any field, for any individual, on any team, meaningfulness and a sense of purpose, drives, lifts, and sustains—and successful teams have it.
**EVALUATE:**

Please consider the following:

Do you have a clear sense of purpose? Can you define it?

What do you want to achieve now . . . and in the future?

What are your long- and short-term goals?

What will achieving these goals mean to you?

What are the goals of the team that you are part of?

Write out your team’s purpose or mission statement.

Is this purpose or mission statement important to you personally?

Do you think it’s important to your teammates?

Are your team’s goals well defined? Are they credible?

Are your team goals and your personal goals compatible or do they conflict?

On a scale of 1–10 please rate how meaningful the team’s goals are to you.

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1 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \quad 5 \quad 6 \quad 7 \quad 8 \quad 9 \quad 10
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meaningless meaningful

What can you can do to make the challenge your team is facing more meaningful to you and your teammates?