



swart & associates®  
HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

# Mastering the Fundamentals – Lessons from Vince Lombardi

The year is 1961 and the 38 members of the Green Bay Packers football team gathered for the first day of their new season training camp. The previous season had ended with a heartbreaking defeat when the Packers squandered a lead late in the dying minutes of the match and lost the NFL Championship to the Philadelphia Eagles.

The Green Bay players had been thinking about the brutal loss for the entire off-season and finally the new season to redeem themselves had arrived. The players were ready to start working on the details that had cost them their championship the previous season...but their new coach, Vince Lombardi, had a different idea.

## **“This is a football”**

In his best-selling book, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*, author David Maraniss explains what happened when Lombardi walked into the training camp in the summer of 1961.

*He took nothing for granted. He began a tradition of starting from scratch, assuming that players were blank slates who carried over no knowledge from the year before...He began with the most elemental statement of all. “Gentlemen,” he said, holding a football in his right hand “this is a football.”*

Bear in mind that Lombardi was speaking to a group of players who, just months prior, had come within minutes of winning the biggest prize their sport could offer. Yet, he started from the very beginning.

Lombardi’s methodological coverage of the basics continued throughout the training camp. Each player learned from scratch how to block and tackle. At some point, one of the players jokingly stated: “Uh, Coach, could you slow down a little? You are going too fast for us.” Lombardi reportedly responded with a smile and continued with his obsession of the basics.

Lombardi’s team would go on to become the best in the league at the tasks everyone else took for granted. Six months later, the

Green Bay Packers beat the New York Giants 37-0 to win the NFL Championship.

## **Fundamentals First**

The 1961 season was the beginning of Vince Lombardi's reign as one of the greatest football coaches of all-time. In fact, he would never lose in the playoffs again and won five NFL Championships in a span of seven years, including three in a row.

Whilst this pattern of focusing on the basics has been a hallmark of many successful sport coaches, the value of this principle is often overlooked in other areas of life. Simply stated, throughout our lives, a focus and many a time a re-focus on the fundamentals is what ultimately determines our results.

It is so easy to overestimate the importance of one critical event or one "big break" whilst simultaneously forgetting about the hidden power that small choices, daily habits and repeated actions have on our lives.

Fact is that without the fundamentals, the details are useless. Similarly, with the fundamentals, tiny gains add up to significant results.

## **Practical Examples of Following the Basics**

Nearly every area of life can be boiled down to some core task, some essential component, that has to be mastered if you truly want to be successful at it.

### **Fitness**

There are a multitude of details you can focus on when working out. Mobility work is great. Analysing your technique is important. Optimizing your programming is a good idea if you have the time and energy. However, all these training details will never substitute for one fundamental question that all athletes must answer: Are you stepping under the bar and putting in the repetitions?

### **Love**

Displays of affection are wonderful. It's nice to buy your loved one gifts. Working hard for your family is admirable (and certainly very necessary). It is wonderful to upgrade to a larger home, upgrade your children's education or some other higher standard of living. In fact, one day I hope to do these things myself. But make no mistake, you can never buy your way

around the most essential unit of love: showing up. To be present, this is love.

## **Business**

When you are offering a product or service to others the analytics and details one can focus on becomes endless. Having a fancy name for your service or product is good. Packaging your offering in extravagant packaging is neat. Creating a hype on social media and other platforms to market your offering is obviously very useful. But when you boil it down to the basics, can you answer with certainty: Does my product or service offer true value to my customers and clients?

There is no denying that mastery in nearly any endeavour is the result of deeply understanding simple ideas. For most of us, the answer to becoming better leaders, parents, lovers, friends, athletes and people is consistently practicing the fundamentals, not brilliantly understanding the details.

When you find yourself getting bogged down by the details, briefly take a second and repeat after me “This is a football.”