

Excerpt from Bochy Ball Book Chapter 4

How Leaders Shape Culture

An overwhelming majority of business leaders believe that culture is a source of competitive advantage and that an organization without a winning culture is destined for mediocrity. And while it's easy to agree that a winning culture is what separates the likes of Southwest Airlines, Wegmans, SAS, Patagonia, Virgin, and others from competitors in their respective fields, shaping a new culture is one of a leader's toughest challenges because the old culture is designed to protect itself.

When Bochy joined the Giants in 2007, he came to an esteemed franchise with a lot of history and a rich legacy, but he also inherited a dysfunctional clubhouse culture. All cultures have a strong immune system. You can't change a culture using its own ways. You have to establish new values and new priorities, and you must do so with unwavering commitment and relentless resolve. When you challenge its tenets and values, the existing culture launches a strong counteroffensive. That's why shaping a new culture requires strong leadership and a clear sense of purpose—something Bruce Bochy and Brian Sabean have in common.

Sabes is a quiet, behind-the-scenes kind of guy. He also has one of the sharpest minds in baseball and an intuitive read on people. Even though superstar Bonds helped turn the Giants into a winning team and led them into the 2002 World Series as the best home run hitter of all time, Sabes knew the club needed to rebuild. Life after Bonds would have to be a more nontraditional, anti-star kind of system, one where everyone understands that everyone else is a critical link in the chain. Winning would have to be achieved by a little bit of everything instead of a lot of one thing.

As GM, Sabes changed the architecture of the club by building from within. He brought in more homegrown players who came up through the Giants system and knew the Giants way. He wasn't afraid to give young players such as Tim Lincecum, Pablo Sandoval, and Brandon Belt, who hadn't had a lot of time in the minor leagues, an opportunity to learn on the job.

Bochy: Brian knew we needed to get younger. He wasn't afraid to take the risk and bring young players up sooner than the norm. But it wasn't a quick-fix strategy. A lot of these guys went through growing pains together, on the job. They made mistakes, but it brought them together, made them stronger, and created the kind of chemistry we're talking about here. The fruits of that structural change started to show in 2010 and beyond. I'm convinced that so many of our guys have performed well in the heat of postseason battles because they've logged so many Major League miles at such a young age. Brian was the mastermind behind this and, obviously, his instincts and patience paid off.

Bochy figured into Sabean's change in architecture as well. Sabes sensed that, by bringing in Bochy, he would naturally change the clubhouse from a superstar culture to an "all for one and one for all" culture. But it wasn't easy, nor would it happen fast.

Bochy: I noticed right away that there were a few factions. It didn't appear to be a group of guys who were close-knit or who played for each other. We had a superstar, and I wanted to get him more involved because of the influence and impact he could make on the club.

The clubhouse itself was not physically conducive to spontaneous meetings, open communication, and great chemistry. Separated by posts and walls and other minor barriers, guys could walk into their locker on one end of the clubhouse without ever seeing a teammate at the other end. Instead of drawing people together it separated them.

Boch didn't mount a huge culture change or create a big brouhaha; he quickly, yet quietly moved to align the team and break down the physical and psychological barriers. Even though the GM had already eliminated the entourages accompanying some players, Boch started to make the clubhouse more of a sanctuary. He got rid of the elitist symbols communicating that there were "haves" and "have-nots" among team members. And, he used every opportunity he had in spring training speeches, clubhouse meetings, and one-on-ones with players to simply and strongly communicate a new set of values. Chief among them was choosing service over self-interest and adopting a team-first mentality.

He also enlisted veterans and the club's most famous player, Barry Bonds, to be key influencers in driving this change. He wanted them to have skin in the game.

Boch: I tried to make a case to Barry and some of the other guys that if we didn't shake it up and create more unity or become more team-oriented, we would never play to our full potential. I also knew that if our players didn't have some ownership in what we were trying to accomplish, our success would be limited.

So, I got some of our starting pitchers, role players, and veterans together to cast a vision of what they wanted to accomplish and how they wanted to rebuild the unity of the team. Culture is lots of little things, you know. So, they decided who got to come into the clubhouse and when; they decided our dress code on the plane; who would choose the music played in the clubhouse; and when the TVs would be shut off before a game. All of this was about giving them ownership. I said, "You decide and then you police it." And they did.

Peter Drucker is credited with coining the catchphrase "Culture will eat strategy for breakfast!" It was a concept that Boch intuitively grasped from his early days as a manager. In baseball you can have great talent (Bonds was arguably the best player in the game—maybe ever); you can know your opponents better than anyone else does; and you can have a well-honed strategy. But, if you don't have a culture that enables you to successfully deploy a winning strategy, the culture will overpower and eventually defeat it. A vibrant culture is the oil that makes the strategy engine—from sabermetrics and recruiting to filling out lineup cards and choosing relievers on the field—run smoothly.

Of course, all of this took time. Boch would say it was at least several years of constantly reinforcing the values of the clubhouse and the attitudes and behaviors that make those values tangible to this day. But he worked at it every day. He tried to be consistent with his message because the lightbulbs go on for different people at different times. Eventually, the message started to permeate the clubhouse and a "new way of being" took shape.

Boch: Somewhere around 2009–2010 I could see that things were starting to change. Our guys were coming together more often and the factions were disappearing. We were moving from disharmony to more of a cohesive unit. Much of this happened because of our homegrown players, but Brian wasn't afraid to go outside [our minor leagues] either. He brought in Aaron Rowand, a center fielder and Golden Glove winner, without giving up any of our top young pitchers.

I wanted our clubhouse to get back to a warrior mentality where everyone played the game hard for nine innings. Aaron was that kind of guy—a gritty, hard-nosed player who could help us put some swagger back in the clubhouse.

Rowand did two things that contributed to the Giants culture change: He played the game in a way that held other players accountable; and he had a knack for drawing guys together socially. In the clubhouse and on the road, Rowand provided key leadership to support the culture shift.

A change in architecture, younger players with a team-first mindset, a veteran outsider who exemplified the way the Giants thought the game should be played, and a manager and GM who understood the power of what can happen when they are intentional about shaping clubhouse culture—it all laid the foundation for the kind of chemistry that characterizes the storied franchise of the San Francisco Giants.

The point here is that the culture change happened because *changes were made first at the top*, and the new values and behaviors permeated the organization because leadership made them a strategic, forward-thinking priority. Even today, after three World Championships, Boch is still working at protecting and promoting the Giants culture because, left on its own, culture takes the path of least resistance and atrophies into something that is unintended. Consequently, his messages in the media, his spring training speeches, and his talks during the season continue to have consistent themes. Boch doesn't fall into the flavor of the month trap. He looks for new and creative ways to convey the core values and demonstrate the essential behaviors to grow a culture where his players gel with a team-first mindset on all dimensions.

DO SOMETHING NOW

If you are leading a culture change, keep in mind that old ways die hard. The status quo is designed to protect itself. Be stalwart in your approach, involve “influential” others to be ambassadors for the change, and be prepared for the long haul. Change (and buy-in) takes time.



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