

The Five C's (Teamwork - Chapter 3)

n/a

Ready:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command." -John 14:15 (NIV)

"The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been." -Henry Kissinger

Set

Over a 32-year stretch of time, Les Steckel has coached championship football at the high school, college and professional levels. As different as each of those experiences has been, there's one philosophy he has always shared with his players. "I used to tell my players, 'Let me take you where you can't take yourself,'" Steckel says. "That requires a willingness to cooperate and be committed."

Steckel could make such a bold statement because chances were he *had* already been where most of his players wanted to go. Born in Whitehall, Pennsylvania, in 1946, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes president and CEO began a lifelong journey of unique experiences at the University of Kansas, where he graduated in 1968 with a triple degree in human relations, political science and social work.

After college, he enlisted in the Marines and served in Vietnam as an infantry officer. After returning from active duty, he joined the United States Marine Corps Reserves in 1972 and stayed involved with the military until retiring with the rank of Colonel in 1999. Steckel often talks about the *esprit de corps* that he learned while serving with the Marines—a French saying that the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as "a common spirit of comradeship, enthusiasm, and devotion to a cause among the members of a group."

On the professional level, Steckel found great enjoyment in his career as a football coach—first within the NCAA Division I ranks at Colorado (1973 to 1976) and Navy (1977) before moving up to the NFL in 1978 as an assistant with the San Francisco 49ers. That job led to a string of opportunities, including stops in Minnesota (1979-1984), where he served as head coach in his last year there, and New England (1985-1988), where he coached the Patriots' offense in Super Bowl XX.

After a brief return to college football at Brown (1989) and Colorado again (1991-1992), Steckel coached in Denver (1993-1994), Tennessee via Houston (1994-1999) where he again coached in a Super Bowl (XXXIV) as well as Tampa Bay (2000) and Buffalo (2003). But perhaps the most important aspect of Steckel's life has been his family: his wife, Chris, and their three adult children—sons Christian and Luke and daughter Lesley.

While the preceding information may read more like a publicity bio, mentions of those three aspects of Steckel's personal history—the Marines, football and family—provide a template for his impressive leadership credentials. It has been through these diverse experiences that he has come to understand the truth behind the old sports cliché, "Behind every great team is a great coach."

Steckel says he has talked to many coaches over the years, and he routinely asks them about their philosophy. Ironically, they will talk about offensive and defensive schemes, but rarely will they be able to produce a coherent philosophical approach to not just coaching players but teaching them about the important things in life. "As a leader, you know you're going to make mistakes," Steckel says. "You know you're not going to be popular all the time. But you have to know what you believe in."

That's not to say having a game plan is not important. In fact, it's one of the most important aspects of leadership at any level and doesn't just apply to sports but also carries over into business, personal finances, family matters and spiritual concerns.

"Everybody needs a game plan," Steckel says. "Most games are won or lost in the final two minutes of the game. You have to have a game plan, and you have to be precise. A game plan consists of many answers for different situations that may come up in life."

"You must have an attitude of 'what if.' If this happens, what am I going to do?" he adds. "You've got to know the situation, the mission and who the enemy is. The mission of a team is to be successful whether that's in the family, on a sports team or in the Marine Corps. Then you have to have answers for all of those situations."

Steckel points to a number of Proverbs that support his belief in having a game plan, including Proverbs 18:15: "*The mind of the discerning acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks it.*" True to a coach's form, Steckel has created a game plan that he says will build a championship team or organization. It's a system he refers to as simply "the five Cs: communication, cooperation, contribution, commitment and Christ."

According to Steckel, a solid foundation for any team must begin with effective communication—first from the leader and second within the ranks of the team members. "Communication is of the utmost importance to teamwork," Steckel says. "There are some Marine Corps principles that I have learned—principles that the Marine Corps has used since their inception. They're things like 'Know yourself and seek self-improvement.' I can't really communicate until I know who I am and hopefully how I'm being received. Communication has to be clear and concise, and to some extent it has to be comprehensive."

With great communication, however, comes great responsibility. "When it comes to building a team, you have to communicate well," Steckel says. "But when you communicate, the best coaching pointer I can give someone is to always put yourself in the other person's shoes. If you can do that, you can communicate in a way that you think that person can understand this

or receive this or know that this is a genuine concern.?

For that to happen, teammates must spend time together and get to know each other. Otherwise, effective, honest communication can't really take place, and the foundational key to teamwork is simply washed away. To describe this concept, Steckel uses the phrase, "Time together equals trust."

"That's a relationship," he says. "It's like a husband and wife. They start out in their marriage, and they're spending time together and learning more about each other. So there has to be that mutual respect. Then as you spend time together, that trust element starts building, and now you've got yourself a great relationship with your wife. The same is true with your teammates or your employees, and now you can go anywhere."

The next step toward building a great team is cooperation. Again, Steckel believes that the team leader or coach is vital for this essential dynamic to take hold. "You have to know your team members and look out for their welfare," he says. "But how do you look out for them? You do things that are going to challenge them. So cooperation to me is team chemistry, and team chemistry is mutual respect for one another. I look at my three children, and I can assure you that I don't favor any of them. I look at them the same. I look at them with mutual respect in the same fashion. I really believe that when you allow people to cooperate, you've got to have good chemistry."

But before cooperation can take place, Steckel believes that trust must be in place. It's that all-important bridge that allows communication to function like a well-oiled machine and not break down in the middle of the journey. In Proverbs 25:19, we are warned that *"trusting an unreliable person in a time of trouble is like a rotten tooth or a faltering foot."*

"Cooperation is far more than just getting along," Steckel adds. "Denying yourself is a way of cooperating. It's losing yourself for the cause. That's what the Christian faith says. That's what any coach would say to his players on the team. What's the objective here? The objective is to win. Are we going out to play basketball tonight so that your name is in the headlines or that we as a group win the game? So you shouldn't be worried about how many points you score or how much time you played."

When Steckel was the offensive coordinator for the Tennessee Titans during the team's Super Bowl run in 1999, he often encouraged his players to embrace the concept of mutual respect by using a popular leadership quote: "It's amazing how much can be accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit."

That idealistic point of view gracefully merges with Steckel's third C in the list: contribution, or, as the former coach defines it, "developing a sense of responsibility in your subordinates." "How do you allow people to contribute?" Steckel asks. "I couldn't wait for game plan day. I wanted to hear what everybody had to say, because I knew that I didn't have all the answers, and I knew that they had better answers than I did in certain situations. They knew that I'd eventually give them credit—either suddenly or later or momentarily. I wanted them to make a contribution."

This was also true in 2002, when Steckel became a volunteer offensive coach for his son Luke's high-school football team in Brentwood, Tennessee, where he helped lead them to a 5A State Championship.

“Every single player played,” Steckel says. “They all played, because I knew the importance of contribution. The number one desire of an employee is to make a contribution to an organization. That’s called teamwork.”

“If the leader is blind to the importance of everybody being a part of the team and utilizing their gifts and talents that God has given them, he’s a terrible leader,” Steckel frankly adds. “Most leaders don’t look at it that way. Most leaders just want to do their thing. But the leader has to have insight into the skills and gifts that his team has. It’s his job to find those things.”

But it isn’t just on the playing field that contribution is an important element of teamwork. Steckel has also seen this invaluable principle take root in his home life, where—with the support of his wife—he raised three very different children.

“Our family was like a basketball team,” he recalls. “My wife was the center. She was the MVP. Everything revolved around her. I was the point guard. That was my contribution. I brought the ball down the court, and I called the plays. I’d give it off to my son Christian who was the shooting guard. He was the oldest. He impacted the other two much like he still does to this day with his observations of life. He was the guy who took some shots. I always called my daughter, Lesley, the power forward because she was the rough-and-tumble one. She’s got some fight. Then Luke came along, and he was the other forward. So we had a team and everybody knew their roles.”

Once each team member understands and accepts their role, the next step is for each member to make the commitment to excellence and to give it their best. Unfortunately in today’s society, the word “commitment” does not have the same power it once did. This is evident in the fact that 50 percent of all marriages don’t last. Steckel also points to the increasing variety of scenarios where commitment has fallen by the wayside, such as athletes who refuse to report to training camp and soldiers who go AWOL in the middle of their service to the military.

“People don’t understand what the word “commitment” means. The true meaning is pretty challenging. It’s pretty emphatic. But I think people often slide commitment into the promise category.”

From a spiritual standpoint, commitment means adhering to the advice given by David in Psalm 37:5 (and then benefiting from the results as described in Psalm 37:6, NIV):
“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.”

This passage serves as a connection from commitment to the final C in Steckel’s five-point plan: Christ. “You must have Christ at the center of your marriage or at the center of your being as a Christian man, as a Christian woman or as a Christian leader,” he says.

One of Steckel’s favorite Scriptures on this topic is Proverbs 15:33: *“The fear of the LORD is wisdom’s instruction, and humility comes before honor.”* On the other hand, Steckel says that selfishness—which is direct opposition to any kind of leadership—can kill teamwork in a heartbeat or slowly over time.

“We as individuals are fighting an incredible, built-in self-centeredness,” he says. “We have to fight that every single day. We have to intentionally deny ourselves. But so often we do what we want to do, and we get on a team and do what we want to do. That’s where you’ve

got to know the cause. The cause of Christianity is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's not about you. It's about Him. So when you're on a team, it's not about you. There's too much me, me, me and not enough we, we, we. There's too much showmanship and not enough sportsmanship.

Indeed, great teams require an enormous amount of humility from every single member, including the coach. This philosophy is birthed from a powerful passage written by the apostle Paul: *Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not [only] for his own interests, but also for the interests of others?* (Philippians 2:3-4).

Embracing this vital teaching allows us to engage in an activity that Steckel describes as "instant obedience." (Read more about this concept in "In His Own Words.") This is exemplified by a willingness to immediately follow orders from anyone in authority and is ultimately keyed by a desire to foster a servant-like attitude within the context of a relationship with Christ.

Jesus Himself said, *If you love me, you will obey what I command?* (John 14:15, NIV).

Those are strong words coming from the greatest leader to ever step foot on the earth, and they remind Steckel just how important his role of leader as a coach once was and how important his role as the president and CEO of FCA is today.

"When I called plays in the NFL, I always asked the question, 'How do you expect me to control 22 people on the field at the same time?? I can't," he says. "The good news is I know the One who can. That's the One I surrender to and give full control."

Go

1. Steckel used to tell his players, "Let me take you where you can't take yourself." Describe a coach or leader who has improved your skill or talent in some area. What are some tangible ways that person helped you?
2. How important is it for you to have a game plan when striving to reach an individual or team goal? Read Proverbs 16:9 and Proverbs 21:31. How could you apply the concept of having a game plan to your daily walk with Christ and the goals and dreams He has placed in your life?
3. Of Steckel's five Cs—communication, cooperation, contribution, commitment and Christ—which one do you struggle with the most? Why?
4. When talking about teamwork, Steckel often uses the phrase "Time together equals trust." In what ways have you found that the time spent with teammates (or the lack thereof) impacts the end result of the team's efforts? How important is trust when it comes to decisions made in the heat of battle?
5. Steckel talks about "instant obedience" (see "In His Own Words?"). Have you experienced this concept in your personal life? Why does instant obedience seem to be such a countercultural idea? In what ways can you surrender to Jesus and His will for your life?

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Bible Reference:

Philippians 2



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