

Tom Coughlin's conversion

Here's what you can learn from the reformed Giants coach

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BY JOSEPH R. PERONE

Star-Ledger Staff

He was an autocratic tyrant with an explosive temper who was fired from his last job and came close to being canned from his current one.

But Tom Coughlin had an epiphany: The taskmaster coach, who once fined two of his players for being late for a meeting even though they had been in a car accident, loosened his management style this season and opened lines of communication with players.

It's hard to argue with the results.

His underdog Giants stunned the football world Sunday, beating the then-undefeated Patriots in the Super Bowl. But the turnaround also provides a road map for any business executive to help make disgruntled employees into better performers, management experts said yesterday.

"He had a reputation as a strict guy who laid down the law," said Mark Clark, associate professor of business management at American University's Kogod School of Business in Washington, D.C. "Then, he softened that approach because he realized you're not just managing numbers, you're managing people."

After a disappointing season a year ago, Coughlin seemed on the verge of being fired -- as much for discontent in the locker room as the team's performance on the field. Giants co-owner John Mara ultimately gave him a one-year contract extension, but warned him to loosen up, especially when it came to dealing with the media and his players.

"Look, I'm not an easy guy to get along with," Coughlin told The Star-Ledger last summer. "When something isn't right, I can't disguise my demeanor."

This season, though, he wasn't as openly critical, and he put in place a players' committee to become a buffer between him and the rest of the team.

Coughlin had confidence in "the people he surrounded himself with, and believed in his formula, regardless of what was written about him," said Matt Eventoff, president of PPS Associates/Princeton Public Speaking, an executive communications strategist. "He had a plan and stuck to it, and didn't waiver in the face of controversy."

Lynda McDermott, an organizational psychologist for EquiPro International, a New York management consulting firm, said it was an example of an old-school executive who was able to transform himself through "situational leadership."

"He adjusted his style to the situation -- to the roster of young players -- not unlike Gen Yers in the corporate world who want more empowerment and less 'command and control,'" she said.

Inspiring leaders actively solicit input and incorporate what they hear into making decisions, according to Carmine Gallo, a California-based communications coach and author of the leadership book, "Fire Them Up."

"Coughlin did something that is absolutely critical to get buy-in from young people -- he empowered them and made them feel as though they were part of the building process," he said. "While Baby Boomers are okay with less communication between themselves and their supervisors, people in their 20s and 30s desire a much more frequent amount of communication."

During the season, Coughlin sat down to talk to his players with no clipboard and no agenda, just to find out what they were thinking. The once-stern taskmaster went bowling with them to establish rapport, and he set up a council of veterans to make it easier to communicate with the entire team.

"The first simple and obvious lesson is that good-to-great managers are always part cheerleader," said Mark Amtower, founding partner of Amtower & Co., a Highland, Md., consulting firm. "Make sure your line managers are positive and energetic, and make sure you are that way toward all of those reporting to you."

Managers always have to be flexible in how they approach workers to make them more productive, said Wally Adamchik, a Raleigh, N.C., leadership consultant.

"Managers get feedback about how to improve all the time, but many choose not to listen to it," he said. "They make the same mistakes again and again."

His development of the leadership council was a smart move, because it allowed the players' concerns to be heard, said Erika Andersen, a Kingston, N.Y., author of "Growing Great Employees: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers."

"Top managers have to make sure the folks who report directly to them are clear on what is expected," she said.

She rejects the argument that leaders should distance themselves from employees so they can be tough disciplinarians. "You don't have to be good friends with employees, but you have to be friendly," she said.

There were other lessons to be learned from how Coughlin approached the Super Bowl, said Timothy Clark, president of T.R. Clark Associates, a Salt Lake City consulting firm, and a former All America defensive end for Brigham Young University.

Coughlin assessed his team's strengths and exposed the vulnerability of his chief competitor, the Patriots, he said. By using the Giants' pass rush to pressure New England quarterback Tom Brady, Coughlin beat a competitor that had one killer product, but nothing else, Clark said.

"When you go toe-to-toe with a competitor, you have to understand their business model better than they do," he said. "If they have a single-dimension strategy, as the Patriots did, you can shut them down."

Furthermore, Coughlin and the Giants also did not repeat the errors that beat them in previous playoff games, said Rachel Weingarten, author of "Career and Corporate Cool."

"The Giants were a marvel in learning from past mistakes, particularly Manning and Coughlin, and not allowing popular opinion or predictions to sway their determination to win," she said.