

BUSINESS PLAYBOOK

Player development as important for business as for sports teams

Entrepreneurs understand that key to success is a long, steady climb

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Game day challenge: How to gain success by focusing

on the incremental running plays rather than the "Hail Mary" pass

Ashton Service Group owner Brian Williams started preparing for this recession 23 years ago.

He owned little more than a tool box, but he paid attention to details and founded a plumbing company that prioritized quality service to a meagre stream of customers.

"It's a long, steady climb," said Williams, who won the **Richmond Chamber of Commerce's** 2008 business of the year award for a venture with between 26 and 70 employees.

Williams' 35-employee firm generates \$6 million in annual revenue. It typifies countless successful businesses that seldom make headlines because either the sector isn't deemed sexy or because the businesses aren't growing via the higher profile growth-by-acquisition strategy.

"I preach to my people that we've got to pay attention to the details so that when the slow times come, the clients will give us a shot," Williams said. "We never overextended ourselves in the busy times so we didn't let anybody down."

BC Lions assistant general manager Neil McEvoy compares this strategy with his team's determination to have a strong running game.

So-called "Hail Mary" passes are sometimes necessary and, when successful, can pull out an unexpected win. But no winning strategy is more practical than to have a reliable, technically competent and consistent grinding game.

"If you can't do the little things, like running the ball for a one-yard play, then the big things will never come," McEvoy said.

Indeed, a business that is able to run the ball – or consistently produce incremental returns – will be in a better position to finance risks that could pay bigger long-term dividends.

Williams takes extra effort and spends the money necessary to ensure that productive grinding game.

Two years ago, when the economy was humming, Williams invested big bucks to fly in an esteemed **Sandler Sales Training** teacher from Philadelphia. He closed the company for four days so everyone could attend the sales training and absorb as many insights as possible.

He also hired a professional coach to visit four times a year to go department by department and "tear us apart," Williams said.

That's another page from the BC Lions' strategy book. They fly veteran Florida-based sports psychologist **Frank Lodato** north to work his magic about three times a year, McEvoy said.

Player development is equally fundamental to both the **Vancouver Whitecaps** and the **Vancouver Canucks**.



Ashton Service Group owner Brian Williams: focus is more on the process rather than the outcome

The Canucks had to work within a \$56.7 million salary cap for players last year. The **National Hockey League**, however, imposes no limits on player development.

Canucks CEO **Chris Zimmerman** would not reveal how many scouts or other player development personnel he employs but he told *Business in Vancouver* that his team has doubled its undisclosed player development budget in the past year.

The Canucks are also spending lavishly to renovate

the team's dressing room to include a medical centre, coach's office and meeting room.

"We spend about \$1 million per year on our residency program," said Whitecaps president **Bob Lenarduzzi**. "It's expensive."

That feeder system is based on the **Western Hockey League** model. The 'Caps provide 18 teenagers with a nominal monthly stipend, free housing, meals and training.

Lenarduzzi doubts that the **Toronto FC** or the **Montreal Impact** do nearly as much.

The Whitecaps also provide its top prospects with:

- the opportunity to travel to places such as Germany and Japan to play as a team against international competition;

- access to nutritionists, psychologists and other training staff; and

- the opportunity to make the senior squad. After all, that's what 17-year-old defender/midfielder **Ethan Gage** did last year.

"One thing I learned from [Simon Fraser University sports psychologist] **David Cox** is that you need to focus on the process not the outcome," Lenarduzzi said.

"You get yourself off track once you start focusing on the outcome, which you can't control, as opposed to all the steps that you need to do to achieve the outcome." ■

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