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Strength in Numbers

Law Department Management



I am an athlete. I love all kinds of sports. Sports teach us so much about leadership and life. It's easy to blow things off as "That's just a game!" And while it is true that the winning and losing part of the game needn't be taken seriously, what is gained from winning and losing is serious business.

One of my favorite sports is basketball. I love the athleticism of the players and the artistry of their movement. But one of the things I'd not really paid attention to up until late last season was the team aspect of the game. Don't get me wrong, I've always been aware it's a team sport and have seen great teamwork in action over the years. While it could be the fact that I'm paying more attention to leadership and teams in action, I think there is a new level of team that I've observed while watching the Golden State Warriors basketball team.

This is not a column written by a fan of the Warriors, but by a fan of teamwork. The Warriors' motto of "Strength in Numbers" had perplexed, yet fascinated me all season. Most sports teams have one superstar, maybe two; and the Warriors are no different. But what catches my attention, and something that leaders and coaches should pay careful attention to, is the interchangeability of the Warriors players, both starters and bench.

Over the course of an 82 game season, it is not possible for the starting five to play every game for the entire 48 minutes — hence the bench players. There are a couple of approaches to this situation. You can have players on the bench that simply allow the superstars and other starters time to catch their collective breath or you can have bench players who could replace the starters, not only holding the lead until the starters are able to re-enter the game, but expanding the lead, playing like the starters themselves.

Depending on which commentator you listen to, any given player in the National Basketball

Association on any team is capable of being a starter in the league. I'm not qualified to judge that statement, but my observations have been if that is the case, many coaches do not use the players on the bench in that fashion.

So what does strength in numbers mean?

The coach and various members of the Warriors team explain the answer in a number of different ways, but what it boils down to is *trust*. The coach, the superstars, and the starters *trust* the remainder of the players to step up and do their part to help the team win. However, what is more important is that the bench players *trust* themselves to do their part to help the team win. Their job isn't simply to provide time for the starters to rest; their job is to help the team win.

How can we use the Warriors' "Strength In Numbers" concept to strengthen the teams we lead in our legal departments or committees? As always, it starts with the leader. We have to recognize that the leader sets the tone for the way the rest of the team sees itself and each individual member of the team. When we acknowledge, empower, and trust each member of the team, we send the message to the team that every member is worthy of being trusted to do what he or she is being asked to do. When that trust is lacking, it permeates throughout the team. No one is able to focus on their role for fear the team will not accomplish its task, because what needs to get done may not get done, whether that is ultimately the case or not.

After the leader makes it clear that each person has a specific job to do and a role to play in the team's success, the rest of the team has to embrace that approach as well. That means supporting and holding each other accountable, but not stepping in to pick up the slack. This is a fine line to walk and path to navigate because the leader and the team have to stay the course sometimes longer than is comfortable to give everyone the space and opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. If we take assignments away from people when they are struggling, we never give them the chance to grow, which in turn denies them the chance to fulfill their role on the team.

"Strength in Numbers" is not a hollow motto for the Warriors and it shouldn't be for our teams either. *Team* means together we achieve more.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.