



Can You Win Your Le Mans?

Lessons from the Hollywood Blockbuster Ford vs. Ferrari

Carroll Shelby stands in the pit as Le Mans is coming to a close; Leo Beebe (head of Ford's racing team) comes down from the Ford suite to tell Shelby that the man driving the Ford team to a decisive win, needs to "slow down."

It's 1966, and the 24 hours are winding down, and Ken Miles is about to win by a lot. A long, hard-fought battle is ending, and Henry Ford II wants a show of 3 Fords crossing the line together. All the emotions and angles, and perspectives are about to come to a head. Miles has been leading the race and wouldn't experience the glory that he rightly earned.

We have a rough-around-the-edges driver, an ego-driven CEO, a VP that carries the water and wants his way, a car builder like none other stuck in the middle, and a man in the shadows, who, one day, some will say saved Detroit - Lee Iacocca, all with nowhere to go and a need to decide what side of the line they are on - and right now!

You may not be trying to win Le Mans, but we are all working to do more, bigger, better, and faster than we ever have before. That means dynamic people in our offices, managing conflict to success, and taking risks. How well we lead, encourage, and plan determines how, if, and when we win Le Mans - our Le Mans.

The story behind Ford vs. Ferrari and the 24 Hour Le Mans' challenge offers learning we can all relate to and apply. I believe several themes in the film are pertinent to the work we are doing today.

Building Your Team

When you look at the film, every manager had specific challenges from the top down when putting together the perfect team to win the Le Mans. Like in auto-racing, when it comes to a winning business model, many different people make up our team. This team is working together for our one common goal - helping our clients successfully reach their goals. And even though we have this defined goal, each team member operates from a different place of motivation, has specific talents and limitations, as well as a unique perspective. How can we put these differing motivations to work to build a successful team?

Ford was motivated by many different things: humiliation, a family legacy, successfully running a company whose vibrancy supported an entire city, ultimately though, his ego was really in the driver's seat. That's a full plate, that maybe not to Ford's scale, but one we can relate to.

At that point in history, Ford Motors was coming off the failure of the Edsel. Being bold and innovative was not an easy choice, but Ford had to embrace it. Developing a race car that made the Ford brand exciting, desirable, and, most of all, sellable was crucial. I cannot say it enough; getting uncomfortable and even being afraid are feelings we all need to grasp.

The lessons we can learn from Ford are that putting the right team together is of utmost importance.

Knowing your team, their capabilities, their shortcomings, and how to motivate them are all keys to understanding how to extract the best performance from them, all while ensuring they feel part of something bigger.

Ford worked with men like Iacocca and Beebe to develop the sports car division. They brought in luminary car builder Carroll Shelby, who put together a diverse team of engineers, gearheads, and fearless drivers, including Ken Miles.

So how does that translate to your business? Think about how you hire. Do you shy away from candidates that challenge you, ones that may seem brighter or faster than you? That's a big mistake. These candidates may take more energy to motivate and manage. That can be stressful for the person who manages them, but the trade-off is that they can take your organization to levels you would otherwise never attain. These candidates can help keep your entire team focused; they are also the ones that we should be seeking out to help us grow and innovate.

Shelby was excited by innovation and problem-solving and ultimately making a fantastic product. Due to the race's precise requirements, this project demanded a creative mind that could reframe problems, engage innovation, and manage expectations.

A perfect Carroll Shelby quote to illustrate this point: "I've always been asked, what is my favorite car? and I've always said the next one."

Shelby teaches us that those team members with analytical and often visionary minds are incredibly valuable. They see the big picture but can dig in to determine where processes and practices can be improved and how to implement those improvements to yield success.

What about the makeup of your team? When you have the opportunity to add new team members, do you simply fill that open sales spot with another salesperson? What if you consider the complete makeup of your team? Reflect on all the strengths and take an inventory of what's missing. Maybe a salesperson isn't precisely what you need. Perhaps it's a strategist – a team member who keeps you aligned and moving forward. Or you could benefit from a communications specialist who helps your team craft compelling messages about your products and how they benefit your clients.

One factor to consider is that today's employees and entrepreneurs, especially compared to the era of Henry Ford II, are not motivated or enticed by the fear that was frequently used to threaten employees.

Employees today, especially younger employees, are motivated and excited by innovation, collaboration, equal voice and contribution . Ultimately, they want to know that they are making a difference.

Managing Conflict

Ford vs. Ferrari gave us examples of conflict at every turn. The most exciting battles came from among the team members. Of course, we say exciting to watch – when you are an outsider, but stressful if you are a participant in the conflict. When you are in the thick of it, are you equipped to help manage that conflict? In Ford vs. Ferrari, arguably, everyone was interested in the same goal. But with that many strong personalities, conflict was inevitable. One discernable difference today is that there is far less concern about who gets the visible credit among most teams.

This leads us to our driver, Ken Miles. Ken is that breed that every bone of his being is dedicated to cars and racing. In the film, it's how he relates to not only his son but everyone around him.

No doubt, each of us has a colleague who lives their job. They wake up, grab their phone, check the overseas markets, read the WSJ, or respond to emails at 5:00 a.m. When you are at happy hour, they aren't distracted by ESPN or the Golf Channel. It's their phone tuned in to the market that holds their interest.

With Carroll and Ken on the same team, their passion for engines was bound to lead to tension. They both had unbridled passion and ego for days, which eventually erupted into a full-on brawl.

It's not unusual to have a member of the team who is a malcontent. What do you do to bring them around? Perhaps it's understanding their motivations and helping to nurture those. Figuring out how to feed their drive and desire, particularly without leaving a path of destruction in their wake, would benefit everyone.

Recognizing these characteristics in your team members and learning to capitalize on them is crucial. Sometimes, it's okay for your team to butt heads. **What's important is to know how to use conflict to motivate your team to excellence and achievement.**

One of the best ways to manage conflict among team members is by looking at how you present yourself. Are you consistent? Can your team expect the same level of support, a positive outlook, and helpful motivation from you, day in and day out? If not, you could be the source of conflict. When your team doesn't know who will lead them every day, it can be challenging to thrive. Giving your team consistency of behavior and environment can go a long way towards leading a highly functioning team.

In a 2020 Sales Insight Lab survey, company culture and management effectiveness were rated most important to salespeople. Traditionally, we were offended if money wasn't the priority. But it's not all about the dollar anymore when it comes to job satisfaction.

Another helpful tactic is to help your employees understand their team members' motivations and how they result in action. This approach can help team members view other perspectives and learn that actions don't mean someone is plotting or out to get them.

Taking Risks

There was so much risk-taking in the film that could reasonably be considered innovation in today's world. In the beginning, they weren't even sure the car would hold together. But they figured out when and how to take the necessary risks, how to make the car go faster, how to make sure the brakes wouldn't catch the whole damn car on fire.

Would developing a multi-million dollar (in 1960's money!) Le Mans winning car translate to vehicle sales for Ford? That was another considerable risk. In a similar timeline to the development of the GT40, Ford was hard at work on bringing the Mustang to market. The idea to use a high-profile race car to drive sales of a mass-market vehicle was certainly a new concept, making the elite accessible to the average consumer. Ford needed something new, something sexy. It was a time when the Thunderbird was considered sleek but indeed not a cool, blue-collar car.

Ford hoped that the Mustang would sell 100,000 units in the first year. It sold 400,000. In year two, it sold a million. Ford had a sense of what consumers wanted and were ready to buy. They invested in a risk that is still paying off many years later.

Today, particularly during COVID, risk-taking is challenging.

I cannot say it enough, getting uncomfortable and being afraid is a feeling we all need to grasp.

When we have a competent team that we trust and functions well, taking well-calculated and research risks can have massive rewards.

What risks are you ready and willing to take? If you can't think of one off the top of your head, think about what's holding you back. What's blocking your good ideas? If it's the team, fix that! Is it planning?

I bet that you may be getting in your own way! Most likely, you took a lot of risks to get to where you are today. There can be a tendency to ease up and protect what you have built. Don't forget to continue growing and expanding; you need to be your "old self" at times.

I'd like to leave you with one final thought and perhaps the best quote from the film that relates to every aspect of our business:

"If you're not winning, you are losing." -Carroll Shelby



About the Author

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