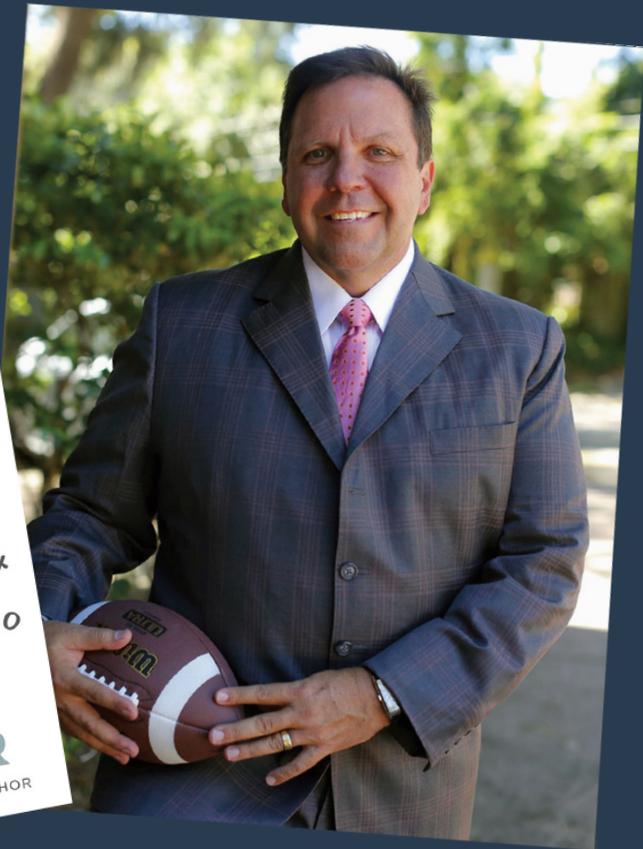
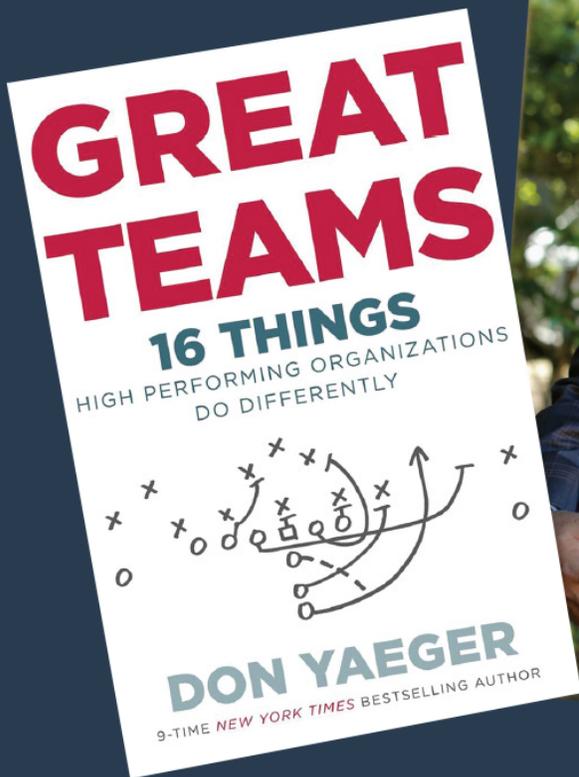


ABSOLUTE
advantage

HOW TO BUILD A HIGH PERFORMING ORGANIZATION

An interview with Don Yaeger



KELLY HATFIELD

Introduction

Don Yaeger is mentor of mine, someone who I have learned from, and whose lessons have impacted me and my business in many ways. I am confident the lessons Don shared with me during our recent interview for our Absolute Advantage podcast episode will impact you in a similar way.

In case you are not already familiar with Don — he is a nationally acclaimed inspirational speaker and one of the leading authorities on what makes great teams great and how to apply their proven practices inside any organization to propel a team to new levels of achievement. He was a longtime associate editor of Sports Illustrated and is the author of 25 books, nine of which have become New York Times best sellers. His latest book is entitled “*Great Teams: 16 Things High Performing Organizations Do Differently*”.

During our time together, Don shared his insights and experience regarding mentorship, culture, purpose, team building, the value of cross training, hiring A Players, including the 4 Pillars of Great Teams. Don invested the last five years of his life conducting hundreds of interviews with the greatest champions of our time in order to not only identify what makes the great teams great -- but -- what provided them with ability to sustain their success over a long period of time. This eBook encapsulates the highlights from our interview. But, you can listen to the interview in its entirety here.

I look forward to your feedback. You can reach me at kelly@engineuityadvantage.com.

To your success,





Mentorship

Kelly: If an executive were to ask you, “How do I find a mentor?”, what would you recommend?

Don: I did a book a number of years ago with a man who became my mentor. He became one of the most influential people in my life — Coach John Wooden — one of the greatest basketball coaches of all time. I was able to have this relationship with Coach largely because I asked. And that’s the challenge. Most of us don’t ask. We select ourselves right out of the potential conversation by not even having it. We have to ask. That’s where the relationship begins.

Know Your Why

Kelly: One of the first things you talk about within “Pillar One” of your Great Teams book is the importance of targeting your purpose and understanding your why. What was your why for writing this book?

Don: My “why” at the beginning was simple, which was just to understand at a deeper level. I’ve been blessed to be in, and to have access to, great winners and to sit down and learn from them.

To make team building relevant to everybody who studies the book. I wanted to be able to share all of the research and information as a conversation. It was a ve-year journey, traveling around the country, talking to the best team builders on the planet.

However, one of the things that stood out to me was that I was coming back from these great interviews a better leader for my own team. I have 18 employees in my three companies, and as a result of the interviews for the book, I was growing as a leader.

The lessons I was studying from all the great leaders I was interviewing was impacting my business in very positive ways.

That just made the point — my why — all the more important. It made the mission all the more important to me because I thought if I’m being impacted this way, if I do this right, others will be as well.

That was my why.



What Makes a Great Team Great

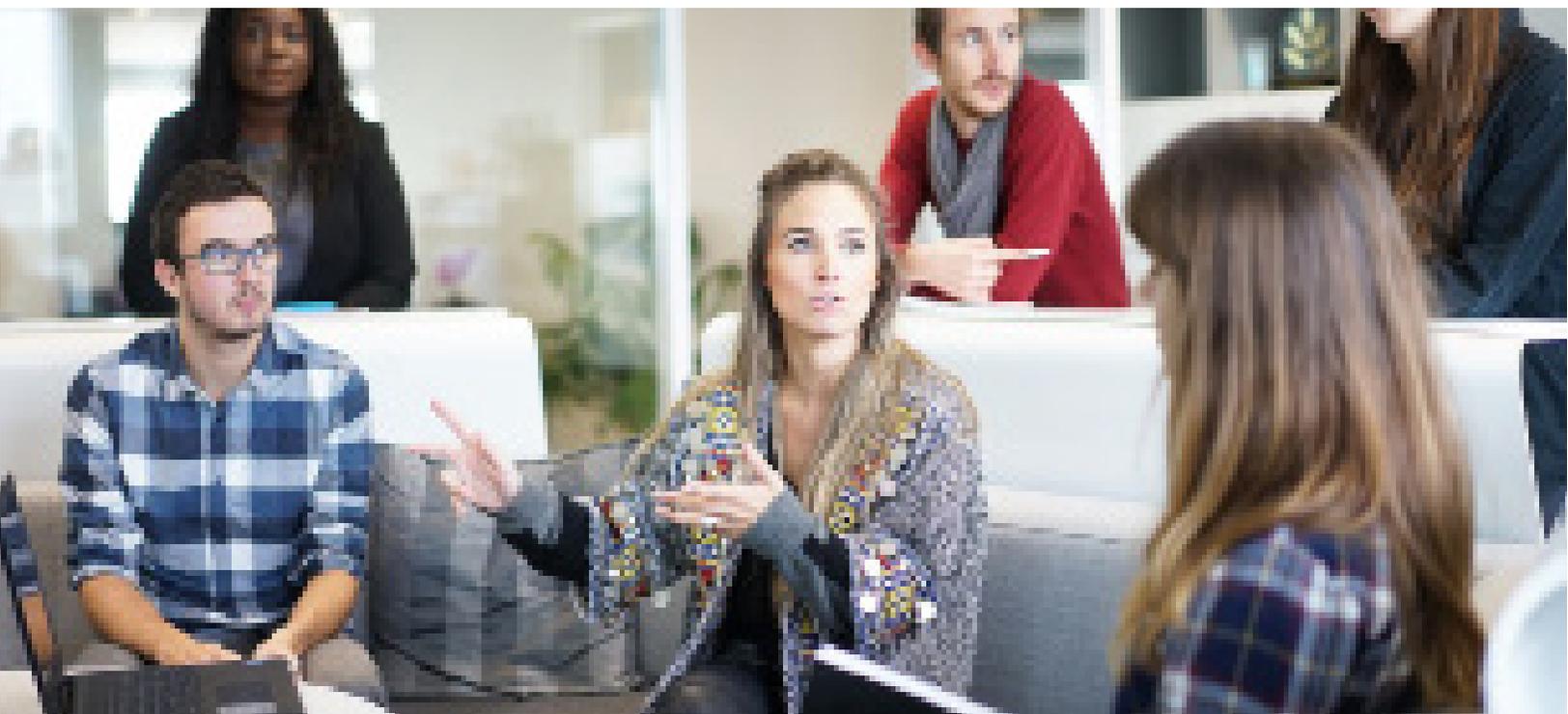
Kelly: What makes a great team great?

Don: Let's start out by defining what is a great team. What does a great team look like? The bigger question was how to pick the ones to study for the book? Generally, what I was looking for were teams that have been able to stay at, or near the top of their field, whether that is baseball, basketball, football, women's soccer, volleyball, or whatever it might. In other words, you don't have to win a championship every year to be great...but you do have to remain highly competitive.

Then there was a business component to my research. I was blessed to have amazing leaders like Steve Ballmer from Microsoft, Gary Kelly from Southwest Airlines, and G.J. Hart from California Pizza Kitchen, sit down and give me the opportunity to interview them about what it takes to be extraordinary and to build an extraordinary organization.

One of my biggest takeaways was that every great team leader was constantly in the study of other great ones.

The fact they were at the top of their profession, best in class, propelled them to study others even more. They wanted to be more engaged in the lives of others because they wanted to stay at the top. They knew that battling against complacency is the most challenging part of any successful organization.



Pillar One: Targeting Purpose

Kelly: Could you share a summary of the “Four Pillars”?

Don: The first one is understanding your purpose. Getting your sense of that becomes a real driver. Most people don't have a strong sense of purpose within their organization and that's one of the things I found both corporately, and in sports, was that the teams that knew who they were in service of — who they were trying to impact — and the lives they were able to change — they came to work differently every day.

Tom Izzo, the great basketball coach at Michigan State University, shared with me the idea that to keep his players fully engaged, he regularly says these words, “Don't cheat the blood lines. You are here today and we're playing on national television regularly because of the people who came before you. Don't cheat them by being anything less than you're very best. Don't bring anything less than your best to the game every day, because if you do, you're cheating those in your blood line.”

That's an effective way to get your team to realize they're playing for something bigger than themselves.

That's what you want to do within your business.

You want those who work with you to believe they're part of something bigger than themselves. And when they do, they come to work differently.

They just do!

Pillar Two: Effective Management

Then there is effective management. Effective management is the ability to build a leadership structure where you're constantly developing the next generation. You should always be looking to bring in amazing talent, and then, looking to develop them and to create in them an opportunity to replace you at an even a higher level.

Pillar Three: Activate Efficiency

Then there is activate efficiency. Our goal should be to look for ways we can make our team better. I devoted one of the chapters in the book to running effective meetings — in sports — we call them huddles.

They're places where you gather for the exchange of information, but the truth is that most meetings within a business context are horribly ineffective. Largely because nobody wants to be there.

Or, if you are there, you're only partially there.

Pillar Three: Activate Efficiency

Sadly, that's true even in some sports huddles. People are there and they're not engaged — or if the play isn't being run for them — they may be only partially engaged in the meeting.

Bad things happen when your team is only partially engaged.

I often share a story of how Coach Mike Krzyzewski of Duke basketball video records his huddles. And then he grades players on their engagement during the huddle. Are they listening? Are they active? Are they staring at their shoes? Were they looking at what's happening in the huddle?

Imagine what would happen if we videotaped most meeting rooms in corporate America?

“How engaged were you during that hour-long discussion on accounting principles?”

What you find is that if you start saying, as coach Krzyzewski does, “I’m looking for you to be fully present or fully absent in every meeting we have.”

That’s a high standard.

Now, you’re saying to people, “Don’t be looking at your cellphone under the table. Don’t be sneaking out a text message or Facebook update just because you can. You’re either fully in the meeting or you need to be fully out. You change the dynamic for your team when you start changing the efficiency of something as simple as a meeting.”



Pillar Four: Mutual Direction

The next is mutual direction. One of the chapters we have in that section is about the importance of your language and a great team actually speaks a different language. They talk to each other differently.

We've all seen the video of the coach who's losing his mind on the sidelines, he's grabbing someone by a facemask, or he's up in their grill so closely he knows what they had for lunch. That way of trying to lead people just doesn't work.

Sadly, we have probably all worked for somebody like that. Somebody who thought their ability to intimidate was the best way of getting the most out of you.

Tom Herman, recently hired as the head football coach at the University of Texas, believes there are two ways you can get people to do things that might otherwise seem unnatural to them.

One of those ways is fear.

The other is love.

Truly love them in a way that means you want the best for them — and — they will give you things they don't normally give other people.

Here's this coach, in college football, this manly man sport, and Coach Herman began a process last year, as his team was leaving the tunnel and heading onto the field from the locker room, he would stop each player and he would kiss them on the cheek. And he would whisper, "I love you," in their ear.

He discovered that for many of these young men, it was the first time a man had ever kissed them. It was heartbreaking. But at the same time, Coach Herman realized that he was the one who got the opportunity to show them what love looks like.

He got to show them what it means to care for them.

At the beginning, all the guys were like, "Oh, coach, that's not cool. That's not good."

Now, they line up.

Our job is to speak a language into the hearts of those that we're attempting to lead because fear only works for the short haul. The ability for people to believe that you care for them — that lasts a lot longer.



Building a Culture of Greatness

Kelly: How do you define culture?

Don: Culture is the language of your organization. Culture is what is acknowledged or celebrated within your organization. When someone does this, they get a pat on the back, they get promoted, or they get celebrated. At the heart of it, what you celebrate signifies the values of your organization — not what is posted on the wall in the lobby.

Years ago, I had an opportunity to write a story about an amazing energy company in Houston, Texas. Posted on a wall behind the receptionist's desk in the lobby were the company's corporate values. Number one on the list was integrity, and as most corporate values statements go, integrity is generally at the top of the list. Then a couple of years later, it all melted down.

That company was Enron.

At the time, Enron was world-class. They declared integrity as their number one value, yet every time they had a chance to cheat on that value, they did at an executive level. You can put all kinds of things on the wall, but if you truly ask your employees in a hidden ballot to share with you what is valued in your organization, you'll find out what your culture is because the culture is what they see being celebrated.



"A Players"

Kelly: We talk a lot about culture with our Enginuity Advantage clients because of its impact on their recruiting efforts, and more specifically, in recruiting A players. Before we dive into the role culture has on recruiting, how would you define an "A player?"

Don: I look at an "A player" as somebody who is in the top 10 percent. Somebody who can do for you, and will do for you, what is best of class in your space. An "A player" is also fully engaged with others within your organization. They want to be part of what you're doing.

They're on the journey with you and they're connected to your purpose.

"A players" want to come to a place where what they do matters. They want to be part of something bigger than them — and we are seeing this play out even more so with Millennials in the workplace.

Accenture conducted a research study on the Millennial generation. They asked tens of thousands of Millennials a series of questions about their workplace. Two of the questions asked were, "Why did you choose where you went to work" and "Why do you stay there?"

Number six on the list of answers was compensation.

This generation isn't as driven by a number as many of us in other generations. Number one on their list was they wanted to work where what they were doing made a difference, whether it was to a community, or something else.

We have to be able to articulate that to our teams. We have to be able to show them why or work matters because if our vision of how we play in our industry, our community, our customer base, doesn't inspire them, then we are probably not the right fit for them.

Bench Strength

Kelly: How do the leaders of great companies deal with the loss of key players?

Don: The key is bench strength. You have to be in a constant development of your talent. For each person on your team, you have to be talking actively with them about how you want them to grow. And as they grow, and somebody leaves, you've already prepared. You then get a chance to see what they're made of.

I was recently a guest on a nuclear submarine just north of Jacksonville, Florida in Kings Bay, Georgia. There I was with these U.S. Navy sailors who when that submarine leaves port — it leaves fully loaded with nuclear warheads. That single sub is the third most powerful nuclear fighting force in the world. That's how significant the responsibility is on these 167 young men stationed on the sub.

Almost every one of them has earned a designation / insignia proudly displayed on their chest called "Dolphins." That's the slang term. But what the designation means is that over the course of time, that sailor learned, and became cross-trained and proficient in every major system.

They are initially trained to do a single job, whatever it might be, but then they become proficient in the operation of any other system on the sub. Somebody leaves, somebody gets ill, and we're in the middle of a conflict, we can't leave that station unattended because a person is not available.

Someone else has to stand in. In the Navy, they reward people for that ability to be ready.

That is bench strength.

They're rewarded with the insignia above their chest that represents, by the way, "I'm so good that I'm good everywhere!"

And...if someone hasn't earned their "Dolphin", it's almost shameful on the sub because being cross-trained is so important to them. That's very powerful.



Foster the Growth of Your Team

Kelly: What are some of the key questions you ask team members to help foster growth?

Don: I set up a regular series of coffees with the people that work with me so I can understand what's going on. I don't want to know what's going on at work — I want to know what's going on with them, personally.

Our goal, our job as leaders, is to get to know our people. And we do that by asking questions that reveal who they are as people.

And the best way to do that is by being willing, in a very transparent way, to reveal who you are.

I want to know what's going on. "How's your son?" "What's happening in your family?" I ask questions that would probably make an HR director pull his or her hair out, but I do that knowing that they, like Tom Herman who kissed his players on the cheek, my team knows that what I learn — and what I do with what I learn — they know that I love them.

Simple Always Wins

Kelly: Would you like to share any parting advice?

Don: A daunting or complex task can be one of the great challenges in leadership. The best that I've worked with are also the best at making things simple.

Breaking the big hairy challenges in our life, in our career, in our business down to the simplest of tasks is important. If we can make things simple, we have the opportunity to lead and be successful for long periods of time.

Some leaders think no one will respect them if they think that what we're doing is simple or if there's a simple answer to what I'm teaching. The truth is, the best ones make it simple.



About Kelly Hatfield & April Taylor



We are leaders and entrepreneurs at heart. We believe FULLY in the power of the ripple effect and the opportunity that each of us has to create meaningful, positive and long-lasting impact in the lives of our teams, our clients and all who we serve. We consistently focus on ensuring that this amazing opportunity is realized and have built several successful companies directly connected to helping others live into their opportunity to make a greater impact.

We have been in the Recruiting and HR field for over 25 years. Along with our amazing teams, we have created 4 successful businesses aimed at matching exceptional talent with top organizations. Through our passion for service and helping people, our reach has organically expanded into the area of coaching and consulting. With a focus on high-performance, we partner directly with leaders and with companies to support and develop their leadership teams and design recruiting and retention strategies. Additionally, our work as hosts of Absolute Advantage Podcast offers a conduit to deep discussions with successful entrepreneurs, executives, and thought leaders across a variety of industries. This has provided us with a unique perspective and deep connection to leadership, people, entrepreneurship and high-achieving practices from all viewpoints.

As successful entrepreneurs and certified High-Performance Institute Coaches, we couldn't be more excited about helping you take your personal and professional life to the next level. We've had a lifelong passion for helping others succeed and are committed to making a positive impact in the lives of the people we touch. With over 25 years in leadership, we know from experience what it takes to build a happy life, successful business, high-performance mindset and high achieving teams. We are certain that one of the keys to our success as leaders and entrepreneurs has been the support we've received along the way from coaches, mentors and subject matter experts in their respective fields. Any time we've needed to level-up, we've sought the advice and support from those who have been where we want to go.

If it's YOUR time for a dramatic transformation and rapid advancement in your personal and professional life, we'd love to help you break through your barriers and reach your highest potential so you can go out and make YOUR impact in the world.

ABSOLUTE *advantage*

Podcast: AbsoluteAdvantagePodcast.com

Website: AbsoluteAdvantageLeadership.com

FREE DOWNLOAD

6 Secrets Of The Highest Performing Leaders

Learn what the most
successful leaders do
differently!

[Click Here to Download!](#)

