

Belichick would be a superb golfer if he weren't so busy with his day job.) Since employees are not robots, they value time away from the job and return refreshed after taking some personal time.

Provide detailed, credible, actionable performance feedback

“I was always worried about [Belichick] and [offensive coordinator] Charlie [Weis]. What did he and Charlie think? Because they are the ones that are making the evaluations.”⁶⁴⁹

– *Tom Brady*

“I didn't just focus on route running or catching [generally] but the small things in running good routes and catching the ball.”⁶⁵⁰

– *Patriots receiver David Givens*

“He cuts through all the [garbage] and gets right to the point. When he looks you in the eye, whatever is coming out of his mouth at the time, you can take it to the bank. You feel like you can... believe in the man.”⁶⁵¹

– *Cleveland Browns cornerback Gary Baxter, on former Patriots defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel*

Performance evaluations should be detailed, credible, and actionable. The Patriots achieve this by disaggregating each player's responsibilities into their constituent elements, teaching how they want each element executed, and giving each player frequent, specific feedback about his performance of each element. Patriots safety Rodney Harrison says:

“[Belichick] gets along with guys. He tells you what he expects out of you, and all you can do is respect a guy like that. He tells you the truth. If you are screwing up, he'll tell you. If you are doing a great job, he'll tell you. ... The key that separates him from a lot of coaches is preparation. There is not one detail that he overlooks. He's always on it.”⁶⁵²

David Givens says Patriots receivers don't think generically about “beating a cornerback.” They prepare to beat a cornerback playing specific techniques: “We work on the jam coverage; we work on the press coverage and the off coverage... There are a lot of different techniques a corner can play, so we just try to get prepared for all of them.”⁶⁵³

Rookie cornerback Ellis Hobbs drills one skill at a time, such as backpedaling, calling it his “point of emphasis *du jour*.”⁶⁵⁴ “I try to focus on one thing a day... then move to the next thing. You have to keep the little things in check. If you lose sight of the little things, they become big things.”⁶⁵⁵

Tom Brady obsesses over every quarterback skill, not merely throwing well. Though one of the NFL's slowest players (whose speed—his dad claims—was once measured with a sundial), Brady works so hard on his footwork that sacking him is like tackling a greased pig. Opponents are awed by his ability to evade tacklers by detecting where pressure is strongest and moving away with just a few small, smooth steps... all the while staring downfield at his receivers:

“You can't go for the hard hit [because] he has little subtle movements that can make you miss. ...You have to [approach him] under... control and just get him down [because] he just makes you miss... I've seen him shuffle. I've seen him just step to the side a little bit. He might shuffle to the side a little bit, and then on some blitzes he kind of runs away from [defenders] so he can get the ball off.”⁶⁵⁶

Former Patriots offensive lineman Damien Woody says, “his awareness in the pocket is second to none. He can feel pressure from anywhere, and he knows how to sidestep. That separates Tom from a lot of pocket passers.”⁶⁵⁷ After studying film of Brady “in the pocket,” former NFL quarterback and current analyst Ron Jaworski insisted Brady is “the NFL's most mobile quarterback.” Attention to detail transformed the NFL's slowest player into its most mobile quarterback!

Brady also works hard on handing the ball off and pretending to hand the ball off: “Corey [Dillon] does a great job of carrying out the play-fake, as if he is really getting the football. [And] Brady sells it.”⁶⁵⁸ Defenders who can't see whether a handoff is real or fake must guess. If defensive backs or linebackers guess wrong or—even worse—hesitate and get trapped in no-man's-land, the Patriots benefit.

Brady has even improved his throwing mechanics: “I was really long and loose my first year. Now, I think I try to be more compact.”⁶⁵⁹ He also credits weightlifting for his stronger arms and legs that help him “throw a tight spiral or put more zip on [my] passes.”⁶⁶⁰

Receiver David Terrell says that—as soon as he joined the Patriots—coaches worked him out in new ways that paid immediate benefits:

“It's been getting my lower body strength up and the other areas I need to be stronger to be successful. It's drills that tie into playing receiver, whether it's getting in and out of breaks [making sharp cuts while running] or going up to get the ball. It's been a totally different transition here. It's fun because you can see yourself getting better... Explosion, quicker feet. We do a lot of quick feet. Anything that makes you more efficient when you're thinking about the transition from workouts to games.”⁶⁶¹

The Patriots sweat such details because details separate winners from losers. For example, left tackle Matt Light swears the key to stopping great pass rushers is not size or speed but technique: “Whoever has [to block Jevon Kearse has] to... have the right footwork. It comes down to technique. It always does.”⁶⁶²

Developing great technique requires nuanced feedback from meticulous coaches, precisely the kind of coach Bill Belichick hires and trains. Patriots players trust and act on the feedback they receive because Patriots coaches: 1) are experienced; 2) explain why they're asking for certain behaviors; and, 3) tape and watch everything... and film seldom lies. After playing in the NFL more than a decade, safety Rodney Harrison is still astonished by Belichick's knowledge:

"I can't believe a coach could know so much about so many different areas of football. Certain things you do, he'll come back and tell you and you probably don't even realize he's looking at you. ...He'll be watching the offense, but he sees things on defense and special teams."⁶⁶³

Most people have a very distorted view of themselves. Football players are no exception. Patriots three-time Pro Bowl defensive lineman Richard Seymour credits film sessions with tremendous improvements in his game by showing him what he *actually* did, not what he *believed* he did:

"I critique myself pretty hard. I'm pretty hard on myself as far as watching film. The first day I came out here, I thought I did pretty good, then I went in to watch film and I was like, 'That's not me.' So I think the more I watch film and the more I continue to come out here, the better off I'm going to be."⁶⁶⁴

Patriots players crave feedback. They want to know how they're doing because they want to improve. They don't want pats on the back. They want honest information. Patriots punter and field goal holder Josh Miller is impressed by longsnapper Lonie Paxton's desire for feedback about his longsnaps: "The thing that I like most about Lonie is he really gets upset when it's not perfect. He really takes it personally. He wants to know what every snap did, he wants feedback. It's not only a job, but it's personal."⁶⁶⁵

Former GE CEO Jack Welch says weak managers fail to provide negative feedback. They believe they're being kind by not telling employees negative things, but "phoney appraisals" instead deny employees the chance to learn and grow or develop a "Plan B" in case they are fired. Welch says managers have "an obligation to let people know where they stand"⁶⁶⁶ because the cruelest thing is firing someone without warning. Forthright feedback—even when harsh—is the only kind way to treat employees.

You can't turn a lump of coal into a diamond without pressure. Bill Belichick expects greatness and knows it grows in the soil of competition. Players understand too. Cornerback Asante Samuel played superbly in 2004, yet the Patriots brought in many new cornerbacks after the season:

"I look at it as 'They're coming in here, so it's time to compete.' That's the only way you can look at it. I don't look at it as a sign that I didn't do my job because I know I did my job and I played very well. I just look at it as 'This is

the NFL, and every year there's going to be people coming in at your position'—that makes competition. Plus, you need depth."⁶⁶⁷

What Richard Nixon said at the 1987 funeral of Ohio State great Woody Hayes is equally applicable to Belichick:

"He was a Renaissance man, a man with a great sense of history and with a profound understanding of the great forces that move the world... Instead of being just that tyrant that you sometimes see on the football field... he was actually a softy, a warm-hearted man."⁶⁶⁸

Asked whether it was a fact or fiction that "Bill Belichick actually smiles from time to time," Tedy Bruschi joked, "Fiction! Never seen the guy smile ever smile... He's just a very serious guy that just wants to win football games."⁶⁶⁹ Belichick's gruffness is not his personality, it is a job requirement. *NFL Film's* Steve Sabol told Belichick another coach who had always been gruff and tough with his players wished—six months before he died—he could gather all his players together and tell them how much they meant to him. Belichick replied: "Absolutely [I share that sentiment]. And also to be able to say, 'When I criticized you, when I got on you, when I rode you, it was to make you a better player to make the team better. It wasn't personal.'"⁶⁷⁰ His insistence on perfection is another job requirement. To quote Woody Hayes:

"We all have a tendency to ease off at times. That's why you need good teachers and good coaches: To push you a little bit. We *all* have to be pushed... I'm cheating myself and I'm cheating my players if I don't get the best out of them."⁶⁷¹

For the same reason, each Patriot gives himself feedback by observing himself on film, as nose tackle Vince Wilfork explains: "As long as I have something to work on and film to look at and see myself last year, I know the things I need to work on and what I'm strong at."⁶⁷² Patriots always look reality square in the eye. If they don't like what they see, they change it.

Shorten the performance-assessment-feedback cycle

"If there's a problem, I want to hear about it in an hour."⁶⁷³

— *Toyota CEO Fujio Cho*

"At Michigan, [Tom Brady] would come up to us... more one-on-one, 'Dave, you want to get in and stick the guy this way. Or you want to get up field at least three more steps and then break.' But now he has the freedom to show you and express it to you on the field, so it's more hands-on."⁶⁷⁴

— *New Patriots receiver David Terrell*

“Work implies... accountability, a deadline, and finally the measurement of results, that is, feedback. ...Unless we build expectations into the planning decision in such a way that we can realize early whether they are actually fulfilled or not—including a fair understanding of what are significant deviations [from expectations] both in time and in scale—we cannot plan. We have no feedback, no way of self-control from events back to the planning process.”⁶⁷⁵

– *Peter Drucker*

Bill Belichick’s coaches and players apply Six Sigma to football. They strive to eliminate every error, defect and mistake. When they detect a problem, they halt the entire assembly line until they fix the problem. Patriots nose tackle Keith Traylor cites perfectionism as the key similarity between his Super Bowl-winning 2004 Patriots and his two Super Bowl-winning Broncos teams in the late 1990s: “There’s no toleration of mistakes. We pride ourselves on trying to be perfect, with no mental errors. The coaching staffs are similar. They prepare you well.”⁶⁷⁶ New Miami Dolphins head coach—and long-time Belichick buddy—Nick Saban believes attention to detail is the Patriots’ secret sauce:

“Their trademark as a team is their ability to fundamentally execute against the team they play. They are one of the best tackling teams I see. They are one of the best teams controlling the line of scrimmage I see—both sides of the ball. They get the best fundamental execution out of the quarterback.”⁶⁷⁷

Patriots coaches quickly detect and correct weaknesses. After beating the Buffalo Bills for their 18th-straight victory, Patriots coaches weren’t ecstatic. They were deeply disappointed in their special teams. They released a player (Shawn Mayer) who missed a tackle on a 98-yard touchdown return, re-signed a former special teamer (Je’Rod Cherry), scratched a player (Bethel Johnson) from the active roster, and tortured special teams players with endless film sessions: “I don’t know how many special-teams plays we watched last week. I’m sure the players were sick of hearing about it. It was redundant. It was beaten into them, and I think they responded well.”⁶⁷⁸ Belichick was as grouchy as a coach on an 18-game winning streak can be. After winning their 19th straight, Patriots safety Rodney Harrison said, “We’re happy because he was a very unhappy camper this week, and you really don’t want to be around him when he’s unhappy. We’re happy we got the victory for that reason alone.”⁶⁷⁹

Patriots coaches film everything, watch every film, and grade every single player on every single play. They provide players rapid feedback and tailor their coaching to quickly fix problems. Players are kept constantly informed about their performance, areas they must improve, adjustments they must make, etc. By minimizing delays between performance and assessment and between assessment and feedback, coaches maximize players’ ability to learn from and fix their mistakes: