Great GMs are made, not born

With billions of dollars at stake, and owners and fans watching their every move, leaders who become pro sports GMs need mentors and a chance to develop to succeed.
There may well be no tougher job in professional sports than general manager. In the past decade, as the four major North American professional leagues—Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, and the National Hockey League—have seen revenues and profits soar, the role of the general manager has become more complex, more challenging, and exponentially more stressful. Increased media attention, fueled by the relentless 24-hour news cycle of cable television, the Internet and social media, has put general managers under intense, unprecedented scrutiny. The job, once an unheralded backroom post handled in relative obscurity by former players, is now tracked and analyzed with such precision by fans and the sports media that job security has dropped precipitously. Of the top 25 general managers in sports, as chosen by Forbes magazine in 2007, only five remain in their jobs today. Given that professional sports is in the midst of a financial golden era—according to a 2013 report from PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, the combined pro sports revenue will reach nearly $68 billion by 2017 (up from $53 billion in 2012), an annual growth rate of 4.8%—there is an urgency for general managers to win and build stable franchises immediately.

In this report, we explore the shifting role of the general manager and consider the daunting challenge of developing talented and effective GMs. We believe that successful general managers must be developed by having access to strong, experienced mentors; by placing themselves in an environment where they have opportunities to handle multiple key disciplines; where there is collaboration and open communication; and where there are opportunities to advance into bigger roles that enhance their careers.
A winning general manager creates alignment. The overarching key is to create alignment around philosophy, style of play, type of players, embrace of technology and comfort with collaboration with ownership and head coaches. Successful general managers understand that the job is ultimately about creating hope for the fan base. It is not only about generating enthusiasm and winning, but also about generating sustainable revenue streams built upon promising and delivering a team that has, at the very least, a chance to win it all.

Our focus will be on addressing these questions:

- Are general managers born or are they made?
- Given the expanded nature and complexity of the job, should franchises or leagues be instituting formal internal general manager development programs?
- Considering the uniqueness of the job, can it even be taught?
- How difficult is it to find alignment in the modern professional sports arena?
A Bit of History.

Prior to the era of free agency and astronomical player compensation, general managers were out of the spotlight, working to find talent and sign contracts while toiling in the shadows of successful coaches. For some dynastic teams, such as Vince Lombardi’s Green Bay Packers and Red Auerbach’s Boston Celtics, the head coach doubled as general manager. Neither Lombardi nor Auerbach, both of whom were superb talent evaluators as well as coaches, would have deigned to allow a general manager to dictate personnel decisions. Such hybrids still exist today—Bill Belichick, head coach of the four-time Super Bowl champion New England Patriots, for example, serves as de facto general manager of the team, in charge of all personnel decisions—but they are a rare breed. Belichick’s predecessor, Bill Parcells, once famously voiced his desire to Patriots owner Robert Kraft to be granted such authority. “If they want you to cook the dinner, at least they ought to let you shop for some of the groceries,” Parcells suggested. Parcells left the team soon after. Only the most successful coaches are afforded the opportunity and few find success wearing both hats.

With the advent of free agency, massive expansion and multi-billion dollar television deals, the general manager’s job description changed forever. General managers today must be bright, insightful talent evaluators, financial wizards, data savants and deft people handlers and communicators both internally and externally. In a job where a vast majority of the players and head coaches earn more than the general manager, dealing with both on-field and off-field crises generated by an array of eclectic personality types is a daunting but pervasive job requirement. Even in the business world, where public companies dance to the pressures of quarterly earnings statements, there are few positions with similar pressures of a sports general manager.

“The general manager has to be smart, self-confident, both publicly and privately with owners, have an academic orientation, but also be tele-genic,” said Billy Beane, the longtime general manager of the Oakland Athletics who became famous as the protagonist in Michael Lewis’s bestseller “Moneyball.” Beane learned the trade under Sandy Alderson, who is given credit for ushering in the new breed of general managers in baseball. Alderson has a degree from Dartmouth, a Harvard law degree, and is also a former officer in the US Marine Corps.
“The general manager has to be able to build an all-encompassing vision,” Beane added. “Working with Sandy Alderson was an exceptional experience because he wanted his management team to learn every aspect of the business and he really didn’t want you to be focused solely on baseball; he wanted really smart, well-rounded people.”

Across several professional leagues—e.g. the NBA and MLB—a wave of promising young general managers with impressive academic credentials has emerged over the years. But there remains a significant gap between excellence and mediocrity in this crucial position. Success often depends more on the acquisition of a superstar athlete than on an impressive management skill set. Navigating the turbulent salary-cap waters, making often-risky bets on long-term contracts, free agents, building a potent team on the field as well as off the field humbles even the most talented aspiring GMs.

Ironically, given the importance of the general manager position, there remains little formal training and preparation for the job. The development of successful general managers is more art than science, and every franchise handles its front office differently but “An uninterrupted and qualified pipeline of coaches and front-office personnel is essential to the long-term sustainability of our game,” said Troy Vincent, the NFL’s executive vice president of football operations. The GM job is far more than an aspiration; it is an integrative learning experience built over years of exposure to the front lines of a given sport. In surveying a sampling of general managers, we encountered a range of philosophies and strategies for identifying and developing prospective team executives. There are individuals such as Alderson, Bill Polian and former Green Bay Packer general manager Ron Wolf, who took seriously the task of encouraging and mentoring young prospects. The impact of their efforts are seen in the number of disciples who emerged as general managers for professional franchises. But remarkably, few teams have embraced this philosophy, preferring to create specialists in individual disciplines rather than generalists with broad skill sets.

Further, recycled general managers tend to be a rare breed. (See Figure 1.) Unlike coaches and managers, who, regardless of their results, often land in other equivalent positions, general managers tend to get one shot at the top spot. Clearly, success breeds success, and many team owners poach front office talent from the halls of winning franchises, a formula with spotty results at best. A glittering resume doesn’t always translate into success on the playing field. How many promising new hires turned out to be disappointments or outright failures? Important questions emerge for current and aspiring general managers in professional sports.
What is the role of the general manager in this complex era of professional sports management? Is there an earnest effort by front offices to identify and develop general manager talent within these organizations? Is there a preferred pathway to success for general managers? Is a stint with a successful organization and ties to a highly successful individual enough to warrant a shot at GM? Are the days of former star players ascending to the front office now numbered? Is the general manager as we’ve come to know him a dying breed, a relic of a bygone era being replaced by teams of quants, salary-cap specialists, data analysts and media stars?
Leadership is a quality associated with an innate talent for influencing a group of individuals to pull together toward a common goal. Warren Bennis, the late author and leadership guru, wrote that “leaders learn from others, but are not made by others.” Great leaders tend to be born with a never-ending curiosity and desire to learn. They possess an ability to communicate their vision and inspire others to follow it. In that way, leaders are born to lead. But that is just the foundation. “The process of becoming a leader is similar, if not identical, to becoming a fully integrated human being,” Bennis wrote.

In the complex environment of professional sports, an aspiring general manager has no chance of success without these in-born characteristics. But beyond that necessary foundation, the skills required to handle the job today must come from exposure to experienced mentors who believe deeply in the need to develop a next generation of talent.

“In the past, the GM needed to have played the games, bloodied their knuckles and bloodied their nose,” said John Schuerholz, president and former general manager of the Atlanta Braves. “The GM job today is much more sophisticated. It involves player analysis, a statistical component and softer skills such as getting a feel for the players. It’s also essential that GMs have a lively intellect.”

When Brian Burke, president of operations for the Calgary Flames, joined the Vancouver Canucks front office in 1987, “the room was full exclusively of former players.” General managers who hadn’t played the game were rarities. Burke was one of the first when he became GM of the Hartford Whalers in 1992, and, as he recalled, “I was about as welcome as a porcupine in a balloon party.” The landscape is very different today. “Everything is more sophisticated and you, as an executive, need to be more sophisticated.”

Alderson, now the general manager of the New York Mets, pointed out that working closely with people is more valuable than a curriculum or syllabus when it comes to developing quality front-office people.
“We have what we call ‘the lunch bunch,’ ” Alderson said. “It’s not a formal staff meeting but we get together and we talk about such things as the first day of a homestand, the first week of the season. It is just about having lunch and talking about things and having everybody there, including the interns. I try to be collaborative. I encourage collaboration throughout the organization, and involve as many people as possible and engage people in specific issues across as broad a base as possible.”

R.C. Buford, the general manager of the San Antonio Spurs, agrees. The Spurs have won four NBA titles under Buford’s stewardship, plus one in 1999 when he was assistant GM. He is a proponent of leading by sharing the knowledge.

“We expose our interns to every different area possible,” Buford said. “I think our people are more diverse today than they were before because there are more pieces to deal with. For example, you have analytics, performance training, growth, social media, player development, and salary-cap management. We can’t have 25 people all doing the same thing. We try to distribute information across platforms in our group, whether it’s face to face or different forms of distribution.”

One general manager, who chose not to be identified, noted that his success has been built upon “a combination of mentorship, timing and displaying confidence and taking responsibility.” He noted that when he came up in the front office, staffs were small compared to today, and thus he had an opportunity to do many different types of jobs. “There wasn’t a lot of intellectual firepower in most baseball front offices, so I was able to dip my hand in a lot of things,” he said. He got first-hand lessons in player development, administration, contracts, the draft and many other critical tasks.

“Whatever 20% of my boss’ job that he didn’t like doing, I found a way to do it for him, and that led to a couple of things,” he recalled. “It made him better at his job because he could focus on the aspects that he really enjoyed. And it made him trust me because he could see that I was able to get that part of the job done and it led to greater responsibilities. If you want an expanded role, then do more than is asked of you.”
This general manager noted that when he got his first GM job, he did something different. “We created a really flat landscape where there was a hierarchy in terms of decision-making—I had to make the decisions in the end—but we had an environment where anyone could ask anyone else questions, where you could walk into anyone’s office—an intern could walk into the GM’s office—and it wasn’t seen as unusual. He could call me out on something if we disagreed. We had a departmental motto ‘We don’t know shit’ and it meant we didn’t know all the answers. In sports, if you think you have it all figured out, you’ll get humbled in a hurry.” Over the past decade, three different employees in that front office have gone on to become general managers.

The one requirement that cuts across all sports and all organizations is passion. Developing general managers is predicated on an unquenchable desire to be completely immersed in the effort.

“You could not work for us unless you had a passion for it,” said one general manager. “You couldn’t work for us unless you were willing to stay until the wee hours of the morning, unless you got along, gave as much grief as you took. The atmosphere was very collegial, and you couldn’t work for us unless you had your own perspective and found a way to contribute.”

To that end, people developed a broad outlook rather than being pigeonholed into amateur scouting, or player development, or major league operations. “Everyone got involved in everything,” he said. “There were no secrets, so the most gifted amongst them rose to the top and became general managers. But it wasn’t anything intentional.”
Should teams institute a formal GM development program?

The Seattle Seahawks, a franchise that won a Super Bowl in 2014 and came within one yard of winning a second in 2015, has developed a keen understanding of how to bring success to the playing field.

John Schneider, the Seahawks general manager, has worked closely with head coach Pete Carroll to make the pieces fit and produce the rewards on the field. Together, they have concluded that creating a more formal development program for the general manager and other front-office staff is a way to ensure success for the future.

“It’s going to be just as important for us to develop front-office people as it is to develop coaches, and we are going to put more emphasis on it,” Schneider said.

As part of the development process, the Seahawks seek to balance out an individual’s skill sets so that someone who is strong at talent evaluation, for example, can also become adept at communications skills. Organizations that are looking for general managers who manage in a general way rather than be pigeon-holed into a specific role, must find ways to create a learning environment for all front-office personnel, from interns to executives. To that end, Schneider is initiating a job-sharing type of environment for Seahawks personnel directors—splitting time in the office, interacting with coaches and players and forcing people to become more of a community than individual specialist.

“There aren’t coaching clinics for personnel guys,” Schneider said. “You can be a great talent evaluator but you also have to know how to manage and lead people. Some damn good evaluators have really struggled as player personnel directors.”

Citing mentors such as Wolf, Schneider noted the impact of exposing people to a lot of different disciplines. “People he trusted, he gave a lot of exposure to a lot of things,” Schneider said. “We were all involved in meetings. Why wouldn’t you want to have your professional staff in on your draft meetings? It’s another set of eyes.”

Successful GM characteristics.

To excel at the GM role, candidates should be:

- Intelligent and confident—be able to justify decisions.
- Active learners—always be engaged in the process.
- Anticipating future trends and understanding how to successfully navigate the landscape.
- Willing to be completely immersed in their role.
- Eager to teach and mentor others with the goal of developing their staff.
- An advocate for a transparent environment—be willing to expose your staff to the draft process, free agency, negotiations.
- Delegating tasks, hence empowering their team to perform.
- Exhibiting a mindset that enhances new ideas and constantly develops new talent.
Despite the obvious, the resistance to development programs is widespread. In the National Hockey League, for example, only one person per team is allowed to attend the league’s general managers’ meetings. Calgary’s Burke has advocated for the past 15 years to be allowed to bring the assistant GM to the meetings, to no avail. “I think it’s absurd,” Burke stated. “I think we should be training the next wave of general managers now. We have no formal training procedures. There’s no other business in the world that turns businesses of this size over to people who have just gotten their learner’s permit.”

Under Mark Shapiro, now the president and CEO of the Toronto Blue Jays, the front office of his former club, the Cleveland Indians, long was dedicated to developing front-office skill sets.

“Every intern is hired with the intent that someday they could be a general manager,” Shapiro said. “We have a process with our interns that we are looking for young guys to come in here and make us better right away; not to do data entry, not to file away scouting reports, but to have a skill set that differentiates themselves, that demonstrates initiatives, and that will contribute and add to our front office immediately.”

According to Shapiro, the process is two-pronged. The first part is selection. Prospective interns are hired after an intensive selection process. After resumes are combed, a four-page questionnaire is sent to those deemed worthy of further consideration. The questionnaire is customized to fit any particular internship and respondents are judged on critical reading skill, writing facility, and an ability to express themselves. Phone interviews follow and the final top two or three candidates are invited in for rigorous face-to-face interviews. “Believe it or not, that is the process to hire an intern making $20,000 a year,” Shapiro said. “If you look back internally here and throughout baseball, it’s been worth it because we’ve developed a lot of high-potential people,” including Texas Rangers GM Jon Daniels.

The second aspect of the development process is understanding the organization’s culture. Given that the Indians are in the 19th-largest television market in the country and last year had the second-worst average attendance in baseball, Shapiro is clear about the team’s challenges. “The only way we can overcome those challenges is with incremental efficiencies and contributions across the entire organization,” he said. “And we don’t care where good ideas come from or where the work comes from. We are inclusive and flat in the way we run meetings and attack our challenges. Whether they are solving issues with a player, doing video work, scouting processes, we don’t tend to pigeonhole or stick those guys in a closet. We include them in meetings to try to help solve our problems.”
The constant exposure to seasoned professionals in various disciplines coupled with hands-on involvement in critical functions tends to be more potent than finishing an MBA program at a business school. The key aspect for these fast-track interns in Cleveland is that they are encouraged to not only do a deep dive into a specific discipline like scouting but to get hands-on exposure to everything. An intern “will be involved in all the conversations so that he is never conducting his job in a vacuum,” Shapiro said.

For the Kansas City Chiefs, General Manager John Dorsey tries to blend “old school and new school” into the process. Another Wolf protégé, Dorsey initiated a formal mentoring program within the front office when he joined the organization in 2013 after spending most of his career in scouting and football operations with the Green Bay Packers. “I have always been a huge proponent of the mentoring program. I include everyone in the process. The way I look at it, one day, I may not be here and somebody better be ready to help.”

To that end, Dorsey exposes his front-office team to the entire draft process. He has done the same with free agency, negotiation, and understanding the salary cap and its implications. “I was taught about the cap by Ron Wolf and I have tried to expand upon the importance of the cap and how it has played such a dynamic role. It takes three years to expose somebody to the whole process. But I feel that if I left the Chiefs right now, we would be protected. We have young guys in developmental stages where if something happens to the guy ahead of them, they are ready.”

In his first season in Kansas City, Dorsey led the franchise to an 11-5 record, completing the greatest turnaround in team history, rebounding from a 2-14 record the previous season. Dorsey was named Executive of the Year by the Pro Football Writers of America.

“My role is to make sure that everything is smooth for the head coach from an operational standpoint,” he said. “To make sure they get the best players and make sure we have the balance of the cap correct. I have a service mentality and I think you have to teach.”
Today’s general manager cannot operate with a “business as usual” mindset and expect success. The game, whatever sport it is, changes constantly, and if a team has had an edge, in most cases others will catch up quickly. Dynasty-like success, such as the San Antonio Spurs, San Francisco Giants, and New England Patriots, is extremely rare. New ways to gain an advantage must be attained.

“You can’t fall in love with any one system,” said one MLB general manager with multiple World Series rings. “A system is good in that it means you have anticipated different variables, you’ve thought through things broadly, you have developed strategies. But if you get stuck in a system, you’re doomed to fail.” Success is built upon constant redevelopment, constant anticipation of the next new thing and trying to crush the competition. “The right mindset with any executive is to first understand the landscape and then figure out how to dominate it,” he said.

Powerful, but can this be taught or developed? For Bill Polian, a Hall of Fame general manager who had great success in three NFL cities, the answer is yes, but with a caveat: It is far tougher to sustain such success and develop front-office talent than it used to be.

“We had a formal development program where we would take them through various jobs and most importantly, give them exposure” to many different aspects of the organization, Polian said. “We gave them projects where they would do things that were outside their area of responsibility.” A college scout, for example, would research contracts in the off season; a pro scout would research trades and the draft. “We tried to prepare them,” he said. “I don’t think there are a lot of teams that do that.”
As general manager of the Buffalo Bills, Polian put together a team that made it to four consecutive Super Bowls (though without a victory). He took his skills to the expansion Carolina Panthers and built a team that nearly made it to the Super Bowl in its second season of existence. In Indianapolis, serving as both general manager and team president, Polian rebuilt the team through the draft, and with Peyton Manning as quarterback, the Colts won the Super Bowl in 2006.

According to Polian, the main impediment to talent development is a lack of longevity and the increased pressure to win. “Everyone is fighting for their lives week in and week out, so there is far less time these days to formulate a plan and to evaluate people,” he said.

Identifying promising, emerging talent is difficult when front office staffs have become far larger and job stability is reduced as teams constantly poach the best and the brightest. Unlike the military, which has formal programs to identify and promote talent, professional sports leagues have failed to successfully implement educational programs.

When front offices were smaller, there was a lot to be done and fewer people to do it. So individuals were given more opportunity to a have a broad-based experience. Polian pointed out that “nothing compares to sitting down with a mentor and asking ‘Why did you make this move’ or ‘Why are we doing this? What is your thinking?’” Getting those answers in real time, while the battles are swirling around you, creates the most powerful learning environment.

“Not all teams can do that,” he said. “It happens less these days. The league puts far more burdens on people than ever before and they are far more centralized. People tend to get more directives from the league office than they do from the general manager’s office.”
Barriers to development.

The mentor role.
Successful GMs boost others by:
- Exposing their staff to every aspect of the business and giving them a variety of projects.
- Their willingness to share knowledge, empower, and delegate responsibility across staff.
- Holding informal staff meetings that encourage collaboration on a variety of topics.
- Creating a learning environment for all front-office personnel.
- Fostering a transparent culture—keeping everyone informed throughout the process.
- Encouraging and promoting new ideas and creativity from all employees.
- Having a strong belief that teaching is a primary way of developing talent.

Today, silos of specialties tend to keep people locked into a single discipline and cut them off from getting a broad, general manager-type education. If someone is working at a Silicon Valley tech startup or a major corporation, a specific education foundation is presumed; how good an engineer can you be? Can you write good software code? Can you run an accounting department? For sports general managers, the educational background rarely matters, but the training to become a successful executive must be based upon mentorship and practical experience “and we are really falling short on both counts,” Polian said. “It’s not a lack of talent, it’s a lack of systemic identification.”

For John Dorsey, it’s also a lack of will. “The one component I think we have gotten away from in the league is that nobody teaches anymore,” he said. “Ultimately, you have to teach as well as lead. If you can’t teach and lead, you are not accomplishing your role. People can be developed.”

Danny Ferry, former general manager of the Atlanta Hawks and a former player, had the good fortune of joining the front office of the San Antonio Spurs, arguably the most successful NBA franchise over the past 15 years. He had been general manager of the Cleveland Cavaliers, where he also had the serendipity of drafting LeBron James, who transformed the Cavs from also-rans to one of the elite teams in the league. Ferry’s first stint in San Antonio came in 2005 just after he retired as a player.

“There was no development program there,” in San Antonio, Ferry said. “We had a small group and everyone was a part of every discussion. In San Antonio I was literally exposed to everything. It was a very collaborative environment, and in the end, it made me more prepared to see everything with a better understanding of what the business side goes through.”
Ferry continues to advocate for creating an atmosphere without what he calls “specials.” The quest for stability in a front office is predicated on winning, and prospective general managers “are not going to get an opportunity unless you come from a winning program with a name. You’re not going to get an interview if you don’t come from a good program that has won. You have to be around a culture of winning and a certain way of doing things, one where you can absorb and learn.”

The only way to develop within this environment is go through the cycle of a full year with a strong program, “and the more cycles you go through, the better understanding you have of it,” he said. Ultimately, Ferry said, the aim is to emerge as a leader. The best GMs make a conscious decision to develop strong leadership qualities, Ferry said, but wanting to be a leader and actually emerging as a strong one are not the same.

And therein lies the most ambiguous of challenges: How can you know when someone is ready? For Thomas Dimitroff, the general manager of the Atlanta Falcons, the answer lies in a strong belief in the processes and systems the Falcons have put in place to run the front office. In a business where bright young talent can quickly be out the door in pursuit of a better offer, Dimitroff believes in the “next man up” philosophy. If an individual is offered a job elsewhere, “we can go back and get new and fresh ideas from some of the new and younger guys that are moving into those positions. I believe there is always someone to step up.”

The skeptic asks: What if they are not ready? To which Dimitroff replies, “If someone tells me that, I say ‘You weren’t ready.’ I know I wasn’t ready for this job. Let’s not kill ourselves overthinking this. If you train some of these younger guys, someone is ready.”

The successful general manager must embrace the concept that strong leadership includes mentoring, a dedication to empowering and delegating that has practical as well as altruistic reverberations. “Part of leading is making sure that we are empowering and delegating properly so that when we need someone to step up, they are ready to go,” said Dimitroff.
When former general manager Dave Dombrowski became general manager of the Detroit Tigers in 2002, he was considered the wunderkind embodiment of the new generation of GMs. He became general manager of the Montreal Expos at age 31, then the youngest GM in the game. He was president and general manager of the Florida Marlins, then served as the president, CEO, and general manager of the Detroit Tigers. Now, at 58, as president of baseball operations for the Boston Red Sox, he is wary that he and other front-office staff who are that age and older are becoming impediments to a next generation of leaders.

“You don’t want people to become stale,” Dombrowski said. “You want people to be driven, to keep moving on and getting better—and a lot of that is growth. If you are growing people and all of a sudden, you don’t have that next step for them because somebody good is already in it, it is incumbent upon you to allow them to pursue another job. If you are not careful, if you don’t work in young talent—even though they might make mistakes as youngsters—you might suddenly wake up and your ball club will be old and you won’t be good anymore.”

While at the Tigers, Dombrowski constantly reminded his staff that young blood is essential to the organization. “We need new ideas, we need fresh development, because they will make us better too,” he said.
GREAT GMs ARE MADE, NOT BORN

Alignment

What becomes clear after assessing the role of the modern general manager is that the single most important element for winning in professional sports today is the alignment between ownership, the front office and the coaching staff. General managers faced with discord between these constituencies tend to struggle in their quest for success.

For example, a growing rift between Los Angeles Angels General Manager Jerry Dipoto and manager Mike Scioscia created such friction between the front office and the dugout that Dipoto resigned. Dipoto reportedly was upset at Scioscia’s unwillingness to embrace the analytics Dipoto wanted to incorporate into the team’s strategy. Whatever the explanation, the burden of disharmony at this level of professional sports adds immeasurably to the already difficult challenges of winning a championship.

Indeed, a look at many of the most successful sports franchises in recent decades illustrates how crucial such alignment is to winning. When the Green Bay Packers earned their way to a 1997 Super Bowl victory, coach Mike Holmgren and General Manager Wolf were on the same page. Under Wolf and Holmgren, the Packers posted an NFL best record of 48-16, won the division three times, went to two Super Bowls, and made the playoffs six consecutive post-seasons. Wolf often said that what made the team special was how meetings between him and Holmgren were tightly focused on what was best for the Packers. Keeping eyes on the prize and forgoing personal goals was the basis for an aligned vision that paid off handsomely.

The success of the small-market San Antonio Spurs is due in no small part to the alignment between Coach Gregg Popovich and General Manager Buford. The pair has been tightly linked together in terms of strategy and personnel, and owner Peter Holt has given them free reign to structure the team. Under their watch, the Spurs have been innovative, consistent, and well aligned in terms of personnel, playing time and the sustainable culture that underpins the team. Under Popovich and Buford, the Spurs have won four NBA titles, a remarkable run in the modern NBA. Recently, their Hall of Famer Tim Duncan continued to take a salary reduction so the team could sign LaMarcus Aldridge. This unselfishness creates a special culture that is the utopia of successful sports franchises: Unlike the Lakers, where Kobe Bryant chose to take as much money as he could make, Tim Duncan chose to do what was best for the organization.
Even after losing free-agent superstar Albert Pujols and Hall of Fame manager Tony LaRussa, the St. Louis Cardinals haven’t missed a beat in their success on the field. Alignment between the ownership, front office and coaching staff has kept the team on a winning road.

For the Chicago Blackhawks, a long-suffering NHL franchise, new ownership coupled with the addition of a new team president who is in synch with the general manager and head coach has resulted in three Stanley Cup championships in the past six years. The close connection between Seattle Seahawks GM Schneider and head coach Carroll is unprecedented in the current NFL. Schneider’s role is to find a Seahawks-type of player that Carroll covets and bring him into the fold. The pair is committed to the development of front-office personnel to create long-term success for the franchise. Under Schneider and Carroll, the Seahawks have been to two consecutive Super Bowls.

The old-time GM—former players’ only club—is certainly a dying breed, if not already gone. But the formula for developing the next generation is fraught with issues that are singular to professional sports. A seemingly perfect resume is no guarantee of success. The elusive run to a championship is dictated by so many factors that are beyond the control of any one individual; the very reason that sports captivates a global audience as it does is due to the very vagaries and uncertainties of the game.

In the NBA, for example, conventional wisdom dictates that a team must have three superstar-level players to hope to compete for a title. In the NFL, an all-star quarterback is a must, and in baseball, a team without an ace pitcher has little chance of winning a World Series. But even that formula is flawed. Injuries to key individuals, a lack of chemistry in the clubhouse, a badly timed losing streak, can undermine the best-laid plans. The Boston Red Sox finished last in 2012, a team in disarray and angst, managed to win the World Series the following season with a group of bearded over-achievers, and then finish dead last again the following season. General Manager Ben Cherington has certainly lost a lot of sleep trying to decode what went wrong, what went right, and what went wrong again.
Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets, is a proponent of analytics and technology in the search for success in today’s NBA. A graduate of MIT’s Sloan School of Business, Morey is a member of the new breed who has embraced the idea of aligning his front-office team to evaluate talent acquisition. “You have to get experience understanding analytics in evaluation,” he said. “In our talent evaluation, it is a group decision with a lot of people involved. We spent a lot of time making sure we get everyone involved in the process.”

We are on the cusp of an era in which the sports general manager’s role is in a state of flux like never before. Having the skill and authority to create the proper alignment within an organization is table stakes to the game. Given the demands of winning, evaluating talent, asset valuation, player chemistry and ability to lead, the profile for a successful general manager is nearly impossible to fulfill. And yet, every season in every sport, candidates emerge and are named to teams—and the majority are fired within five years. It is disappointing, a result of too few skilled mentors available or willing to develop the next generation of general managers.
Conclusion

General manager is not a position for the faint of heart. The influx into some sports of highly educated, versatile, data-driven young executives is reshaping the general manager’s position in dramatic fashion. New general managers who emerge as winners will be those who are self-motivated, intellectually curious, have a non-stop work ethic, the ability to evaluate talent and a leadership style that can inspire internally and externally. Finding the right fit with the head coach and owner will continue to be the biggest puzzle that must be solved in order to be successful in this role. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2
The success combination.

In analyzing combinations regarding the sequence of hiring the coach or general manager first, the most successful circumstances occur with an entrenched coach or GM with a philosophy that has been successful and ingrained in the organization. An incoming coach or general manager must adapt to the incumbent, so there is alignment in vision down to the players and up to ownership. In any other scenario, success takes longer; with the demand on winning instantly, longevity is not afforded by many owners or the media for unsuccessful performance on the field.

**NFL Super Bowl Champions 2010-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Champion</th>
<th>GM</th>
<th>First Stint</th>
<th>Years to Win 1st Title</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Head Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>New England Patriots</td>
<td>Bill Belichick</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bill Belichick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Seattle Seahawks</td>
<td>John Schneider</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pete Carroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>Baltimore Ravens</td>
<td>Ozzie Newsome</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>John Harbaugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>New York Giants</td>
<td>Jerry Reese</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tom Coughlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>Green Bay Packers</td>
<td>Ted Thompson</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mike McCarthy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NBA Finals Champions 2010-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Champion</th>
<th>GM</th>
<th>First Stint</th>
<th>Years to Win 1st Title</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Head Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>Golden State Warriors</td>
<td>Bob Myers</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Steve Kerr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>San Antonio Spurs</td>
<td>RC Buford</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gregg Popovich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>Miami Heat</td>
<td>Pat Riley</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Erik Spoelstra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>Miami Heat</td>
<td>Pat Riley</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Erik Spoelstra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>Dallas Mavericks</td>
<td>Donnie Nelson</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rick Carlisle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MLB World Series Champions 2010-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Champion</th>
<th>GM</th>
<th>First Stint</th>
<th>Years to Win 1st Title</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Head Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>San Francisco Giants</td>
<td>Brian Sabean</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bruce Bochy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Boston Red Sox</td>
<td>Ben Cherington</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>John Farrell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>San Francisco Giants</td>
<td>Brian Sabean</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bruce Bochy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>St. Louis Cardinals</td>
<td>John Mozeliak</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tony La Russa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>San Francisco Giants</td>
<td>Brian Sabean</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bruce Bochy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NHL Stanley Cup Champions 2010-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Champion</th>
<th>GM</th>
<th>First Stint</th>
<th>Years to Win 1st Title</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Head Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>Chicago Blackhawks</td>
<td>Stan Bowman</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Joel Quenneville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Los Angeles Kings</td>
<td>Dean Lombardi</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Darryl Sutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>Chicago Blackhawks</td>
<td>Stan Bowman</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Joel Quenneville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>Los Angeles Kings</td>
<td>Dean Lombardi</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Darryl Sutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>Boston Bruins</td>
<td>Peter Chiarelli</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Claude Julien</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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**John Dorsey**  
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**Daryl Morey**  
General Manager  
Houston Rockets

**Bill Polian**  
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Indianapolis Colts

**John Schuerholz**  
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Atlanta Braves

**John Schneider**  
General Manager  
Seattle Seahawks

**Mark Shapiro**  
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Toronto Blue Jays

**Troy Vincent**  
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