

# Business lessons from the Cubs' climb



**RICK  
BRIMEYER**  
Brimeyer  
LLC

He is president of the Ames, Iowa, consulting firm

I started writing this column in early summer, but as soon as I started the Chicago Cubs went into their only slump of the 2016 season.

Convinced that I or the column was certain to jinx a promising season, I decided to table it until after the season. I'm glad I waited.

While I can't assure that St. Louis Cardinals fans will read beyond the headline, there are leadership and management lessons worth sharing from observing the Cubs organization's climb from futility to success. I'll highlight lessons in italics.

The Ricketts family purchased the Cubs from the Tribune Co. with a deal that closed following the 2009 season. New chairman Tom Ricketts took time to understand the situation. He endured the 2010 (75-87 record) and 2011 (71-91) seasons before turning over the front office. He gave his management team what they needed without interference from him.

In October 2011, he hired Theo Epstein as president and Jed Hoyer as general manager. Both were young, highly intelligent and proven winners having previously led the renaissance of the Boston Red Sox after 86 years of futility and alleged curses. In short, *Ricketts didn't compromise in selecting his management team.*

By the start of the 2012 season, the new leadership team had published "The Cubs Way," a manual that documented the best practices for all critical processes (scouting players, developing players, even details such as running bases) to be used at every level of the organization. It became clear that the new Cubs *culture was going to emphasize processes.*

One of Hoyer's first player moves was to trade for Anthony Rizzo, a young player he originally drafted and later acquired during his time with prior organizations. Hoyer knew that, in addition to being a potential star, Rizzo (a cancer survivor) had a maturity beyond his years and was a *rock-solid individual that one could build a team around.*

Epstein and his crew spent their entire professional careers in the analytics era of baseball, advancing the newfound science beyond their peers. Thus, *data-based strategies were developed* on how the organization would make the much-needed step improvement in overall level of talent by drafting young hitters and acquiring proven pitchers via free agency and trades.

Most importantly, *they had the perseverance to stick with those strategies and give them time to work* during painful seasons in 2012 (61-101), 2013 (66-96) and 2014 (73-89). The temptation for a quick fix was no doubt incredible during five consecutive losing seasons that averaged 93 losses per year and saw at-

tendance drop by 20 percent.

By the start of 2015, after two seasons of nominal improvement and a minor league system loaded with talent, Epstein added Joe Maddon as manager. Maddon, another proven winner, quickly demonstrated why he was renowned for getting top performance from his players.

Under Maddon, each day's line-up became unpredictable as he *maximized players' flexibility* by moving them among various spots in the field and the batting order. This kept players rested, feeling involved and engaged during the long season. It also allowed him to respond seamlessly when inevitable injuries occurred.

Maddon *made work fun.* Each victory was closed with a short victory party (complete with a disco ball). Road trips occasionally had wacky dress themes. Even a surprise pre-game petting zoo at Wrigley Field broke up the monotony for players and their families.

Perhaps most importantly, Maddon *guided players through the inevitable disappointments* of a 162-game season. He preached the "value of 24 hours" after a tough loss, keeping it from evolving into a losing streak. A subpar individual performance was almost always greeted with a chance to redeem oneself as soon as possible.

The carefully selected roster primarily policed itself, led by journeyman catcher David Ross. *When coaching was necessary, Maddon performed it in private while remaining publicly supportive of the player.*

Under Maddon in 2015 the team skyrocketed to a 97-win season before bowing out in the National League Championship Series. Burdened with 108 years of history and the tag of pre-season favorite to win it all in 2016, Maddon encouraged the team to "embrace the target" by acknowledging that they were indeed a good team playing at the highest level and that process would become more important than ever.

Lessons learned from 2015 were incorporated into 2016 as additional efforts were made to keep players, especially pitchers and veterans, better rested for a longer postseason run. *Short-term sacrifices were made for the long-term goal.*

Very late on the evening of Nov. 2, 2016, most valuable player Kris Bryant, who was playing in high school as Ricketts purchased the Cubs, charged a slow-rolling grounder and threw to Rizzo at first for the third out in the 10th inning of the seventh game of the World Series. The ensuing celebration was not the expiration of a curse, but rather the culmination of astute, disciplined management from the top down.

## RICK SAYS

Perhaps most importantly, Maddon guided players through the inevitable disappointments of a 162-game season.