



## Three Strikes and You're IN!

How My Love of Baseball Helps Improve Workplace Productivity and Profit

I've always loved baseball, but I never realized that it would come to define my style and passion for helping companies optimize their most important asset – people! Let me give you an example of what I mean. When I began speaking to groups, I quickly realized that when I was in the audience and the speaker began sharing the 10 steps, or the 12 secrets, or the 25 tips to something or other, by the time they got to step 5 or 6, I'd forget what they were steps of! So, I decided to deal with everything in threes. Like a good at-bat, it felt comfortable and keeps things simple.

Baseball is a simple game; not easy, but simple. It all began for me when I was nine years old. As the smallest guy on the team, they gave me uniform number 1 (the shirts were sized from smallest to largest back then). I was little, but spunky, fast and absorbed the game like a sponge! They put me in center field where I soon earned the nick-name "The Vacuum" because I sucked up everything that went past the infield. One game, I surprised my team, the coach and all of the parents in the stands by catching a fly ball on the right centerfield wall and proceeding to throw a one-hopper to third to catch the guy on second tagging up. Not only was it a great play, but the coach didn't even expect a nine year old to understand that aspect of the game. This was the beginning of a love affair that would last a lifetime.

By the time I was 12; I was the biggest guy on the team and got to wear number 15. That year I pitched and in one game struck out 17 batters. The last out was a dribbler back to the mound, so I made that play too. We lost the game (I guess I walked some guys), but still got the game ball. Yea, I know, it's pretty amazing for one player to make all 18 outs in a ball game, but this was Little League, so all you need are some untimely walks, and poor run support from your offense to have this happen. It was still a pretty cool day for me!

In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, at 13 years old, we had a guy at school that had us all bowing at his feet. Curt was bigger than everybody else, hit the ball so far that we didn't even go look for it, was dating a 10<sup>th</sup> grade cheerleader, and scrimmaged with the high school basketball team on the weekends. He even had facial hair; not stubble, but the real thing! I'll never forget the day when the call came in . . . I'd been called up to play on the White Sox; Curt's team, and his dad was the coach. I got a base hit the first time up and will forever cherish the high five from Curt when I came in to score.

Well, just when you guys are beginning to whisper about who is lucky enough to have my rookie card, things took a hiatus for about 20 years. All of a sudden, everybody else grew up, I lost my nerve, went to work, began raising a family and baseball became something I just watched on TV. Like every fan, I always hoped to go to a game and catch a foul ball; sigh, the dreams of the fan, not the player.

*Making sure they know you care as much as you really do.*

But, the story's not over yet. When my kids were young, we went to the school carnival and there was this big dunk tank right next to ticket booth. For \$5 you got three balls and if you hit the bulls eye and the principal took a bath. "Go for it Dad, you can get 'em (they'd heard the stories of my youth!). On the second throw, whoosh, I nailed it and down went Mr. McKinney; hero again! I thought about this feat for a couple of weeks, and sure enough, as luck would have it, ran into a guy who was playing men's over 30 baseball; real baseball, with metal cleats, wood bats and 90 foot base lines. Heck yea, I can still do this, so I told them I was a pitcher. I got my chance and after balking twice did get to strike out a couple of guys with the high hard one, but my elbow and hamstrings just didn't hold up. Most of these guys had played college ball, some even had some minor league experience. They never did find out that I hadn't pitched since I was in little league, but hey, I got to run, hit throw, smell the grass and the leather; I was a ball player again!

This too was short lived, as my 40 year old body just couldn't do it week after week, but let's fast forward to this year (finally!). Still the baseball freak at 54, I go to opening day at Chase Field to watch the Arizona Diamondbacks every year. This year my buddy (who always gets tickets for my birthday) found us front row seats half way down the first base line in shallow right. Yep, I brought my glove!

We did the whole deal; hot dogs, beer, and peanuts and watched the Dbacks take the lead over the Rockies. In the seventh inning we got text from two friends and found out that they were in our same section, about 20 rows up. We stood and waved, so they could see the cool seats we had. It was the perfect day for baseball on a warm April day. Everybody around us was into the game (hey, we were down there with the real opening day fans). Top of the ninth, first pitch and [Ryan Spilborghs](#) slices one down the right field line and it's tailing foul, coming towards our section. We're all on our feet, a couple of us braver souls stretch out over the wall as this screaming liner hooks our way. I, of course reached the farthest. Smack, ball against leather. It seemed like an eternity . . . somebody had caught it. I thought I felt something, so pulled up my mitt and holy cow; there was a ball in it. I was stunned, then ecstatic. I jumped up, pulled the ball out of my glove and turned to show it to my friends up above. 3000 people went nuts and jumped to their feet. Imagine that feeling! I'd seen this happen on TV, but never thought it would be me!

Wait, there's more! They played it back on the jumbotron and the analyst Mark Grace voiced his approval – "That's why you bring you glove to the ball game. Nice back hand by the veteran . . . that's just good glove work!" I was in heaven! Here, check this out [play video and hold up glove with the ball].

Okay, you're all wondering; what's this got to do with recognizing employees and getting high performance in the workplace? Glad you asked. There are five lessons here:

1. Training - Be prepared to make the play. I spent my whole life learning the skills to make this catch. Not only that, I was ready with his glove on, was still paying attention in the ninth inning and had the instinctive ability to make the play of this level without thinking. A well trained, focused, present and capable workforce will not only make more plays, but will have fewer accidents, waste less material, break fewer pieces of equipment, demonstrate more cooperation, achieve better productivity and make your firm a lot more money.

2. Practice – Looking back, I realized just how many hours I'd practiced the skills that ultimately made his reactionary catch possible. It was a backhand play on a fast moving baseball. Only well-practiced employees will be ready to instinctively do the right thing under pressure. Those few milliseconds of indecision that separate the well-intentioned rookie from the well-honed expert could make all the difference between a catch and a costly incident. Lost time accidents, injuries and equipment damage due to inexperienced employees continues to be one of the most expensive and wasteful areas for many companies.
3. Attitude - Have the confidence to go for it while others pull back or duck. Anybody can bare hand a little pop foul, but to snag a tailing liner you've got to have a combination of experience, confidence and guts. Employees who feel valued and respected are more likely to put in the hours and the effort to be really good at what they do; not because they fear being fired if they don't, but because they like you, appreciate the company and want be a part of a winning team. They're also a lot less likely to take their skills to your competitors when things get tough.
4. Recognition – When I turned to the stands and held up the ball, just imagine how it felt when thousands of cheering fans came to their feet in approval - it was overwhelming! Giving immediate, appropriate and genuine recognition when an employee takes a chance and it pays off is one of the most valuable things a supervisor can ever do. When your management team is ready, aware and has the tools at hand, this is not only easy, but soon becomes a habit that transcends the entire organization. Most people underestimate the value of an honest, timely pat on the back when it's deserved. If your team is a well-oiled machine, your supervisors will have more time to concentrate on opportunities to use recognition, because so much less time is being wasted on recruiting, training, and coaching of new employees due to higher than necessary turnover.
5. Share the Glory – While I made the play, everybody around me seemed to enjoy sharing in the moment almost as much as I did as the high-fives ensued. Let's face it, there's only so much time in the work day for celebrating success and handing out recognition. The best managers realize this, so they make sure that as many peers as possible get to participate in each recognition moment. When other team members see how often it happens, they share the love and look forward to their turn. Team-based recognition is a great way to foster camaraderie and keep everyone more focused on the job at hand.

Now I know what you were saying, this was a lucky break, because I was in the right place at the right time. But what if we could create an environment in your workplace where this happened regularly; on purpose! That's what I'm going to share with you in this book, and here's the best news of all:

It's fun, easier than you think, and it won't cost you any money. As a matter of fact, it'll make you money, and you'll be able to prove it to the CFO!