

How a Major Paradigm Shift Aided a Culture of Winning

By Mike Huszar

HENDRICK VISIT

Recently, the consultants at DRIVE visited with Hendrick Motorsports' team. It was a distinct pleasure for a bunch of "car guys," but more importantly, it was an opportunity to benchmark a world-class organization. Hendrick has four drivers that are household names to many people: Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson, Dale Earnhardt Jr., and Kasey Kahne. Over the last twenty-five years, few race teams can boast of more wins. As of the sending of this article, Jimmie Johnson has won three out of the last four races, and this past week, the four cars that Hendrick entered, all finished seventh or better.



PIT CREW PARADIGM SHIFT

We had the privilege of seeing this winning organization in action on a Wednesday while preparing for its next race on Sunday. The learning we received was amazing, so much so that it cannot be contained in just this one newsletter. We will focus on one major shift that has occurred within pit crews over the past 25 years.

I remember watching races on ABC's *Wide World of Sports* as a young boy and seeing members of pit crews who appeared to be out of shape, standing around smoking while the race was happening. In 1960, at the very first race at Charlotte Motor Speedway, a pit stop (with just two tire changes and fuel) was clocked at 45 seconds. In 1990, the average pit stop (four tires and fuel) was 20 seconds with eight people. Today, the average is 11 seconds with six people. Although numerous changes occurred in order to achieve this impressive improvement, we are going to focus on one key paradigm shift – from mechanic to athlete.



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PIT CREW PARADIGM SHIFT CONTINUED...

The old paradigm was to employ only the best mechanics for the pit crew. The rationale for which was that if there was a problem, these mechanics would best be able to manage it. Being selected was a great recognition tool for hard work during the week. However, as pit stops were hovering around 20 seconds, the pit times hit a plateau. That is when the grand experiment began. What if athletes were used for pit stops instead of mechanics? Athletes would have the mentality of overcoming failure, the discipline of practice and repetition, and the physical conditioning to achieve new heights in the pit stop world. Concerns had to be addressed, however. “What do athletes know about cars? What if something goes wrong? It’s not about the person in the pit, it’s about the car!” Naysayers appear to exist in all industries.

LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

With all these concerns, it’s surprising that this grand experiment even began. We asked the Hendrick team about this. The answer: “Mr. Hendrick had to sign-off on it. Ray Evernham (crew chief) signed off on it. Everybody in senior leadership not only signed off on the change, but protected the experiment. The terminology was actually, ‘Leadership had our backs.’” This solidarity was considered critical to overcome the naysayers. In the infancy stages, naysayers rose up after each mistake.

We met with Andy Papathanassiou, the “Human Performance Coordinator” at Hendrick Motorsports. He recruits college athletes to be a part of pit crews. I immediately fell in love with his title. Imagine a position within HR in our manufacturing organizations titled “Human Performance Coordinator.” Mr. Papathanassiou likened his job to that of an Athletic Director in college. He himself was a Scholarship athlete at Stanford University. He was an offensive tackle that shucked 60 pounds to be part of a pit crew. He is still in impeccable shape, as are all of the pit crew members that we met. Because Andy was meeting with us, he disclosed that he arose at 5am in order to hit the gym – working out is a mandatory part of every pit crew member’s job! As we pulled into the facility we saw crews working out together. The workout facilities were phenomenal.



RECRUITING ATHLETES

We learned that actually three different types of athletes are recruited; wheel changers (shorter, quick, with excellent hand-eye coordination), tire carriers, fuel guys (tall, powerful), and jack men (strong, quick-footed).

RECRUITING ATHLETES CONTINUED...

At any given time, there are about fifty people being developed for pit crews. Just like in sports, there is a shelf-life for pit crew athletes. The average career for a pit crew athlete lasts about ten years. So there is a constant flow of talent recruited and developed at any time. These developing professionals practice “moving stops” where they repeat pit stops over and over again, many times in a day. These stops are observed, critiqued, modified, and repeated. There are cameras mounted everywhere to see the stop from every angle. Sunday is race day. Monday is review day. The team breaks down film including high speed pit videos and point-of-view video from helmet mounted cameras. Often, film is reviewed during the race to make mid-race corrections.

STANDARDIZATION

As in manufacturing, struggles exist with people who prefer to perform “their own way.” Standardization is crucial to success. We asked about standard work documentation and were surprised to find that there actually wasn’t any. That can’t be good, right? Well, actually it is. Imagine getting a manufacturing changeover down to 11 seconds with six people, each with individually choreographed roles who practice hundreds of times each week. This team of six reviews film, critiques the findings, and develops as a team. At the time of the actual changeover, the work is so naturally engrained, that no documentation is necessary. If documentation did exist, it wouldn’t be for the people conducting the changeover anyway. It would be for management to ensure that the changeover is performed to standard. And that “check” through leader standard work occurs daily with these pit crews. It is my contention that documentation is a countermeasure to the problem of being unable to practice and study film multiple times per day. I believe documentation is a countermeasure to the failure of having the same team work together for years. In essence, it is a countermeasure to a non-ideal condition!

The fact that a non-manufacturing team struggled with standardization was not a shock to me. We observe this problem regularly. However, the next “cultural shift” astounded me! Andy told us that, “we have to train people to ‘not do their best.’” What?! He then said, “Individual speed does not translate to team speed.” He explained that in racing, an ultra-competitive endeavor, everything must go right in order for the team to win. Imagine having the best car, the best driver, the best pit crew, and the best leadership for a race and then losing due to a mechanical malfunction. It could happen, and everyone is critical to team success. He went on to say that perfection is key and “fast” equates to mistakes. Therefore, the speed is choreographed and metered to aid in mistake-free execution.

IMPRESSIVE CULTURE

As we visited this world-class facility, I could not help but be highly impressed with everyone that we met. The level of ownership, accountability, and enthusiasm was remarkable. I asked Ken Howes, the Vice President of Competition at Hendrick and a former crew chief, how Hendrick maintains this culture of winning. His reply spoke volumes to me. He said, “Well, we as a team practice the discipline of meeting deadlines. We’ve never missed one that I can remember – ever.” Now that is something that I cannot say. That is something that I’ve never heard at any organization that I’ve ever seen. That is something to strive for. Congratulations Hendrick Motorsports! We look forward to your continued success.





The DRIVE team stands behind one of Jimmie Johnson's cars.

If you would like to learn more about world-class people development and culture building, contact Paul Eakle at 865-323-3491.