

COACHING *for* LEADERS

Pick a Fight: How Great Teams Find a Purpose Worth Rallying Around

by David Burkus

- [Featured on episode 481](#)
- Purchasing this book? Support the show by using the Amazon link [inside our book library](#).

Dave's Reading Highlights

While modern corporations spend billions of dollars every year on “team-building” and on making sure that they hire top talent to “get the right people on the bus,” it turns out there is a much older, and much lower cost, way to rally a team. It’s not about ropes courses, trust falls, or any other of the team building activities that so many have tried and found wanting. It’s not even about how to motivate people by casting a vision or setting a big hairy audacious goal.

It’s about finding out, or sometimes just declaring, what battle your team is fighting. It’s about finding the common threat to the team or its stakeholders and outlining a clear path to overcoming it.

We want to start revolutions.

We want to bring justice to the world.

We want to overcome serious odds.

We want to defend the weak.

We don't want to sell more widgets than the other guys.

Picking a fight is a powerful motivator; but leaders need to pick their fight wisely.

Instead of someone to fight, they need to find a cause worth fighting for.

It's not about competitors; it's about the crusade.

It's not about who you're fighting; it's about what you're fighting for.

The secret to team success isn't "team-building" and it's not finding the right people.

It's finding the right fight.

It wasn't an overnight transformation, but Paul O'Neill's internal fight against accidents—his fight for worker safety gradually changed the systems and the culture. Since prioritizing worker safety meant studying the production process, the improvements made also made the plants run more efficiently. Since monitoring and responding to accidents meant constantly communicating safety numbers and ideas for increasing safety, eventually executives began sharing other data and other ideas more rapidly as well.

O'Neill's fight for safety didn't just turn around accident rates—it made the whole company better. When O'Neill left Alcoa in 2000, the company's income was five times higher than when he'd started. And its market value had increased from \$3 billion to over \$27 billion. It was a nearly impossible turnaround.

You can't dangle a small bonus in front of someone and expect them to change behaviors developed over decades. But you can appeal to their sacred values and recruit them into a fight to defend them. O'Neill focused on the unacceptable loss of fellow employees. He made safety and the well-being of employees the most sacred value in the company, and in doing so he changed decades-old

Highlight [page 24]: behaviors, made factories more efficient, and ultimately more profitable.

O'Neill called his people to fight for each other, against the common enemy of complacency and acceptance of risk, and for the sacred value of life and health. He knew that would work better than any rational appeal. It may have confused Wall Street at first, but it recruited employees to the fight from the start.

That's why his fight worked.

The right fights aren't rooted in anger or competitive rivalry—and we'll look at why soon—the right fights reinforce sacred values.

And in doing so, they motivate at a higher level.

Another option, one that passes the authenticity test sooner, is to look for existing sacred values in your organization and find ways to emphasize how the work of the organization IS the work of upholding those values. We'll discuss specific types of "fights" to lead in Part Two. But for now, consider the following questions to find those sacred values:

- ◆ What founding stories get told and retold by members of the organization?
- ◆ In what ways does the organization celebrate success?

What situations make organizational members really angry? Why? What words do customers use to describe the value you provide to them? What artifacts or symbols get admired or promoted often in the organization? Ask these questions around the organization, and collect the stories that surface, and you're one step closer to finding your fight.

Andrew Jackson—despite his past and future quarrels with just about every ethnicity other than his own—had pulled together the most diverse fighting force in history and defeated an army of the largest empire in the world. The miracle at New Orleans wasn't just that a

smaller army of Americans held off the much larger, much better trained, British forces. It's that this army managed to come together and fight alongside each other at all. But it turns out it's not that uncommon. And nearly a century and a half later, social scientists would begin to study how groups at odds with each other so readily toss their differences aside and unite against a common threat.

In the same way, had Andrew Jackson arrived in New Orleans with an army large enough to defend against the British onslaught, he never would have reached out to the Choctaw warriors or to the pirates. (Don't believe me? Just take a quick look at his interactions with Native Americans many years after the War of 1812.) But the British threat was too great, it required more than just his militia, and so not only did he have to recruit other groups, those groups had to work together fast. The superordinate goal of fighting the British ensured they did just that.

In the same way, leaders can speak to disparate groups and unite them as one team if they understand that different groups have different things at stake, but all have the same superordinate goal. Toward that end, here are some questions to ponder as you search for the superordinate:

- ◆ What changes for each group or person if we don't win?
- ◆ How does life or "business as usual" cease if our goal isn't met?
- ◆ Where are these threats coming from?
- ◆ How do our customers or stakeholder's lives change without us in the fight?

And most intriguingly, a 2014 study found that leaders who pick fights with competitors often end up motivating their opponents to fight dirty.

Yes. Steve Jobs and Apple accomplished amazing things in the world of computing. But it's also worth asking what more they could have done if Jobs had used his rhetorical gifts to bring the fight against an enemy that was truly unifying. Had he picked larger, more

superordinate fights, he likely would have led Apple further and gotten them there faster.

Most of the world, and certainly the western world, is drawn to stories of plucky, underrated people or teams going up against well-established, easily favored champions. We crave stories of humble beginnings that end in glorious triumphs. We love it when the team nobody believed in wins the title. But it turns out that framing a conflict as an underdog tale won't just attract an audience, it'll also motivate the storyteller and—in our case—the larger team. There's a growing body of research that supports the idea that casting oneself as an underdog doesn't crush one's spirits. Quite the opposite, it enhances not just the motivation to perform...but performance itself.

The Underdog Fight is likely the most potent type of fight to pick. Not only is the popularity of underdog stories near-universally enjoyed, but the motivating effect of being seen as an underdog appears universal as well. And what organization (or even individual) hasn't faced enough criticism to be able to construct a "they don't take us seriously enough" story? The drive to prove others wrong—and its accompanying drive to prove ourselves right—is a powerful motivator. But certain conditions must be met for an underdog narrative to be internalized. The rejection or criticism needs to come from a source seen as less than credible, and there needs to be evidence you can point to that suggest those critics are wrong...

The "I Saved A Life" program at Kaiser Permanente is an example of what we'll call the Ally Fight. It represents a different kind of fight to pick than the ones we've discussed previously. In a Revolutionary Fight or Underdog Fight, the organization or team is framed as doing the fighting directly. But in an Ally Fight, leaders frame their work as being an ally to stakeholders who are engaged in a fight themselves. And while it might seem that being one degree removed from the battle would dampen the effect on motivation and bonding, research suggests it's just as strong because of a different motivational lever.

When Grant followed up a month later, he noticed that just that small meeting with a scholarship recipient had a big impact on the callers.

In the group that had the chance to meet a beneficiary of their work, the average caller made double the amount of calls per hour and spent double the number of minutes on the phone. They worked twice as hard to reach potential donors and persuaded more of them to donate. Their weekly revenue doubled and then doubled again, from an average of around \$400 before meeting the scholarship recipient to more than \$2,000.

If you're wondering, the other two groups saw basically no improvement from their baseline numbers.

It's impossible to over-state how big this effect is. They didn't receive any sales training or any additional incentive compensation. They didn't suddenly develop a love for calling strangers on the phone. But getting the chance to see, directly in front of them, and chat with, a beneficiary of their hard work moved them to work even harder. They weren't fighting to make the university more money—that wouldn't motivate anyone. Instead, they got to see themselves as allies in the student's fight to overcome financial burdens and pursue a life-changing education—a fight he was closer to winning with each phone call his fellow students made.

While it's definitely something to consider when the other types of fights don't feel like a good fit, the Ally Fight is more than just a fight of last resort. Instead, it's a fight your organization and its people are already a part of, they just may not be realizing it yet. So, finding that Ally Fight might involve going deep with customers and finding the near-universal story each of them are telling about how your offering helps them live that story. In some cases, you may be the first one to mention that story as a fight. Consider Quest Nutrition from the introduction. Quest helps individuals fight against metabolic disease. It's not a term many customers would use, but it is indeed what they're trying to avoid.

The video, the posters, the whole campaign was met with enthusiasm, but Pfau's team didn't stop there. Perhaps because they knew just how complex KPMG's operations were, how vague the role of auditors was to the outside world, and even how different each

team's projects were, they embarked on a second phase of the project to encourage current employees to find individually meaningful answers to the question "What do you do at KPMG?"

They let each employee decide what fight they were joining. In the absence of a large, over-arching fight that leaders could point to, they opted to help employees make the fight personal.

KPMG launched the 10,000 Stories Challenge, encouraging employees to reconsider their roles as more than auditors and as allies in 10,000 different fights. They even released an application that allowed people to create and share their own poster modeled after the corporate ones that contained their unique answer. Pfau explained: "We helped them to elevate and reframe the work that they do. They could see themselves as conducting audits, or they could see themselves as protecting the life savings of 53 million American families."

They could pick their own fight.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in the worker survey was how results broke down by two different types of managers: those who discussed this new higher purpose and those who didn't and just focused on the work at hand. Among employees of leaders who reminded them of their fight, 94 percent said KPMG was a great place to work and a company they were proud to be a part of. But among employees whose leaders didn't discuss purpose only 64 percent said the same. The 10,000 Stories Challenge— 10,000 individual fights—worked to motivate everyone. But managers played a huge part in how much that fight was internalized.

Even when the fight gets personal, leaders still play a role in helping people pick their fight.