From the Gridiron to Government

How Tom Brady's Leadership Insights Can Transform Government Teams

By Michael J. Keegan

NFL great Tom Brady and Nitin Nohria of the Harvard Business School have collaborated on a compelling and timely article, for the September-October 2024 *Harvard Business Review*, which focuses on the often-overlooked aspect of leadership: the importance of teamwork and how great leaders bring out the best in their teams.

"When our society talks about success, we tend to focus on individual success. We obsess about who is the 'greatest of all time,' who is most responsible for a win, or what players or coaches a team might add next season to become even

better. What can get lost in this way of thinking is that leaders don't accomplish anything by themselves," explains Brady and Nohria.

Drawing from Brady's experiences in football, the authors present a set of principles that people in any realm can apply to help teams successfully work together toward common goals. As I read the article, I thought it would be worthwhile to show how these leadership insights can be applied in a government context as part of my "The Art of Leadership" series.

*"We obsess about who is the 'greatest of all time' . . .
[but] leaders don't accomplish anything by themselves."*

Tom Brady, co-author with Nitin Nohria, in the article "Tom Brady and the Art of
Leading Teammates." *Harvard Business Review*

Brady's Key Leadership Behaviors

To set the context, I'll provide a summary of the seven
leadership behaviors identified by Brady and Nohria:

Put the team first: Leadership is about prioritizing the
team's success over individual achievements, even in the
face of personal adversity. Brady shares how he supported
his teammates and put the team first, even when it meant
sacrificing his own playing time.

Show appreciation for unsung colleagues: Recognizing and
valuing the contributions of those who may not receive the
spotlight, such as blockers in football or support staff in an
organization, is crucial for maintaining morale and motivating
the entire team.

**Set the standard and create a culture of 100 percent
effort:** Leaders should model hard work and hold everyone,
including themselves, to high standards. Brady emphasizes
the importance of pushing oneself and others to go beyond
what is required.

**Recognize teammates' individual psychology and the best
ways to motivate them:** Understanding what motivates each
individual on the team allows a leader to tailor their approach
to bring out the best in everyone, whether through tough love
or encouragement.

Understand and complement the style of the formal leader:
Brady discusses how he complemented the coaching style of
Bill Belichick by providing emotional support and connecting
with teammates on a personal level, thus creating a balanced
leadership approach.

**Recognize and counteract external forces that can cause
selfish behavior:** Leaders must be aware of external pressures
on team members, such as those from agents or family, and
work to reinforce a team-first mentality.

Create opportunities to connect as people outside the office:
Building relationships and trust outside of the regular work
environment is essential. Shared experiences, even outside
the professional setting, can strengthen the bonds within a
team and improve overall performance.

Applying Brady's Insights for Government Leaders

Leaders in government can draw valuable lessons from Tom
Brady's leadership insights by focusing on team cohesion,
recognizing individual contributions, and fostering a culture
of accountability and mutual support. Here's how they can
effectively apply these principles:

1. **Emphasize team-centric leadership.**

    Application: Government leaders should prioritize the
    success of the team over individual achievements. This
    means making decisions that benefit the organization as
    a whole, even if it means personal sacrifices.

    Example: In times of crisis or when facing significant
    challenges, leaders can set an example by taking on
    additional responsibilities or stepping aside to allow
    others to lead if it's in the best interest of the mission.
    For example, during the 2008 financial crisis, President
    Obama assembled a diverse team of economic advisors
    with different perspectives. He emphasized the
    importance of collaboration and made decisions that
    sought to stabilize the economy, showing how team-
    centric leadership can steer through crises.

2. **Show appreciation for unsung heroes.**

    Application: Public sector organizations often have
    employees who work behind the scenes, such as
    administrative staff, IT support, or field workers, who
    don't always receive recognition. Leaders should actively
    acknowledge these contributions.

Example: Regularly highlight the work of these individuals in meetings, newsletters, or awards ceremonies to boost morale and reinforce the value of every team member's work. For example, U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's recognition of unsung heroes came during the implementation of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) in 2021. The ARP was a massive economic relief package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The execution of this plan required the coordinated efforts of thousands of Treasury Department employees who ensured the timely distribution of relief funds, unemployment benefits, and economic impact payments.

Yellen consistently highlighted the contributions of these employees, emphasizing that their hard work was critical to the success of the ARP. In public statements and internal communications, she made it a point to recognize the dedication of Treasury staff, including those in administrative roles, data analysts, and IT specialists who worked behind the scenes. By acknowledging the work of every team member, she fostered a sense of unity and purpose within the department.

3. Set high standards and lead by example.

Application: Leaders should model the behavior they expect from their teams. By setting high standards for themselves, they can inspire their teams to do the same.

Example: If a government leader wants to foster a culture of innovation, they should actively engage in creative problem-solving and encourage others to take calculated risks. For example, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was known for setting high expectations, demanding accountability, and leading by example. One of his key actions was the overhaul of the leadership responsible for managing the wars when in 2007, Gates removed General Peter Pace as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This decision was not easy or popular but was driven by Gates' belief that fresh leadership was needed to address the evolving challenges in the Middle East. His approach to the budget is another example of leading by example. Recognizing the need for fiscal responsibility, Gates proposed significant cuts to defense spending and sought to redirect resources from expensive, less critical programs to more urgent needs like equipment and support for soldiers on the front lines. Gates tenure at Department of Defense (DoD) is a

solid example of how setting high standards and leading by example can drive significant, positive change in government, even in the most challenging circumstances.

4. **Understand individual motivations.**

   Application: Just as Brady identified what motivated his teammates, government leaders should understand what drives each member of their team. This requires getting to know employees on a personal level and tailoring leadership approaches to fit their needs.

   Example: For one employee, public recognition might be a powerful motivator, while another might be more driven by opportunities for professional development. For example, Robert Wilkie, former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs work centered on improving services for veterans. By aligning the department's goals with the mission to support those who have served, he tapped into the motivations of employees who are dedicated to this cause. Wilkie emphasized the importance of recognizing the contributions of VA staff. By acknowledging their hard work and dedication, he addressed the intrinsic motivation of employees who seek validation for their efforts. He sought to improve the work environment within the VA, understanding that job satisfaction and a supportive culture are crucial for maintaining high levels of motivation among employees.

5. **Complement the leadership style of formal authorities.**

   Application: In government, leaders often work within a structure where authority is shared or where they must support elected officials or higher-level administrators. Understanding and complementing these leaders' styles is crucial.

   Example: If a senior official is detail-oriented but not as strong in interpersonal relationships, a leader might focus on team building and communication to ensure the team remains cohesive and motivated. For example, Admiral Michael M. Gilday, who served as the chief of Naval Operations from 2019-2023, worked closely with then Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite and his predecessors, aligning Navy strategies and initiatives with the Secretary's vision and priorities. This alignment ensured a unified approach to naval strategy, fleet modernization, and operational readiness. Gilday's complementary leadership style has helped shape a coherent and effective naval strategy that aligned with broader defense goals and policy directives.

6. **Counteract external pressures.**

   Application: Government employees, like athletes, face external pressures—political influences, public scrutiny, or personal ambitions—that can sometimes conflict with team goals. Leaders should recognize these pressures and work to align individual and team objectives.

   Example: When political pressures arise that may lead to self-serving behavior or superficial compromises, a leader can reinforce the importance of the public good and the organization's mission to ensure the team stays focused. For example, Robert Lighthizer, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) from 2017 to 2021, was a government leader who during his tenure effectively countered external pressures while upholding U.S. trade interests. He focused on making structural changes to trade practices, rather than merely addressing the trade deficit. His leadership in negotiating trade deals, particularly the U.S.-China Phase One trade agreement, demonstrated his ability to resist external pressures from foreign governments, international organizations, and even domestic stakeholders to achieve meaningful results rather than settling for superficial compromises.

7. **Create opportunities for team bonding.**

   Application: Building trust and camaraderie is as important in government as it is in sports. Leaders should facilitate opportunities for team members to connect outside of formal work settings.

   Example: Organizing team-building events, offsite retreats, or informal gatherings can strengthen relationships and improve collaboration when back in the office. For example, General Stanley McChrystal, former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), introduced the "Team of Teams" concept that emphasized breaking down silos and fostering cross-functional collaboration. He believed that small, agile teams could be more effective if they were deeply connected and aligned with a shared mission. McChrystal encouraged regular communication and interaction among teams that traditionally operated independently. He used daily video conferences to connect teams across different locations, ensuring that everyone had access to the same information and could contribute to decision making. McChrystal's approach to leadership transformed the JSOC. His focus on team bonding, communication, and a shared mission allowed for more agile and effective operations in a complex and rapidly changing environment.

By focusing on team dynamics, recognizing individual contributions, and setting high standards, government leaders can achieve remarkable results even in the most challenging circumstances.

Implementing Brady's Leadership Insights in Government Settings

Implementing Tom Brady's leadership insights in government settings can be effective regardless of team size. Here's how government leaders can apply these principles universally:

Emphasize teamwork and trust.
- **Action**: Create an environment where trust and collaboration are the foundations of your team.

- **Implementation**: Encourage open communication, where team members feel safe to express ideas and concerns. Build trust by being transparent and consistent in your actions.

- **Scalability**: In small teams, foster personal connections through regular team-building activities. In larger teams, develop systems where trust and teamwork are reinforced through clear roles, responsibilities, and regular feedback.

Focus on preparation and discipline.
- **Action**: Prioritize thorough preparation and maintain high standards of discipline within the team.

- **Implementation**: Set clear expectations for performance and preparation. Lead by example by being consistently well-prepared and disciplined in your approach.

- **Scalability**: For smaller teams, this might involve more direct coaching and personalized preparation plans. In larger teams, create standardized procedures and protocols that ensure everyone is aligned and ready for challenges.

Cultivate adaptability and resilience.
- **Action**: Cultivate a mindset that is adaptable and resilient in the face of challenges.

- **Implementation**: Encourage your team to embrace change and view challenges as opportunities for growth. Provide support and resources to help them navigate difficult situations.

- **Scalability**: In small teams, offer personalized support and mentorship. For larger teams, establish a culture of resilience through training programs and by sharing stories of overcoming adversity.

Lead with passion and purpose.
- **Action**: Instill a sense of purpose and passion in your team's work.

- **Implementation**: Clearly articulate the mission and vision of your team or organization. Connect individual tasks to the larger goals and encourage enthusiasm in pursuing them.

- **Scalability**: In small teams, engage directly with each member to understand their motivations. In larger teams, use internal communications and regular updates to keep everyone connected to the mission.
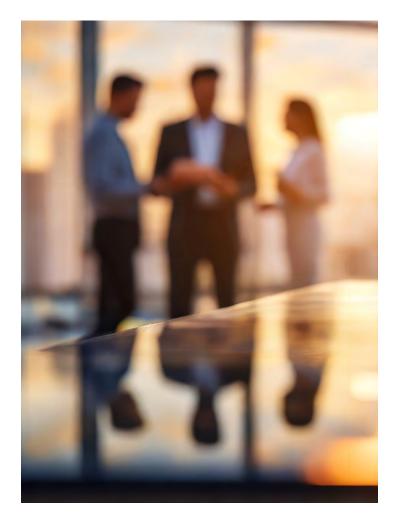
Encourage accountability.
- **Action**: Hold yourself and your team accountable for achieving results.

- **Implementation**: Set measurable goals and regularly review progress. Encourage self-reflection and continuous improvement.

- **Scalability**: For smaller teams, this might involve frequent check-ins and personal feedback. In larger teams, establish accountability systems like performance reviews and peer evaluations.

Celebrate success and learn from failure.
- **Action**: Recognize achievements and use failures as learning opportunities.

- **Implementation**: Celebrate both small and large successes to boost morale. When things don't go as planned, analyze what happened and share lessons learned with the team.

- **Scalability**: In small teams, this could be informal celebrations and direct feedback. In larger teams, establish recognition programs and formal debrief sessions.

Begin by applying these principles in manageable areas or pilot projects. Engage your team in the process of implementing these insights. Solicit their feedback and make them part of the change. Regularly assess the impact of these

leadership practices and adjust as needed. As the leader, embody these principles in your daily actions to set a strong example for your team.

Conclusion

By using these insights, government leaders can create more cohesive, motivated, and high-performing teams. By focusing on team success, recognizing individual contributions, and fostering a culture of mutual respect and accountability leaders can navigate the complexities of public service more effectively.