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Innovation Lessons from the Miracle Mets of 1969: Part 2 of 3

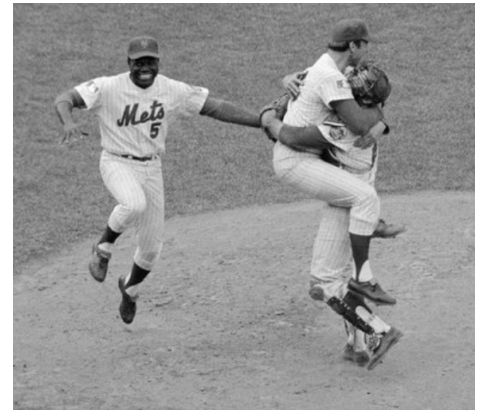
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How the Worst Team in Baseball History Innovated to Win the World Series 50 Years Ago

The New York Mets of 1969

Even if you're not a baseball fan, the magical tale of the Miracle Mets of 1969 is captivating. It's one of those, "you'd never believe it if it didn't actually happen," stories that reached its climax a half century ago last Fall.



From Worst to First

The New York Mets baseball club got their start as an expansion team in the 1962 season and promptly lost 120 games – a record that still stands.

Over the next six seasons they averaged over 100 losses, regularly exceeding that threshold symbolic of complete ineptitude in major league baseball.

Culture Change Comes with New Leadership

Gil Hodges had been a member of the great Brooklyn Dodger teams of the 1950s. He played in the World Series 7 times. He knew how to win. When he took the helm with the Mets in 1968, he immediately looked to instill a new culture and mold the team to his vision.

The Mets suddenly made progress. In Hodges second season in 1969, instead of losing 100 games, they won 100 games, the most in the National League.

They swept the Atlanta Braves in the National League Championship Series. And then went on to face the Baltimore Orioles in the World Series.

Hodges Takes a Different Approach to Turn the Mets Around

Hodges implemented what in retrospect amounted to several strategic innovation practices that led to the team's success.

Each of these practices also happen to be advantageous towards creating strong functioning innovation organizations.

Naturally, given the baseball analogy, I submitted a lineup of 9 practices I uncovered that Hodges put into action with the Mets:

1. **Hire facilitators to guide the process**
2. **Allow the status quo to be challenged**
3. **Instill a winning spirit**
4. **Provide an opportunity for every team member**
5. **Promote mutual trust**
6. **Enable external sources of ideas**
7. **Eliminate the fear of failure**
8. **Identify underlying problems**
9. **Create your own miracles**

In this blog, I will be going over practices four through six. Practices one, two, and three were covered in [part 1](#) of this article which can be viewed at this link:

<https://www.maritzcx.com/blog/general/innovation-lessons-from-the-miracle-mets-of-1969/>

4. Provide an Opportunity for Every Team Member

Gil Hodges' ran the Mets differently than a typical baseball manager. He found a role for everyone.

Ron Taylor, a relief pitcher on the 1969 team said, *“Hodges did one of the greatest jobs managing in the history of the game. He defined everyone’s job at the start of the season and made very few changes... Everyone knew what was expected of him. We were given what amounted to job descriptions, just like in industry.”* 1

Hodges Gave Everyone On The Team The Opportunity To Play Regularly

Second baseman Ken Boswell added, *“He used all 25 players, and that kept everyone fresh and well rested... Everyone knew that he might be called on at any time. Gil changed the whole attitude on the club.”* 2

Rookie infielder Mike Pfeil also confirmed, *“Hodges has to get a lot of credit... He made everybody feel like they belonged. Everybody played. Even if you were a fringe ballplayer like myself, you’d still get at least two starts a week.”* 3

In 1969, the Mets had 13 players with at least 200 at bats. In contrast, The Chicago Cubs, which held the lead over the Mets all summer in the National League East, had just 9, thus lending further to the notion that the Cubs ran out of gas in the final month of the season when they had a record of 8 – 17.

Conversely, the Mets finished with a 23 – 7 record in September and won 38 of their last 49 games going back to mid-August. Art Shamsky said, *“by using his entire 25 man roster it kept everybody fresh for the stretch run of the season.”*4

Hodges Platoon System Kept all the Players Fresh and Ready to Contribute

As mentioned in [part 1](#), Hodges developed a platoon system in which groups of players regularly played together depending on whether the opposing team’s starting pitcher was a lefty or a righty.

The lefty squad thus could count on starting any game in which a right-handed pitcher was slated to take the mound. Hodges maintained this system right through the team's brilliant stretch run and into the post season.

In the National League Championship series against the Atlanta Braves, the Braves sent a steady dose of right-handed starting pitchers to the mound. As a result, the Mets lefty hitting platoon started each game. Thus, the lefties were ready to play and they played well.

The Mets went on an uncharacteristic hitting tear in the series clubbing 37 hits and averaging 9 runs per game in the three-game series sweep.

While the lefty batters were ready to play against the Braves, right-handed hitting first baseman, Donn Clendenon, regarded as the team's spark plug, didn't play at all in the series. But Clendenon understood his role and was ready to play in the World Series when the Baltimore Orioles started lefty pitchers in 4 of the 5 games.

Clendenon was at his best against the Orioles. He hit 3 home runs, batted .357 and earned the World Series Most Valuable Player award.

Similar to the 1969 Mets, in companies that exhibit a great culture of innovation, everyone has the opportunity to contribute. All employees are free to share ideas.

At Google for example, company programs engage all employees in problem solving and idea generation. Many new products like Gmail and Google News were developed via programs that enabled employees the freedom to develop and pursue projects that interested them. 5

Another example of the benefits of inclusiveness comes from Salesforce.com, a company that topped the Forbes list of most innovative companies six times in the first seven years of the rankings.

CEO Marc Benioff credits their innovation prowess on the importance of including all employees in the innovation process.

He said, “I don’t care if it’s my idea, an employee’s idea, a competitor’s idea, a partner’s idea or some other associate’s idea. I can’t do it all. I don’t have all the ideas. My job is to build a culture of innovation. That’s something we try to enforce. We encourage it. We value it. We notice it. We compensate for it. We require it (innovation).” 6

5. Promote Mutual Trust

Gil Hodges was an ex-marine and a stern disciplinarian. When he came to the Mets he said, *“It’s time, I think, we did something about that clown image of the Mets.”*

He banned poker playing, instituted a curfew, put controls on drinking and fined players \$25 a pop for mental mistakes on the field. 7

Hodges was tough, but he also endeared himself to the players. He developed rules regarding who would play and in what situations and he consistently applied them.

This fostered an atmosphere of trust between him and the players and even among the players themselves.

Wayne Coffey, authored a book about the 1969 Mets titled, “They Said It Couldn’t Be Done.” In his book, Wayne had this to say about Hodges, *“Every single player told me, in so many words, that the ’69 Mets would not have won the Series, or even gotten close to it, without Gil Hodges. Apart from being a superior in-game manager who was always thinking four or five innings ahead, Gil had a gift for making everybody feel important.”* 8

Hodges Created Trust by Consistently Applying Rules to All Players

Art Shamsky noted, *“He treated us all the same way. We all to a person respected the man as much as you could respect a man. I think Tom (Seaver) looked at him as a father figure.”* 9

Ed Kranepool, a Met since the inaugural 1962 season, said, *“Gil... was altogether different. From spring training on, he molded the ballclub the way he wanted it. He never played favorites. He had one set of rules... Everybody knew his position on that team. ‘These are the guidelines’, Gil would say, ‘this is the way you win.’* 10

By fostering an atmosphere of trust, Hodges was able to get the most out of his players.

Rookie pitcher Gary Gentry gave testimony to the trust Hodges fostered among the players, *“Everybody was on each other’s side. The overall feeling was that we were all in this together. The pitchers were especially close. My locker was between Seaver’s and Koosman’s, and we helped one another and learned from watching each other.”*11

And utility infielder Al Weis further confirmed the atmosphere Hodges created, *“I credit Gil with getting the most out of all of his players, whether on defense, offense, when to bring in different pitchers... everyone was involved... We all got along well and accepted our roles.”* 12

Trust is a Required Factor to Foster Innovation in an Organization

Hodges created an atmosphere of trust on the Mets which led to collaboration among the players. Trust is also one of the most essential factors in creating a corporate culture of innovation because if there is no trust there is no collaboration and employees will be unwilling to share ideas if they feel they will not benefit from sharing.

This is why the world’s most innovative companies promote sharing of ideas, particularly across departments in an effort to break down silos. A great example is 3M.

One of 3M's strengths is how it treats employees by providing them opportunities to grow and to receive credit for the work they produce. They enable their scientists to meet customers and understand their problems.

They also facilitate sharing of ideas across fields within the company at various technical councils, forums and other cross-disciplinary gatherings. 13

Employees are more likely to share knowledge and ideas when they feel comfortable that the company will adequately recognize them for the collaborative behavior.

At 3M, employee recognition is based on voting by their peers rather than by upper management. Thus, employees have the incentive to work together rather than to compete with each other.

The company benefits from the collaboration as well, since a great many new products have resulted from sharing of ideas and new product development test results.

A prime example is Post it notes, which were the result of a failed test of a new adhesive that was described in a 3M technical council by Spencer Silver.

Arthur Fry, who attended the technical council realized the weak adhesive could solve a problem he had keeping bookmarks in place, and thus the spark was created for the development of a blockbuster new product. Both men received credit and each have been inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

6. Enable External Sources of Ideas

By leading the Mets to the National League Championship and the World Series, Gil Hodges earned National League Manager of the Year in 1969.

This was familiar territory for Hodges who himself played on 2 World Series championship teams as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers “Boys of Summer” teams.

Hodges Leverages His Network For Outside Ideas

Although Hodges did not lean on others beyond his coaching staff for advice, he did leverage the close ties he had kept with his former Dodger teammates on occasion.

Starting pitcher Jerry Koosman said, *“Gil... was able to maintain strong ties with other Dodger greats... throughout spring training and during the season a steady stream of legendary Dodgers would visit our ballclub and lend their assistance... Sandy Koufax taught me how to throw my curveball. He was friends with Hodges... and he'd come by the clubhouse... I learned from Sandy how to throw it slow and medium – a very effective combination.”* 14

Encouraging the collection and consideration of ideas from outside the organization has led to many great benefits for innovative corporations as well.

In the business world we call this “open innovation.” By widening the breadth of perspectives and allowing for a larger array of ideas than can be generated by employees from inside the organization, open innovation can yield dramatic results.

One of the most famous examples of open innovation was the Netflix Prize. In 2006, Netflix launched an open competition to identify a new algorithm to improve on predictions of user ratings of movies. Netflix offered a grand prize of \$1 million that was open to anyone not connected with the company.

The winning team developed an algorithm in 2009 that improved upon Netflix's own algorithm by 10% (which was the threshold to win the prize).

One issue with open innovation is maintaining privacy and confidentiality. Although Netflix did not disclose any individual customer data on conducting the open innovation contest, they were still subject to a privacy class action lawsuit and consequently decided to end further contests. 15

However, open innovation contests remain in constant use in the business world in an effort to solve for many other types of consumer and commercial customer problems.

GE created a unit called FirstBuild which runs a global co-creation community and a micro factory to source and develop ideas for new consumer products and rapidly bring them to market. Products that perform well are then adopted by GE for scaled up manufacturing and distribution.

The Opal Nugget Ice Maker, which enables consumers to make restaurant quality nugget ice at home, is an example of a successful open innovation developed product by FirstBuild.

End of Part 2

That's three more practices that have come to the plate in this installment, so that concludes part 2 of The Innovation Lessons from the Miracle Mets of 1969.

Next month the 3rd and final installment of the article will appear on this blog.

I'd love to receive feedback on this article at Leonard.Ferman@maritzcx.com

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Len Ferman is a senior consultant at MaritzCX. Len specializes in qualitative research, facilitating ideation and action planning sessions, leading customer journey mapping engagements and providing training on the innovation process. Prior to joining MaritzCX, Len spent 25 years with Fortune 100 companies managing customer experience research and innovation. Len led the front end of innovation at Bank of America and served as head of ideation. He developed the Idea Tournament process to identify and select the optimal concepts for development. Len is also an adjunct professor at the University of North Florida where he teaches a course he developed on business creativity and innovation. His unique teaching methods were highlighted in a Forbes magazine article titled, "How to Prepare College Students to Innovate." He also authored a college textbook, "Business Creativity and Innovation: Perspectives and Best Practices", that was published by Cognella in 2019, and is available on Amazon. Len graduated from Duke University with an M.A. in Economics and an M.B.A.