

Published in General

Innovative Lessons from the Miracle Mets of 1969: Part 3 of 3

March 17, 2020 | Written by: [Len Ferman](#)



This is the final post in a 3 part series. Read the first two parts: [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)

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

The New York Mets of 1969

The New York Mets baseball club of 1969 has come to be known as simply the Miracle Mets.

The story of that club is perhaps the closest that major league baseball, or for that matter all of professional sports, has ever come to producing a true to life fairy tale.



From Worst to First

The Mets first season in 1962 was a record setting campaign in futility. The Mets lost 120 of their 160 games. No major league baseball team before or since has come close to losing that many games.

And the losing didn't stop there. From 1962 – 1968 the Mets lost an average of 105 games per year as they finished in last or second to last place every year.

Then, in a stunning reversal of fortune, in that miracle year of 1969, when men first landed on the moon, the Mets won 100 games and won the World Series.

The Players Credit Their Manager

The players on the 1969 Mets all gave the credit for the amazing turnaround to their manager Gil Hodges.

“We were managed by an infallible genius[i]”, said Tom Seaver, the club’s young star pitcher.

And leading batter on the team, Clean Jones said, “If we had been managed by anybody else, we wouldn’t have won. Gil Hodges was the difference[ii].”

Gil Hodges, the Mets manager, 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 spent most of the year observing his new team. By 1969, he was ready to implement change and mold the team into a winner.

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 submit 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**

Innovation practices 1 – 3 were covered in part 1 of this article which can be viewed [here](#).

Innovation practices 4 – 6 were covered in part 2 of this article which can be viewed [here](#).

In this blog, I will be going over practices 7 – 9.

7. Eliminate the Fear of Failure

In great innovative organizations, risk taking is encouraged. Failure itself is encouraged because it is often through failures and learning from past mistakes that breakthrough improvements are achieved.

In the case of the New York Mets there was already plenty of failure taking place. Before Hodges took over the team in 1968, they had been known as the “lovable losers” for their first seven seasons.

But little learning was taking place from that failure. Hodges changed that. He looked for opportunities to teach players lessons, and he did it in a way that eliminated fear and made the players think.

When players feel the manager supports them, they can play more relaxed and not be afraid of the manager pulling them out of the game.

Wayne Garrett noted, “The thing about Gil was that he never got on you, he never humiliated you.”[\[iii\]](#)

Tom Seaver said about Hodges that, “...he was always there for you. Every player felt he had his complete support.”[\[iv\]](#)

Early in the season, when Hodges was looking for a steady third baseman, he also was willing to experiment. In a test that failed, he tried to have 22-year-old outfielder Amos Otis play at third base. By trial and

error Hodges eventually found that a platoon of veteran, 36-year-old Ed Charles and 21-year-old rookie Wayne Garrett could cover third base adequately.

In another experiment however, Hodges struck gold. He moved starting pitcher Tug McGraw to the bullpen. McGraw wanted to be a starting pitcher. He had started 25 games for the Mets in the 1965 – 1967 seasons and 44 games for the Mets minor league Jacksonville club in the prior two seasons.

In spring training Hodges informed McGraw that he could be a starter in Jacksonville or a relief pitcher in New York.

Hodges told McGraw, “I believe this ballclub is ready and we need a good reliever, a stopper.”

McGraw recalled, “To me that was like ‘Holy Cow’ this is for real, we’re not fooling around here and if I want to be a part of it, this is what I have to do. [i]”

McGraw responded to the move by becoming one of the best left handed stoppers in baseball in 1969.

Hodges started 15 different players in at least 40 games in 1969 as he continually experimented with players at different positions throughout the year. No other contending team in the National League had more than 13. The 2nd place Chicago Cubs had only 10 and the 3rd place St. Louis Cardinals had just 8.

Hodges also made the Mets into a resilient club that didn’t get down when they lost.

Backup catcher J.C. Martin summed it up well, “Never once did I see Gil Hodges react in a way to cause panic. Never once! I don’t care what happened. We could pull the dumbest play in the world, but he’d never show panic. And he instilled that in his players.”

Even after the Mets lost game 1 of the World Series by a score of 4 – 1, they didn't lose faith in themselves.

Catcher Jerry Grote said, "Gil walked in (the clubhouse) and said, 'Hey you guys just played good out there... We know now we can beat them.' Coming from Gil you just believed it because at that point everybody on the club had total and complete confidence in him[iii]."

Just as Gil Hodges experimented, tried radical new approaches and instilled confidence in his players, great companies with innovative cultures exhibit these same traits.

In innovative companies, change is embraced rather than feared. Experimentation is not just encouraged it is expected or even better it is the normal state of how the business operates.

Encouraging failure is critical towards achieving successful new products, services and experiences for customers that deliver significant positive changes.

Harvard Business Review suggested to, "Aim for 70% success. If you expect everyone to nail a task with 100% success, they are unlikely to take risks, which is an innovation killer. Letting them know that 70% success is OK will ensure they don't play it too safe.[iii]"

Success through failure is not actually a new mantra. Thomas Edison famously said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work", as he described his painstaking efforts to produce the first long lasting incandescent light bulb[iv].

Amazon is a current example of a company that has made experimentation a core part of their business model. Amazon encourages a fast failure approach for testing new idea prototypes rapidly in the market[v].

Founder Jeff Bezos has said, “To invent you have to experiment, and if you know in advance that it’s going to work, it’s not an experiment. Most large organizations embrace the idea of invention but are not willing to suffer the string of failed experiments necessary to get there.^[vi]”

Great innovative companies create the environment that inspires their employees to develop great innovations. Much like Gil Hodges inspired his Mets players and instilled in them the confidence that they could win the World Series, Steve Jobs inspired his employees at Apple as they shared his same passion for producing insanely great products.

8. Identify Underlying Problems

One of the keys to producing breakthrough innovations is to have a deep understanding of the problem you’re trying to solve.

Companies that seek to have empathy for their customers by dedicating the time and resources to understanding the customer’s journey are able to gain the insights necessary to develop solutions that will delight them.

In a similar manner, Gil Hodges focused on studying his new team and identifying the problems that caused the “lovable losers” to drop 101 games the year before he arrived.

Like an ethnographic market researcher, who observes people in their natural environment to understand the problems they encounter, Hodges spent most of the 1968 season observing from the dugout.

Bud Harrelson recalled, “He didn’t do much in ’68 because he didn’t really know the players yet, and he didn’t want other people’s opinions about the players that we had. He just kind of sat back, quietly watched and analyzed.”^[xiii]

Harrelson in another interview related, “In 1968 I think he kind of sat back and observed what he had to work with. Then, in 1969, Gil really went to work.” [i]

The first thing Hodges noticed was that the team lacked a winning mindset. In fact, the attitude of the team was that losing was not just the norm, it was acceptable, it had become a habit.

Cleon Jones said, “Hodges was making us think differently about ourselves. We hadn’t finished so well the year before and none of us was thinking we would be that great, much less a championship team... He made us feel like we were a better team and better players than we thought.” [xiv]

Tom Seaver noted this about Gil Hodges, “His standards were high and he encouraged me to set mine high too.” [xv]

Hodges also analyzed the data from the prior season and found a reason to believe that 1969 could be different for the Mets.

He framed it in brilliantly simple terms as Bud Harrelson remembered a Hodges speech during spring training, “In ’69 he came to spring training and he had some suggestions. I remember him saying do you guys realize you lost 36 one-run ballgames?... if we can stick in those games and win half of them, all of a sudden we’re going to be a contending ball club.” [xvi]

Hodges was also deeply committed to helping players improve by getting them to examine the mistakes they made.

Wayne Garrett noted, “If you did something wrong, he would take you aside and ask you a question. He would make you tell yourself what you did wrong.” [i]

Similarly, Bud Harrelson recalled, “Gil used a lot of psychology. He would call you in for a one-on-one and get into your mind. Why you did certain things. Not to reprimand you, but to let you grow.” [iii]

Hodges was a brilliant baseball man. His penchant for quiet observation to study his players put into practice an adage from Albert Einstein who once said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.”

What Einstein meant is that if you can deeply understand a problem then the solution become obvious.

Just as Hodges spent 1968 focusing on identifying underlying problems, great innovators spend a considerable amount of time empathizing with their customers and exploring their problems before designing a solution.

David Kelley, founder of the one of the world’s most admired design firms, IDEO, and originator of the Design Thinking movement, said, “The main tenet of design thinking is empathy for the people you’re trying to design for.” [iii]

And similarly as Hodges demonstrated commitment to the growth of his players, business leaders that are committed to their employees and focus on organic innovation as opposed to growth purely through acquisition, will generate more satisfied employees that are more likely to create better customer experiences.

Kelly added, “Leadership is exactly the same thing—building empathy for the people that you’re entrusted to help. Once you understand what they really value, it’s easy because you can mostly give it to them. You can give them the freedom or direction that they want. By getting down into the messy part of really getting to know them and having transparent discussions, you can get out of the way and let them go.” [iv]


9. Create Your Own Miracles

The 1969 New York Mets started the season as a 100 to 1 shot to win the World Series. But manager Gil Hodges predicted the Mets could win 85 games, 12 more wins than the prior year, which in turn was 12 more than the year before Hodges became the manager. Most sportswriters laughed at Hodges prediction.

The Mets played above everyone's expectations, except Hodges, for most of the summer.

But on August 13th, the Mets still stood 10 games behind the Cubs. Many pundits were talking about the Mets potential in the next 2 – 3 years, already counting the Mets out of any chance to catch the Cubs. And for good reason. The Chicago Cubs featured a line up in which the number 3, 4 and 5 hitters were all future hall of famers.

And this is where the miracle began. From August 13th through the end of the season the Mets had an amazing record of 38 – 12, which is still today the franchise record over a stretch of 50 games and the best stretch of any team during the decade of the 1960s.

The New York Times called it “a stretch drive equal in quality to any produced by baseball's most famous champions of the past.” 

In the stunning drive to close the season, the Mets not only made up the 10 games on the Cubs, they surged past them and won the division by 8 games, clinching on September 24th.

The magic did not stop there. The Mets faced the Western Division champion Atlanta Braves in the National League championship series. Atlanta was favored to beat the upstart Mets. They had powerful hitting that featured former all-time home run king Hank Aaron.

And the Braves were hot. They had won ten in a row and 17 of their last 20 games before losing a meaningless game on the final day of the season. But the Mets shockingly outhit the Braves and swept the best of five contest to earn a spot in the World Series.

A case can be made that the Mets' World Series opponent, the Baltimore Orioles, were the greatest team in the history of baseball. The Orioles had been an excellent team for most of the 1960s. But in 1969 they reached their peak. They won a franchise record 109 games. They nearly matched that total the next season in 1970 with 108 wins a world series victory. No other team in the history of baseball has before or since had back to back seasons with 108 or more wins.

The Orioles were certain of the outcome before they took the field for game 1. Referring to the Mets chances of winning Brooks Robinson coldly remarked, "We are here to prove there is no Santa Claus." [iii]

No one else gave the Mets a chance to win the World Series, except the Mets themselves.

After losing game 1, the Mets essentially shut down the Orioles. Koosman took a no hitter into the 7th inning of game 2 enroute to a 2 – 1 victory.

In game 3, Gary Gentry and Nolan Ryan combined for a shutout. And Tom Seaver held the Orioles scoreless until the 9th inning of game 4. When Cleon Jones caught the final out of the decisive game 5 and pandemonium erupted in Shea Stadium.

Coach Joe Pignatano said, "Gil was overcome with emotion and started shaking... He realized what he had done." [iii]

The worst team in baseball the prior 8 years, had managed to beat a great Baltimore Orioles team to win the 1969 World Series.

It is not hard to understand why the team has been known simply as the Miracle Mets for the past 50 years. In fact it's rather easy to simply ascribe the Mets incomprehensible championship to an act of providence.

But in the days, months and years afterwards many of the Mets players and coaches challenged or even took offense to that romantic explanation. In their minds the difference maker was without doubt manager Gil Hodges.

Catcher Jerry Grote said, “The season wasn’t a miracle. You don’t win 100 ball games with miracles.... I think the main thing we had going for us was confidence. Gil instilled that into us.”[\[iv\]](#)

Art Shamsky’s explained the phenomenal finish this way, “What we were doing was starting to figure out how to win close games no matter what team we played... We went from a club that always seemed to find ways of losing games to winning them.”[\[v\]](#)

Just as Hodges had implored the Mets to do in spring training, they became masters of winning the one-run game taking 41 of them in 1969 after having lost 37 the prior season. No other team in the National League won more than 30 one run games in 1969. And the Mets also won the only two one run games in the World Series.

But perhaps the future lawyer, Donn Clendenon, summed up the case the best, “You don’t win 100 games and a World Championship on luck. There was no miracle involved.... It all goes back to Gil Hodges. He made us believe we were winners.”[\[vi\]](#)

Just as Hodges made his players believers and created what seemed like a miracle, many great innovative company leaders have achieved similar astonishing results.

Steve Jobs was focused on creating insanely great products. He recognized the key to doing this was his people.

He once said, “Innovation has nothing to do with how many R&D dollars you have. When Apple came up with the Mac, IBM was spending at least 100 times more on R&D. It’s not about money. It’s about the people you have, how you’re led, and how much you get it.”

In the case study, “Innovation at Apple,” employees told the researchers, “...the work culture at Apple was driven by a passion for products.”[\[vii\]](#)

Jobs was quoted as saying, “We hire people who want to make the best things in the world.”

Jobs inspired his employees to think differently to develop unconventional new products and to believe in themselves. He also created a culture in which employees felt driven by a higher purpose than making money.

Today, Elon Musk carries the torch for inspiring employees to accomplish what is generally thought to be impossible.

Gwynne Shotwell, COO and president of SpaceX, said, “I love working for Elon... he drives you to do your best work... When Elon says something, you have to pause and not blurt out ‘Well, that’s impossible,’ you zip it, you think about it, and you find ways to get it done. I’ve always felt like my job was to take these ideas and turn them into company goals, to make them achievable.”[\[viii\]](#)

Steve Jobs, Elon Musk and Gil Hodges all demonstrated the ability to inspire their people and create their own miracles.

This concludes the three-part series on innovation lessons from the miracle Mets of 1969.

I’d love to receive your feedback at Leonard.Ferman@maritzcx.com.

© Copyright 2020 Len Ferman

Sources:

[\[i\]](#) Clavin, Tom and Peary, Danny, Gil Hodges, New American Library, 2012, page 332

[\[ii\]](#) Amoruso, Marino, Gil Hodges: the Quiet Man, Paul S. Eriksson, 1991, page 79

[\[iii\]](#) Cohen, Stanley. A Magic Summer: the Amazin Story of the 1969 New York Mets. Skyhorse Pub., 2009, page 140

[\[iv\]](#) Shamsky, Art. AFTER THE MIRACLE: The Lasting Brotherhood of the 69 Mets. SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2020, page 113.

[\[v\]](#) The Quiet Man page 80

[\[vi\]](#) After The Miracle page 131

[\[vii\]](#) The Quiet Man page 103

[viii] The Quiet Man page 103-104

[ix] Harvard Business Review 1/30/2017

[x] <https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/34-inspirational-thomas-edison-quotes/>

[xi] www.innovationresource.com/amazon-five-critical-factors-explain-amazons-incredible-success/?utm_source=Innovation+Trends&utm_campaign=370cde2005-January_Newsletter_01_11_2018_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_ab11edd55f-370cde2005-196363669

[xii] <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-amazon-ceo-jeff-bezos-thinks-about-failure-2016-5#its-because-he-believes-failed-experiments-are-a-necessary-evil-to-creating-successful-inventions-he-says-failure-and-inventions-are-inseparable-twins-2>

[xiii] Travers, Steven, The 1969 Miracle Mets, The Lyons Press, 2009, Foreward by Harrelson

[xiv] Shamsky book page 37-38

[xv] The Quiet Man, page 165

[xvi] Travers, Steven, The 1969 Miracle Mets, The Lyons Press, 2009, Foreward by Harrelson

[xvii] Cohen, Stanley. A Magic Summer: the Amazin Story of the 1969 New York Mets. Skyhorse Pub., 2009, page 140

[xviii] The Quiet Man page 161

[xix] <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/27/sports/sports-of-the-times-if-hodges-managed-these-mets.html>

[xx] The Quiet Man page 78

[xxi] After the Miracle, page 37-38

[xxii] A Magic Summer, page 154

[xxiii] <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/04/05/archives/theyll-always-be-playing-for-hodges-two-mets-reflect-hodges-has.html>

[xxiv] The Quiet Man 160

[xxv] <https://www.fastcompany.com/1746447/david-kelley-designing-curious-employees#:~:text=>

[xxvi] ibid

[xxvii] Harrelson, Bud, and Phil Pepe. Turning Two: My Journey to the Top of the World and Back with the New York Mets. Thomas Dunne Books, 2012. Page 63.

[xxviii] New York Times, 9.25.1969 page 56

[xxix] New York Times 10.12.1969 page 310

[xxx] Clavin, Tom and Peary, Danny, Gil Hodges, New American Library, 2012, page 346

[xxxi] The Quiet Man page 119

[xxxii] After the Miracle, page 74

[xxxiii] After the Miracle, page 134

[xxxiv] The Quiet Man page 74

[xxxv] The Quiet Man page 123

[xxxvi] The Quiet Man page 121

[xxxvii] Debapratim Purkayastha and Massesha Syeda, "Innovation at Apple", IBS Center for Management Research, 2011

[xxxviii] <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-spacex-president-and-elon-musk-work-together-2018-4>

Len Ferman

General | 7 Articles |

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.