

# **NICK SABAN – A CASE STUDY FOR RECRUITMENT METHODS AND APPLICATION OF TUCKMAN’S MODEL OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT**

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## **CASE DESCRIPTION**

*This case is well-suited to an introductory-level management class where curriculum includes concepts of recruiting, managing teams, and Tuckman’s Model of Team Development. For this case, the primary subject matter concerns recruitment methods; the importance of team development; identifying the characteristics of each stage of team development; and how leadership can guide teams through the team development process. A brief overview of the history of college football will be presented. In addition, it will analyze the career and recruitment tactics of Nick Saban, head coach of the University of Alabama football team. Tuckman’s Model of Team Development will be presented and the ability to implement Saban’s recruitment success in the world of business will be examined for viability.*

*This case has a difficulty level of three-four (junior-senior level) and is designed to be taught in an introductory management principles class. The case can be taught in less than two class hours with an additional one to two hours of outside preparation time by students.*

## **CASE SYNOPSIS**

*College Football has become one of the most popular and most watched sports in America. As games, conferences, and rivalries become competitive, teams and coaches must turn to their recruitment and team development techniques as a way to ensure success for years to come. As players graduate, enter the NFL draft, or get injured, teams need a dependable group of players ready to step up and be productive members of the team. Businesses work to recruit and retain employees of high value who will be beneficial to their business for the foreseeable future. While there may be obvious differences in the recruitment needs of coaches and managers, they are all working towards the goal of finding the best person for the job. Tuckman’s Model of Team Development can be used to analyze recruitment and team development methods of both college football teams and standard businesses.*

## **HISTORY OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recognizes the first official college football game as the 1869 matchup between Rutgers University and the College of New Jersey, which is now known as Princeton University. The game took place on November 6 and was

played in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Only an estimated 100 people were in attendance, which is a far cry from the packed stadiums we commonly see today (Richmond, 2019). The original rules of the game were based on the London Football Association. This did not allow any player to pick up or throw the ball, creating a better comparison to soccer or rugby than what we know as football. At this time, twenty-five players were allowed to take the field for each team, again a stark difference when compared to modern-day, eleven-man football (Parlier, 2020).

The first rivalry in college football, which is still very active today, was Harvard v. Yale. The pair played their first matchup in 1875, and this is one of the first games that began using more regulations and rules that were more akin to modern-day football (Jost, 2011).

Seven years after the first official game, the first set of rules for American football were established by representatives from Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. The group of men met at Massasoit House in Springfield, Massachusetts to discuss how best to move forward as the game was beginning to gain both attention and popularity. It was at this meeting that the “Father of American Football” emerged. Walter Camp is regarded as almost the inventor of modern-day football and is credited with implementing common rules and regulations like the line of scrimmage, the quarterback snap, and the downs system (Parlier, 2020).

We are accustomed to having countless college football games available for our viewing and subsequent scrutinizing on any given fall weekend. However, it was not always like this. It was not until October 1921 that the first game was aired on the radio. The rivalry between West Virginia and Pittsburgh University was broadcasted on a commercial radio station in Pittsburgh, KDKA-AM. Eighteen years later, in 1939, Fordham played Waynesburg for their season opener and this game was the first to be broadcast on television. NBC played the game on W2XBS with a broad estimate of 500-5,000 viewers tuning in (Parlier, 2020).

Instant replay is another aspect of college football that is regularly taken for granted. Now, plays can be replayed as many times as needed and from a handful of angles to determine exactly what happened. However, this technology was not used until 1963, when a 1,300-pound machine wound back the tape and showed a potential touchdown in an Army vs. Navy game over and over for the fans, coaches, and officials alike. It was eventually determined that Army did not make the touchdown (Parlier, 2020).

Another notable first in the world of college football includes the implementation of two-point conversions. This rule was not officially added to NCAA guidelines until 1958. This was done in hopes of increasing scores and creating more balance between offensive and defensive play. The first year two-point conversions were in play, teams appeared to favor them more than they do now, with this play being attempted 51.4% of the time (Parlier, 2020).

Today, there are various conferences, bowl games, rivalries, and championships. A major factor in the creation of these divisions and matchups is the use of rankings, which was not common until 1936. That year, the Associated Press released the first set of rankings that included 20 teams. At the end of the season, Minnesota was at the top of the list, making them the official champion (Parlier, 2020).

In 1998, the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) was established to revamp the ranking system. This system now matched top-10 teams with one another to compete in an end-of-season

bowl game. The No. 1 and No. 2 ranked teams were to compete for the championship title. The first year of this system, Tennessee defeated Florida State (Parlier, 2020).

2014 saw another revamp of the system with the introduction of the College Football Playoff (CFP). In this system, the top 25 teams are ranked each week of the regular season. After the final regular season week, the top four teams are matched up to play in a playoff round. The winners of the first round of playoffs then play one another in the CFP National Championship game. The first CFP National Championship game saw Ohio State defeating Oregon (Parlier, 2020).

### **NICK SABAN**

Coach Nick Saban recently completed his thirteenth season as head coach for the Alabama Crimson Tide football team. He started with the program in 2007 after coaching stints with Louisiana State University, the Miami Dolphins, and other various college and professional programs. His overall college coaching record boasts over 240 wins and less than 70 losses (The University of Alabama, n.d.). Overall, Saban holds a .791 winning percentage, and each season with the Tide has resulted at least an .84 winning percentage or higher (Nick Saban Coaching Record: College Football at Sports, n.d.).

Saban's first season at Alabama was dismal compared to where the program stands today. Saban and his team went 7-6, with a sixth straight loss to rival Auburn in the Iron Bowl (The University of Alabama, n.d.). However, the shift in leadership and level of trust for the still new coach was evident as Saban and the Tide went 12-0 in the 2008 season. Since then, under Saban's leadership, the Crimson Tide has produced overwhelmingly successful results, boasting at least 10 wins each season since 2008.

Saban is a highly regarded individual at the University of Alabama. This is evidenced by his major contract and subsequent compensation package. In 2018, Saban signed an additional contract extension, increasing his contract to run through the 2025 season. That year, his salary increased to \$7.5 million with a \$400,000 increase to be expected each year after. He also received a signing bonus of \$800,000, which was to be duplicated for his completion of the 2019, 2020, and 2021 seasons (Associated Press Editors, 2018). This contract extension was perceived as great news for Saban and Alabama fans alike.

Saban is a six-time National Coach of the Year, SEC Coach of the Year, Bobby Dodd National Coach of the Year, and was the first recipient of the Bobby Bowden National Coach of the Year Award. He is one of only two coaches to ever win six national titles in the poll era, with the other being former Alabama coach, Paul "Bear" Bryant (The University of Alabama, n.d.). He is widely considered one of the greatest coaches in the history of modern college football.

Obviously, Nick Saban is doing something right when it comes to recruiting players for the Crimson Tide, evidenced by the fact that Alabama has finished with the No. 1 recruiting class multiple times, including a seven-year reign as the top class from 2011-2017 (Nick Saban, 2019). He has been responsible for recruiting powerhouses that have gone on to have widely successful NFL careers, with 34 Saban-coached Alabama players going in the first round of their respective drafts (Martinelli, 2019). Many aspects of Saban's tactics are different and distinct from other

programs, such as the fact he is constantly recruiting. He chooses not to rest on his current roster and their talent. Rather, he works to better his team and fill their weak spots (Busch, 2017).

Saban seems to have a recruitment pitch that is carefully prepared and polished. Based on reports from past players, fellow coaches, and staff members, Saban seems to use many symbols as a way to relate to players and their families. One of these symbols is reported to be a grand piano. As the story goes, Saban and his wife purchased this piano when they could not truly afford it. They spent several years paying off the piano. This demonstrates that Saban is willing to have persistence when working towards a goal and expects his players to do the same. Lastly, it allows Saban to relate more to potential players as it shows he once struggled with finances and lived more humbly.

In addition, Saban uses more conventional tactics. His home office is decorated with photos of his National Championship winning teams and his National Championship rings. All of this seems to serve as a way to show potential players that they can and most likely will win with Alabama (Gallo, 2019). He ends the pitch by stating, “We want you, but know that we will win with or without you”. Again, this sets him apart from other coaches as it puts more hype around the program, instead of the potential individual player (Gallo, 2019).

This entire pitch is clearly successful. Former Alabama player Josh Chapman, who went on to play as defensive tackle for the Indianapolis Colts, remembers his recruitment time spent with Saban fondly. Chapman was set to go play for rival school Auburn University until he met with Saban in his home office. During this meeting, Chapman says the spark in Saban and his team became truly evident, and he felt the plan Saban had in place for the young player. It was enough to sway his decision, and Chapman soon became a key member of the Crimson Tide (Anderson, 2017).

You cannot discuss Saban’s team development and leadership strategy without discussing what is referred to as “The Process”. This method was born in 1998 when Saban and his underdog team of Michigan State Spartans faced off against number one ranked Ohio State. Instead of focusing on what most would consider an already decided outcome of the game, he chose to have his team focus on the basic process of what it takes to play good football. “The Process” worked, and Saban and his team defeated the Buckeyes. Saban has implemented this method at every team he has coached since then with the most success being found with Alabama. In short, Saban trains his team to focus solely on each individual play. Players, coaches, and staff members alike are taught to not look at the scoreboard or other external factors. Instead, all attention is placed on the present play. Despite the outcome, the team then moves on to the next play, and the next play, and so on until the end of the game (Samuels, 2018). This differs from many other coaches and programs as the main focus is usually on the outcome of the game as a whole, regardless of what the team did to get to the end results, as opposed to placing the focus on each individual play and what it takes to be successful in that moment alone.

The Tide is on a tight schedule when it comes to team development. A football season only lasts from August through early January, which does not allow time for mistakes to take place. To combat this, Saban and his team practice throughout the off-season, as much as allowed based on NCAA rules. According to NCAA rules, during the off-season, teams are

limited to a maximum of eight hours per week, which can only be made up of weight training, conditioning, review of film, and walk-throughs (NCAA Bylaws, n.d.). Taking advantage of the practice allowed enables them to work through the initial stages of team development during a less risky time. Conflict occurring in the off-season is much easier for a team to manage than if it came during a high-stakes week in the regular season. This is because conflict during the off-season has a higher likelihood of taking place internally and only involving members of the team. This empowers Saban and his team to overcome conflict in a simpler manner, as they are only responsible for their own ideas, thoughts, and actions. During the regular season, conflict includes opposing teams. This conflict is more complicated to resolve because Saban and his team have no control over their opponents' thoughts, ideas, and actions. Since the Tide cannot change their opponents, they simply have to concentrate on their team and find solutions to their internal conflict.

Saban and his team participate in several team bonding activities. For example, following the team's spring game, which is a scrimmage between players on the team, the winning group joins Saban for a steak dinner. The losing team is left with pork and beans (Byington, 2017). This has been a long-standing tradition. Both players and fans enjoy the jokes and comradery that transpire because of the team's spring game. The University of Alabama has countless other traditions, especially concerning their football program. These traditions assist and encourage the team members' bonding, especially when it comes to the team's new players. By ensuring his players become familiar with each other early in the off-season, Saban builds a positive norming stage.

### **COLLEGE FOOTBALL VS. THE BUSINESS WORLD**

College football and the business world have more similarities than one might assume. Both situations are highly competitive. College football is full of young players dedicated to the sport and performing at peak levels. The team must have the ability to contend with their competition. In the business world, job markets are extremely competitive. Therefore, it is a necessity for organizations to recruit and maintain top talent, just as football teams do. Both types of organizations want the best and brightest individuals for their respective teams and companies. Therefore, they must have effective recruitment and team development techniques. These methods will likely look different for a college football team than they will for a corporation. However, their goal is ultimately the same: find and retain the best person(s) for the job.

The two worlds do contrast in a couple of key areas. One major difference that impacts how they recruit and develop their team is the turnover rate. College football teams can lose up to a quarter of their players per year. This could be due to graduations, transfers, injuries, or the choice to enter the NFL draft early. Because of this, the team must have a solid bench of players ready to step up and perform in a highly productive manner at any given time. In the business world, the rate of loss is less extreme and predictable. There is no typical eligibility period like there is in college football. Consequently, a business does not need a roster of employees ready to step in immediately when needed. Instead, companies generally train their employees slowly

and allow them to gain experience before promoting them to the equivalent of a “starting position” within the organization.

### **TUCKMAN’S MODEL OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT**

In 1965, Bruce W. Tuckman introduced a model that described four stages to team development according to his study, “Developmental Sequences in Small Groups” (Tuckman, 1965). Tuckman’s model of team development has been classified as linear-progressive (Mennecke, 1992). Therefore, to become a functioning team, members will progress through the following four sequential developmental stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965). In 1977, Tuckman and Mary Ann Jensen reviewed teaming literature and determined it was necessary to add a fifth stage to the model: adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Knight & Tippett, 2006). Although teams will experience all stages of development, Tuckman’s model does not account for the length of time teams will spend in each developmental stage (Sutherland & Stroot, 2010). Consequently, the longevity of the team as well as the tasks needing accomplished are determining factors as to how long groups will stay in each stage (Sutherland & Stroot, 2010).

According to Tuckman’s research, each stage of team development has two dimensions: interpersonal and task (Tuckman, 1965). The interpersonal dimension relates to the human side of teams (Mackey, 1999). This incorporates how members interact with one another; the team’s behaviors; and the relationships formed among team members (Mackey, 1999; Sutherland & Stroot, 2010; Noel & Patterson, 2006; Anderson, 2010). Trust and conflict among members; task accomplishment; and team’s morale and cohesion are all impacted by the interpersonal dimension (Mackey, 1999; Sutherland & Stroot, 2010; Noel & Patterson, 2006; Anderson, 2010). For a team to be successful, it is important to note that cohesion is imperative (Severt, et al., 2016; Yalom, 1995). The task dimension pertains to the necessary activities being divided among team members so the assigned work can be completed (Mackey, 1999; Sutherland & Stroot, 2010).

The stages of team development are distinct and well-defined (Mackey, 1999). In the initial stage of team development, forming, the team members come together for the first time and interpersonal relationships begin (Tuckman, 1965; Knight & Tippett, 2006; Francis & Young, 1979; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). During the forming stage, team members are getting acquainted with one another; determining their roles within the team; becoming acclimated to the task; and forming a team identity (Noel & Patterson, 2006; Knight & Tippett, 2006; Anshel, 1995; Weinberg & Gould, 1995; Yalom, 1995). In addition, boundaries may be tested between the team’s leaders and members to help alleviate any ambiguity as to who will be on the actual team (Tuckman, 1965; Roeske-Carlson, 2000; Francis & Young, 1979; Weinberg & Gould, 1995).

Storming is the second stage of team development (Tuckman, 1965). This stage is plagued with conflict and competition: members’ resistance to the team’s influence; rebellion against one another; and defensive and emotional responses to task demands (Tuckman, 1965; Knight & Tippett, 2006; Mackey, 1999; Roeske-Carlson, 2000). Conflict is unavoidable when

people are working together, and there are numerous reasons for conflict to occur (Seck & Helton, 2014). First, members may become arrogant and/or comfortable enough with the team to express their honest thoughts (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). This will inevitably lead to differences of personalities and opinions. Second, issues relating to one's power, control, and position within the team's hierarchy can lead to conflict and opposition among members (Weinberg & Gould, 1995; Anshel, 1995; Carron, 1982; Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Francis & Young, 1979; Tuckman, 1965; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). Finally, team members face the challenges of how to effectively address, handle, and resolve conflict (Noel & Patterson, 2006). Even though conflict can be difficult for members to endure, avoiding it is not advantageous for teams (Mackey, 1999). Teams must create an environment where members can present their issues and concerns without being disrespected or attacked (Mackey, 1999). It is essential for members to manage their differences in a cooperative manner for the team's overall effectiveness, growth, cohesion, and success (Yalom, 1995; Seck & Helton, 2014).

The third stage in Tuckman's model of team development is norming (Tuckman, 1965). The norming stage is marked with trust, openness, cooperation, and shared understanding and expectations of team members (Knight & Tippett, 2006; Seck & Helton, 2014; Carron, 1988; Roeske-Carlson, 2000). Since trust and respect are present, members candidly communicate their ideas, concerns, and constructive criticism (Mackey, 1999; Seck & Helton, 2014; Roeske-Carlson, 2000). With the open lines of communication, the team has the ability to establish new roles, ground rules, goals, and acceptable behavior and norms (Seck & Helton, 2014; Mackey, 1999; Carron, 1988; Weinberg & Gould, 1995; Noel & Patterson, 2006; Roeske-Carlson, 2000). In addition, members finally begin to function and grow as a team as they work together to accomplish their goals and assigned tasks (Mackey, 1999; Knight & Tippett, 2006; Carron, 1988). Members develop team unity and cohesiveness as they appreciate the value of working together instead of individually (Knight & Tippett, 2006; Anshel, 1995; Carron, 1982; Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Francis & Young, 1979; Tuckman, 1965; Weinberg & Gould, 1995; Carron, 1988).

When the team becomes highly functional, productive, and cohesive, they have reached the fourth stage of team development, performing (Tuckman, 1965; Noel & Patterson, 2006; Mackey, 1999; Carron, 1988; Yalom, 1995). In this stage, members have strong relationships allowing them to communicate effectively in order to solve problems and make decisions in the best interest of the team (Carron, 1988; Yalom, 1995; Noel & Patterson, 2006; Mackey, 1999; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). Members focus on effectively working together to successfully achieve task completion and team goals (Carron, 1988; Yalom, 1995; Seck & Helton, 2014; Noel & Patterson, 2006). For this to happen, confidence, cooperation, and trust are demonstrated by each team member (Weinberg & Gould, 1995; Seck & Helton, 2014; Carron, 1988; Yalom, 1995). It is important to note that people who have had the opportunity to work in highly performing teams state that it is personally beneficial; however, it is extremely difficult to obtain and remain at this stage of optimal team development (Mackey, 1999).

In the final stage of team development, adjourning, the team is disbanding (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Sutherland & Stroot, 2010). Here, members complete or postpone their final tasks and objectives (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Seck & Helton, 2014). In addition, members may

become emotional as they reflect on how the team's strengths, goal accomplishments, relationships, and the team's journey impacted them on a personal level (Sutherland & Stroot, 2010; Seck & Helton, 2014).

Team development is a complex process (Roeske-Carlson, 2000). Glacel and Robert stated, "In the development of any team, certain stages of behavior [Tuckman stages model] take place which impact how well the individuals and the team accomplish their task" (Glacel & Robert, 1996). Irvin Yalom provided further explanation on the importance of group development and how it is an actual process. He demonstrated that if particular learning and growth processes were bypassed in the early phases of team formation, then the team will be incapable of reaching the performing stage of team development (Yalom, 1995). Numerous individuals and organizations believe a team's productivity and performance can be significantly enhanced if leadership properly navigates members through Tuckman's stages of team development (Glacel & Robert, 1996; Knight & Tippett, 2006).

### **HOW FOOTBALL TEAMS DEVELOP UTILIZING TUCKMAN'S MODEL**

Just like a business, football teams go through each stage of Tuckman's Model of Team Development. The process and its individual steps may look slightly different than it is perceived in the business world, but the wanted outcome is still the same: to build and develop the best and most successful team possible.

The forming stage for a football team would involve the entire recruiting process. Potential players are getting their first feel for the team dynamics and deciding if it would be a good fit for them. Recruitment takes place for each individual position and role on the team, making this a more continuous process based on the team's needs for the upcoming season. Beyond the recruitment process, this stage also encompasses the process of selecting which eleven players should take the field at one time. This decision also includes looking at how players connect with one another. For example, the team must determine which receivers perform the best with the quarterback and how to utilize them together and separately.

For the second stage of team development, storming, players may feel competition among themselves. Often, players are competing for starting positions and feel the pressure this creates, leading to conflict among teammates. The conflict created in this stage may cause the team to partially regress to the forming stage again as players are evaluated and reevaluated.

In the norming stage, the strategy and plan for progression has been well-established and thoroughly communicated to the team. In addition, players practice in their respective positions and adjustments are made as needed. The tasks and activities completed by team members allows the team to enter the performing stage. Here, the team competes against their opponents and utilizes the tactics determined in the earlier stages of team development to reach the best possible outcome.

Adjourning, or the final stage, comes at the end of the season for most players. In this stage, various players leave the team for the NFL draft, transfer to another school, or graduate from the university and lose eligibility. In addition, coaches and staff may move positions or leave the team all together. Adjourning can also take place for individual players any time

throughout the season. In this case, a player would most likely face a season-ending injury, expediting the adjourning process for them as an individual.

This team development process is obviously applied to the season as a whole; however, it can be applied on a weekly basis as well. Every week, the team will encounter a new opponent with a different set of strengths and weaknesses, presenting various challenges for the team to address. Consequently, the team must be responsive to this and adjust their strategy accordingly.

## YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Using resources available to you, research activities, actions, and/or behaviors Coach Saban engages in during each individual stage of the team building process. Be sure to provide the information you find and properly cite (i.e. reference) all supplemental sources.

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