

# MATTMCWILLIAMS

Live with Passion. Lead with Purpose. Leave a Legacy.

## Why Ignorance May be Your Biggest Asset

I'm about to share with you the story of one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made in business. It was a decision that, in retrospect, began the downward spiral of a company I helped launch. But first, I want to tell you about "The Idiots."

The story of the 2004 Boston Red Sox baseball team is the stuff of legend. What they did in the postseason only happens in the movies...except that it really happened.

They called themselves "The Idiots." Down three games to none in a best-of-seven series, they faced seemingly impossible odds. No team in the history of baseball had come back from a deficit like that to win four games in a row to claim the series. To make matters worse, they were down by one run in the ninth inning against arguably the best relief pitcher in Major League Baseball history.

And they won. They improbably won that game, and the next one, and the next one, and game seven, before going on to win the World Series in a sweep.

How did they manage to pull off such a feat?

I believe it's in large part due to the name they gave themselves: "The Idiots."

### **How to Defy the Odds**

How do you defy the odds in sports? The same way you do in business and life. By not caring about the odds in the first place.

"The Idiots" didn't care that the Red Sox were "cursed." They didn't care that the franchise hadn't won a World Series in eight decades. They didn't care that no one had ever come back from a 3-0 deficit or that Mariano Rivera (the Yankees' relief pitcher) had never blown a lead in the postseason before.

The odds may have been against them, but they were self-proclaimed idiots. Ignorance was a competitive advantage.

### **Why You May Not Want to Hire Industry Experts**

"We need to hire an industry expert. Someone with experience and connections." That was the consensus amongst the executive team at a previous business of mine.

We'd grown from nothing to a company with nearly fifty employees and more than \$12,000,000 in annual revenues in only three years. We did it by bucking all the industry trends. We were successful because we didn't care what the competition was doing. We stood out precisely because of our ignorance.

We didn't know any better. We did things because we thought they were the right way. We didn't know the "rules" of the game, so we made up our own rules. We played a different game than the competition.

We were, like the Boston Red Sox, idiots in the industry. And it paid off.

And then we lost our way. We hired that industry expert. We became a little more like the competition. We became less recognizable on our own. We became a part of the very machine we'd fought against for years.

For us, that was the beginning of the end.

### **Playing Your Own Game**

In his book, *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of a man named Vivek Ranadivé and a group of twelve-year old girls. Vivek and all of the girls were new to the game of basketball.

Let that sink in for a moment...all new players with a coach that had *never* played the game. We all know the end of that story, right? The team gives its all, but lack of skill and knowledge cripples them. In the end, they probably win only a few games, if any.

But that isn't what happened at all. Because Vivek and his girls were like the 2004 Boston Red Sox. They were like our company was in its early years. They didn't know the norms. They didn't play the same game as everyone else. They used their ignorance to their advantage.

Vivek's team played a style of basketball unlike anything the other teams had ever experienced. They pressed the entire game. That means that rather than let the other team dribble the ball to half-court and begin playing defense there, they pressured the other team from the inbounds pass all the way up the court.

Many times the other team could not even inbound the ball. And when they did, Vivek's girls swarmed the opposing player. They were relentless.

Many times, they were so dominant and the pressure was so much for the other team that they found themselves up by scores of 30-4, 20-0, and other teams essentially gave up. Ultimately, they made it to the national championship game.

So, how does a man who'd never played basketball coach a team who'd never played basketball to the national championship? Here's what Gladwell writes:

We spend a lot of time thinking about the ways that prestige and resources and belonging to elite institutions make us better off. We don't spend enough time thinking about the ways in which those kinds of material advantages limit our options.

In other words, we rarely stop to consider how our ignorance can actually work *for* us. We say things like:

- "I don't have enough experience."
- "I don't have the right connections."
- "I don't understand the industry enough."

When we do that, we forget that those exact excuses might be our biggest assets.

Gladwell goes on to write:

Most people would have shrunk in the face of that kind of criticism. Not Ranadivé...Why should he care what the world of basketball thought of him? Ranadivé coached a team of girls who had no talent in a sport he knew nothing about. He was an underdog and a misfit, and that gave him the freedom to try things no one else even dreamt of.

Vivek did the same thing our business did its first three years. He did the same thing the Boston Red Sox did to defy the odds and make sports history. He did the same thing I'm asking you to do.

Consider your ignorance your biggest asset. Stop making excuses or trying to mold yourself to others. Use your lack of knowledge to your advantage.

***How has ignorance paid off for you?***