

Business Lessons From Curt Cignetti and the Indiana Hoosiers' Worst-to-First Turnaround

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Key Takeaways

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- Belief, discipline and execution turn structural change into sustained competitive advantage.

By now, we have all learned there is a new sheriff in the world of college football. No, not my beloved alma mater, Michigan. Not other “blue bloods” like Alabama, Georgia, Texas or Ohio State. It is the team that, up until two years ago, had more losses than any other program in history: the Indiana Hoosiers.

In just two years since the hiring of their head coach, Curt Cignetti, they sit alone atop college football as the 16-0 national champion this year, including three wins over teams ranked in the top five (tripling such top-five ranked wins in their entire 138-year history).

How was this even possible? This worst-to-first story will go down as one of the greatest stories in college football history.

Let's dissect this further, as there are a lot of valuable business lessons to be gleaned here for your businesses.

To summarize how this amazing turnaround happened for Indiana, it came down to the following things: market conditions changed to their benefit; ownership embraced the desire to win at football; they hired a smart leader; the leader had a clear vision of the type of team he wanted to recruit; and, lastly, they all bought into the vision, believing the impossible was actually possible, and put in the hard work to make it happen.

Let's dig into each of these points.

Market conditions changed in college football

Two things happened in college football in the last couple of years that forever changed the sport: (i) the NCAA allowed players to get paid, through name-image-and-likeness deals; and (ii) the NCAA allowed players to freely transfer between teams through the transfer portal.

Paying the players meant that the schools with large alumni bases (Indiana is the largest) and wealthy alumni (like Mark Cuban at Indiana) could amass large sums of money to put them on a more even footing with the historical "blue blood" programs. The transfer portal enabled players to move between teams if they didn't feel they were getting enough playing time or didn't like their coaches, which meant the historically second and third-string players at the "blue blood" programs were now starting at the other schools that were willing to pay for their services. These changes became the big equalizer in college football.

I don't like a lot of these changes, as it feels like the Wild West right now with limited guardrails being imposed by the NCAA. But these changes were earth-shattering for the sport.

Instead of a season ending with 4-to-5 teams that were capable of winning a playoff and the championship, now there were 15-20 teams that were good enough to go on a run and win a championship. This created more parity than ever before.

As we apply this to our businesses, think of what artificial intelligence is doing in the workplace; it is the great equalizer, putting both big companies and small startups on a more equal footing.

Your startup's market conditions have materially changed in the last couple of years; how are you going to capitalize on that?

Ownership embraced the desire to win

Indiana was never really considered a “football school”. On the other hand, with their success under coaches like Bobby Knight and players like Isiah Thomas and Steve Alford, they were always considered a “basketball school”.

But basketball isn't where the lion's share of athletic revenues is generated – they come from football. And Indiana was never going to truly maximize their athletic revenues until they set a clear goal of being successful in football. University President Pamela Whitten and Athletic Director Scott Dolson made that a priority and began to invest accordingly.

What is the “North Star” vision for your business, and are you making the appropriate investments to enable you to hit that target? If not, you will never get there.

They hired a smart leader

Not many college football fans had heard of Curt Cignetti

before his time at Indiana. His name was never mentioned in the list of college football's great coaches, like Kirby Smart at Georgia, Ryan Day at Ohio State or Dabo Sweeney at Clemson. But when Indiana's leadership started to research him, it was clear he was a winner wherever he went.

In 2009, he was on Nick Saban's coaching staff at Alabama that won a national championship (and who better to learn from than college football's greatest coach of all time). Between 2011-16, he turned around a struggling IUP program into a perennial conference champion. In 2019, he led James Madison to the FCS (Division II) national championship.

When Curt Cignetti famously told the media, "I win. Google me!", he wasn't kidding.

The business lesson here is to hire smartly. It isn't always the person with the biggest brand logos on their resume, or the most attention, that will be the best hire. Do your homework, peel back the layers of the onion, and you may find your own "diamond in the rough".

They recruited the right type of players

Most college football recruiting classes are ranked by how many five-star high school recruits a team signs. Indiana didn't have a single five-star recruit on the roster that won the national championship.

Cignetti took a different approach and made three smart moves: First, he brought roughly 15 players with him from James Madison when he took the Indiana job – experienced players who had already won a national championship and could help establish that same winning mindset in a new locker room.

Second, he leaned heavily on the transfer portal rather than high school recruiting, preferring proven college players over

untested high school prospects. Third, he targeted players who shared his “chip on the shoulder” mentality – under-recruited and under-appreciated athletes eager to prove themselves, like quarterback Fernando Mendoza, who went on to win the Heisman Trophy and defeat his hometown team, Miami, which hadn’t even considered him good enough to walk on.

It turned out to be a powerful recipe for success.

The same holds true for your business – people really matter. Find the experienced staff member, perhaps from your competitors, wanting to prove they can succeed at the next level.

They all bought into the vision and put in the work

Bo Schembechler, the famous Michigan football coach, once said, “What the mind can conceive and believe, the mind can achieve. And those who stay will be champions.”

Curt Cignetti must have said the same thing to his team. If you think of Indiana as all-time biggest losers, that is where we will stay. But if you actually believe you are on an equal footing with the greats like Ohio State, Alabama, Oregon and Miami, you can actually beat them (which they did in four consecutive games).

But more than believing, they had to put in the work, winning in the weight room, practices, coaching sessions, film watching and game planning, as well. That “chip on their shoulder” was particularly helpful here to get them to put in that needed work. Big picture: Winning is a mindset, and to get there, it requires discipline, which Indiana had in spades.

Are you clearly communicating your vision to your staff? Have they bought into that vision? Are they putting in the hard

work that will be required to win (e.g., gain market share and exceed your goals)? If not, back to the drawing board, as without that vision, a clear strategy and communication, religious management and hard work, you will never get there.

Closing thoughts

When Indiana went 11-2 in 2024, Cignetti's first year, I thought it was a fluke, catching better teams by surprise. But when Indiana was the first team ever to go 16-0 to win the national championship in 2025, beating top-ranked teams by large margins of victory, I knew Indiana was no longer a "basketball school," and their football success was here to stay. Which is bad news for my Michigan Wolverines and everyone else in the Big Ten.

In the last two years, Northwestern has now passed Indiana as the team with the most all-time losses in college football. Maybe Dave Braun and his coaching staff will be the next team to achieve the "impossible," winning a national championship in the coming years.

Indiana has certainly given them and every other team in football that winning playbook, which everyone is trying to copy in hopes of "catching lightning in a bottle" for their programs. Expect to see more "historical underdogs" hoisting the championship trophy in years to come, thanks to Indiana and Curt Cignetti paving the way, proving what is actually possible with a well-conceived vision, strategy, team and execution.

Which "blue blood" will your business beat for your "national championship"?

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