



From the NFL to the Board Room: What Rodgers Taught the Packers About Talent Engagement

“At least being in a conversation makes you feel like you’re important; you’re respected.

— Aaron Rodgers

The Green Bay Packers are perhaps the most storied team in the National Football League (NFL). They’ve won more championships than any other team in NFL history, taking home the first two Super Bowls and seeing ongoing success with wins in 1996 and 2010.¹ Given their accomplishments, one might think that players are lining up for a chance to play with the Packers — and many are — but not Aaron Rodgers. In fact, after issues with organizational management and feeling like his voice wasn’t heard, this renowned quarterback and 16 year veteran of the team recently went so far as to contemplate his retirement.² Sound familiar? If you’ve lost star players before, this case is for you. Aaron Rodgers taught the Green Bay Packers a lesson in talent engagement, and we’ll take a look at what you can learn from this example to attract and retain your own top talent today.



→ THE PROBLEM

It started in February 2020 (although the media didn't hear about it until earlier this year). As the season ended, Rodgers expressed his desire to be more involved in conversations directly affecting his job (i.e., his own contract, talent management, and the retention of key players).² He also wanted to help the organization learn from some of their mistakes in the past, such as how outgoing veterans were treated or how selection and trading decisions were made.² This, essentially, was a question of talent engagement. Rodgers believed organizations such as the Packers should capitalize on the expertise of long-tenured, high performing employees by involving them in decision-making processes. Rodgers was also disappointed with the lack of commitment the organization had made to keep him on the team. The Packers didn't offer him a contract extension after the 2020 season even though it would have given them extra salary cap room.³ Understandably, Rodgers took this as a sign that they may not want to include him past the 2021 season. In addition to this job insecurity, Rodgers' frustration with the personnel department and general manager (Brian Gutekunst) grew when he wasn't included in conversations about personnel decisions during free agency in March 2021 or ahead of the draft in April.³ Rodgers later admitted in a press interview that it was at this point when he began seriously considering his retirement.² How were the Packers able to keep Rodgers on the team after such a significant rift in their communication? They finally included him in the conversation. Although this did not fully resolve the underlying issues, it was the first step in ensuring Green Bay's star quarterback would remain for another season.

AARON RODGERS QUOTES⁷

“ My confidence... comes directly from my preparation. I put the time in, I watch film, I study our game plan, and I practice hard. So when I go into a game, I expect to play well.

“ That's what really motivates me: to make my coaches proud, my teammates proud, and the fans proud.

“ As you get older you realize there's always going to be critics. Critics are going to win every time because they can change their critique based on the stats and their own personal feelings.

“ I know I'm capable of greatness, and I'm expecting to reach that level.



HISTORY OF THE PACKERS

The Green Bay packers were organized in 1919, in the editorial rooms of the Green Bay Press-Gazette. No one recorded how many people came or who was there, not knowing that their team would one day become among the most renowned in the NFL. The Packers were sponsored by the Indian Packing Co., which is where their name originally came from. They joined the NFL (at that time still called the American Professional Football Association, APFA) in 1921.⁶ Since then, Green Bay has become the only NFL team to win three straight titles (which they did twice: 1929-30-31 and 1965-66-67) and the Packers have played in the NFL's deciding game 13 times (only the Giants have played for more titles.)¹ The Packers also won the first two Super Bowls (over Kansas City in 1966, and over Oakland in 1967), as well one in 1996, over New England, and their fourth and most recent victory in 2010 over Pittsburgh.¹

→ THE SOLUTION

Rodgers did end up signing on with the Packers for the 2021 season, but he restructured his contract, reportedly voiding the final year in 2023.³ The deal might be considered less of a win and more of an uneasy cease-fire. Rodgers will play for the Packers this season, but if they are unable or unwilling to address the issues he's raised, he will be able to request and be granted a trade out of Green Bay. "They have about six months to try and repair that relationship," FOX Sports' Jay Glazer reported, "If at the end of this year Aaron Rodgers decides he wants out, they have to trade Aaron Rodgers. They have agreed to it already."⁴ This wouldn't be an ideal outcome for the Packers. When organizations lose their star players, those players get picked up by someone else. Consider Tom Brady, the longstanding quarterback for the New England Patriots. After 20 seasons with the Patriots, he left the organization and joined the Tampa Bay Buccaneers (Bucs). Not only did Brady lead the Bucs to a Super Bowl victory in his first year with the team, but the New England Patriots finished the season with a losing record. Brady's case highlights the fact that talent is always in high demand, and when teams let their top talent go, someone else will be waiting to pick them up. Based on his recent comments to the press, Aaron Rodgers could be next. The Packers clearly have some work to do, but Rodgers has already taught them a few lessons along the way. Let's take a look at what they learned (and let's wait and see whether they put it to practice).



→ LESSONS LEARNED

Rodgers spoke to the press late last month, following the Packers' first practice of the season. During the conversation, two themes emerged as to why he was disappointed with the Packers and what led him to restructure his deal. The first was a dissatisfaction with how the organization was run. Rodgers pointed out that information he passed on was not being used, and he touched on his frustration with how outgoing veterans were not given the respect they deserved. He also mentioned his discontent with how players were being selected and traded — largely based on what they contribute on the field rather than to the team culture.² "One of the most important things is chemistry and cohesion in an organization," he told the press. "I'm interested in how (the Packers) look at certain players, and if they value character, if they value chemistry, if they value what they bring to the locker room."²

The second theme that emerged in Rodgers' press conference was one of communication and collaboration. It was very clear that Rodgers' greatest disappointment was the fact that he had not been involved in free agent conversations. Even if he was not given any final decision-making power, he would have appreciated being given a seat at the table. "At least being in a conversation makes you feel like you're important, you're respected"² he stated. Rodgers noted that he wanted to be involved in the conversation because it would affect his ability to do his job.² He also thought that he could provide some expertise: "I think I have a unique perspective, being in a locker room and having been a starter here for 13 years and being here for 16 years. There's not many people who've been in a position of influence longer than I have in this building, so it gives me a unique perspective to shed light on how things work together."² Here, Rodgers is emphasizing talent engagement.

THREE THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT AARON RODGERS⁸

- Rodgers was not a well-known football prospect in high school, and didn't receive a single scholarship offer from a Division I football program; instead, he took the junior college route and was recruited by California State University after he led his team to a 10–1 record in just one season as a starter.
- Rodgers has been both a contestant and, more recently, a host on Jeopardy!
- He is also the first active NFL player with an ownership stake in an NBA franchise.



As a tenured player and star performer, Rodgers gave the Packers an example of how top talent needs to be valued and involved to best leverage their unparalleled perspective and expertise. Consequently, management should consider these employees valuable stakeholders and contributors to strategic decisions, not just for their own development, but for the development of the organization and their team.

What is noteworthy about these themes is that Rodgers doesn't just advocate for change — he initiates and demonstrates what that change should be. First, Rodgers himself modelled what it looks like to value team culture in how he mentored younger players and shaped the locker-room environment. He also modelled effective communication and collaboration when he spoke with many team's recent veterans, asking about their experience leaving the team so that he knew what he should advocate for in order to improve the organization.² Leadership, Rodgers once said, "can't be forced or contrived. It has to be your personality."⁵ And given the many lessons he taught the Packers this year, it's clear that leadership is certainly a genuine part of Aaron Rodgers' personality. The question now, is whether the Packers will learn from their leader and retain him in the coming year.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. CONSIDER CHARACTER** When considering who your star performers are, remember that performance is important, but beyond what a player brings to the field, it matters what they bring to the team. Seek leaders who want to engage with the organization and to change it in a positive manner. Focus on people who exemplify your core values, and who build corporate culture. Over time, this will result in stronger, more satisfied, and better performing teams.
- 2. INVOLVE OTHERS, PARTICULARLY STAR PLAYERS** No matter what your industry or profession, it's important that you involve employees — especially those like Aaron Rodgers who bring unique perspectives and expertise. There are many benefits to involving employees in decision making processes, including greater motivation, engagement, and performance, as well as a stronger commitment to the organization and its leaders.
- 3. COMMUNICATION IS KEY** Communication is especially important for talent involvement and engagement. Make sure key stakeholders are included in the conversation. Encourage critical thinking by informing star performers of ongoing issues and relevant decisions to be made, then asking for their input. Be sure to take the time to engage with their feedback.



→ HOW SIGMA CAN HELP

Are you looking to implement some of the lessons Aaron Rodgers taught the Green Bay Packers this year? If so, SIGMA can help! Over the last 50 years we've worked with more than 8,500 private and public organizations to develop people potential and increase organizational effectiveness. We provide full-service succession planning, custom consulting, and a range of templates and resources. We also offer a number of succession planning workshops. To learn more about our solutions, click here, or contact us directly for more information. ■

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