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# Business, Baseball, and Overcoming the Defensive Shift Part II

## Adapting and Winning When the Rules of the Game Change

Our professional work lives and the game of baseball are more closely related than you might think and in November 2021 we discussed how the defensive shift, a strategy of positioning field players outside their traditional locations to limit the number of hits an opposing team gets, was being employed in the game today. This tactic helped balance the playing field, especially for clubs with smaller payrolls and rosters less likely to have many high-performing superstars. It also demonstrated how organizations can learn from baseball when it comes to adapting and utilizing new rules to their advantage.

But the competitive environment (baseball or otherwise) is never static. For the 2023 season, Major League Baseball's governing body implemented several changes to speed up the pace of the game and increase the excitement level for fans. These changes include a pitch clock of 15-30 seconds (situation depending), larger bases for safety, and most notably, eliminating the defensive shift. Games this year are nearly 30 minutes shorter than recent ones and the pace of play is keeping fans more engaged. But what do these changes mean for individual teams and how do they approach their strategy for the season?

One team that excelled early in the updated 2023 campaign is the Tampa Bay Rays. They began the season 12-0, one of the best starts in baseball history. Now, the Rays are no longer dependent on hitting home runs to overcome the defensive shift, they utilize pitchers who work more efficiently, and deploy a young team which understands these rule changes from their time in the minor leagues (where they were tested). The team also plays well together and believes in the



Figure 1: "Umpire Javier Navarro" by mark6mauno is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

strategies their manager laid out for them. By tweaking the team's roster, player utilization, and strategy, the Rays got off to a fast start.

From the outside we also get to see in real-time how all clubs adapt to these rule changes and use it as a learning example for other competitive environments. One difference, however, between baseball and other professional endeavors is that with baseball we clearly know who decided on the rule changes, what those changes are, and when they would be implemented. In the rest of life, these things are rarely so well defined.

But that does not mean organizations are left to the mercy of swirling environments around them. To thrive when things change you need to start with your **people**, both the ones on your team now and the ones needed for future success. Successful adaptation means paying attention to three critical areas to help organizations win when the rules of the game shift:



- **Talent Management:** Without the right talent, adaptation becomes impossible. Teams that don't have the right players for the rules of the game aren't competitive very long, especially once the rest of the field figures out how to play in the new environment too. This means proper retention, recruiting, and hiring is crucial. Whether keeping and growing talent or replacing it, correctly maturing and matching people to the updated capabilities is a major difference between success and failure.
- **Talent Employment:** Once a roster is set, how teammates are utilized is a vital consideration. Not everyone is a long ball hitter or throws a 100 MPH fastball. The same is true in professional organizations. Teams need to play to their strengths and then capitalize on them under the new rules. A home run hitter may have a powerful swing, but if you only need a single to win, it may not be the flashy player who's the best choice but rather the quiet base-to-base hitter in that situation.
- **Leadership:** Lastly, nothing is more influential to the success of an organization than proper leadership. To get the most from their people, leaders need to be many things, but most of all they need to be "servant-leaders" (putting their people before themselves), be clear and consistent in their communications, and they need to develop (and employ) strategies which best utilize their people's strengths and talents in the most impactful manner.

In the end, baseball isn't that different from the rest of life and the rules of the game shift all the time. But through the right management and employment of talent and good, clear leadership organizations can adapt and win.

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