

# **INSTRUCTORS' NOTES: 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 toward 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.*

## **TEACHING RECOMMENDATIONS**

This case study provides teaching opportunities regarding team development and recruiting. To begin the lesson, ask students: "Have you ever been on a poorly performing

team?” The follow-up question to this is: “What occurred that made your team underperform?” These questions and students’ responses will lead you into the discussion of Tuckman’s Model of Team Development. When walking students through Tuckman’s Model, identify exactly what happens at each stage as well as why it is important for teams to progress through the developmental stages. Since students learn in various ways, it could be beneficial to play clips of shows and/or movies, such as *Remember the Titans* or *Miracle*, to help students understand and visualize what each stage of team development truly looks like. From here, you would guide the discussion into Saban’s recruiting and team developmental tactics and their success. To conclude the lesson, have students examine how Saban’s recruiting and team development approaches can be applied to any type of business entity.

An alternative teaching approach would be to assign students, individually or as a group, the case questions to complete as an in-class or at-home written assignment. This case study provides students a chance to begin thinking from a managerial perspective. Students will learn that if an organization is going to succeed in a highly-competitive business environment that strong leadership is necessary to implement effective recruitment and team development practices. There is a likelihood that not all students will have a prior understanding of college football. To combat this, assign students to groups based on their knowledge level. This will ensure each group consists of students with some college football knowledge with others possessing little to no prior knowledge.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What activities and/or actions does Coach Saban engage in which relate to the “forming” stage of the team building process? List your information and your sources.

Coach Nick Saban and his Alabama football team participate in many activities during what would be considered the “forming” stage of team building. One big aspect of this stage for the Crimson Tide is the annual fall camp in which the team participates. This camp consists of approximately 20 practices that lead to the opening game of the season. Oftentimes, these practices are centered around team bonding. The first few practices may not include any sort of tackling or contact, with players practicing in shorts and t-shirts instead of full pads. A significant part of these practices is the traditional Fan Day that the school hosts each year. On this day, fans and community members can watch a practice and even get players’ and coaches’ autographs before they begin (“University of Alabama Athletics”, 2019). All of this works to build relationships among players and coaches and allows them to become more comfortable and accepting around one another. They also work to get accustomed to things such as plays and positions as well as settle into a solid team identity moving forward into the regular season.

2. What activities and/or actions does Coach Saban engage in which relate to the “storming” stage of the team building process? List your information and your sources.

Coach Nick Saban has stated he values respect among his players and coaching staff. This ideal appears to bleed into how he handles conflict that arises during the “storming” stage of

team development. In this stage, which can take place throughout any time of the season, team members may disagree with one another and conflict can arise as members find their place and work through the kinks associated with teamwork. To combat this, Saban makes his players limit their talking on the field, both during practice and game days. Instead, he encourages players to talk through their concerns or issues regarding plays off the field where tensions may be lower and other individuals, such as coaches and staff, can help mediate. He feels this limits emotional reactions and can help players focus on the game at hand instead of reacting based on those emotions created by the tension (Casagrande, 2016). By making his players take a step back before confronting an issue, Saban allows them to calm down and approach the concern in a more levelheaded manner. Of course, there will be conflict with any team, but Saban seems to have the right idea in his approach to find resolutions in a more calm and logical manner.

3. What activities and/or actions does Coach Saban engage in which relate to the “norming” stage of the team building process? List your information and your sources.

The “norming” stage for a college football team may take place during the early games of the season when the stakes may be lower than later in the season. Here, Saban really sees how his team works together and can make any necessary adjustments. These adjustments may relate to starting positions or the execution of plays. One of the most notorious cases of this was during the 2018 season when Saban had to decide between Tua Tagovailoa and Jalen Hurts for the starting quarterback position. Usually, teams have decided and announced their starting quarterback long before the season begins. However, Saban chose to practice both players during the off-season as if they were starting and did not announce the position until the player took the field at their opening game (Low, 2018). Saban gave his offense the longest possible time period available to work through the “norming” stage and eventually the best fit for the position emerged naturally. If Saban had not gone with this tactic and chosen a quarterback prematurely, he may not have seen some of the issues with each player, and his decision would not have been as thorough.

4. What activities and/or actions does Coach Saban engage in which relate to the “performing” stage of the team building process? List your information and your sources.

The “performing” stage for college football teams takes place during most of the season. Here, teams attempt to play at their peak levels and work towards championship titles. Saban has clearly proven his ability to create and maintain a high-performing team. However, he is not afraid to make adjustments to keep this level of performance, even if it is in the middle of a national championship game. In the 2017 National Championship game, Jalen Hurts played as quarterback for the entire first half. He was not performing to the best of his ability and struggled majorly compared to his performance during the regular season, putting up zero points for the Crimson Tide during his time in the game. Saban decided to start true freshman Tua Tagovailoa in the second half even though the young player had not seen any playing time during the season. The risky move worked as the Tide went on to defeat Georgia 26-23. When asked about the decision, Saban said he played Tua because the team needed to gain more yardage and Tua could

throw the ball better as Jalen is known more for his running game (Lauletta, 2018). This decision, which would not be made by many other coaches, highlights the fact that Saban will do whatever is necessary to keep his team performing in the manner they need to, even if it is unconventional.

5. What activities and/or actions does Coach Saban engage in which relate to the “adjourning” stage of the team building process? List your information and your sources.

The “adjourning” process for a college football team can have almost two separate processes within itself. One process involves the loss of players, often because they declare for the NFL draft. In this case, Saban supports his players and usually attends the draft or posts supporting messages on social media. In the other process, Saban now has to regroup his remaining players and work towards developing his new recruits. It is evident throughout the case that Saban has a tried and true method for this process and has proven his ability to recruit some of the top talent in the country.

6. Based on the information collected, what activities and/or actions is Coach Saban engaging in, to maintain the ongoing high performance of his teams and prevent a movement into the “adjourning” stage? List your information and your sources.

Coach Saban as well as every other coach, wants to extend the performance of their teams as long as possible. In the case of Saban and his team, this often means extending their season into the playoffs and eventually to the National Championship game. This can be difficult as they have to maintain and improve upon their performance for an extended period of time, but it can work to prevent the “adjourning” stage for as long as possible. Saban also encourages his players to stay at Alabama as long as possible, as opposed to entering the NFL draft as underclassmen. Saban believes this is the best thing for the player as another year or few years of college play can place them in a better draft class and eventually lead to stronger, more lucrative contracts for them (“Saban: Players lose by entering NFL draft early”, 2019). This does not necessarily prevent the adjourning stage as a whole as players will always move on from college. However, it does work to limit the impact the adjourning stage can have on the team as more returning players can lead to less conflict and more team cohesion earlier in the team development process.

7. Based on the information you have collected, can Coach Saban’s team development methods be implemented by business organizations? Why or why not?

Based on the success of Alabama throughout the entirety of Saban’s time with the school, it is apparent that they are doing something right when it comes to recruiting and team development. Saban and his team have continually held the top-three-ranked recruiting classes each season, taking the No. 1 spot six times (VanHaaren, 2019). The question is: How can this success be implemented in the world of business, and will managers be able to find the same

results?

As mentioned in the case, Saban does not only recruit when there is a need. Managers should always be open to potential new employees, especially those who may fill gaps within their current workforce. Saban also has high standards for his players and does not deviate from them. A 2013 New York Times article stated that Saban had between 8 and 10 characteristics for each position that he did not stray from (Bishop, 2013). Managers can implement this by standing firm on what they look for in a candidate. Lastly, managers must follow through on promises made during the recruitment process. Saban tells his recruits that Alabama is a winning program, which they clearly are. During the recruitment process, businesses need to provide potential employees with a clear picture of the company. In addition, they should not promise anything that will not be delivered. This will boost employee satisfaction, which contributes to retention and overall performance of the company.

Team development may be initially easier for a sports team; because in most cases, there is already a clearly defined goal. With Saban and his team, it is winning a national championship. To replicate this, managers should ensure that all team members know their goals and agree that they will work toward their achievement as a cohesive unit. This will expedite the team's ability to reach the performing stage of team development. Managers should also take note from Saban in the timing of the development stages. It is important to introduce new team members at a low-risk time. For the Tide, that is the off-season. For a business, it may be their slow season. This will give new members time to connect with the existing employees, allowing the group to progress throughout the stages of team development without haste or fear of high-stakes consequences.

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