

Jacob Morgan 00:00

No, you sound great. Okay. And so you know, with Riverside just don't hang up right when we're done. It's just going to quickly upload your video. Yeah. Okay. All right, push record, and then jump right in unless you have any other questions. Ready to go. All right. Hey, everyone. Welcome to another episode of leading the future of work. My guest today, John, you bacon, and he is the best selling author of a book called let them lead unexpected lessons in leadership from America's worst high school hockey team. John, thank you for joining me.

John Bacon 00:35

Thank you, Jacob. And sad to say it's all true.

Jacob Morgan 00:39

So I was gonna ask you about that. So when you say America's worst high school hockey team, some people out there might be thinking, you know, maybe they were bad. But were they really America's worst high school hockey team. So how bad were you guys?

John Bacon 00:54

Well, they were zero 22 And three, if you non sports fans out there, they know it's not a sports podcast. The Zero is where the winds go people. So zero wins 20 losses three times that was in the 99 2000 season. The year before that they win three games. Out of the 25 or so. There's a website called a CSA CS ch O, I think it is the ranks all the teams in the nation. They just started the year after this. But it made a pretty good case in the book that they would have qualified as the nation's worst based in comparative records and geography and so on. So they would have ranked you had 1000 Plus teams, that's not good. So yeah, Jacob, a lot of teams might have sucked. But these guys, you know, we aspire to suck. That was the goal. So

Jacob Morgan 01:41

yeah. Okay, so we're gonna talk about that today. But before we jump into that, give us a little bit of background information about you. I mean, how did you get involved with with coaching this team? What was your background in?

John Bacon 01:53

Sure I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of the University of Michigan. I went to Ann Arbor here on High School, so that school I ultimately coached our mascot is in fact, Jacob, the river rats, I'm not making that up, either. We're the only one in the country. A lot of lions and tigers and bears out there, but only one river rats. We had a very good team, my senior year were Final 14, I was not a very good player. So I'll get into shortly. Third and fourth line kind of guy killing penalties. Once he went to the University of Michigan ended up writing for the Detroit News from 95 to 99, writing feature stories covering the Olympics and World Cups and things like that cool stuff, then left that to write books and to coach this high school hockey team in 2000. So there's my crazy background. And part of that background was in fact that I was the worst player in school history. This is also not hyperbole, like the previous stat, I can prove this empirically. I know your listeners like numbers, I still hold the record Jacob for the most games, and here in uniform 86. I dressed for all, every game for all three seasons, we head back then, with the fewest goals zero. And that can't be beat. You can't plan all the games and

scoring none of the goals. No one can beat that record. So. So we're playing school history worst in America? Yes. This is the combination we're looking for here. And that's competition they picked. So that is not a very promising start.

Jacob Morgan 03:16

How did you get that job? By the way did you apply for did they just come to you and say, Hey, John, we got the worst team, you're the worst player? Like how was I want to know how this conversation went?

John Bacon 03:29

Well, it's actually more than a conversation is a pretty formal interview process. They received dozens of applications, which may sound surprising for the worst team in America. But it had been a very good program. It's still you know, well funded education system here in Ann Arbor and all that and pretty serious Hockeytown. So we had seven interview finalists. And then it came down to me and one other candidate with six people on the committee. And the final vote was four for him and two for me and Yes, Jake, if you can do the math, I should have lost right then and there. And it should have been the end. And the for voting against me, by the way, where the athletic director, my former eighth grade math teacher, a good friend of mine who voted for the stranger, by the way, so there's, that's not a good sign. Her secretary, one of the parents and the incoming Captain all voted against me. These are people you really need on your side. And I did not have them. But the other two I had was another parent and our legendary trainer, Rod Sorby, who's a star in the book. He kept on hammering the other four to find one of them. The athletic director in this case, flipped her vote. It was three, three, the principal breaks the tie with another interview, he picked makes I want to hear on that was it he knows nothing about hockey. So it was largely dumb luck that I got it. And when I got it, the players and the parents were deeply unhappy. So when I talk to current employers, you're talking about the future of work. We know that you know, recruiting right now is very hard. Retaining is very hard. Loyalty is very hard. Well, recruit to that. You're the worst plan school has Rate the worst team in America, and they hate you. So start there. So that's that was the starting point in 2000.

Jacob Morgan 05:07

Why did you even apply for this job? Actually, I mean, what what made you want to coach this team?

John Bacon 05:14

It had been a dream of mine. It pays nothing it pays \$5,000 per season four months. It pays you nothing in the offseason, when you still have to have practices and workouts and whatnot. So it's not money, it costs you a lot of money just to do it. There's no real prestige to it. I had no plans to coach elsewhere afterwards. That was not the idea. But I'd been a player in the team had been an assistant coach and the team for four years, long before as the head coach. I had coached at Culver academies without Clark was the nation's winningest ice hockey coach. I coached baseball as well, I'd always had the coaching bug, I love coaching, I just wanted to build an experience they would not forget, that was my ultimate goal. And a positive way is the idea. So in my when I took the job, my dad, his first question was your question, Jacob. He said, Why would you want to do that? So it's always been my dream. And then he, when I told him the record of the team, he shrugged and said, and I quote, well, when

you're on the floor, you can't fall out of bed. So there's my dad's motivational pep talk. Right there. And that's the name of the first chapter actually. So thank you, dad for that.

Jacob Morgan 06:19

I love that when you're on the floor, you can't fall off the bed. That's a great quote. Okay, so you're clearly in. What's the nice way to put this not not a good spot? Right? A lot of you know, the worst team worst player, people are mad, the captain is mad. And it's your first day. So you show up to work coaching this team? What do you even say to these people? Do you remember what your first day was like?

John Bacon 06:48

Very clearly, and it's in the book also. But before that, I met with my mentor al Clark of Culver academies to get the most wins of anybody. He started in 1976. With an outdoor rink and 12 Hispanic kids never skated before. Bottom skates in South Bend, Indiana, and the third year, their state champs fourth year, their state champs eight straight state champs till finally that into beat team, they would go in the state title. And this is one of the best programs in the country. And he's also a Phi Beta Kappa math department chairman, which is very unusual. So he didn't cut any corners. So this guy's my hero, and a great mentor to have. And one bit of advice I've got for your younger listeners out there is early on, don't worry about money, put mentors over money. The money isn't that great when start out anyway. So if you get a good mentor, you're heading in the right direction. And without that, it's going to be hard. So I asked my mentor al Clark, what do I do here? And he said, the first thing you got to do is to make it special to play for Iran. And Jacob being a smart aleck. I said, Well, we're already the worst of in America, that's pretty special. And he said, No, he said, the easiest way to make it special is to make it hard. I'll say it again. The easiest way to make it special is to make it hard. That's utterly paradoxical. It is the opposite of what everyone was telling me about. The millennials is now Generation Z. Of course, they're lazy. They're entitled, you need beanbag chairs, you need Casual Fridays, and Taco Tuesdays. No, he said, raise the bar right away. Look at the Navy SEALs, the Navy SEALs, the hardest job in the world. \$54,000, they take 6% Because they're selling the mission. They're selling the heart. They're not trying to sugarcoat it. So that's what I did. I sent out a letter to all the players before I even met them. And I said, Congratulations, you are trying out for the hardest working high school hockey team in the state of Michigan. And we work and then I met with the team and Mike Henry's back deck, he's the captain would have been a great, phenomenal captain, but he voted against me the first time. We're now great friends. And I had a questionnaire in that first letter, just a one page questionnaire, you know, basic stuff, how have you been playing hockey? What position? What do you like most about it? How can I coach you better simple stuff off the top of your head. And of the 15 guys who showed up in Henry's back deck that day, three, turned it in three as 20%. And so after learning all their names, and learning all their stories and be nice at first, I chewed him out. And I said, this is the problem. It's not Trenton, our arch rival, the best team in the state. It's not our travel across town and we're pioneer. It's this if we can't do this, was it too hard? was a complicated. You had my number. You had my email, you had my snail mail address. If anybody contacted me and said, I need an extension. I had a question. No, none of you did. You failed miserably at this. And this is the problem. If we can't do this, we can't do anything. And I say I'll see you at the workout on Monday and I walked off. And I joked with my assistant coach that you might be the head coach by the end of the day. But the whole point of the wakeup is what you're doing is not nearly good enough. We can't function this way and get anything

good done. And the key there, by the way, was that always focused on behaviors and not outcomes? Because I could not guarantee any outcomes were the worst time in America. How long will it Take us to when you have zero wins. You don't know how far below zero you really are. If you have four wins, you know you're one went away from five. If you have zero, you don't know how many wins you are, how many games you are from just one when you don't know. So I couldn't get any of that we focus on behaviors always, and not the outcomes, and we'll get to roles, work hard, support your teammates. That's it, we do those two things. I'm happy. If we don't do those two things. I'm not happy. And my word had to be good.

Jacob Morgan 10:27

No, no, no, it's actually quite interesting, because it seems like you started off with a little bit of a tough love approach. Which I think a lot of the actually, I don't know, maybe you would have some incident. Are leaders comfortable with this tough love approach? I feel like there's, they're worried about saying something like this, because they don't want employees to say, Oh, you were mean to me, you were rude to me. I can't work here anymore. I mean, I grew up with Russian immigrant parents, right. So all I knew was tough love growing up, of course. So I mean, I don't know, where do you stand on that? Are we a little too soft for tough love today?

John Bacon 11:04

That's what they said. Then also, that's what they said, I still teach in Michigan. And they said that about the Michigan students and it's not true. Now you won't get all of them, but you don't want to have them. That's the key. When you get all of them, no will some of them walk away? Maybe. And that's okay. The Navy SEALs take 6% The Peace Corps, different sides of the political spectrum, perhaps very hard jobs, very rigorous interview process to for what, like a few \$100 to dig ditches in the poorest countries in the world. They take excuse me, they take one out of six applicants. So they're not selling the salary, they're selling the mission, I was going to sell the mission. So you can do you get them all that way? No, you don't. But it's worth noting that all those workouts Monday, Wednesday, Friday, weight room first and on the track, and we don't waste a minute, it's hard, hard, hard, 90 minutes or so. And they're voluntary workouts, by state law, I can't make you come. Alright, that's the that's the law of the land. Not one player quit from the worst team in America, that shows you how hungry people actually are for real challenge, a real mission, somebody who believe in them, when to push them. And so I would still advocate this approach. Now, it's not just tough love, if it's just that you're gonna lose them. Anyway, that same day, we also designed new uniforms the senior class did, they got a lot of love for being on the team, a lot of attention, a lot of positive reinforcement. I didn't yell at them very often, the yelling was, hey, we can do this. But if you lower the bar, you've already compromised your mission anyway. So you've already lost my opinion.

Jacob Morgan 12:36

It seems like this starts with having that mission, right? Because if you make it about the mission and not about the money, you need to make sure first that you have a mission that is worth fighting for. So how do you start with that? Because, you know, a lot of companies, they might say, oh, you know, we just want to be number one for customer satisfaction, or we want to create the best product and you know, we're gonna give them tough love and hope they fight for that mission. It's not a very inspiring or

motivational mission. So how do you start there to make sure that you have that mission? I mean, is that something that you focus on to?

John Bacon 13:09

Absolutely two things both in that first letter, this before I met them again, one was, congratulations, you are trying out for the hardest work in high school hockey team in the state, which we already talked about. And we work. So right there on Twitter teams, that's pretty cool for team. And the cool part about this book, by the way, is my players are now in their 30s. They're about your age or so. And they can now look back on experience and know what mattered and what didn't. These are all leaders now themselves with wives and kids in many cases. So they chip in a lot of great stuff. And it's one of the players said, when you have not done anything in a year and a half and two years, and somebody believes you can even be the hardest working team in the state that attracts you. So that's one thing right there. And even in that first letter, I said, our goal is nothing less than a state title. Now, that's quite crazy for the worst time in America. But I said, but I mean, it won't happen this year, it's gonna happen sooner than you think. And when it does happen, those guys are going to invite you back at the senior banquet and give you a standing ovation. So off the start, they won the horsemen team in America, and in the state of Michigan. Day two, they went also we are now fighting for a state title. Daniel Burnham who built modern Chicago had a great line. He in the 1890s. He said, make no small plans, they lacked the power to stir your soul. If the if the pitch is hey, let's go and be mediocre. Good luck, that ain't gonna work, and you won't get the right people. And again, I stress this, you want to attract the right people. And if you lower the bar, the hot shots don't want that the hot shots are going somewhere else.

Jacob Morgan 14:41

Yeah. And you make an important point, which is it's not about attracting and keeping everybody it's about keeping the people that that you want to have. And I think a lot of organizations are very obsessed with tenure and how do we get people to stay as long as possible? But the reality is that we need to be focusing on getting the right people to stay, not just getting everybody to stay. Because it's kind of like being in a relationship where it doesn't make sense. You don't get a prize for being in a relationship the longest you want to be in a relationship where you're both growing and developing, you love each other. And it's, you know, it's good for everyone, not just because you're in it for so long

John Bacon 15:17

longevity of that approach, I agree with you entirely. When I see a company with less than 10% turnover, I get a little nervous. Now, more than 20% is a different problem. Of course, that's the more common problem. But as I said, though, amazingly, not one player quit, they all could have. And none of them did. I was not expecting that, frankly. So you might be surprised by how positive these results are, even from the quote unquote, worst team in America. These guys had kind of every bad habit you'd expect. But they were so hungry for a mission for purpose or sense of belonging, that they ate it up. But they only get that if you if you ask for it.

Jacob Morgan 15:56

So let's start a little bit with why they were the worst team in America. And then we can talk about some of the things that you actually did to transform that. So when you came in, I mean, obviously, you know, they knew how to skate. They knew had a shoot, I mean, it's right. That was table stakes of the job, like

you need to know how to skate you need to know how to pass the puck and stuff like that. So they were clearly competent in that regard. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been on the ice. So what was what was the problem if it wasn't with their technical skills?

John Bacon 16:25

A few things. One, when you lose that many games that often, morale cannot be much lower. That was a problem. Of course, they did no work in the offseason, which these days you have to do. That's in part because after you lose every game, who wants to do more of this. So that's another problem. Of course, they had a basic level of talent, as you point out, I mean, hockey, soccer, anyone can walk, right? I mean, you might not be a very good soccer player, but you ever knows how to walk, you have to know how to skate to play hockey to begin with. We didn't have very many travel team players in our team. We also had a number of very good players in the building who are going to hear on high school, but playing for the triple A travel teams and things like that, and not playing for the high school team. crucial point, by the way, I did not cut a single player ever from that zero 22 and three teams. So some studio their junior seniors on up and sophomores. Of course, not one player ever got cut. So we got we added some good players who came down later on. But we didn't cut any of those guys, and most of them played very big roles in this team. But they didn't know anything about the game of hockey, they the practices were not very good. The team had not won 10 games out of 25 in more than a decade. And we had already done it period. So it was all those things combined. And the biggest thing I mean, a lot of players in the team, were talking about quitting the team before the year started and or quitting hockey itself. So when you hate the game that much for a lot of reasons. You're up against it. So again, the recruiters out there, I know exactly what you're facing because they faced it. But what's the shocker is lowering the bar does not work raising it does.

Jacob Morgan 18:06

Okay, so we talked about what you did kind of on day one, you sent out this letter, a lot of people didn't even respond to it. So you kind of have day two, day three, day four, what were some of the things that you started to put into practice to try to transform this team around?

John Bacon 18:23

Well, I'm pleased to report Jacob after my little speech in the back deck about the questionnaire, they all turned him in that Monday at our first workout. So they bet 1000 on that one, every single player had it. So we got that much down. Then we tried to stretch and count to get ourselves ready with the seniors in the inner circle. And everyone else in the outer circle are trying to breed layers of leadership. And we could not do this 1520 minutes we were at it, but I never took it over for him and never stop. We're gonna keep on going until we get this right. So it was frankly pretty pathetic. And it's not because these guys weren't smart or didn't care. They were embarrassed to show that they cared. Beings years one, two and three, they chanted the record at the school dance at the time was own 50 year old 20 Oh and 20 the players chanted this at the dance. So the losing to become a point of pride. So that was the hardest these days to get them to stick their necks out for fear that they might lose. I mean, I can't guarantee victory. So but that got better the workouts got better. By the end of the summer, Jacob every one of us had thrown up on that track, every player and the coaches, we did it with him. And you know, you're turning a corner. And Al Clark, my mentor told me this is going to happen. If they know they had to do something that not everybody would be willing to do just to be on the team. Then with a

little encouragement, they will enforce the culture themselves. That's what happens in winning cultures. So sure enough, late August and this is Michigan so it rains cats and dogs that morning, the sun comes out it's 93 degrees. Steam is coming off the track. It's that that holiday so much steam that on the starting line of our track, I said gentlemen Look down the football field. Can you see the goalposts and the air is so wiggly? You can't see the goalposts. I said That's right. It's the hottest hour of the hottest day of the year. And we're lucky that it falls on Wednesday at 1230. And not Tuesday night, Thursday night, four o'clock. Otherwise, we've missed our chance to prove how tough we are how far we've come. We're not going to whine about this, we're not going to cry about this. We're going to brag about it and break every record we've got on this damn track who's with me? And by then they all are they start getting into it, except for new guys. ninth grader grumbles something I didn't catch it. My Henry, my now converted captain who is a great, great leader, he turns to the kid and says, Hey, you play for here on and it's harder over here. And once I heard that, I said, hallelujah. That's what I was waiting to hear and not from me. But from them. I'm some old, I'm 35 years old, very old to them. They don't care what I think. But my Henry is the coolest kid in school, you need him. He's a senior, you're a freshman, when he starts saying that, now we've got an actual culture. And now we got it rollin. So that's when I knew that things had changed.

Jacob Morgan 21:05

So from organizational speak, I guess it's kind of like having the brain champion, the culture evangelist inside of an organization, which seems, it seems like those are important people to have the kind of the cheerleaders to get everybody else on board.

John Bacon 21:19

They're essential. And we're jumping ahead a little bit. But you're too I stress this in the book, it's a establishing your, your standards. And that's the first thing we did. The second step is the layers of leadership. And the third one is you let them lead you they take over. But in the layers of leadership, clearly, it's important to lead by example, you're from Russian immigrant parents, I guarantee you, they're very hard workers, very intense, very serious. I know these people, of course, and you know them better than I do. So you know, they're already leading by example, that's vital. But we had a joke in our team that leading by example, is not nearly nearly enough. And if you lead by example, you've got a name, and you're called a sophomore. Because all that means is you know, your job and you can do your job, congratulations, you get a job, you get a jersey, you get a stall in our locker room, you get a place in our bus, that's all you get. And if I'm an employer, you got a parking spot, and a cubicle and a computer and a paycheck. But that's how you get your junior year you better know your job, do your job, know everyone else's job, too. And your senior year, you know, your job, do your job, everyone else's job and help them do their jobs better. Now, it's not my culture. It's your culture. It's not my team. It's your team. So do I have high standards? Is there tough love? Absolutely. But guess who runs the team? Actually, you guys do. And that's something that very few bosses are willing to do. This takes courage. And everything I'm telling you, Jacob is simple. But none of it is easy. So this takes courage to do it this way. You have to have faith in your people. And I had faith in the worst team in America, because they had shown me for the year even started, how much they had changed. So it was it was fun to do. And it's actually cool to do.

Jacob Morgan 22:58

So instituted the tough love. You made it really hard. You made it special to be part of the team. Anything else that that you implemented, which helped transform this team?

John Bacon 23:11

Sure. Well, we talked about changing the culture, of course, be patient with that behavior. That's big. Yes, another thing talk a little bit about that. Sure. Work hard for your teammates, those the only two grades you get on my team, basically. Because those we can do every day we wake up, it's our choice. It's not the weather. It's not the referees, it's not the goalies pucks bounce. Not bad luck. None of this stuff is not in look at your companies. It's not COVID. It's not the economy. It's not the FAA, it's not the SEC, it's not anything else but your attitude, work hard support teammates. That's it, who would not work want to work at a place where everybody's working hard, and everybody's got your back. That's exceedingly rare. And if you find one, you better hang on to it. Because those are the exceptions, not the rule. That's all we judged on. Now. I did have a ton of stats for every game 15 stats per player per game. That's theater stats per game 20 players, but I never told which one is more important. We post them on the board the next day every day so they could see it right away. They all went right up to that board right away. And I learned this from a speech in Santiago, Chile. I was there to speak, but the person before me had a great speech. So I took notes. And she researcher I think Ruckers said that high achievers love to be evaluated and low achievers hate to be evaluated. So guess what I did? I evaluated 15 stats per player per game, every game. And what happens is high achievers love it. And low achievers either become high achievers, or they find someplace that somewhere else they can be mediocre. But what's great about all the stats is it wasn't scores and assist wasn't his leading scorers. Everybody found a way to contribute to the team's success. It wasn't just goals and assists if I'm running a company. Don't just give me sales. Give me CSI, give me a tenant. Give me complaints. Give me whatever else you got, give me a whole rack of things. And there are a lot of ways you can help us, as we talked about that a lot too. And again, reduce your rules, make them stick those the behaviors, of course, next thing, of course, second phase is building trust layers of leadership. Before that, by the way, I gotta say, also help get help. When I see a new leader, take over the tendency. And I know you've seen this a lot with your guests. By the way, your guest list is incredibly impressive. And the podcast is great. Love it, honor to be on it. What happens? guy gets in charge, I don't give it 25 or 55. All of a sudden, I feel like I need all the answers and to be all powerful. I can't ask questions. I can't take suggestions. Those are all weakness. That guy's in trouble. That guy's going down. And when he goes all the way down, guess what, there'll be no safety net there. He has no allies left. So Warren Buffett had a great line. He said, if you if you think you're the smartest guy in the room, get a better room. And my goal is to be the dumbest guy in the coach's room. And I greatly exceeded my expectations. I was surrounded by fantastic assistant coaches, strong leaders hire strong leaders and weak leaders hire weak leaders. So Vladimir Putin, by the way, I'm sure you've got an opinion about this. But I guarantee you that he had a lot of Yes, men in that room. And no one had the guts to tell him the truth that this will be harder than you think. And that leaves a lot of problems. So that's my advice there. Go ahead.

Jacob Morgan 26:24

You have a question about one of the things that you brought up. And I'm trying to remember what it was if somebody one of the first things that you said, Oh, man,

John Bacon 26:34

we talked about results that behaviors have high standards have

Jacob Morgan 26:38

high standards? No, no, it was high standards. So you know, there's this notion inside of organizations, right? Focus on your strengths, not your weaknesses. Not everybody can be a star player. But even if you're not a star player, you have strengths that people could focus on, you know, John Wooden, who a lot of people consider to be like the, you know, the greatest coach in history. Yeah. And you he was famous for saying, I don't believe that everybody on my team is going to be an all star like I can't have a team where everybody's an all star, but I can focus on the strengths of my people. Is your approach different to that? Because it sounds like you're saying everybody needs to be kind of high performing. But is that realistic inside of an organization where everyone is a high performer?

John Bacon 27:18

If you separate two ideas, behavior from performance, behavior, guess what? That's everybody. And the bus. As we said, the bus waits for no, man, if I tell you the bus leaves at five o'clock, it's not 501. And I'll give you the leading scorer, the starting goalie and I've left them both in the parking lot. You go, you leave. So one set of rules for everybody. And don't let your top salesperson not help handle the paperwork or show up late that's a playing favorites. demoralizes the whole team and frankly, John Wooden and I've interviewed him a couple times in high regard for him. But I one huge issue. I've got a big disagreement. And that is he said, My the rules aren't equal, but they are fair. In other words, if you're pleading scoring me five minutes late, if you're the scrub at the end of the bench you can't be That's bull that's not a team to me. And granted that guy's 111 national titles and basketball and I haven't so force himself in my advice and pretty hard to disagree with John Wooden but I don't agree with that for creating a culture or a team. What is across the spectrum? Is the performance. We had guys in the team who are our second and third year who are some of the best players in the state. We're all Staters. Where's another guy Scotty McConnell, in the book, he scored his first goal with 3.2 seconds left, and his entire high school career. That's our Rudy by the way. So from the movie. So we had a spectrum there and playing time was not equal. That was certainly the case that better players got more playing time everyone, if you dress gets in the game, that was my rule, but the playing time will not be equal. So in that sense, performance is one thing behavior is another. And that's we have to separate it. Good question. So

Jacob Morgan 28:57

you focused on the beach, yes, you focused on the behaviors that people were exhibiting, even if they didn't achieve the results that you were hoping for, if they had those right behaviors that mattered to you most.

John Bacon 29:09

That's all that mattered. It didn't No matter for playing time and things like that. So their performance resulted in my performance with them. But their behaviors also dictated my behaviors with them. If your behaviors are good, then you have the same status evidence on the team, the same warm ups, you get the same attention in practice, you get the same wealth from us, from the coaches and so on and we love them all. And one of my big points coming up and this applies to this is water all the plants don't

get in the business of picking the winners. We try to predict that guy's got to this guy doesn't you don't know yet. Be humble enough to realize that all kinds of people including Einstein, can surprise you down the road. This list of players like this and performers is too many to count. Tom Brady was picked what 190/9 I think in that draft, I guess it worked out pretty well the best player in the history of Football. So five rounds of players went before him before he went water all the plants. I don't know who's gonna grow, you don't know either. I don't know how far how big, how quickly, but I know this, if you don't water them, they're not going to grow. So they all got to get the Love. This is where you go from tough love to the love. You all get my love you all get my attention, y'all get my respect, you got a problem, I'll stop what I'm doing to listen to you no matter who you are in the lineup. So all that is what I give back.

Jacob Morgan 30:30

But what happens if the behaviors don't lead to results? So take for example, I don't know a sales professional, either exhibiting the right behaviors, but they're not closing any deals and not bringing any more money, whereas their, their peers on the team are? Do you say that you just keep that person on the team, even though they have the right behaviors, but they can't achieve the results?

John Bacon 30:50

We do a few things. One, first of all, be patient, because you don't know when it's going to kick in, or why oftentimes the best salespeople become that in year two or three, be as patient as you can be based on your business model and so on to coach the guy. All right, what are you doing? Well, what are you doing poorly, not just the behaviors, but we have a perhaps a sales protocol most companies do, of course, are we following the protocols? You're following up with phone calls? Are you cataloging all your calls and all your business or you're setting up meetings, let's go over the particulars to make sure we're doing everything we're supposed to be doing. So that's next thing. Third thing is, you've been at it for two or three years, you're doing all the right stuff, not just the behaviors, but the actions, alright, to become a top salesperson and it's not working, maybe services your thing? If your attitude is that good, I probably want to keep you. So maybe service is your thing. Maybe sales is not a great fit for you. Maybe debugging programs is where you should be. So in that case, I want to keep an umbrella but perhaps not in that role. And that's speaking of which, by the way, three players. We moved from decent but not great forwards to defenseman who all want best defenseman in the league by year two. So in that case, okay, you're good for but not a great one. Let's move you back on defense. Let's coach you up there. And Bobby champions and Perry marijuana both moved from for to defense, and when the league's best defenseman played college hockey. So in that case, you find a new role.

Jacob Morgan 32:15

It's very interesting to kind of identify other roles or areas where employees might be a good fit. So I really liked that message of if people have the right behaviors, but they're not achieving the right results. You shouldn't get rid of them because they have those right behaviors. But maybe they need to be in another opportunity or in another position on the team. And I think a lot of leaders forget that. And they're very quick to just say, Hey, you're not meeting your numbers, you gotta go.

John Bacon 32:39

Well, the great Albert Einstein quote, of course, if you judge a fish and its ability to climb a tree, you think the fish is pretty stupid. It's not what the fish does. So if I'm judging, you know, Perry, Maryland and Bobby chapters, and how many goals are scoring the scoring a few then you're okay. But let's find a new role. And they scored as many or more goals on defense, amazingly, than they had an offense and no company that I know of is just got one role sales or whatever, find new roles. And in our team made a lot of rules. We also had penalty killers, for example, penalty, penalty killing is not very glamorous to other people, it was to us, we kept track of penalty killing, for penalty killing, I don't know if you can handle the puck or not. All I care about is if can you skate fast enough to catch the guy who's got the puck, all right, and then we shoot it down the ice and you kill the penalty accordingly, I need one good minute out of you per shift, and we have two shifts for two minute penalty. And those guys had a very clear rope, I use third and fourth line players. For those guys, they didn't want to gas my scores for that role most teams do. So you try to find as many roles for all these players as you can. And also, this is important too. If you are a third or fourth line player, I need you, I need a strong third and fourth line that was one of the greatest strengths we had as a team is that our third and fourth line is better than your third or fourth line. And I tell him that and make them feel special, that every role here is important or else we wouldn't have a role for you. So this is big. And that's that's crucial. I got that from Bo Schembechler the former Michigan football coach. He had a great line about his secretary Mary passing and Lynn cook. He said it's not their job to open up envelopes and send out emails and answer the phones. It's their job to win big 10 titles. And they do it by being the best secretaries in the big 10. So they're not just processing things, you're part of his team. And when you win a big 10 title at Michigan, the lowest student manager because the same size ring as the starting quarterback does, the women prefer pendants, but they get them also, you're all part of this team and all of us are here to do one thing, and that is win big 10 titles, and therefore you're part of this greater mission

Jacob Morgan 34:44

and love that. Why does leading by fear not work?

John Bacon 34:48

It doesn't work. I'll say this. I think you need about five or 10% of fear. You have to be willing to be unpopular once in a while. It's really to go off the handle once in a while. Not very often. That's That's it tricky, better use carefully. And these days of course, that's definitely that's an adjustment you have to make for the modern era, you had to bring that one way down from what you're allowed to do years ago, even as a coach, I would have to do that now. But fear itself though, if that's you versus them, if it's you versus them, you've already lost, they're more of them. I've got 25 players, I've got six assistant coaches, if it's me versus them, I lose the system coaches are now working against me and others the players were not going against me. And then you get the the quiet quitters. For example, we hear about today. You know, the passive aggressive screw you I'm gonna go very slowly on this. I can't monitor them all. They have to want to do it. So great line from one of my heroes, John Cooper. John Cooper was the coach of Lansing Catholic central when I was coaching. And over here on he is now the coach of the Tampa Bay Lightning in the NHL, he's won two Stanley Cups and almost won a third this year. So I guess Jacob, our career paths somehow diverged along the weeks, I'm free this season, it turns out so hats off coach Cooper, great line, bad teams, nobody leads, good teams, coaches, lead, great teams, everybody leads, and you don't get that through fear. You get that out of respect. And another mentor of mine, a Hollywood agent. She said movies are made for two reasons. One is passion. The

other is fear. And fear doesn't work. So fear, fear works for a little while, but it is ultimately corrosive. Because the adversity, the ratio, see early on, it's tough love. But now we're getting a lot of love. And fear is not the way to go.

Jacob Morgan 36:34

I'm also curious to hear your approach to setting goals, because I know that that was something that you wrote about extensively in your book, too. When you think in the business world, how a lot of people set goals. Are there any issues with that? Is there a better way for us to be thinking about how to set a goal for ourselves or for our team?

John Bacon 36:52

Yes, great question. I can see Jacob, you've done your homework. So I hope your listeners appreciate that for all your many guests, you actually know about the book, of course, and know how the book works. Yes, the third section, of course, is let them lead. And one aspect of that is goal setting. What almost always happens is and I've been to these meetings, I've spoken at these meetings, the CEO, the department chair, whoever it is gets up there. PowerPoint, here are our goals for this year, bla bla bla bla bla bla, people in that room have never seen those goals before, they will never see them again, they don't care about any of them, they have no input, they have no idea how these numbers were arrived at. There's no bind whatsoever, those goals are not going to be achieved. I'm telling you that right now. So that's not how you do it, you do the opposite. And this is again, we start letting them surprise you letting them take over. We had 10 goals per season every season. And these we took very seriously. We laminated them, we printed them out, we put them on the walls, put them on cards in your wallet, that they're required to carry around, I had only two of the eight of the 10 goals. My first two were highest grade point in the state for high school hockey teams. And we did achieve that at 3.27. Jacob I gotta tell you, hockey teams are not known for their academics. So this was more heroic than you ever this is not the tennis team is a cross country team or one of those high achieving bunch. This is a hockey team. That was very impressive. Second thing was the fewest penalties in the league, we almost got your second and third place out of 12. Because I knew they didn't care about those. Ostensibly, they're never going to pick those three through 10. We're all theirs. And the seniors ran the meeting, they had spent two or three days on this with the rest of the team, they would have 30 or 40 ideas and boil them down to eight. And those were their goals on the wall. And now they've got buy in. And guess what, here's the beautiful thing, they will raise the bar higher than you ever would. And after our first year, guess what? They had state champion as the 10th goal every year from that point forward, and we almost achieved it. So we came became shockingly close.

Jacob Morgan 38:51

Wow, that's awesome. So

John Bacon 38:53

the point there is let them set their own goals. Even salespeople Yeah, let them come up with the numbers. And if they didn't put the numbers too low, do you want that guy? That's not a good sign off?

Jacob Morgan 39:03

How long did it take for this transformation to happen? And what was the ultimate transformation? Did you go from being the worst team in America to being the best team or what was the outcome? And how long did it take?

John Bacon 39:13

Sure we the fruit we won our first three games. Amazingly, we won more games in our first week than we'd won the previous two seasons combined. So that was good. A good week, we had a 10 game losing streak, but we finished the first year with seven wins. That's the most improved human school history. The second year we are 16 Nine until we went from zero to seven to 16 and two that was that broke the record again for the most improved team. I felt bad we weren't Jacob we are the most improved team two years in a row. So we went from zero the worst team in the school history to the second best team in school history in two years. Again, largely the same players. They didn't cut any one of those guys. Third year were 17 four and five. We are number four in the state out of 200 teams. We are number 53 in the nation. We have past 12 103 teams. We started 12 and 36 And now number 53, we passed 97% of the nation's teams in three years. No one's done it before. And I guarantee you, it'd be extremely hard for anyone do it again, if you have a start out last. That's only one team a year can do what we did start out at the bottom, that's how far and how fast we got the next year, we're still very good. And we beat Trenton, the state champs for three at their place. We didn't want to say title, but we were good enough to win one at that point. So that dream was real. From the end of second season on we lost the Trenton our second year, and the regional finals, three out of two therapists, we shot them by a little bit. Their fans gave our fans our players a standing ovation. At that point they knew and Trenton won the state title that year. At that point, were that close to winning the state title?

Jacob Morgan 40:43

No, I love that. One more question for you before we jump into some action items out there, it seems like one of the things that made all this possible is as a leader, as a coach, you had to be able to connect with your people. And it doesn't seem like that's something you can really fake. Absolutely. How important? How important was that kind of connection with them, like knowing your players on a human level, who they are as individuals, what they care about what they value? Is that something you did? And can you speak a little bit about the difference between sort of faking it versus being genuine behind it?

John Bacon 41:17

You can't fake it, period. And look your employees, you're not going to fool. And believe it or not, you really can't fool high school boy, because those guys are cynical in many ways their phoniness is their probably biggest enemy. So don't even try it. Look, either care about them or you don't. And one question I like to ask in my speeches is who is your favorite teacher? And I bet Jacob off the top of your head. You can pull it up in a second. I've asked that question from Vancouver to San Diego to Sao Paulo, Brazil. I've asked an English Portuguese and that's been you're more than 300 times and nobody in the world hesitates on that answer. Who is yours?

Jacob Morgan 41:54

I have a few. I remember an elementary school teacher named Miss Grenier. I remember AP Psychology teacher in high school. And I remember a statistics professor that I had at UC Santa Cruz, whose name is Carlos Dobkin.

John Bacon 42:12

Hey, that's quite a range. Grade, Mr. Mitchell. Teacher here Yeah, third grade high school and then of course college Santa Cruz though the banana slugs? And is that them?

Jacob Morgan 42:24

That is correct. Hey, yeah.

John Bacon 42:25

How about how about the man? Oh, gotta love that one. Of course. When I asked the question, I get answers like that. I get third grade I get high school I get college. There is no there's no similarities whatsoever. No pattern to this subject, the grade, race, gender, any of this stuff. None of it has any bearing whatsoever. It wasn't a two things. Let's take Miss Grenier for example. Third grade or your second Mitchell's your high school teacher?

Jacob Morgan 42:51

Yeah, Mr. Mitchell was my psychology teacher in high school.

John Bacon 42:55

Alright, question. Was he easy?

Jacob Morgan 42:58

No. In fact, I didn't do particularly well in his class.

John Bacon 43:01

And he's still one of your favorites. That's pretty amazing. Did he care about you?

Jacob Morgan 43:08

Yeah, yeah, he definitely cared about the students in there. In fact, me and several, several other students would spend some time talking to him after class, even even after the bell rang, we still want him like talk, don't

John Bacon 43:18

stay after class, talk to you. That's it. That's the whole thing. Everything else is details. I got a lot of details in the book. But if I care about you, but I don't push you. I'm a pushover and I need you in my schedule. God bless you. But I will not remember you. If I push you this is back to your earlier point about tough love. If I push you, but I don't care about you, I'm a jerk. And I will remember you, but not finally. And that's the model we're talking about earlier, that does not work either. So right now what we're doing, we're doing the softy, we're here, the beanbag chairs and the casual Fridays, Taco Tuesdays and so on. That doesn't work. It just doesn't, they liked the stuff, they're gonna they're gonna like they won't perform any better. The other way also does not work if I push you, but I don't care about

you. That doesn't work. All it is is your favorite teacher. I care about you so much that I will stay after school. I'll talk to you over lunch to make sure you achieve our high standards, the goals that you have set for yourself. That's what a great leader actually does. So in that sense, that's that's how the whole thing boils down really?

Jacob Morgan 44:19

Well, as I mentioned last 1015 minutes or so I really like to focus on action items and specific things that leaders out there can do to implement in their careers and their lives, whether it's at home or inside their organizations, and very first one with us. How can leaders be great coaches, because that's one of the things that we keep hearing the most about is a leader needs to be a coach. I actually talked about it in my most recent book called The future leader. And one of the things that I say when I talk about the skill of the coach is a coach helps make other people more successful than they are not just more successful, but more successful than they are. And I feel like those last two words help people help people become more successful than you lose two words people oftentimes forget, they assume it's just helped somebody become more successful, which, to be honest, is pretty easy to do. Right? You spend five minutes with them, you teach them something, you're better all of a sudden they're a bit more successful. Yeah. And it's like, you know, that's not really what a great coach does. So when you think about what a great coach does, what do great coaches do? And how can the listeners, the viewers out there become great coaches in their teams?

John Bacon 45:27

Well, first of all, think of your favorite teacher and be that person. And that means probably uncompromising, but caring about you a great deal. But as far as the there are two kinds of leaders really, and you kind of hit a hit upon this, Jacob, I think there are leaders who find your success a feather in their cap, the more of my people who are doing well, the better I looked, the better is for everybody, or your success is a threat to me. And therefore I know that interesting, you're getting attention and awards and all that. If you got the second kind of boss, you need to quit. You need to transfer because they know they don't change, and you'll never be the very successful under them. No matter how great you think you are. You will not I've had both kinds of bosses. Trust me, you gotta leave on that one, sadly, but but you want to be the kind of coach look, I never scored a goal as a player. Yeah, it bothers me. But man, when Scotty McConnell scores, his only goal with 3.2 seconds left, I was crying. There's no way any goal I scored would have made me cry. I was so happy for scooter working so hard for so long. And he finally did it with 3.2 seconds left in his senior night. And we still talk about that. I saw him for lunch two weeks ago, that was 18 years ago. We've got a barbecue in my backyard. Every summer, they all come back. They come back with wives and kids older than my kid. By the way, I'm a late starter. They give me parenting advice, Jacob and I've got to take it. The point is that I love these guys. And I'll tell you right now, if you don't love people don't become a leader. You're not going to like

Jacob Morgan 46:49

it. Yeah. Yeah, no, it's simple and straightforward advice. And as far as how to be an effective coach, is it? I mean, do you make time do you each day, go up to one of your employees and just recognize them? Do you get to know them a little bit more as a human being like, where do you start even to be a great coach?

John Bacon 47:14

Right there in my class at Michigan called Leading by coaching, which led to this book, actually, this and the TED Talk led to the book and the website is let them lead by baking.com, which I always forget to get out there. Let them lead by booking.com. I've got my own podcast on which I'll be inviting you shortly. Jacob, I hope you can join us. On your podcast, you do a great job, of course, and our listeners would love to hear from you. But the biggest thing that came out of it, we did a survey in class, they had study groups and so on. What was the most important the most important traits? What are negotiable traits can be yes or no? And what are deal breakers. And the deal breakers are lack of respect, lack of trust, why are you screaming at you and so on? Any leader does that you probably lost your people forever. They're negotiable ones, for example, our pregame speeches, motivational stuff. Our Clark, my mentor, his big speech was, well, let's be a good one to win. Okay, thanks. John Wooden didn't have John Wooden never gave a pregame speech. He didn't. He won national titles. So hats off. So that may or may not matter to stay true to your personality, they're the biggest thing that came up every single time. And I don't know if I would have guessed it was you have to know your people. And my one of my mentors over here, our Gallup, a 96 year old World War Two veteran who still cycles every day, he told me you cannot motivate anybody you don't know, before the old line goes before they care how much you know, the better know how much they care. You start with the heart first, start with the heart, the brain comes second. There's not a connection there. It's not going to work.

Jacob Morgan 48:48

What if it's not natural to because I think for a lot of leaders. They view work as kind of a place you show up, you do your job, I'm happy to help you with your tasks. You know, if you don't know something about work, but for a lot of people, it's kind of uncomfortable, like, tell me about your family. Like I think of my dad, for example, right? And I talked to my dad, sometimes I'm like, do you share anything personal about work? And he's like, no, why the hell did my coworkers want to know about me? Why do I want to write school kinda like work is a place of business. So for people out there where you know, they're not comfortable, venturing into that personal realm of getting to know people, they just lost cause

John Bacon 49:30

now, for a few reasons. One is again, be true to yourself. I Clark. I talk a mile a minute, I talk a lot. I love talking to people. Al Clark has none of those things. Phi Beta Kappa math major. He says about 20 words a day, but he cares about his people. And and how do you know when someone cares about you? You just do. My son is seven years old and I say Do you know how much I love you? He goes Yes, I go he goes, I just do. Yeah, that's it. I mean, you still have to care about with them, it doesn't mean I've had fake conversations around the watercooler. But hey, so what'd you do with this weekend? You like soccer, and now I don't have that. But I have to care about you beyond and employ. Now some people can work that way. And if you work at a widget factory know about making widgets, and that's good for everybody, then fine, you know, no one's unhappy with that. But if you really want to achieve great things, you probably have to, if you want them to achieve as you say better than they can be better than you can be. You have to get to know him on some level does have to be big conversations, but they have to know your care. And how do they know you care? They just do. And what a former player of mine Steve LASIK once said is the sad fact is you don't like somebody who's

working for you. They already know. And I don't know how they already know but they do so and likewise you care about them. They know that too. So you don't have the your dad but I know these guys, they covered the Red Wings for a while Detroit Red Wings Slava T stuff he got Larry on off on some of the great stars of Soviet hockey. They're gruff. They're tough. Oh, there's in many ways, and you get to know them. And they're so warm and so friendly. All right, but how do you know that? It is a John that cared about you a great deal? And I think everyone's not, none of that happens. All right. And Bo Schembechler once asked him about what he hates his arch rival and his mentor. I said, You loved him, didn't you? Of course, I love him. He's a great man. And I say, did you ever tell him that you love him? Did I ever tell what he has? are you what are you? Know, you don't tell a guy like that in the 50s and 60s? Did you love them? It just wasn't done. But it was no, it was it was felt. And they have to feel that. That's the point

Jacob Morgan 51:28

now. Maybe one or two more questions for you before we wrap up? Sure. What are some of the big mistakes that you see leaders making when trying to coach their people? Because a lot of people try to be coaches, but not everybody succeeds? Where? Where are the big stumbling blocks? Where do people fall? And how do you avoid those stumbling blocks?

John Bacon 51:47

First we talked about a couple of times is be yourself. This is my personality, and I can't I can't do out clerk. I can't get by in 10 words a day. I'm not a math major. It's not my strength. Math Department Chairman's stolen, you got to be your own personality, whatever it is, be authentic. That's one thing. And trust that, too. When you're the head coach, when you're the department chair, when you're the CEO, whatever. You're no longer there best power. Alright, we're the assistant coach, you're the uncle, everyone loves you. You're the head coach, you're the dad and you get the tough love. Right? That's there's a big difference in the role there. You need great assistant coaches, but they're not always going to like you and you got to always like them anyway. So don't don't expect to get love and, and harmony from them all the time. I got a kid you know, every kid at some point says I don't love you. Well, you can't turn around, say I don't love you either. It doesn't work, you're the adult act like it. So don't expect it always come back to eight. What you really want is respect. If you're getting respect. That's it. wherever else you get on top of that is gravy. That's another thing to three. Don't underestimate them. And don't let them underestimate themselves. Let them set their own goals. Don't lower the bar for them. Don't ever tell anybody. What they can't do. Oh, you can't do that. No, no, no, no. Instead of No. Because give them yes. If yes, you can do that if X, Y and Z. All right, it sounds a whole lot better than no, you can't do that. Because XY and Z, the same things. All right, you can't do because the budget the lawyers, this none out, you can do it if you can figure out the budget and the lawyers and blah, blah, blah, your job. So try to put them more in charge of their own their own work. Of course, the last thing, of course, is let them lead. That's the title of the book. Driver's Ed, man, we've all gone through it, I drive and you watch, you drive an iWatch. Third step, I handed the keys. That's the scary one. Like I said, it takes courage to coach this way takes courage to lead this way. My kids going through bike training was the hardest part I bike, he watches he bikes, I carry him, then, ah, I gotta let go the damn seat. Don't be afraid like oh, this and they're gonna wipe out. Let them wipe out. You know what, sooner or later they're going to paint the porch, they gotta carve the turkey themselves. And they're not going to do the way you did. And then you got my third year, by the way, we had a 14 game

winning streak. We lost two games very closely to get two very good teams. I put the seniors in charge of coaching. The next game picking 20 players address five to start changing during the games, how hockey works. The between period chalk talk after the game talking to enter news, they did the entire thing. I didn't say a word the entire night. And they beat a ranked team six to nothing. So that's what you can accomplish. That's what they can accomplish when they know you trust them.

Jacob Morgan 54:32

Now, in hearing your talk kind of reminds me about the difference between leading from a position of influence versus reading from a versus leading from a position of power or from your title because you need to separate the two right? I mean, there's a couple of different ways to lead. You could say hey, I'm your boss, I'm the VP you need to do what I'm saying and you know, go do it. Or it's leading from that position of influence where you know you're leading and P People want to follow you because they know that you're going to coach them and guide them you have their back. And it's a very, it's a either way you can get people to do what you want them to do by forcing them, but one of them has a significantly greater impact and longer term results versus the other one. So I like that different comparison.

John Bacon 55:19

That's a great point. And I know we're getting near the top here. But I said earlier about leading by fear, you can do about five or 10%, you have to that everyone has no you know what, once in a while, I'm gonna play the head coach card that we're doing because I'm the head coach. And once a while you can do that you can't do it that often. You better mean it when you do it. But usually, the great line comes from Scott Drew, friend of mine who used to be the dean of Michigan Business School, he's now the CEO of Equinox fitness was around the country. His great line is when you're the dean of Michigan Business School, you have to lead as if you have no power, because you have no power. Which is ultimately true. The people have the power. I mean, again, if it's me versus them, they win. So I have to make them want to do this. That's the hard part.

Jacob Morgan 56:02

Yeah, yep. Couldn't agree more. Well, this has been a fantastic discussion and conversation, why don't you let people know? Where can they go to learn more about you to grab your most recent book, and if anything else that you want to mention for people to check out?

John Bacon 56:15

Sure. It's a let them lead by bacon.com. That's got my TED Talk. It's got my appearance on Good Morning America, New York Times it's got also, of course, how to order the book, you can order it of course at Amazon or anywhere else, including your bookstore, and my podcast, let them lead. I've had about 40 guests on so far. We've been at it for almost a year. And we're picking up and I'm gonna have Jacob on here before you know it, because you're too damn good. So that's how you follow me. And of course, I do do a lot of corporate speaking as well.

Jacob Morgan 56:43

Very cool. Well, John, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to speak with me. I really, really appreciate it.

John Bacon 56:49

Take it. There's a lot of fun on top of everything else, when work is really going well. It's also fun. Thank you.

Jacob Morgan 56:54

All right. That's right. Thanks, everyone for tuning in my guest again, John, you bacon make sure to check out his book. It is called let them lead unexpected lessons in leadership from America's worst High School Scott from America's worst high school hockey team. And as you heard, it really was America's worst high school hockey team. So that's it for us. See all of you next week.