

Do You Play Offense or Defense at Work?

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During the last few weeks, we've made a decision in our offices at The Table Group that would seem to apply to any workplace. We call it moving from defense to offense. Understanding the difference between these two approaches as it pertains to football is helpful in applying it at work.

In football, defense is initially easier to learn than offense. At the beginning of the NFL season, scoring tends to be lower than later in the season. That's because it takes time for an offense to hone its skills and coordinate its actions, while a defense can more readily show up and be turned loose to respond to whatever the offense is trying to do. As the season goes on,

scoring increases as the offense begins to improve the coordination of their plays while the defense shows relatively less improvement.

At work, as in football, playing defense is a primarily *reactive* affair. We typically respond to what is happening in front of us. It's easier to play defense because we don't have to think as hard or make as many decisions as we do on offense. When it comes to day-to-day work in the office, defense involves responding to e-mail and requests for meetings from others and waiting for something urgent to grab our attention. Many of us—perhaps most of us—work in a defensive posture. We arrive at work and go straight to our desks where we open our laptops, check our e-mail, and respond to whatever the world has for us that day.

Playing offense is different. It is a primarily intentional, *proactive* approach. It's more difficult than defense because it requires us to discern for ourselves what our priorities should be and to stick with our plans in the face of distractions and temptations. An offensive posture at work involves beginning the day by reviewing our projects and setting goals for the day *before* we look at e-mail or text messages or expose ourselves to any other potential distractions. It also involves allowing urgent but relatively unimportant tasks to go by the wayside (which is much easier said than done) so that more critical initiatives receive the time and attention they require.

In football, defense is more exhausting than offense. Announcers frequently can be heard saying “the defense is tired because they've been on the field for a long time.” They never say the same thing about the offense. Why? Because playing offense is energizing. We are motivated when we see our plans put into action. The same is true at work. When we play offense, we find ourselves energized at the end of the workday, with a sense of accomplishment around what we've achieved, and renewed excitement for the next day. When we play defense, when we spend most of our day responding to noise and distraction, we often leave work exhausted, wondering if we made any real progress and wary of what the next day will throw at us.

One way to shift from defense to offense is to make our goals and projects extremely visible to ourselves and everyone around us so that we are

reminded about which priorities should demand our attention. Another way is to force ourselves to close our laptops and turn off our phones as much as possible, or at the very least, to disable the alerts that we receive every time a friend decides to send us a video of a giraffe having a baby. Continually checking e-mail and text messages is a killer of an offensive mindset.

Finally, and this one might sound strange, we should probably spend more time working and socializing with people who share our goals and projects, because they will naturally encourage us to stay on task. Spending too much social time with people who have different priorities can derail our offensive mindset, as most of their comments and interruptions will draw us away from our areas of focus, rather than toward them. Which is not to say that offense is anti-social or isolated, but rather that it is intentionally social and purposefully interactive.

In just our first day of taking a decidedly offensive mindset at The Table Group, we found that we made noticeably more progress than usual and that our sense of excitement and anticipation for the future had increased significantly. We also found that many of the defensive issues that occupied most of our attention seemed to disappear or shrink in importance. Which gives credence to the old saying, “a good offense is the best defense.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Lencioni is founder and president of The Table Group, a firm dedicated to providing organizations with ideas, products and services t