

BEST LIFE

The Man Who Saved the Red Sox

How did they regain the World Series trophy? By sending their executives to obedience school.

By Geoffrey Gagnon

The two-out dribbler off the bat of Edgar Renteria trickled up the infield in the way that meaningless grounders do. It hopped, ever so routinely, into the glove of White Sox shortstop Tadahito Iguchi, who made a quick toss to first. An unspectacular play by baseball standards, it was a kick in the balls to the Boston Red Sox. While the visiting White Sox spilled onto the field at Fenway Park, Renteria and his Boston teammates dropped their heads and made for the showers. Eleven months after sweeping the 2004 World Series and capturing their first title in 86 years, Boston had been unceremoniously bounced in the first round of the 2005 playoffs.

Down in the losers' locker room, general manager Theo Epstein was trying to put the best face on it, congratulating players on a good season—they were 95–67, after all. But it was a tough reversal of fortune for the heartthrob of New England, the local boy who had finally exorcised the curse of the Bambino the year before. Epstein, who had grown up less than a mile from Fenway, was just 28 when team president Larry Lucchino named his one-time protégé general manager in 2002. Lucchino, meanwhile, who recently celebrated his 63rd birthday, is one of the most successful baseball executives of his generation. When he was with the Baltimore Orioles, he'd been the driving force behind Camden Yards, the gorgeous retro-ballpark that ushered in a new era in intimate, fan-friendly facilities. During his tenure with the San Diego Padres, he had done the seemingly impossible, pumping up revenue for a small-market club in a region with no natural affinity for baseball. With the Red Sox, he faced the challenge of adding to an already rabid fan base—and he'd accomplished that as well. But on October 7, 2005, Boston was not focused on Epstein's or Lucchino's achievements.



After all, this was not how it was supposed to go down. The world-beating Red Sox, with the second-highest payroll in the league, had been swept by the White Sox, a team whose own epic losing streak was notable only for the fact that nobody cared. But, as the world would soon discover, being bounced from the playoffs was the least of Boston's problems. With the Red Sox out of contention for the first time in 18 months, a season's worth of pent-up bitterness and frustration between Lucchino and Epstein was about to explode into public view. Within days, each had accused the other of disloyalty. Epstein was convinced that Lucchino's relentless focus on the bottom line had

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become a distraction in the hothouse atmosphere of Boston sports; Lucchino argued that Epstein had no appreciation for exactly why he was able to afford that \$120 million-plus payroll.

On one hand, Epstein's crew in baseball operations were charged with fielding a winning squad, and Epstein had become the darling of the Boston media by succeeding mightily at that task. But a team is also a business, and since buying the team in 2001, a new ownership group headed by John Henry and Tom Werner had set lofty goals for boosting profits. "We spent the first few years building the brand and focusing on the outside world," says Sam Kennedy, senior vice president of New England Sports Ventures, the corporate entity that owns the team.

By the end of the 2005 season, Lucchino had been enormously successful in his efforts to build the Red Sox "brand" by attracting casual fans, known derisively among die-hard loyalists as "pink hatters" for their nontraditional headgear. In the wake of the team's Series win, five players even appeared on a special edition of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. New seats were added to seemingly every available nook of Fenway, the oldest park in the majors, and the team aggressively courted corporate sponsors. All of these efforts brought in new money, which was necessary to field a team of superstars. But Epstein, both because he personally shies away from the limelight and because he's convinced more attention only makes things more difficult for players in the already suffocating Boston atmosphere, viewed many of these efforts as distracting.

That might have been fine—after all, what workplace doesn't have its share of philosophical differences?—but personal disputes between Epstein, who had started his career as a college-age intern at the Orioles under Lucchino, and his former mentor added to the split. When the Sox failed to land Alex Rodriguez following the 2003 season, Lucchino felt that Epstein had been blaming him, *sotto voce*, in the press. When Epstein was raked over the coals for trading team icon Nomar Garciaparra midway through the 2004 season, the situation was reversed. Even the layout of Fenway Park exacerbated the rift: Epstein's baseball operations staff worked in the basement of the Sox office at Fenway Park, while the rest of the team's executives—

including Lucchino and the men in charge of New England Sports Ventures—were on the third floor. By the time Epstein's contract came up at the end of 2005, the rift had been bubbling under the surface for more than a year, and a scathing October 30 column in the *brdy* that criticized Epstein for not "respecting his elders" proved to be the proverbial final straw.

The next day, Epstein quit. As the news trickled out of the Sox offices, a media throng descended upon the 93-year-old stadium. No one was surprised to see a man in a gorilla suit shuffling through the crowd—it was Halloween, after all. But under the mask was Epstein, evading the cameras. After slipping past the press, the wunderkind architect of the world-championship squad spent the next few weeks following Pearl Jam around South America. Across New England, hard-bitten Red Sox fans wondered how their club had fallen apart.

And they wondered if it could ever be put back together.

Today, of course, many fans would have to strain to recall those bleak weeks of confusion. Epstein returned to the club after less than three months, and this year, the Sox have been among the best teams in the majors. Just as in 2005, they're working toward the playoffs this fall as the defending World Series champs. The big difference this time around? That front-office acrimony is ancient history. That's because while the organization was still reeling from the fissures that had divided it, Sox management had the good sense to call in some expert help.

Eddie Erlandson is not your standard, made-to-order executive coach—which is to say he's not some toothy grinner with a salesman's laugh and a bunch of canned motivational quips. Instead, Erlandson is a former surgeon and an ultra-long-distance runner; a guy who drives himself hard and who has honed a special talent for understanding what makes men like him tick. With his singular insights (and his medical training), Erlandson and his wife, Kate Ludeman, run an Austin, Texas-based executive consulting firm called Worth Ethic, which specializes in taming hypercompetitive, aggressive alpha leaders—a breed of executive of which there is no shortage in corporate America, or, for that matter, professional sports.



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In the past few years, Erlandson and Ludeman have become gurus to a litany of heavy hitters, from Hollywood über-agents to business titans at companies such as Coca-Cola, eBay, and Dell (where the firm's namesake, Michael Dell, has become so smitten with the approach that he has put most of his senior staff through intensive one-on-one sessions with the pair). The central irony that animates their approach is that the very traits that help men become leaders in business—assertiveness, confidence, ambition—are pretty much the same ones that can make them horrible leaders. Unchecked egos will derail productivity, communication lapses will calcify into grudges, and jerk bosses with piss-poor attitudes can sink entire companies. Reprogramming these guys—that's where Erlandson and Ludeman come in. Despite Erlandson's aversion to corporate bromides, he occasionally unleashes a bumper-sticker-worthy slogan: "We curb the belligerence and unleash the brilliance," he says. You might say they run an obedience school for bosses.

Roderick Kramer, PhD, a professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, who has studied the psychology of leadership, says Erlandson has diagnosed a critical chink in the corporate armor. "Hard-charging executives value rising fast and winning in every situation," he says. "But the skills that help them get to the top don't help them lead particularly well."

Erlandson flew to Florida and met with a couple dozen of the Red Sox organization's senior staff in Fort Myers just before the 2006 season. Though Erlandson won't discuss the particulars of the work he does with his clients—in fact, he stopped cooperating with this story when he learned Best Life was focusing on the Red Sox portion of his business—Kennedy says the hired healer walked into a room of natural born skeptics. "A lot of us who work in business don't think about coaching or getting better. Especially the alpha-male types," says Kennedy. "Here, you have sports guys and business guys, and it's easy to think we've got it figured out."

The executives thought they were in store for a lecture and maybe a few hokey trust-building exercises. They were prepared for more than a little eye rolling. But Erlandson started to win them over when he told them that, as a doctor, he was interested in the physiological roots of executive behavior, rather than mealy-

mouthed self-help games. Erlandson explains that while we do our thinking in the cerebral cortex of the brain, we've evolved in such a way that our emotional responses can bypass the normal systems. This made sense when, say, a lion was chasing a man across the savannah and he didn't have time for cool analysis. It doesn't work so well when the sales team reports weak numbers for Q3. Anger can trigger irrational reactions. Erlandson calls the physiological response "brain hijacking" and says composure breeds the neurological balance that business leaders need to make complex decisions.

In addition to being true, this explanation has the added virtue of presenting the alpha male with an implicit challenge: If you can stop that hijacker and maintain control of your brain, you'll improve your results. Erlandson transformed Red Sox doubters into devotees by tapping into the singular goal he knew they all shared, which was a desire to get better. "He understood instantly that we all have a lot riding on the success of the organization," says Kennedy. "That's how he reached us, by telling us he could make us more effective."



"An alpha's greatest strengths can become his greatest weaknesses," says Erlandson. A guy's self-confidence can make him autocratic. His tendency to set big goals can make him wildly demanding when he's setting them for others. A charming boss can use that charisma to manipulate. A guy's determination can become stubbornness. The leader who loves competition can get so caught up in the game that he detaches from his teammates.

To make matters worse, alpha leaders are often wired by experience to think the bad behavior is what got them where they are today. "They tend to think, I yell at people and I'm successful, so the reason I'm suc-

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cessful is because I yell at people,” says Erlandson. “These guys think this damaging behavior is the key to their business effectiveness.”

After a day and a half with Erlandson, the executives went to dinner. Kennedy was blown away by what he saw transpire. “People who wouldn’t normally be sitting near one another were sitting next to each other, just getting to know the other person in a new way,” he recalls. “Just 18 hours earlier, these people had been miserable. I’ve never seen anything like it. And it’s especially impressive here, where we have a pretty highly charged alpha-male environment.” Lucchino and Epstein declined to comment for this article, but they seem to have buried the hatchet.

That dinner was not an anomaly. Red Sox executives credit Erlandson with quietly rewiring the culture throughout the office and getting a team of hard chargers to charge in the same direction. Today, resentments are thawing as the guys realize they aren’t the only ones in the office who are working to be better listeners and clearer communicators. When everyone is trying, the doing becomes easier. “I made a promise to myself that if I saw something that bothered me, I would talk about it,” says Chuck Steedman, a former vice president who just recently left the organization. His colleague Sam Kennedy agrees: “There’s a heightened awareness about how to deal with one another. You feel liberated. I would say we increased our concern for the folks working here by about 500 percent.”

The Red Sox executive offices sit just a few dozen paces from the hot-dog vendors on the mezzanine level at Fenway. It’s not a great working environment for the easily distracted: When David Ortiz launches moon-shot homers over the Green Monster in left field, the walls practically rattle. Outside Steedman’s window, a massive billboard highlights the team’s 2007 World Series sweep with a picture of the team celebrating. Though fans have never heard of Erlandson, Red Sox execs aren’t shy in saying the consultant from Texas helped make that win possible. “Eddie deserves as much credit as anybody within the organization for that title,” says Charles Steinberg, an L.A. Dodgers executive who spent six seasons with the Red Sox.

With the Red Sox gunning for a repeat this fall, success this time around feels a lot better, say the execu-

tives. Part of that is because as the pressures have ramped up, Erlandson has helped dial down the Sox leaders’ exposure to it. He wants them focusing more on their families and less on the daily grind of their jobs. “There are a lot of younger executives here at the Sox, and I think a lot of us, at times, put our careers above our families and health. This work becomes a lifestyle,” says Kennedy. “Eddie has helped us recommit to our families and to things outside the office.” The result, he says, is that guys are sharper than ever. Telltale signs of too much stress—bad backs, sore necks, bouts of off-season colds—are now much less common.

Earlier this year, Steedman walked out of his office and into the ballpark. The team wasn’t playing, so the place was quiet and empty. Even without the players and fans, Steedman had plenty to show off. He pointed out a row of new skyboxes along the foul lines, new billboards that represented recently inked business deals, and a restaurant project taking shape near centerfield. His point was clear: He and his colleagues have been busier than ever. “Nobody here is satisfied with what we’ve achieved yet,” he says with an unmistakable confidence, grinning like an unabashed alpha.



Eddie works with executives of professional athletic teams, high tech startups, and major corporations across a number of industries.

He has coauthored two books; *Alpha Male Syndrome* and *Radical Change, Radical Results*.

Previously, Eddie was Chief of Staff at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, where he was a vascular surgeon.



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