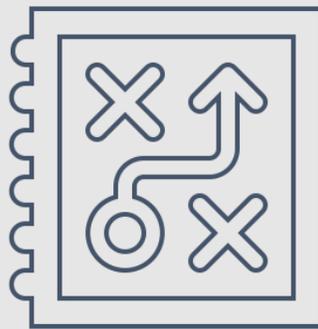


Coach's Playbook for COVID-19



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Purpose

This Playbook is a strategic and tactical guide designed for coaches at all levels of sport looking to build resilient teams through COVID-19. It is meant to be an a la carte menu of strategies for you to adapt and customize, not a one-size-fits-all solution.

This document is organized in a linear progression – from most urgent to most important. Physical, mental, and cultural development are only possible with the establishment of structure and running effective virtual meetings. Use the table of contents on the next page to jump to the most relevant topics.

DISCLAIMER

This Playbook does not encourage the use of any practices that violate high school, [NCAA](#), professional league, or government mandates. Please defer to the appropriate governing bodies and exercise best judgement to stay within rules and regulations.

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Current Situation

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has posed new challenges to organizations of all sizes around the globe. With shutdowns and closures in every country, teams must figure out ways to adapt to the new normal. Forecasts of when social distancing will stop and institutions will reopen [range from this summer to 2021](#).



I. Establishing Structure

Operating Rhythm

The entire world is doing its best to navigate the new normal, and teams are no exception. Most players are not used to virtual classes or training sessions. Coaches and training staff are accustomed to being able to teach and coach through real-time demonstration and feedback. Furthermore, the normal rhythm of the day is completely thrown off. A routine breakfast check-in or the first period of class is essentially non-existent.

So what? Now what?

Get back to the element that every athlete and coach knows and craves: structure.

This is the number one thing I have emphasized in my conversations with coaches in the face of uncertainty. Why? Because athletes (and coaches alike) thrive on it. This is an uncertain time, but it doesn't mean it has to be unstructured.

The formation or lack of structure will be the most overlooked critical success factor that will make or break an upcoming season.

It is a challenge to refocus a team after a 3-day weekend or 2-week spring break, for even the most disciplined of teams. Now, imagine doing this after 2-8 months of irregular schedules – including irregular sleep (based on sleep chronology, high school and college students will naturally go to bed later and wake up later), inconsistent workouts and film study, unbalanced eating schedules, etc. We do not know how long quarantine and social distancing will last, so the faster you can get your players into a routine that works for them, the better.

Note: The individual timing within the routine is far less important than just having one. Not everyone's routine needs to be the same, but everyone does need to have one. If all of John Doe's classes start after 11AM and he establishes a schedule that allows him to eat a complete breakfast and get an afternoon workout in before the team meeting – GOOD. But this should be consistent, written out, and

**Meet Uncertainty
with Structure**

followed. It's not worth fighting to try to standardize when the real win is in maintaining an individual's focus and discipline.

When you finally have the team back together, **you can easily recalibrate a working schedule, however you cannot sync a non-existing one.** In my projection, the consequence of *not* creating or encouraging individual structures will result in a 2-3 week (minimum) lag period to get the team back to into a rhythm.

Focus player's attention on the small daily habits. It is often said, "the way you do small things is the way you do all things". Examples include:

- Consistent timing: wake up times, bedtime, eating schedule, training schedules.
- Team study hall: From 4-5pm every day, a Zoom link will stay open for the entire team to work on their schoolwork.
- Class attendance: For those under a 3.0 GPA, please send a screenshot of the Zoom classroom and include the date and time in the picture. Athletes with a GPA above 3.0 do not need to check-in with a coach on daily class attendance.

Create One Source of Truth

Right now, most athletes are getting secondhand data. They hear it from mom or dad, friends, or worse, social media. There are three important pieces of information that should be included in every regular update:

1. **COVID-19 updates:** Includes world and location statistics, and prevention and mitigation best practices.
 - o Good sources to draw from:
 - [Center for Disease Control Updates](#)
 - [World Health Organization \(WHO\) COVID-19 Microsite](#)
 - [WHO COVID-19 Situation Reports](#)
 - [WHO COVID-19 Q&A](#)
 - [Apple App for Tracking and Updates on COVID](#)
2. **School updates:** Includes class schedules, back to school dates, summer class disruptions, fall start date, etc.
3. **League/sport updates:** Answers to questions regarding season schedules, delays, cancellations, hours requirements, etc.

Implementation:

- Assign one assistant coach to collect all data and brief the team at the start of every Monday team meeting.
- *No update* is a good update. Even if you have no new information (such as season delays), be sure to say, "there is nothing significant to report".

The speed of your communication should match the speed of your environment.

Purpose: Players know exactly *where*, *when*, and from *whom* they will get relevant information. Every moment a player spends guessing or predicting if they will play next season is time and energy lost improving themselves, connecting with teammates, or building the culture.

Contingency Planning: 3 Calendar System

There are three potential paths that every season can take (no matter which season you play).

1. **No disruption:** This is the best-case scenario. Teams are allowed back on campus with no restrictions or significant changes to schedule.
2. **Season or offseason delay:** How would this change the school and game schedule? How would practice schedules change if your 10-game season was condensed into 75% of the time?
3. **Cancellation:** Your season is cancelled. Now what?

In this case... It's not the best team that wins, it's the team that *prepares* the best

You should have a plan of attack ready to account for each of these paths. This includes calendar projections written in pencil since dates are in a constant state of flux.

Use a **Pre-Mortem Analysis** to plan for every angle. This exercise forces leaders to examine all of the potential reasons for failure *before* an event or strategy is put into place. Being able to think like the enemy and in worst case scenarios allows you to plan contingencies for all of the *what ifs*.

Implementation:

- Enroll the entire staff and a few select players (ex. captains or other senior leaders) to participate in an hour-long Pre-Mortem Analysis. Consider changes and restrictions due to class schedules, countable hours, compressed season timelines, strength and conditioning progression, etc.
- Enroll the whole team in distinguishing the opportunities they see in the situation. Plan to have a conversation about how they can address inevitable breakdowns as a team.
- Inform players and staff about upcoming decision points and how it will affect training plans or season start. Explain that everything is subject to change and you will communicate changes as soon as they arise.

STRUCTURE SUMMARY

Structure is the foundation necessary for speed and execution. Meet uncertainty with structure.

1. **Operating Rhythm** – Informs a predictable cadence in which information flows throughout the team.
2. **Create One Source of Truth** – Centralizing and communicating consistently reliable information reduces distractions and improves focus.
3. **Contingency Planning: 3 Calendar System** – Prepare for the *what ifs* by planning through the best case and worse case scenarios.



II. Running Effective Meetings

Meeting time is more precious than ever. **Digital leadership is a learned skill and getting familiar with technology platforms is now a requirement.** Below are different technology platforms, meeting formats, and facilitation techniques to help you get the most out of your meetings.

Communication Technology

Your IT infrastructure is the backbone of your operation. In a virtual environment, you are only as good as the tools you use to bridge the distance. During the school year, teams have the ability to communicate in-person daily (and sometimes multiple times per day). As we are all being forced to go virtual, technology is becoming our lifeblood.

Most teams already have something up and running. If that is the case, continue to use the same platform, but become more familiar with its array of features. It's better to stay with what works for you and your team rather than try to make a massive pivot to a new system for only one or two additional features.

If your team does not have a formal communication platform established, below are a few suggestions based on their main functions. Before choosing one, practice navigating their website and/or watch YouTube tutorials about how to use their interfaces to see if it meets your team's needs.

- **Chat:** [Slack](#), [Microsoft Teams](#), [WhatsApp](#), [GroupMe](#)
 - o Email is clunky and outdated compared to the options above.
- **Video/Meetings:** [Zoom](#), [Microsoft Teams](#), [Google Hangouts](#)
- **Strength & Conditioning Platforms:** [Google Classroom](#), [Teambuildr.com](#), [Facebook Private Group](#)
- **File Sharing:** [Dropbox](#), [Box](#), [Google Drive](#)

Meeting Format

- **Ideal Meeting Duration:** 30-45 minutes. If they run longer, [research](#) says that people tend to lose focus and engagement.
- **Agenda:** Show the agenda at the beginning of the meeting or send it out in the calendar invite. Put time boxes/restrictions around conversations that have the potential to run over time.
- **Assign Roles:** You do not *need* roles for every meeting, but consider them for large group meetings that have a lot of content. Roles serve two functions: (1) provide an opportunity for ownership and (2) ensure that the assigned person is paying attention... the second reason is less noble **shrug*.
 - o **Lead:** Most likely the Head Coach. However, if you have strong facilitative leaders (ex. either assistant coaches or upperclassmen), they can also assume this role.

- **Briefer:** For weekly small group meetings, assign 2-3 briefers who will be responsible for sharing lessons learned on a specific topic or film set during the meeting.
- **Note taker:** Responsible for taking all notes and distributing with the larger team afterwards. This creates an additional steady and central source of information.
- **Meeting Chat Moderator:** Responsible for moderating the text chat and pushing questions to the lead. They act as a gauge to direct what topics may need extra attention.
- **Define Winning:** At the beginning of *every* meeting, state the current mission (ex. “establish ourselves as the hardest working team in the league”) and the meeting’s purpose (ex. “The goal of the next 45 minutes is to ensure we have clarity on our new plyometrics and flexibility phase”). There should be no doubt about what your goals are and how you’re investing the team’s time to meet them.

Sample Agenda: Weekly 45-minute team meeting

| Time | Agenda Component | Owner |
|-------------|--|----------------------|
| 0900-0905 | Defining Winning | Head Coach |
| 0905-0910 | Updates (re: COVID-19, school update, and league) | Lead/Assistant Coach |
| 0910-0930 | Core content (i.e., what aspect of the team do you need to move forward?) | Lead & Briefers |
| 0930-0940 | Summary & next steps <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the main takeaways? (Check on learning by asking a few players what they got out of the meeting) - What are next steps? What assignment are they expected to turn in? By when? - When is the next meeting for the team/unit? | Lead |
| 0940-0945 | Questions & buffer time | Lead |

**If you have team meetings, unit meetings (offense/defense), and position meetings; every position coach must speak with one voice. There should be no separation in messaging from one interaction with a staff member to the next. See Chief Marketing Officer in Section V for more.*

Virtual Meeting Best Practices

This is the new normal, so we must establish a new set of standards. Consider using the following practices:

- **Get comfortable being on camera.** Encourage your team to do the same unless they have bandwidth issues. It is important to see each other to connect authentically.
- **Establish the expectations for virtual communication.** Phone is down and away. Muted when not speaking.
- **Use humor and connect authentically.** Ask players how their families and pets are. Start your meeting with a funny YouTube video. Engage before you educate.

- **Use specific names & ask for details.** Say, "Jane, can you fill me in on XYZ? What's happening here and how would you recommend we address it next time?". General questions lead to general answers. Specificity allows for tactical execution.
- **Model the behavior you want your team to use.**
- **Encourage the chat.** With bigger teams, there will be a smaller percentage of voices on a given call. A lot of questions indicate a high amount of safety and trust with the coach running the meeting and among peers.
- **Pause for questions often and check the chat frequently.** Monitor both the online conversation and text chat.
- **Speak at a 75% pace.** We are now talking through speakers and internet bandwidth, slow down and enunciate to get your message across.
- **Tactical facilitation techniques**
 - o **Engagement Prompts** – *to increase engagement*
 - "Does anyone else have something to share?"
 - "What else?"
 - "Give me a thumbs up if you're on the same page."
 - "By show of hands..."
 - o **Cut off prompts** – *if the conversation is going long*
 - "We'll take two more comments and then move on."
 - "Thanks for your suggestion. For the sake of time, let's park that discussion for now and come back to it offline."
 - o **Exercises** – *to sustain energy*
 - Video reflection: Show an engaging video clip (1-2.5 minutes) and ask the team to reflect with a strong follow up question. Discuss answers as a group afterwards.
 - Small group breakouts: If your meeting video platform allows, split the team into smaller discussion groups for more intimate conversation.
 - Drawing: Ask them to draw their interpretation of a particular topic. Humans are strong visual learners.
 - Writing exercises: Pose a question or topic and ask individuals to reflect. Discuss answers as a group afterwards.
 - o **Use silence.** It takes 7 seconds of silence for Americans to break it.

RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS SUMMARY

Compared to the flexibility we are afforded in-person, we are now in a time poor environment. We must be even more precise and streamlined with our workflow and messaging.

1. **Communication Technology** – Ensure you have the basic tech in place before implementing new meeting formats.
2. **Meeting Format** – Keep meetings short, structured, and scripted (ideally between 30-45 minutes). Repeatedly define what winning is for the short and long-term.
3. **Virtual Meeting Best Practices** – Overnight, you have been turned into a professional speaker. Practice using tools that engage the audience. Attention is your new currency.



III. Physical Conditioning

Based on my conversations thus far, physical conditioning has been a strong focus for many teams. Most teams have adopted new ways to distribute workout plans and offer instruction.

At the college level, the most critical piece is partnering with your strength coach to make appropriate adjustments to workouts. Figure out who has weights at home and build plans accordingly. Otherwise, pivot to body weight, speed, and plyometric work. Empower the strength and conditioning (S&C) coaches do what they do best. Most athletes will not have the necessary equipment at home to strength train adequately. If budget permits, consider buying athletes necessary equipment.

At the high school level, your program might not have a dedicated strength coach. You can always buy a plan online, but here are some free training resources:

- [Nike Fitness App](#) – Download for free. Dozens of free workouts and fitness plans using little or no equipment.
- [YouTube Channel: Yoga With Adriene](#) – My favorite place to go for free yoga. Great for flexibility and core work.
- [Peloton](#) – Currently offering 90 days of free classes on their app.

Team / Position Workouts

Aside from traditional film or whiteboarding meetings, set up virtual dial-ins so that players can train together. Ask players to prop up their phone camera in a shoe and put on Bluetooth headphones. You can now coach players live through drill work and players have their coach in their ear.

Team Accountability

On larger teams, ensuring players complete their workouts can become a full-time job. It also pins the accountability on the coach and further perpetuates the *us vs. them* mentality that exists. One solution is to set up groups of 8-10 led by an upperclassman leader. That leader is responsible for ensuring their team completes the workouts and reports results. Be sure to explain the accountability structure and publicly empower the leaders to own their teams.

**This is hard and this is different...
and you can do hard things
differently.**

Team Challenges

Use Instagram or Snapchat to post a 24-hour athletic challenge (30 second plank, 50 pushups, squat hold, etc.) and tag 5-10 players to do the same. This will inevitably make it around the team. These fun mini challenges are great culture builders AND they act as triggers to initiate the assigned workout.

Incorporate a daily skills challenge for players to practice specific skills. For example, basketball players film themselves playing +/-3 or doing a dribble combination challenge. The winner (determined by the assistant coach or team manager) earns the option to take one conditioning session off.

PHYSICAL CONDITIONING SUMMARY

Most teams have made a successful pivot to digital training platforms. Continue to find creative ways to build and deliver training programs.

1. **Team / Position Workouts** – Leverage video to coach aspects of the game that would often occur on the practice field.
2. **Team Accountability** – Empower the team to police themselves by naming team leaders and creating competition.
3. **Team Challenges** – Use team challenges to build culture.



IV. Mental Conditioning

Mental performance training is often the difference in a close win or loss. Structures for mental conditioning might be less urgent in the short term but will be crucial in the mid to long term. Push your team to grow in all phases of their lives.

Numerous studies have linked mindfulness practice to improved attention and emotion regulation. Here are my most highly recommended apps:

- [Headspace](#) – Free. Sponsored by NBA.
- [Calm App](#) – Free. Partners with LeBron.
- [10% Happier](#) – Free trial.

Phase Groups

Phase groups are a way for a team to create autonomous ownership and internal pockets of leadership. Groups of 5-7 are assigned bi-monthly reading, videos, and short assignments designed to strengthen team chemistry and boost individual performance. The phase group leaders will be responsible for organizing the group to meet for 30 minutes every two weeks to discuss course material and offer support and accountability. Topics might include mental performance strategies, growth mindset practices, and practical exercises and content selected by the staff.

Requirements

1. Phase Program Curriculum
 - a. 45 minutes of assigned bi-weekly reading/videos/exercises
2. 30 minute bi-weekly phase group meeting organized by the phase group leader
 - a. Groups will meet via preferred video platform
3. Audiobook

Team Audiobook

Encourage your team to learn together. Consider some of the classics below:

- [The Energy Bus](#)
- [You win the Locker Room First](#)
- [Chop Wood, Carry Water](#)
- [The Compound Effect](#)
- [Legacy](#)
- [Mind Gym](#)
- [Raise Your Game](#)
- [It Takes What It Takes](#)

Film Study

Position groups can still meet regularly to improve their sport IQ and learn the game. For veterans, this is an opportunity for them to lead and teach. Consider implementing the following practices in your team's film study:

- **Assign cut ups:** Instruct a few veteran players to study and teach 5-10 film cut ups to the rest of the group. They are now accountable for knowing the content and it reinforces peer to peer leadership.
- **Pause often:** Frequently stop and allow newer players to voice questions that they might have.
- **Use learning checks:** At the end of the session, ask each player the #1 thing they got out of the session. This reinforces learning and allows you to see what they focused on and retained.
- **Assign questions:** Offer film-specific questions that go with each cut up. *Ask: What do I want my players to get out of watching this set of clips?*
- **Utilize the chat:** Request that people ask questions in the chat.
- **Give assignments to be completed during the meeting:** E.g., you must post 2 comments/questions in the chat box based on what you're seeing.
- **Leave time for questions and discussion:** Dedicate the last 5-10 minutes of every film session for questions.

Mental Reps

Quarantine doesn't mean players can't get reps – it just means that you need to be more creative in how you provide opportunities for them. The brain doesn't distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. Here are some ways you can include mental reps in player development:

- **Limit meeting size:** I would recommend you don't hold mental reps meeting with more than 3-4 players so you can pay attention and offer feedback to each of them.
- **Leverage video:** On video chat, have players set up their phone (lean it up against a shoe, have them ask a sibling to film, etc.) and put in Bluetooth headphones. Talk players through progressions, plays, or scenarios as they walk/run through the motions. If they have other people to support, third parties can act as a teammate or opponent to simulate a game-like environment.
- **Record the video:** Record the session and offer more targeted feedback after reviewing.
- **Visualization:** Have players close their eyes as you talk through specific plays or situations. Pause after each prompt to allow players to simulate each step along the progression.

This isn't perfect. But the alternative is getting no reps before the team is back on campus.

Staff Development

This is the perfect time for the staff to lean into a variety of professional and personal development opportunities. Here are some places to look:

- [LinkedIn Learning](#)
- Online Courses: [Udemy](#), [Coursera](#)
- Staff book club – read a book and discuss how/if you can leverage best practices internally

MENTAL CONDITIONING SUMMARY

Most teams have made a successful pivot to digital training platforms. Continue to find creative ways to build and deliver training programs.

1. **Phase Groups** – Divide the team into groups tasked with reading, reflecting, and discussing topics together
2. **Film Study** – Teach players not only about the sport, but the fundamentals of how to watch film.
3. **Mental Reps** – The brain doesn't distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. Use video and visualization to simulate live scenarios.
4. **Staff Development** – Bring the staff closer together by learning a new skill/reading a book.



V. Building Culture Through Crisis

Building a championship culture is hard enough as it is. Now that you are forced to be remote, you must be even more intentional to do so. Even if you perfect structure, physical conditioning, and mental conditioning, culture exists as the differentiator between good teams with talent that lose and great teams that win.

Leverage the platforms and methods that come easiest and most organically – no one likes to be forced to have fun. Keep it simple and be consistent.

Chief Marketing Officer

Congratulations! You and your staff have been appointed to Chief Marketing Officer!

In every touchpoint, you are making a sale. Whether it be ideas or physical products, you are always selling (see Daniel Pink's book, [To Sell is Human](#) for more) and the way you frame and message makes all the difference. **Everyone is experiencing adversity and uncertainty right now, and everyone has the opportunity to make adversity their advantage.**

Modeling strength in the circumstance encourages your team to do the same.

This is not a time to coast... it is a time to accelerate.

The time you formerly spent coaching (meaning time spent on the field training technique) is now reduced or eliminated. Instead, your job is to connect, motivate, market, and teach in every touchpoint.

You can think about your marketing campaign in three different levels:

- **Macro** – *The big picture. What are you driving towards? What type of team do you want to become?*
 - o **Strategic messaging:** This is your true North and sets direction for your team. With less time spent together, the quality and frequency of your messaging must increase to account for the loss of in-person communication.
 - o **Implementation:** All staff (including S&C personnel) must be in alignment about how they are speaking about the situation. Use daily/weekly staff meetings to ensure that the entire group is speaking with a common narrative.
- **Meso** – *The next milestone of growth.*
 - o **Operational milestone:** Determine the next mesocycle (ex. 5-week strength phase, 4-week speed phase, etc.). This includes associated physical, mental, and cultural initiatives that align to driving your macro campaign forward.
 - o **Implementation:** During the weekly team meeting, clearly communicate the purpose and objective of each cycle. Update the team on group progress. Use individual [Personal Development Plans](#) to help players set goals that help the team meet their mid-term goals.
- **Micro** – *The next step.*
 - o **Daily focus:** What do the next 24-48 hour look like? Workouts? Meetings? Mental conditioning sessions? Focus the team on showing up presently for the next thing.

- **Implementation:** Coaches should touch base with players every 1-2 days to build relationship, provide support, and motivate (if necessary). Use video/Facetime whenever possible.

Relationship Building

Practices to generate stronger relationships:

- **Start the video chat early:** Open up the meeting room 15 minutes early and take the opportunity to connect with players before the meeting officially starts. This informal banter is critical for maintaining connectivity.
- **Check in by class after the meeting:** Ask the sophomore class to stay for 10 minutes after the meeting. Ask them for their thoughts on how you and the staff can best support the team. Allow input and clarify as necessary.
- **Write cards:** Coaches write dozens of cards to athletes during the recruiting process – why not write your current players a card stating how excited you are for the upcoming season?
- **Team study halls:** Keep a video line open during specific times and encourage players to log on for team study halls. Even if it turns into a hang out, it is vital time the team gets to spend together.

Culture Building

Practices to generate stronger team culture:

- **Social media takeovers:** 'A Day in the Life' of one of your responsible athletes (remember you are giving them a platform and extending your brand) on Snapchat or Instagram story. This is another great avenue to attract recruits.
- **Daily quotes/videos:** Post your favorite videos and quotes as a source of inspiration.
- **Accountability buddies:** Assign groups of 2-3 to check in on each other's progress and provide support. Have them share a weekly 'Stop, Start, and Continue' goal set.
- **Read a team book/listen to a team audio (repeated):** Assign a book to the entire team or by class (depending where they are in their leadership journey) and have assistant coaches hold weekly discussions on themes and how the class can apply lessons learned.

Empowerment: From Coach-Fed to Player-Led

The bigger the team, the more accountability and empowerment you need with your veteran players/seniors. While messaging and direction is happening from the top, the opportunity is for the team to come together and redefine standards for how they operate through adversity.

Empower others to lead and take on new roles. Now is a better time than ever for experimentation.

The opportunity is for the team to come together and redefine their standards for how they operate through adversity.

BUILDING CULTURE THROUGH CRISIS SUMMARY

Even if you achieve structure, physical conditioning, and mental conditioning – culture exists as the differentiator between good teams with talent that lose and great teams that win. You can continue to build your culture through COVID-19, and great teams will use it to their advantage.

1. **Chief Marketing Officer** – Approach every interaction like you have the potential to upsell. Tell a story with your daily messages that act as a part of an overall narrative.
2. **Relationship Building** – People are craving connection. Offer organic opportunities for the team to connect.
3. **Culture Building** – Ensure you're not crossing the boundary of forced fun. Less is more.
4. **Empowerment: From Coach-Fed to Player-Led** – Provide top-down guidance and direction and give players opportunities to lead. Resist the tendency to micromanage.

IV. Rest

I would be remiss not to mention the importance of rest and intentional down time. Coronavirus is an unprecedented forcing function that is slowing the world around us. The athletic community has a natural bias to action and hence, we surge into a state of frenzy and run the risk of burnout.

Be intentional in taking a moment to recharge mental, physical, emotional, spiritual and relational energy. Write, journal, practice gratitude, meditate, start the blog you always talked about it, learn how to cook – we are at our best when we are fully expressed.



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For more information or support, visit www.sebastianlittle.com or
contact sebastian@sebastianlittle.com.

Thanks for taking the time to read and reflect on this Playbook. If I can support you and the team in anyway, please get in touch.

Well wishes to you, your family, and your teams during this time. May we approach this challenge with grace, compassion, and love. Stay healthy and be well.

*My very best,
~ Sebastian*