

Rewriting the hiring playbook

The NFL makes headlines for its lack of diversity, but what we are seeing is a failed process to evaluate candidates properly. Many hours and billions of dollars have been spent on Diversity Equity and Inclusion. Yet, the hiring process is failing to produce equitable results. They have celebrated diversity and developed rules and procedures in the hope of affecting real change; admittedly, they were unable to make significant progress in the area of hiring diverse head coaches. Failing to achieve this diversity goal, not because of a lack of qualified diverse candidates, but because the process uses subjective criteria over objective facts to base hiring decisions. Race and bias draw attention to the issue; the Flores lawsuit highlights the inability to vet candidates effectively; the solution to diversity is creating an evidence-based hiring process that produces quantifiable outcomes.

The news of Brian Flores bringing a class-action lawsuit against the NFL sent the media into a frenzy. Curious to know more about his experience, I researched his case. The information leaked to the press claimed he was challenging to work with, disagreed with the owner, and failed to retain his staff. The articles discount his .559 combined winning % the last two seasons or that despite a 1-7 start, he ended the season 9-7. Over the past two seasons, the objective data failed to support an immediate termination, but subjectively he was deemed a “problematic coach.” After his termination, he interviewed for several new head coaching roles, only to be rejected. It wasn't until a text message from a former boss alerted him to the idea that he might not be interviewing for open roles that his perspective changed.

[According to his lawsuit](#), the interviews were shams, nothing more than a game of three-card Monte. Everyone involved already knew the outcome, the interviews were for show, and the results were predetermined. This doesn't sound overly surprising; the struggles of black coaches have been reported on for years. In a [2016 ESPN article](#), [Mike Sando](#) wrote that the Rooney Rule was ineffective due to a lack of black coordinators; six years later, the number of black coordinators has increased, but the number of head coaches has not. As Coach Tony Dungy stated, “It has become, ‘Just let me talk to a couple of minority coaches very quickly, so I can go about the business of hiring the person I really want to hire anyways.’” What has changed in the last six years? Minority coaches have built stronger resumes, the bias remains.

Why the Rooney Rule Isn't working

The Rooney Rule has not successfully increased the number of minority head coaches. Many interesting articles have been written about the [statistical probability of head coach hiring and race since the Rooney rule](#). They highlight the case of Eric Bieniemy; calculated his likelihood of being hired in the past three years as a black candidate at 37%-46% and 54%-60% as a white candidate. These probabilities don't reflect the reality of the interview process where Bieniemy has gone 0-14. To understand why minority candidates like Bieniemy aren't being hired, we must look at each interview as a unique event. This analysis misses important qualitative data to decode what the critical factors are in the selection process, in addition to objective criteria.

Objective criteria are quantifiable data we can measure. Several key resume elements make up the current crop of 32 NFL head coaches. This data was compiled using the resume information available on www.pro-football-reference.com; from when they were hired. For example, Mike Tomlin would have six years of NFL coaching experience and one year as a Defensive Coordinator, based on his hire date in 2007.

Median Years of Experience

Head Coach @ Time of hire

Coaching in the NFL - 12 years

Head Coaching - 0 years

Coordinator - 3.5 years

College Coaching- 4 years

NFL playing - None

Subjective measures used to evaluate coaches are difficult to ascertain, but several terms are repeated in post-hiring press conferences: Innovation and Communication. Based on the number of times they are repeated, we can infer the importance of these subjective measures.

Innovation

Innovation is a buzzword; while important in medicine and technology, football is still played in a similar manner as it was 20 years ago. How does one measure the importance and the ability of one coach to innovate over another? How much has football changed in the last 20 years? Has Brandon Standley revolutionized football by going for it on fourth down? What are the observable characteristics of an innovative coach? An offensive of all Running Backs, Wide Receivers, a Defensive Lineman at Linebacker, a Pass run-pass offense? My observation of the NFL is that of the iPhone, a new version, basically the same thing. Confidently stated and rarely quantified.

Communication

What makes a great communicator? According to Peter Economy at Inc, they possess five critical skills; They know what they are talking about, listen more than they speak, focus on understanding what people say, pay attention to nonverbal cues, and are aware of misunderstandings. In basing decisions on communication, it's important to note that cultural differences make a difference in how communication is viewed. The outcome of a great speech can be overstated; Rex Ryan was loved for his press conferences but failed to produce a winning team in 6 of 8 seasons as a head coach. Communication is an essential skill in business, but it goes beyond tone and charisma. How do you objectively create a system to measure effective communication?

Recent Hires

Analyzing the qualitative data provided in a post-interview press conference and news articles, we can gain insight into the criteria used to select the hire. Using this publicly available information, we can attempt to see how subjective or objective the process is. These estimations utilize this data, and the examples given are only for discussion purposes.

Case Study: Miami Dolphins

The Dolphins fired Brian Flores, according to reports, because he was difficult and did not agree with the ownership's direction on QB and draft picks.

Replacement: Mike McDaniel (Diverse Candidate)

Credentials: 15 years in the NFL and one year as an Offensive Coordinator, no Head Coaching experience

Relation to Median: 3 years over in NFL, -2.5 year Coordinator, equal Head Coaching experience

Reasons for hire:

"We were looking for the qualities of leadership, intelligence, innovation, and someone who really understands what it takes for winning in the long run," Ross said in the [USA Today](#). "First of all, he's probably one of the brightest coaches that I've spoken to. When you talk to people, the first thing they'll say about Mike is he is innovative; he is thinking outside the box. I had coaches in his former division calling me and telling me how great he was, and I said, why are you calling? And they said, 'Really, to get him out of the division.' It says an awful lot about a person and who he is."

Ross says a lot in a few words. The word choice here, "winning in the long run," clearly means not winning today but in time. Having been in the NFL for 16 years, he's been on teams that have made the playoffs four times. He's only been an offensive coordinator for one season and did not call the plays. The 49ers were seventh in total offense and thirteenth in points scored. All the qualities listed above provide great feelings; the results have been good but not exceptional. The primary issue the Dolphins face is a QB issue with Tua. Mike McDaniel is not publicly considered a quarterback coach or whisperer. The last QB to work under McDaniel, Jimmy Garoppolo, has fallen out of favor with the 49ers due to injuries and ineffectiveness. Many look at McDaniel as an innovative genius but is that his or Shanahan's play-calling. Why is this same title given to a proven performer like Eric Binemeny?

Yes, McDaniel is a Yale alumnus, but that has never been a stated factor in any previous selection of head coaches. Another issue addressed in the lawsuit is an objective side-by-side comparison of candidates. When comparing candidates' resumes, experience, and

performance, the hiring criteria can quickly become unclear due to the variety of backgrounds. To create a system that selects the best candidate, you must have data to analyze and a process to review this data. Every company and team has unique needs, and the weight of each point needs to be established and reviewed pre and post-hire.

Second Choice: Kellen Moore

Credentials: Retired NFL QB, 4 Years in the NFL, three years as Offensive Coordinator

Relation to median: Under by eight years, under by .5 years Coordinator, + NFL player experience

Kellen has previous NFL playing experience and more experience as an OC. Having no previous Head Coaching experience, expectations would also be very low for Miami as he learned the ropes for the next few years. The Cowboy's offense led the league in yards and points per game and finished the season 13 for 13 in the red zone. Looking at the data, Kellen is the much stronger candidate. Despite his statistical prowess, the concern is that he's not innovative enough. The preference for a creative coach is not founded on statistical fact but on the perception that new is better.

Previous Coach: Brian Flores

Credentials: 14 years in the NFL, No Head coaching or Coordinator experience

Relation to median: 2 years over NFL exp, under 3.5 Coordinator, 0 HC, no playing

Coach Flores did not have any experience as a coordinator or head coach before Miami.

Observation:

The Miami Dolphins organization, over the last two hires, has chosen a coach under the median for the experience. It's hard to see how an organization that fired a coach because the franchise was in disarray would hire an inexperienced wunderkind to solve this structural issue. It leads one to believe the GM and owner want to control a large portion of the franchise and are looking for someone who can make magic with their ingredients. Innovation would then become the essential prerequisite for the role.

Organization Direction: Comfortable losing for the foreseeable future.

Keys to getting hired:

Agreeable to GM and Ownership Direction.

Good Looks

Innovation

Upbeat personality

Stronger Candidates:

Byron Leftwich: #2 Ranked Offense, two more years of Offensive Coordinator experience

Brian Daboll: #3 Ranked Offense, seven more years of Offensive Coordinator experience

Eric Bienimy: #4 Ranked Offense, three more years of Offensive Coordinator experience

Kellen Moore: #1 Ranked Offense, two more years of Offensive Coordinator experience

Giants: Brian Daboll

Credentials: 21 years NFL, eight years OC

Brian was a hot candidate and had been highly sought after by multiple teams.

Why did the Giants hire Brian Daboll? According to [Jake Aferiat at the sporting news.](#)

"One of the biggest reasons Daboll landed with the Giants, it seems, is Schoen's familiarity with him. The two worked together in Buffalo from 2018 through the end of the 2021 season, meaning Schoen saw up close Allen's growth as an NFL quarterback, of which Daboll was a key part."

"Over the last four years, I have observed first-hand Brian's strengths as a leader — he is an excellent communicator, intelligent, innovative, and hard-working. Brian's genuine and engaging personality is refreshing," Joe Schoen GM. "He fosters relationships with the players and coaches around him. He is progressive in his vision and values collaboration, two of the attributes we think are essential."

The dynamic here is clear. Joe Schoen had a personal relationship with Brian Daboll that gave him the confidence and belief that hiring Brian Daboll was the right choice. Personal observation and work experience are excellent ways to vet candidates. If that is the criteria for hire, then the only other candidate that should have been interviewed is Patrick Graham. He was interviewed and exceptionally well-liked and respected by all reports within the organization. Is it possible that Brian Daboll is/was a better candidate for the role in both subjective and objective data? Yes. Was Patrick Graham given equitable consideration knowing that he would have to overcome a personal relationship between the new GM and Coach Daboll? What process was in place to assure he was given this consideration? It will be interesting to learn what the NFL's internal investigation uncovers.

Rejected:

Brian Flores: 17 years NFL, three years HC

Dan Quinn: 15 Years NFL, six years HC

Leslie Fraizer: 4 Years HC, 2x Super Bowl Champ

Patrick Graham: 13 Years NFL, two years DC Internal Candidate

Lou Anarumo: 9 Years NFL, three years DC

Keys to hiring:

GM relationship

Personality

Communication

Innovation

Alternative Candidate:

Leslie Fraizer

Patrick Graham

How can the NFL Solve this Problem?

Developing objective criteria to rate and evaluate head coaching candidates would open the doors to diverse candidates by creating an equitable playing field. The NFL has spent almost ten years addressing the supply side of developing qualified candidates; it's time they address the vetting process. Coaches Sean McVay and Pete Carroll have spoken about this issue, but it is not enough to state the obvious. The bias in the hiring process is not solely a matter of race but a matter of poor design in the selection process.

The NFL needs a hiring process that produces quantifiable results that can be repeated and improved to produce optimal outcomes. Ray Dalio states in his book Principles, "The process for choosing people should be systematically built out and evidence-based. You need to have a people-hiring machine that clearly states the goals so that outcomes can be compared with them and the machine." To achieve an equitable and diverse workforce, the NFL must state clearly its goals and objectives in hiring head coaches. Creating a systematic process in hiring, with 32 teams in the NFL creating one hiring methodology is a big challenge, but the process is the path to progress. The NFL could do more for minority candidates by developing an equitable and efficient hiring process than could ever be achieved by a superficial focus on diversity.

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[Brian Flores Vs NFL](#)

