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The Tunnel

IT WAS FEBRUARY 4, 2007. A cool mist hung in the air over the Dolphins Stadium in Miami, Florida, as Super Bowl XLI was about to begin. The weather was unusual; one of only two Super Bowls in NFL history where it rained. But the less-than-ideal conditions couldn't dampen the electric atmosphere as over 74,000 fans packed the stands, eagerly anticipating the clash between the Indianapolis Colts and the Chicago Bears.

As I stood in the concrete tunnel leading to the field, my heart was pounding. After years of sweat, sacrifice, and dedication, I had reached the pinnacle of my sport. In just moments, I would step onto the field to play in the biggest game of my life. The roar of the crowd reverberated through the tunnel, growing louder with each passing second. My teammates and I bounced on our toes, barely able to contain our excitement and nervous energy.

Finally, the signal was given. United as one, we surged forward toward the field. The tunnel attendants did their best to hold us back, fear flashing in their eyes as they faced down a stampede of wild Colts. When the gates finally opened, we exploded onto the field in a beautiful chaos of motion and sound.

Amidst the overwhelming sensory assault, one voice somehow cut through the blaring crowd. "Ben! Ben! Ben!" I was already

five yards past the tunnel entrance when I heard it. Something in that voice made me slam on the brakes, even as my teammates streamed past me onto the field. I knew that voice anywhere.

Turning back toward the tunnel, I searched for its source. There, hanging halfway over the concrete railing at the mouth of the tunnel, was my father. Somehow, this small-town Minnesota minister had fought his way through the massive crowd to position himself at the exact spot where I would emerge.

As our eyes met, I saw the intense pride and love shining in his gaze. For a split second, time seemed to stand still. Here I was, moments away from playing in the Super Bowl, the culmination of my lifelong dreams. And yet my father had risked life and limb just for the chance to see me and offer a few words of encouragement before I took the field.

In that instant, I faced a choice that would come to define my life far more than anything that happened in the game itself. Part of me wanted to simply acknowledge my father with a quick wave and continue onto the field. After all, I needed to stay focused. This was the biggest moment of my career. Surely my father would understand if I didn't stop now; we could talk after the game. But as I started to turn away, I felt as if I had slammed into an invisible wall.

A quiet but powerful voice spoke in my heart: "Go back. Go back to your father. Go back to where it all began." In that moment, I was reminded of what truly mattered in life. All the fame, fortune, and accolades in the world couldn't compare to the love of family and the beliefs that had shaped me into the man I had become. Without hesitation, I spun around and sprinted back toward my father. "Dad! Dad!" I called out. Tears welled in my eyes as I reached up to clasp his outstretched hand. "I love you, Dad. It all started with you, in the backyard. Thank you for everything."

My father's eyes glistened as he replied, "I love you too, Ben. And I am so proud of you." In that powerful moment of connection,

I was transported back in time. I saw myself as a young boy, playing catch with my dad in our backyard. I remembered how he would let me tackle him, dramatically falling to the ground as if felled by my mighty strength. Those simple moments had planted the seeds of my love for football. But far more importantly, my father had used those times to instill in me the core beliefs and values that would guide me throughout my life.

His creed was simple yet profound:

- Honor God—because I believe playing for something greater than yourself produces greatness.
- Work harder than everyone else—because I believe hard work develops talent and builds character.
- Never stop improving and learning—because I believe there's always someone right behind you wanting what you have.
- Have fun—because I believe if you don't love it, what's the point?

These weren't just empty platitudes. My father lived out these beliefs and their value principles every day, leading by example. He showed me what it meant to have a strong moral compass, to persevere through adversity, to constantly strive for growth, and to approach life with joy and passion. These beliefs became the foundation upon which I built my life and career.

As I reflected on this, I realized that everyone has their own set of core beliefs instilled in them by influential figures in their lives. Whether it's a parent, grandparent, coach, teacher, or mentor, we all have those guiding principles that shape our worldview and decision-making. I wondered, what were the nonnegotiable beliefs that had most impacted my teammates' lives? What beliefs were they passing on to others?

With a renewed sense of purpose and clarity, I squeezed my father's hand one last time before jogging out onto the field.

The nerves and pressure of the moment had been replaced by a deep sense of peace and confidence. I knew who I was and what I stood for. Whatever happened in the game, I would play with honor, give maximum effort, continually adapt, and above all, enjoy every moment of this incredible experience.

As it turned out, we defeated the Chicago Bears 29-17 that night. A kid from the small river town of Hastings, Minnesota, had just played on the biggest stage in American sports, in front of over 140 million viewers worldwide. Winning the Super Bowl was a dream come true. But you know what? That brief interaction with my father before the game remains one of my most treasured memories from that night. Far more than any play on the field, that moment encapsulated everything that had brought me to that point. It reminded me of the power of love, family, and having a strong set of guiding beliefs.

My name is Ben Utecht, and my NFL Super Bowl-winning experience with Coach Tony Dungy and the Indianapolis Colts awakened my passion for helping organizations build championship cultures. You see, the lessons I learned from my father and my time in the NFL apply far beyond the football field. They are universal belief principles that can transform any team or organization. I was incredibly fortunate to play under Hall of Fame coach Tony Dungy, a man who revolutionized leadership in the NFL.

Coach Dungy's philosophy was simple but powerful: "If you build better men, you will get better football players." He understood that true success comes not just from developing skills, but from cultivating character. This approach resonated deeply with me because it aligned perfectly with the values my father had instilled. Coach Dungy didn't just pay lip service to concepts like integrity, hard work, and continuous improvement. He built his entire coaching strategy and team culture around these core beliefs. Every practice, every meeting, every interaction was infused with these principles.

The results spoke for themselves. Not only did we achieve greatness on the gridiron, but our team was known throughout the league for its strong character and positive influence both on and off the field. We weren't just great football players; we were becoming better men. As I transitioned from my playing career into the business world, I realized how rare and valuable this type of intentional culture-building truly is.

So many organizations have lofty mission statements and lists of core values plastered on their walls. But how many actually live out those ideals on a daily basis? How many have systematic approaches to reinforce and develop those values in their team members? The sad truth is that most companies' stated values are little more than empty words. They sound good in theory, but have little impact on day-to-day hiring operations or decision-making. Just look at companies like Enron, which touted "integrity" as a core value while engaging in massive fraud.

Clearly, there's often a huge gap between the values an organization claims to hold and how it actually behaves. That's why I believe it's time for a radical shift in how we approach organizational culture. We need to move beyond shallow mission statements and vague value propositions. Instead, we must develop comprehensive strategies and systems to cultivate the beliefs and behaviors we want to see in our organizations.

Think of it like creating a game plan for culture. Just as a football team meticulously prepares for each opponent, organizations need to be intentional and systematic in how they build and maintain their culture. This involves clearly defining your core beliefs, creating structures and processes to reinforce those beliefs, and holding everyone accountable to living them out.

In the pages that follow, I'll take you on a journey to transform your organizational culture. Drawing on my experiences both on and off the field, I'll provide practical insights and proven strategies for building a championship-caliber team. We'll go behind the scenes of the Super Bowl-winning Colts, examining

how the culture Coach Dungy built translated into success on the field. And I'll show you how these same principles can be applied in any business or organization. You'll learn how to develop your own "Culture Creed"—a set of foundational beliefs that will guide every aspect of your organization.

The chapters will flow in and out of inspirational stories designed to connect you emotionally to the power of culture. They will also include sections focused on teaching and coaching content that will concentrate on themes and bullet-pointed practice applications designed to empower you to transform your culture through knowledge and experience.

We'll also explore how to effectively communicate these beliefs, build systems to reinforce them, and create accountability structures to ensure they're lived out at every level. The truth is, you will always have a culture in your organization—whether by design or by default. So why not be intentional about creating the culture you want? Why not build something truly extraordinary that brings out the best in every team member and drives your organization to new heights of success?

Are you ready to transform your team or organization? Are you prepared to move beyond empty platitudes and build a culture of true excellence? Then let's begin this journey together. It's time to create your championship culture.