



## Drafting LINKS Teams



***Darin W. White, Ph.D. (Samford University) has used LINKS for 20+ years. He is the Chair of the Entrepreneurship, Management, Marketing Department and Executive Director, Samford University Center for Sports Analytics.***

### **You are a long-time user of LINKS. Can you explain why?**

I love LINKS—it is the greatest pedagogy out there—when you want to teach students about marketing and marketing strategy there’s nothing that comes close in my mind. I’ve had a lot of experience with LINKS. I have made mistakes, but have also learned a lot along the way. You name it I’ve tried it. I have run it with undergrads, with MBAs, and I’ve run it in an executive education environment for entry-level people to senior-level people.

### **What is the most important issue you want your students to learn?**

Right now I’m using LINKS in the *Principles of Marketing Class* at the undergrad level at Samford. My objective in this class is to open the student’s eyes to the importance of knowing that to be successful in business you have to be totally “customer focused”. That means looking at customer insight data and driving all your strategies based on customers’ insight data. I want them to walk away knowing that if you’re going to be successful in any company, you had better be totally driven to satisfy your customers. That’s the big learning emphasis in my class.

### **How do you begin your course?**

We normally start with three days of lectures over the material. I divide the manual into three parts and give the students a quiz. They must read the manual and I highlight areas and answer any questions they have. All along, I prep them and get them ready to fill a job position survey. I explain that to be the CEO is a big honor. Everyone who applies to be a CEO has their application reviewed by other faculty members who had experience with these students. We are looking for the best students who will provide leadership for their teams. We have created the culture where the students want to be in the CEO position. They see it as an honor and something great to put on their resume. I also tell them that the other advantage of being the CEO is that they get to craft their own team. It allows them to have a choice in who will make up their team.

### **How many of the students vie for the CEO position?**

In my last class of 40 students there were 8 spots available and 20 who applied. So I vetted those 20 people through the faculty and picked the 8 finalists. We put that on social media—on Facebook and Twitter—“congratulations to these 8 students who were elected as CEO in the LINKS Simulation.” They get the feeling that this is really cool to be elected.

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Another thing we created is a special Twitter account just for the LINKS industry they are in. I will tweet all kinds of interesting facts and figures and information about the industry. It's an unofficial news source to get them thinking. I use social media as a way of keeping the conversation going even outside of class.

### ***Once the CEOs are chosen, how do you proceed?***

Next, and this is on a Friday, we put the 8 CEOs on one side of a table and eight chairs opposite the CEOs. The CEOs come prepared to that class with questions they want to ask. I tell the CEOs to take this very seriously because the way they build their team will determine how successful their team will be. I rotate every single student in class so they are interviewed for 2 minutes by every single CEO.

Every two minutes I say "Rotate" and the students move to another CEO. There is a lot of energy and everyone is talking. Other students are waiting for their turn to come in and be interviewed. It's always a fun class because the students know that the CEOs are going to be making up their team following this questioning.

### ***How do you go ahead with the draft process?***

I give the CEOs the weekend to think about everything and everyone--to look at their notes and develop a draft strategy. On Monday when class starts only the CEOs show up. The rest of the class comes in 30 minutes later. When the CEOs come in the room I have all the team members' names written on the board. Then we do a drawing about who is going to pick first and second up through #8 and then #8 gets to pick again and it goes back down to #1. That is called a snake-eyes draft.

Every CEO is given \$2 million in LINKS money which they use to negotiate trades during the process. Depending on the numbers, everybody has to have a minimum of 4 and maximum of 5 people on their team. Once the draft starts, I tell them at any point they may stop the draft and negotiate a trade with money, or players they have already picked, or they can even trade their position in the draft line-up. There is a potential that someone who has five people on their team might trade two people for one person, plus some money. It's up to them—it's wide open. It's very fluid. If anybody wants to stop the draft and negotiate, we do it. They can also offer up their draft order and switch spots to be able to pick next or trade money or players. This is the exact way that the NFL does their draft picks. I keep things moving and tell them they have 2 or 3 minutes to get the job done. We continue that way until everyone has been picked and there is no one left on the board.

They all have a lot of fun doing this. Normally the draft choices take 30 minutes and the final teams are written on the board. I do make the CEOs promise that they will not tell anyone who the last person picked was. We are sensitive to that and don't want any hurt feelings. Once everyone agrees there are no more changes, we open up the room and let the rest of the class in.

### **Now that all the students are back together in class what happens next?**

Each of the teams get together to have a meet-and-greet with each other, and swap phone numbers and other information. I tell the CEOs in advance that they are going to have this time, so they are prepared to discuss what they want to accomplish in this meeting.

Each team must draft a contract known as a 'firing memo' which they sign and bring to the next class.

After the teams have been formed, I have everyone do a pre-season poll to predict how they think they are going to come out—ranking each team one through eight. My secretary organizes this info and I post how all the

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classmates think it's going to come out in the end. It is interesting to compare this with the actual standings at the end of the class.

By this time, the game has been initialized and everyone has gotten Q#1 to Q#3 results so they go through this information and make sure that everyone is on the same page. They have that weekend to work on their first decisions which will be due.

It really works well. The CEOs take a lot of ownership of their team because they have built their own team from the start.

### **Why did you come up with this method of choosing your teams?**

I tried the method of me choosing the teams, and also randomly placing students in teams. Now my first goal is to get the students to really buy into their team.

This way, the CEOs are the recognized leader of the team and take ownership of building a positive culture within the team. When the CEOs are applying, I stress that and say to them that this is an opportunity to practice your leadership skills. I challenge them asking—"do you want to build your team based on friendships or based on skill sets?" By using the draft, you get a lot more buy in from your CEOs.

### **Why else is this method superior?**

I find there is a lot more competitive parity when it comes to the teams when the CEOs pick them themselves. The students know themselves a lot better than I do. They have been in the same classes with each other for several years. They tend to do a good job of building teams that are fair and equal across the board. There is seldom a time when one or two teams run away with it.

The third reason is there are always some students who are the loafers—the ones that don't want to do put a lot into it. I find that when they are up to the last pick the CEOs will find the person they can work with together and seem to be able to motivate even the loafers.

### **How do you handle the loafers?**

I tell the whole class "your group puts together a contract of what is expected of you, and you sign it, so if your group fires you, and they have justifiable cause, I will not stop them."

I tell them "if you get fired, you are not going to have a very good semester".

We also do a peer review. Everybody evaluates everybody in the group and if their mean score is under 70 their simulation grade is docked by that percentage off what the rest of their team got. So, if the student got 65% and the group got 95% that student gets 65% of 95 as their grade. If in general, everyone gives a student a low grade, I take that as a sign that the student was not working at all to their potential and it is going to cost them big time on their grade.

Over 25 years I have had two instances where students got fired and did not graduate. It doesn't happen often but it has happened. And in the real world if you are not pulling your weight, you are going to get fired and those are the consequences.

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### **How do you end the semester?**

If we have 12 quarters, after the 8<sup>th</sup> quarter, the students write a strategic marketing plan to describe what they did, and explain what their plans, goals and objectives were, and what their revenue perspective was. Then at the end of the 12 quarters, they write another report to say how close to reality they got with their strategic plan and if they were accountable. This is very real world. It makes them stop and think about the big picture rather than just reacting.

If we don't have a full 12 quarters, then I will at least do a final day and each group talks about what they learned that they will take into the work place with them.

### **How has your background influenced your approach?**

I coached men's college soccer for 12 years and I bring a lot of my coaching philosophy into this. If you want to get the best out of people you have got to set a high bar and be real with them.

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