

# Beating the odds: Research examines how leaders use underdog stories to motivate their teams

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Underdog narratives are a tried-and-true leadership tactic designed to motivate teams and organizations. Leaders across industries, from

telecommunications to sports, love to craft a come-from-behind image to ignite those inspirational hard-scrabble stories where the little guy wins by beating the odds.

Those narratives can become a team's collective identity. For instance, Philadelphia Eagles players embodied the underdog persona by wearing dog masks during their historic run to victory over the perennial "big dogs," the New England Patriots, in Super Bowl LII.

But little is understood about how these underdog stories influence the actions and attitudes of [team members](#).

Does the us-versus-them mentality make team members believe they are being treated unfairly and thus, push them to take more risks or cut corners? Does buying into the underdog identity give workers a higher goal and create a greater sense of well-being?

A newly published article tackles that subject and offers a roadmap—and lists potential potholes—for leaders across all industries to consider when crafting an underdog narrative.

"All groups have an identity, and usually, it is up to the leader to shape it," said Logan Steele, an assistant professor in the School of Information Systems and Management at the USF Muma College of Business. "A powerful way leaders shape a group's identity is through the stories they tell. What we don't know is, what is it pushing you to do when you see yourself in that underdog image?"

"The purpose of this paper was to lay a foundation for future research to understand what those consequences might be," he said.

The article, "Organizational underdog narratives: The cultivation and consequences of a collective underdog identity," was published in the

*Academy of Management Review*. In it, Steele provides examples in the sports, telecommunications, apparel and automotive industries to illustrate how leaders use underdog stories to inspire and achieve their organizations' aspirations.

"While there are many potential upsides to utilizing this story—such as increased motivation, engagement, and well-being—this paper also highlights some of the potential drawbacks and how these drawbacks may be mitigated," he said.

"One consequence of adopting a collective underdog identity is increased risk-taking by members of the organization," Steele said.

For example, shortly before launching the iPod in 2001, Apple was in a bleak state, with competitor Michael Dell famously proclaiming that Apple should shut down and give money back to its shareholders. Yet Apple's collective underdog identity and the company's dedication to innovation changed how society interacts with technology.

On the flip side, Uber was often cited for morally questionable forms of risk-taking behavior during its rise from underdog status. The company reportedly skirted regulations around the world, allegedly stealing technology from competitors and even stalking a reporter to advance its agenda.

Steele said one way to mitigate the potential drawbacks in risk-taking behaviors is to avoid casting the underdog narrative in an us-versus-them scenario.

"When you frame success as a zero-sum game, you motivate members of an organization to sabotage their competition. The message is that we're being treated unfairly and are at a disadvantage, so people may try to level the playing field by cutting corners," he said.

Buying into a collective underdog status can also lead to a greater sense of well-being.

For example, New Balance famously promotes itself as an underdog in the athletic shoe industry by breaking from industry out-sourcing norms and having a significant portion of its footwear produced in the U.S.

"Members of the organization take pride in seeing themselves as working against industry giants as the little guy who promotes the social good by supporting [local communities](#)," Steele writes.

**More information:** Logan M. Steele et al, Organizational Underdog Narratives: The Cultivation and Consequences of a Collective Underdog Identity, *Academy of Management Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.5465/amr.2019.0336](#)

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