



The Elusive X

THE INSTITUTE OF
LEADERSHIP
& MANAGEMENT

WHITE PAPER

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Introduction

Sport metaphors are often used in business and successful sports people are frequently interviewed for their leadership and performance insights in business journals and the press. In 2001 Jim Loehr and Tony Schwarz offered advice on developing what they termed 'corporate athletes' which identified how the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing of a leader all contribute to optimum performance. Terry Orlick's Wheel of Excellence introduced in 2008 emphasized the importance of focus and its constituent parts. Parallels continue to be drawn and the increased profile of sport as a business (e.g. football) and as a publicly funded enterprise for which returns must be shown (e.g. Team GB in the Olympics) means that the crossover between elite sport and business performance is gaining increasing attention. As attractive as the comparisons are to many, there is also a recognition of the ways in which sport and business differ, and, there may be limitations in the lessons to be learnt from sport leadership (Levleva and Terry, 2008).

UK elite sport has certainly seen an increase in success in recent years. Increased investment of financial resources is often cited as the reason but even before the closing ceremony in Rio questions were being asked about the sustainability of our Olympic achievement. Undoubtedly investment plays a key role but investment alone does not guarantee winners so what other factors contribute to success? What is the elusive quality of sport that inspires heroic performances, bravery on the field of play, lifetime loyalty from fans and the kind of devotion that corporate teams can only dream of building in their employees? Why does business look to sport for inspiration?

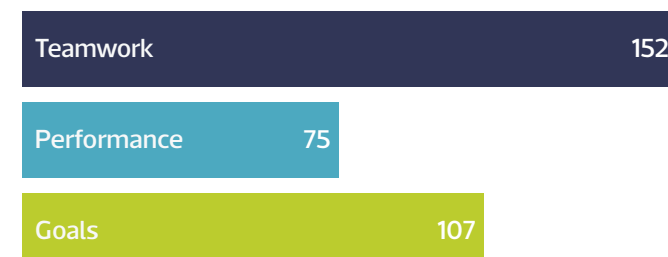
Can leaders and managers transfer learning, draw parallels, gain insight and use sporting approaches and practices to transform organisational performance? Can knowledge of these approaches and practices deliver sustained high performance when it matters most? Is there an "Elusive X" which exists over and above financial investment that aids performance in intensely competitive environments?

In order to explore these metaphors The Institute of Leadership & Management conducted original research by convening focus groups of Olympic-level athletes, leadership and performance experts and CEOs. This white paper draws on this focus group research to explore how the lessons of success in elite sport may be transferred to a business context. It shows how businesses can usefully adapt the approaches in elite sport such as understanding of teamwork, goal clarity, the use of feedback and high performance mindsets to improve performance. It highlights important differences between business and elite sport and questions the extent to which there is a crossover of learning and practice between the two domains.

Discussion at the focus groups centred around what sport could teach business and while the discussion was wide ranging, three key dominant areas of discussion: teams, performance and goals were initially identified.

Further analysis focusing on the main research question regarding performance in intensely competitive environments revealed the key themes of **teamwork**, **clarity**, **metrics**, and **mindset**, these emerged as the most important ways in which corporations could emulate the success of sport.

Figure 1: Dominant areas of discussion / number of mentions





Teamwork

The Hawthorne experiments in the 1930s revealed the importance of the wider team on individual performance (Mayo, 1933). Action Centred Leadership (Adair, 1988) identified the interplay between team, task and individual in team performance. Teamwork is a business essential, team members need to work with and respect their peers, and leaders need to motivate both individuals and the team as a whole. Like the athlete whose individual performance is of paramount importance, treating people not only as employees but as valued individuals positively impacts performance. The increased focus on leveraging diversity in the modern workplace and acknowledging the possibilities of using a diverse team for commercial advantage places even greater demands on team developers.

It might initially appear that in elite individual sports the individual is paramount – after all it is the runner on the track or swimmer in the pool that is awarded the medal, however the discussions revealed the extent to which every elite athlete is propelled by an array of supporting players such as physiotherapists, coaches, federation executives, sponsors, volunteers, sport psychologists and managers.

“...the Olympic team was 366 athletes; 1,500 people went out there for Team GB...so it's very easy to just think about the field of play but...there's a massive, massive organisation that sits behind it'.

In business as well, the underlying team is often hidden from view. Focus in business is usually on the CEO or other senior leaders rather than the team within the organisation working at business as usual. There are different organizational dynamics within sport to those in business. The elite athlete is the ultimate performer but coach and other support staff guide the athlete on a day to day basis. In business the high profile player might call the shots and set the strategy but in sport the coach and athlete are in less of a top down relationship. Organizations may gain insight from looking at the practice of teamwork in elite sport, with its focus on the relevance of all team members and the more equal dynamic between coach and athlete.

Clarity of Goals

Many experts identify the ability to formulate a broad vision, and then translate that into workable detail, as essential to successful leadership (Westley and Mintzberg 1989, Handy 1992, Deering et al 2002, Alimo-Metcalfe and Bradley 2008.) The range of skills and behaviours required by such visionary leaders has been the subject of much research and the focus group discussions revealed how powerful having a clear vision can be and how the need for clarity extends beyond vision.

The importance of clear and obtainable goals was discussed at length during the focus groups. Elite sport has clear and easily defined success measurements (e.g. medals or match wins) and this was seen as something that should, and could, also be focused on in business.

‘you’ve got to create an objective way of scoring performance, and the beauty of sport is really the beauty of sales. It’s really easy to score objectively; you either did it or you didn’t do it’

However, whilst elite sport has a major overall aim the discussion highlighted the need to break down goals into clear and achievable short term objectives. These immediately tangible targets were vital in reaching the overall aim.

“..being Olympians, they’ll have very clear performance plans. There’ll be aligned to that goal...and that probably breaks down to the hour, to the minute at times, as to what’s happening day in, day out, to link back to that goal..”

“You don’t start at the beginning of an Olympiad and go ‘I want to win a Gold medal’...That’s not the thing that make you get out of bed – it’s the smaller goals along the way..”

‘if you get all the little things right, you build those little one percents or half-percents up. You’ll get to the 100% in the end.’

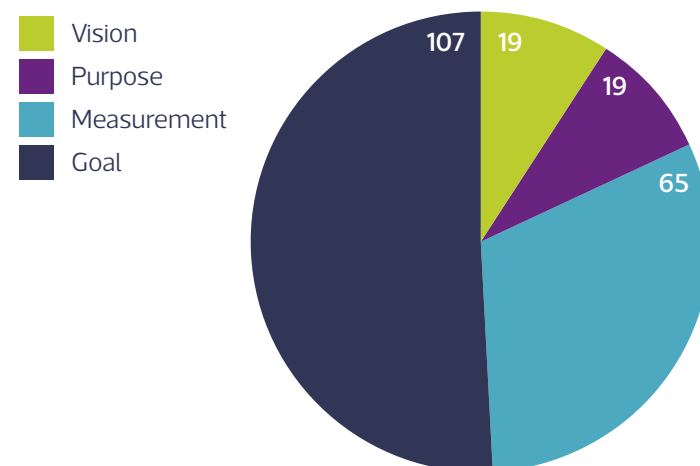
The alignment of overall goals with day to day work was also felt to transfer well to business context. Staff need to understand the overall target and see how their operational tasks build towards that.

At first glance, elite sport has a simpler measure than most business. As the UK funding body, UK Sport, has recently shown funding for Olympic sport is focused only on those most likely to achieve medals. This overarching focus given to the ultimate goal was echoed in the comments at the focus group.

“In elite sport, mediocrity is not tolerated..... How do you help people say “you’ve got to be the best you can be and there is no ‘good enough’”?

Most businesses will have a wider range of objectives that run over a variety of time frames, rather than, for example, the one to four year cycles of major sporting events. So while both elite sport and businesses need to break down overall goals into smaller steps the relative weight between the steps and final achievement will present more of a challenge in non-sporting environments with longer and or continuous time scales for achievement.

Figure 2: The importance of clarity



Metrics of Performance

The embedding of performance management systems incorporating appraisal processes and the increased use of tools such as 360 degree feedback highlight an increasing recognition that staff should be encouraged to reflect on, and improve, their performance using honest, regular and supportive feedback. Good practice indicates that leaders should give feedback on an ongoing basis although most organisations only operate a formal annual, or semi-annual, appraisal process .

Regular and transparent feedback on performance is embedded in elite sport by the approach to goal setting, the number of unambiguous measures that are available and the regularity of competition. While feedback is also key in business the focus groups all recognized that the approaches are different in important ways. For example one participant said:

‘There is no sports person out there in competition, paid, or driven sports that may have a review in 12 months’ time. They’re being reviewed and measured constantly’.

Such intense feedback is likely to prove a challenge in business which normally focuses around yearly, or half yearly feedback. The group felt that this extended period led to mistakes being hidden and tolerated in a way not possible in elite sport. In business it was felt that there were more places to hide. But they also

recognised the difficulty in transferring such an intense structure to a corporate environment. As one participant noted

‘how would you work that...daily, that intimate feedback into organisations’?

It is apparent that a clear and regular system of goals (that are meaningful to the person in question) coupled to clear metrics and a shared definition of success can facilitate an intimate, iterative system of feedback which mirrors the cycle of training and improvement in sport.

But there is a potential tension between direct and constant feedback and another characteristic of elite sport success, namely empowerment. The group felt that empowering people was key to success. As one outlined:

‘I think the X factor [in sport] is...empowering people, empowering athletes, empowering people in the company to actually be involved in the big vision’

With another adding:

‘what I always used to say to my team is... “I don’t mind if you make a mistake; don’t do the same mistake’

There is a danger that overly frequent feedback stifles staff, leaving them constantly responding to events rather than taking the initiative to strike out in new ways. Empowering staff means allowing them to make their own mistakes which could be limited if there is constant feedback and monitoring. However, it is clear that elite sport and business share the focus on empowerment with innovation highly prized by firms and performance enhancing feedback increasingly demanded by staff.

The Right Mindset

Mental toughness has been claimed as the real key to excellence within both sports and business (Jones, 2008). Since it is an area of training that is routinely considered within sport, and rarely within business, it would appear to be a key area in which business can learn from sport. The most successful athletes have well-developed performance protocols or competition plans that help them to identify which behaviours are required at each stage, where to focus their attention and facilitate the generation of productive thoughts (Bond & Sargent, 2004; Terry, 1989). Carol Dweck (2006) introduced a distinction between a “fixed mindset” and the “growth mindset”. An individual with a “fixed mindset” focuses too much on the perceived talent and not on their ability to develop it.

Emulating the mindset of an athlete proved a focus of discussion, with an athlete’s mindset seen as a highly desired in the business context. The group identified specific traits that are shown by elite sport performers, which could be grouped into ‘mindset’

These can clearly be the traits of a successful business leader but the challenge is to develop these in non-sporting environments. The focus groups highlighted the overall mindset of elite sports people:

“..there’s much more of an emotionally based motive to do something in the world of sport, that the achievement or result is very tangible and personal, it means something personal to yourself...”

In large business organisations it may be difficult for leaders to feel such a direct personal connection to overall results but the drive to make it personal is clearly one that could improve business performance.

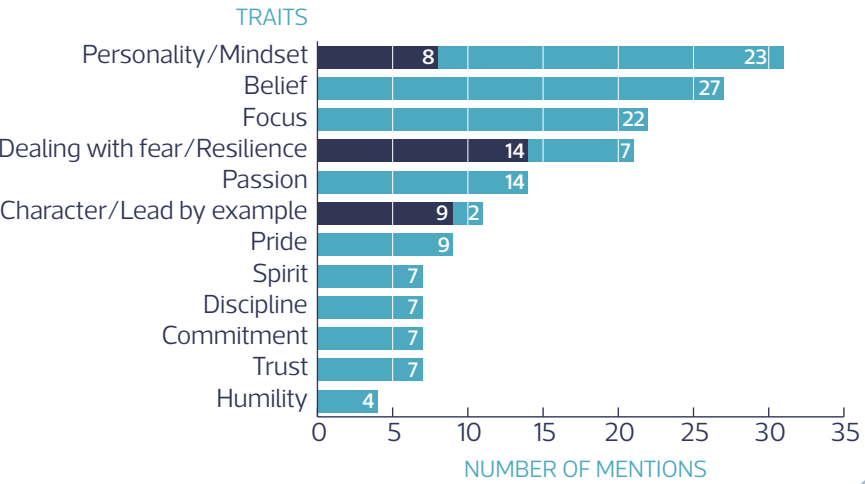
The focus groups also highlighted how success in sports only comes after an extended period of work which inevitably includes setbacks and mistakes. Success was seen as being able to bounce back, face pressure and cope with failures. Again the transfer to successful business leadership is clear although as one participant said

‘hopefully it’s in all of us, but what do we do to unlock it?’.

Leaders in business can learn from sport that they need the right mindset of resilience and perseverance. However, an athlete’s motivation is, in part, also propelled by the brutal reality that they can be cut from the team at any time unless they achieve peak performance, and that an athletes’ shelf life is relatively short. Demanding that an executive perform to this level throughout their career or risk immediate dismissal might be unrealistic but does focus attention on how high performance can and should be supported.



Figure 3: Mindset and Elite Athlete Traits



Conclusion

What is the Elusive X?

Sports and business are both quintessentially high performance environments sharing the same requirements for leadership, teamwork and a high performance mindset. Yet the corporate world has yet to achieve the systematic performance improvement that elite athletes so often demonstrate.

Whilst the focus groups participants recognised that there are differences between the two domains: the transparent and objective nature of sport is such that performance is immediate and clear, goal-setting would seem to be a lot simpler in sport than in business, where there may be a range of complex goals that can conflict, the career span of athletes is shorter than most business careers and the ratio of time spent training to performing stands in direct contrast to that of business.

But there are clear opportunities for learning transfer and the research conducted for this white paper reveals that the 'Elusive X' can be broken down into four themes: teamwork, clarity, metrics and mindset.

If a corporation systematically identifies the improvements it can make in each one of these four areas, the transferability of sport principles to business is surprisingly pragmatic.

- Recognizing the contribution each team member makes to performance and contribution is not necessarily a function of visibility.
- Ensuring that real clarity exists for all employees, not only in terms of a grand, inspiring vision, but clear translation into shorter specific goals for everyone so that all employees know where they 'fit' and that they are valued.
- Once goals have been clarified, a strategic and transparent means of measuring performance for each employee should be devised that is developed both reciprocally and iteratively.
- Finally, an appreciation that a growth mindset is for everyone and resilience, self-belief and focus are not innate attributes but characteristics that may be developed.

This white paper offers a first step identifying how businesses may capture the elusive and powerful nature of sport to achieve inspiring results and to engender real gains in performance.

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