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Part 2

Leading through Transformation

What can business
leaders learn from
competitive sport?



Performance is in the relationships

In part one of this article, leadership consultant and former professional athlete, Jennifer Hadjieva explored how business leaders can learn from the likes of the New York Mets and Roger Federer. In part two she explores more lessons from Michael Jordan, Will Carling and Rafael Nadal.



In part one we discussed the multifaceted role of team leaders, the importance of growing in adversity and failure and the need to recognise the moments that matter. But what about the importance of relationships in senior teams?

During a transformation, inter-personal team relationships become essential to maintaining motivation. It is the collective effort that counts. For example, if a football team is performing poorly, would you blame just one or two players? Or ask them to carry the entire team? Undoubtedly, it would be more helpful to use all eleven players on the pitch, the ones on the bench, the physical therapist, the sports psychologist... in other words, the entire infrastructure that makes up the team.

Individual commitment to a group effort is the key to oneness. It is the trust and certainty that your teammates will support you and pick you up that creates a thriving environment. Therefore, leaders must encourage a culture of oneness, in which every player is as important as the next one. In our experience, however, too often leadership teams continue to operate as a collection of individuals.

“You see, the real reason the [Chicago] Bulls won six NBA championships in nine years is that we plugged into the power of oneness instead of the power of one man. We're all susceptible to falling down and being exposed. But when we lose our fear of that, and look to each other, then vulnerability turns into strength, and we can take responsibility for our place in the larger context of the team and embrace a vision in which the group imperative takes precedence over personal glory.”

Basketball coach Phil Jackson

Superstars vs the team

When studying high performing teams, super star individuals are not what drives performance.

Helpfulness, connectedness and cohesion are what drives great results over time. When the Bulls won their fifth title Steve Kerr, unexpectedly, took the winning shot. For the coaches, fans and team mates it seemed obvious that super star Michael Jordan would be the one to take it, but in line with the final seconds of the game plan, Kerr was trusted by his team even though he had struggled in the finals, only making 30% of his shots when entering the Game 6. A strong sense of connectedness and cohesion and trusting each other when it matters the most was seen as key to succeeding as a team.



The power of relationships



But what about my own experiences in the world of individual sport? Is it the athlete or the coach who is the leader?

The leadership provided by the coach has a tremendous effect on the lives of athletes and their sporting experience. The coach's main responsibility is to create an internal and external environment in which the athlete can develop and achieve their goals. Effective leadership is when people perform in accordance with the leader's intentions while finding their own needs satisfied (Misasi, Morin and Kwasnowski, 2016). Arguably, the coach is a spider in a web who ensures all parts of the team operate in symphony. So, the athlete is the star, but not necessarily the leader.

The experiences of tennis icon Rafael Nadal, arguably one of the most successful athletes in history, highlights the critical role relationships play. His close-knit team is recognised as one of the key factors behind his success. "The only time it's become an individual sport is actually when you're on the court. You play with your team, you work with your team. And I think that does a lot, it extends people's careers for two reasons.

First because they know how to prepare the players and avoid injury. Secondly, being around a team helps you not get tired."

As a leader, how much time and effort do you spend getting to know and care about your people?

Are you investing enough in the human aspects of your leadership?

Whilst leadership clearly is not a simple process, and there is no one model fits all, Misasi et al.'s research indicates that the best way for a coach to lead an athlete to perform at a high level is to get to know them deeply and to work hard to understand their goals, motivations and needs.

"To be able to truly lead someone, you have to know them. Not the work colleague, not the player, but the real person behind that front."

Will Carling

Recover well to perform well

But what about the moments that are not about high performance? The moments off the court matter as much as the ones on.



One major difference that we see between the world of sports and business, is the genuine considerations for mental and physical well-being. Time away from the court or the workplace is critical because it provides an opportunity to reflect, relax and re-establish a sense of well-being and positive mood in order to be able to deliver peak performance when it matters.

As an athlete, I had a number of self-care priorities that kept me motivated. Spending time with my friends and family was a way of relaxing, so I made sure to do plenty of that. I also made sure I fulfilled my basic needs of sleeping and eating well. We all need to keep an eye out for ourselves and our well-being. Leaders need to understand that self-care is critical and should be at the forefront of any organisational culture.

Our article on [resilient leadership](#) lays out how leaders can encourage their people to recharge by reconnecting to a personal purpose, solidifying a network with people you can trust, and finding an energy source. Only by resting well and prioritising their health and wellbeing can people make valuable contributions to a team and perform when it matters.

As a leader, how are you helping your team to build trusting relationships?

Are you investing time in really getting to know the people you lead?

How are you supporting them to prioritise feeling well to perform well?

Step back to step up



This two-part series has discussed a number of lessons business leaders can learn from sports when leading through transformation:

- Leaders need to build and sustain energy, momentum and optimism. It is their role to inspire and motivate their teams.
- Failing is an important and key part of success. Leaders who build a culture in which people feel safe to fail when they try something new or challenging, and step back to reflect, will foster more resilient teams.
- Leaders need to carefully choose where to focus their energy and consider the moments that matter. Long-term success requires the ability to step back, to step up.
- Success in the relationships and leaders need to make a conscious and genuine effort to get to know the real person behind the people they work with.
- Leaders need to consider the mental and physical wellbeing of the people they work with. Only by resting well and prioritising their health and wellbeing can people make valuable contributions to a team and perform when it matters.

Both sports and business leaders should reflect on how their leadership style and behaviour result in their people reaching their personal goals, performance goals and help build a winning mindset. For many leaders that means taking a look in the mirror and rethinking the drivers of high performance and re-evaluating the essence of what it means to be a great leader.



If you would like to find out more about how we can partner with you to develop your leaders and create high-performing teams in your business, please get in touch with us.



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