

Spotlight on Learning from Sport



In sport, when you're benched, or told you haven't made the squad, those feelings of rejection are similar to those you feel when you're excluded from an important client pitch or meeting. This is the time you can call on the mental toughness or the confidence you've developed in sport to help you deal with disappointments in the workplace

Kris Chesney, International Men's Rugby Player (2019)

Teamwork

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.

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

Resilience

Resilience means having the ability to bounce back from adversity. Success is seen as being able to recover quickly from setbacks, face pressure and cope with failures. 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 athlete's 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.

Mental resilience or 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 less frequently 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)

An athlete's mindset is highly desired in the business context as 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. 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.

Confidence

Confidence is the trust that you have in yourself and your abilities. It allows you to have a positive yet realistic view of yourself and the situations in which you are involved. In business, it is important to have confidence in your own ideas and abilities so that you can propose improvement and change, accept challenge, stand up for what you believe, have the courage to admit your limitations, and learn from your mistakes. Having a well founded confidence also means you avoid being reckless.

Research into performance has shown self-confidence to be an important factor that enables people to achieve success and, when missing, causes others to fail. It is asserted that people who compete, or who have competed, in sports work better towards team goals, have greater aversion to failure and have higher levels of self-confidence and self-respect (Fletcher, 2011).

High confidence	Low confidence
Doing what you believe is right even if others criticise	Behaviour is determined by what other people think
Admitting mistakes and learning from them	Mistakes are covered up with the hope they can be corrected before anyone notices
Taking risks to achieve success, willing to take on challenges	Avoiding taking risks by staying in comfort zone, fearing failure. Reluctant to take on challenges
Able to be compassionate with others, as they are with themselves	Struggle to be compassionate with others

Giving Feedback and Progress Checking

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. Participation in sport enables leaders to be better at setting clear obtainable goals, empowering staff and providing feedback on performance.

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 approaches are different in important ways; people who participate in sport are reviewed and measured constantly. Such intense feedback is likely to prove a challenge in business which normally focuses around yearly, or half yearly feedback so when giving feedback, consider carefully both your style and its content.

Common understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure everyone understands the principle of constructive feedback • Offer training for these who need it, this includes awareness of language
Develop a feedback ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There always needs to be more positive than negative feedback to your team • In high performing teams it often is 5/1
Change performance appraisal culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make appraisals more frequent so they become timely, or, • Remove them and replace with more regular feedback
Establish other feedback mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the question in a safe way "What should we stop ? What should we do more of?"
Leaders model behaviours of constructive feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders should model the behaviours of constructive feedback in the organisation so that it cascades down

References

- The Institute of Leadership & Management (2017). **The Elusive X** www.institutelm.com/resourceLibrary/TheElusiveX.html
- The Institute of Leadership & Management (2019). **Leaders at Play** www.institutelm.com/resourceLibrary/leaders-at-play-game-changing-leadership-from-sport-to-workplace.html