

Sporting chance

In its appreciation of the performance-boosting power of management, sport leaves much of the business world trailing far behind, according to Phil Shohet

People whose closest acquaintance with any form of physical exercise is the 10-metre dash from sofa to fridge during TV commercial breaks often have no qualms about offering their expert opinion on the performance and decision-making of individuals, teams, coaches and managers.

All these armchair athletes have one thing in common: an unshakeable belief that their team would do much better if they were in charge. But offer those same individuals the opportunity to take over the management of their respective companies and few would have the same confidence in their abilities. The worlds of sport and work are very different. Or are they?

Businesses often look to the examples of successful sporting teams to improve the performance of their workplace teams, sending them on courses designed to identify those with leadership abilities and encourage better all-round teamwork. Experience has shown that people who work together as a team function more efficiently than a group of individuals trying to achieve the same objective on their own. It therefore seems logical to suppose that sport has many lessons to teach the commercial world when it comes to maximising the skills and potential of their employees.

Examination of the advice offered by some of the world's top sporting managers reveals a number of common themes. One of the most important is: players play, managers manage. To be truly effective in a leadership and coaching role, it is impossible to be part of the team as well. Just as important, technical expertise and managerial ability do not necessarily go hand in hand. New Zealand All Blacks rugby coach Graham Henry never played at the top level, yet he managed arguably the most successful rugby team in the world. There are examples of other successful leaders in sport who were average players.

The manager's care of and attitude towards the individuals within the team are integral to their long-term success. 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care,' is a mantra repeated by many top coaches. Their key to motivation is to convey the clear message that they want the individual to achieve, not just for the good of the team, but because they have a genuine interest in seeing that person fulfil his or her potential. The success of the team as a whole will follow as a natural result.

Just one aspect of this attitude is the different approaches to performance reviews. In sporting teams, this is a continuous process and a major part of the management role. In business, it is a formalised process that happens on an annual basis. But why wait a year to tell someone they're not doing a good job – or promote them if they are?

Choices, choices...

Finding the right players for the team is, of course, key to success, and many sporting managers are surprised at how little time and effort the business world seems to expend in recruitment and selection. There can be few human resource managers or staff partners who cannot recall several occasions where new recruits have failed to live up to the promise of their CV. Indeed, surveys show that a considerable number of CVs bear little relation to the achievements and abilities of the authors.

This is extremely rare in the world of sport: managers are far more rigorous in their selection process and take nothing for granted. Personality profiling is now common for new players, with the resulting report used by the manager to better understand the individual and how they need to be handled.

One of the big advantages sporting managers have is their ability to drop underperforming or disruptive players. Legislation

in the commercial world makes it far more difficult – yet another reason for businesses to take a great deal more time and trouble with their staff selection.

Another vital element of success in sporting management is the level of responsibility that managers give to their players. Many include more experienced members of the team in discussions about tactics and team selection. Firstly, this allows the players to feel a part of the chosen methods and goals of the team, thereby strengthening their commitment. Secondly, the more responsibility they have, the better they will perform. They will feel valued, their self-esteem will improve, their belief in what they do will increase and they will become more accountable for their actions.

It is perhaps not surprising that the rules for good management in sport are broadly similar to those in business. The ultimate objective is the same: working together to achieve success. In business terms this means growth and profitability; in sporting terms it means accolades, fame and, of course, increased earning ability. Taking lessons from those who coax extraordinary performances out of extraordinary people will perhaps help those whose task it is to coax extraordinary performances out of ordinary people.

Ultimately, sport is about performance and the three elements that go into it: drive, determination and discipline. All are found in every successful team; all are found in every successful organisation. They are essential motivators and can be taught to the entire team or organisation, helping to create a culture where people can make a positive difference.

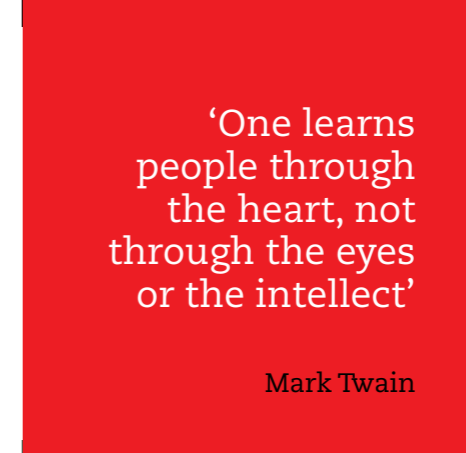
In its recognition of the power of management, sport is leaps and bounds ahead of much of the business world, which still underrates the influence of the immediate supervisor on employee motivation and performance. This power can be employed constructively or destructively. As a former Manchester United football manager said: 'A good manager can make a team 10% better, a poor manager can make it 50% worse'. ■

Phil Shohet, senior consultant, Foulger Underwood



'It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit'

Harry Truman



'One learns people through the heart, not through the eyes or the intellect'

Mark Twain



'A good manager can make a team 10% better, a poor manager can make it 50% worse'

Sir Alex Ferguson

Top 10 leadership tips

1. Treat everyone as equals in the way you speak to them
2. Lead by example
3. Provide continuous encouragement
4. Do not dwell on mistakes or apportion blame
5. Make everyone feel part of the same team – no cliques
6. Involve everyone but keep your distance
7. Trust your subordinates' judgment
8. Ensure there is no hidden agenda; inform everyone of the objectives
9. Get rid of persistently disruptive individuals
10. Appear to be calm and in control.