

What can managers learn from the world of sports?

Sports people need to be creative to achieve optimum performance. Jones (2002) transitioned from sports psychologist to business consultant, and cited creativity and innovation as critical for a team's performance, whether it is a sporting or business team. Creativity in sports management is an example of how business can learn from sports. The improvement in performance of the athlete because of the trust and closeness of their relationship with their coach can be mirrored in the business world.

Business managers tend to both coach and manage people, whereas sports people have separate coaches and managers. Business managers help people to develop as individuals, and help people produce business for the company. Managers will lift their productivity if the coach and manager roles are separated. Business managers can strive for performance for the company, and they can introduce a coaching role in the company who add more of the intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. Unlike some current executive coaches, these people would work closely in a team with the manager to bring out peak performance in the individual. This triangle relationship is supported by the conclusions of Bales and Slater (1956). They discovered that two leaders with distinct roles self-emerged in research on groups of Harvard University Graduates. One was the "task leader", and the other was the "socio-emotional leader". Bales and Slater found that the socio-emotional leader only emerged after the task leader was identified.

Athletes have three "zones". A "fired up" zone, a "middle" zone, and a "down" zone. Athletes keep in the "middle" zone during training. Their coaches lift them when they are in the "down" zone and settle them down when they are "fired up" when they don't need to be. If athletes stay fired up when they don't need to perform at their peak, they are harder to get into the "fired up" zone when they really need to be. As managers, we can recognise these zones and lift people when they are down and settle them down when they are fired up until they need to be fired up for peak performance times – eg big meetings and presentations.

Weinberg and McDermott (2002) interviewed ten sportspeople and ten business leaders on leadership, group cohesion and communication. Both sport and business leaders agreed that an interactional style of leadership is best, but they leaned toward a more democratic style if possible. Both sport and business leaders noted that the most common way of achieving cohesion was the development of a shared vision. Managers can learn from these aspects by revisiting the organisation's vision in a democratic way – let the team refine the vision.

Loehr and Schwartz (2001) encouraged business people to learn from athletes and have a focus on training body, mind and spirit to discover peak performance. A manager can perform better by being physically and spiritually fit, as well as mentally fit. Of particular interest was the observation that in tennis, the best competitors "use precise recovery rituals in the 15-20 seconds between points". These competitors had "heart rates rising rapidly during play, and dropping as much as 15% to 20% between points". Managers can learn rituals that help them to refocus and hence perform. Maybe a few minutes before important meetings can be dedicated to refocussing.

After carefully studying Olympic athletes for many years, Gould et al (1999) have developed a pyramid model of peak athletic performance. It relies on peak performance strategies (e.g., visualization, mental plans, positive self-talk) that athletes use which are transferable to business managers. Managers can visualize the results they want, change their self-talk to be positive, and extend their mental planning.

Other creativity in sports that managers can learn from:-

- Athletes “cross-train” to keep training fun while they are still exercising. Managers can organise interdisciplinary projects and move people around the organization temporarily so the variety will keep people performing longer.
- Athletes often form close “apprentice” relationship with former athletes, understanding that tacit information flows there. Managers can seek out older mentors so they can develop quicker
- Managers can organise their working life to focus on peak performance times, to make sure that are peaking for the most important times, eg for shareholder meetings. To achieve that, they may need to tapering mental activity before the event, relax on the day, and begin to mentally engage before the event, going “into the zone”
- Sports people look for revolutionary techniques to radically improve performance. The “fosby flop” in high jumping and “discus style” in shot put has dramatically improved performance. Managers can look further a field for techniques to improve their performance. Pascale, Milleman and Gioja (2000) apply chaos theory from the world of Physics to help managers bring life to their organizations.
- Sportspeople use oxygen creatively. They perform better when they train in environments of less oxygen (hypobaric), and recover better in environments of more oxygen (hyperbaric). Managers can prepare for key events by keeping physically fit.
- Sports people aim to perform at key events and games. They then rest before the next campaign. Managers can structure organisations with short term project teams. Since creativity is difficult to sustain in the long term, this will give people time to recover what they need to foster a new wave of creativity.
- Sports people, especially in teams sports, are empowered to make decisions in an instant – who to pass to, what move to make. Managers can foster creativity by pushing decisions as “far down the line” as possible, so front line people can respond quickly within the game plan.

References

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