

Creating the Conditions for Olympic Level Success at Work

I was listening to an Olympic coach discussing the attributes which lead to success at the Games. After years of working with the best athletes in the world, he and his psychologist friend had come to the conclusion that there are certain traits that mean all the difference when it comes to medal winning performance. They became known as the CORE model and can be applied to any realm of human endeavour.

What had become obvious over time is that athletes who displayed these traits began to pull away from the rest of the pack. They were goal focussed and rebounded from setbacks quicker. They were problem solvers and ambitious to get to the next level of success. With this level of self-motivation it is easy to understand why people with these traits would rise to the top and be dynamite to a business's productivity, results and profits. As an inspirational leader, your job is to create the environment that promotes these behaviours.

The CORE traits are:

Commitment: The top performers are totally committed to their goals. Most people approach a challenge half-heartedly, often dipping a toe in the water with the other foot planted firmly on dry land. They don't fully commit themselves to a new approach or goal until they know how it's going to work out. Unfortunately for them, challenges often require complete commitment in order for them to succeed. Conversely top performers, after careful preparation, jump in with both feet because they know it takes courage to achieve great things. They understand that there's no action, opportunity for success or growth on the side-lines. The ancient Greek warriors understood this idea.

The element of risk is a trigger of *flow states*, that zone when you're able to perform at your highest potential because you have to be fully immersed in the endeavour to succeed. The Greeks possessed an unwavering attitude towards victory and commitment. When the Grecian armies landed on their enemy's shore, the first order the commanders gave was:

"Burn the boats."

Ownership: Top performers take ownership. Even if there is a problem that is caused by something or somebody else, they will take charge of the problem and solve it themselves. Peak performers will not accept excuses or reasons for not overcoming a problem, they implement solutions. In business, if people don't have a sense of ownership in their work, then engagement declines. The antithesis being if you can increase the average level of ownership in a team, you will likely see profits increase. When leaders ensure the team members have some *skin in the game*, they enjoy the benefits of better relations between managers and workers; higher productivity; less waste; a self-regulating culture in which team members

watch each other's backs. This leads to an unleashing of problem solving and innovation that accelerates growth. As gold medallist Mia Hamm put it:

"I am building a fire, and every day I train, I add more fuel. At just the right moment, I light the match."

Right results focussed: High performers make quantum jumps in performance by adjusting to immediate feedback. In the workplace, there is a subtle difference in the way systems of feedback are used, some are effective for peak performance and others, not so much.

When feedback and 'kpi's' (key performance indicators) are used to control the behaviours of the team by a manager, they can actually cause a different problem. Hitting targets becomes the goal, instead of achieving success for the organisation.

An example of this apparently happened within the NHS. A *kpi* from hospital hierarchy was passed down to the casualty department. It was regarding how long patients were allowed to be left on a gurney in the waiting rooms and hallways of the hospital. A time limit, it was thought, would facilitate quicker processing of patients through the already overstretched department. As a gurney is a wheeled bed, the staff simply took the wheels off the gurneys and this transformed the gurneys into static beds.

Innovative but not what management was looking for. The nurses were not bought into the higher purpose and so focussed on the wrong results. Outside motivation is helpful, but it takes self-discipline to achieve the top spot.

Excellence: The path of excellence is not the pursuit of perfection or competition with others. Olympic athletes are only really comparing themselves to their previous days or weeks results. A constant process of evaluating the results, adjusting course and setting new goals to be accomplished is the path of excellence. This is how climbing the mountain of Olympic success is achieved. A long period of head down struggle, only to look up one day and find themselves on the top of the podium. As Mark Spitz remarked:

"I'm trying to do the best I can. I'm not concerned with tomorrow, but with what goes on today."

What lessons can be transferred to the workplace?

Team members must have buy-in to the higher purpose and mission of what you're trying to achieve. Arbitrary targets, with penalties if they're not achieved, rarely work over the long term. There is a need for real-time feedback, preferably not just the opinion of somebody but recorded results are more helpful. I often use video feedback to help sporting clients. That's

not always possible, but feedback systems should be utilised in a way that empowers team members to be able to alter their own behaviours accordingly.

A clear goal is necessary but also aligned with a purpose. If team members understand the goals, why they are important and know they can influence the strategy, you're going to get clarity of focus on the right results.

As opposed to having managers, it would be better if the systems and hierarchy in place were seen as the supporting role in the drive for success. As much as we all focus on the star who has won the medal, enlightened leaders know peak performers don't achieve success by themselves. But it's important that the invaluable leader and support staff don't take away autonomy or a sense of ownership from team members. As Lau Tzu said:

"When the best leader's work is done the people say, '*We did it ourselves.*'"

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