

Sports Lessons from Business

by

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There are many companies and consultants who ply their trade by offering businesses the chance to gain insights into the way in which successful sports teams operate and how the lessons can be applied for business success.

It is interesting however to reflect and look at the success rate in business and that of sports and even more so the continuity of enduring success within business. Whilst sport offers us some fantastic and blinding moments of glory, there are comparatively very few examples of continual success over a long period. In the business world there are hundreds, from small family concerns to giant corporations.

Sport and business are different but there are some clear parallels and cross learning available - but beware the sports team that tries to operate as a business or a business that tries to operate as a sport – success is measured very differently by fans than it is by shareholders.

Sport is, by its nature, focused on the short term and training and performance are periodised for specific competitions and seasons. In business this is not acceptable as it requires consistently high team and individual performance regardless of season, team changes, competitors, the market or even holidays.

I would suggest that achieving long-term high performance is the shift change challenge faced by all professional sport in the open market and creating this shift is the greatest challenge for sports coaches, team managers and rugby administrators.

How might business help sport to solve this problem? A mixture of process and future focus is probably the best summary and there are very many areas to consider. However, here are some interesting areas about which you may wish to think:

The process focus of long-term success

1. A solid, committed and organically developed core team.

There is plenty of research to support the importance of continuity of leadership and team membership. Popular examples include Sir Richard Branson at Virgin, The Rothermeres at Associated Newspapers, Phillip Green at BHS, Bill Gates at Microsoft and the board at Rentokil.

Continuity means that the company has a long term focus which is constantly updated plus the advantage of time. Time is critical in order that messages filter down and everybody understands the processes and focus of the company, its aims, objectives and culture.

How long has your management team been in place?

Do you have a fully supported development process in place?

Have you identified future leaders and started to develop their skills?

2. Team selection and development.

The selection criteria to join a senior board will at first be based upon background and CV. These are robustly measured through psychometric assessment and interview. It is critical that the new member of the team can do the job...but more than that. Do they have the correct psychological profile for the team? The use of psychometrics and assessment centres would be of great benefit to sports teams. Often we have a team of stars when what we desire is a star team – that depends upon the emotional mix of the people involved.

What are the key competencies required to be an effective member of your team?

Are these competencies emotional as well as physical, technical and tactical?

How do you measure these competencies?

3. Constant research and creativity.

Huge budgets are set aside by companies who understand that standing still is guaranteed failure. It is critical to discover new ways of doing the things that we are doing now but better or at least differently. A fashion supplier may have a great and profitable product which sells well and provides excellent revenue – it would be easy to sit on this banker product but ultimately another company will come along with something new and better and you need to deliver.

When did you last learn something new?

Do you have a system for constant innovation and creative thinking?

What could your club do differently which will give you the edge in the first game of the season?

4. Brand awareness.

Companies understand what they do and why they do it. They do not make training shoes, they innovate running technology; they don't print newspapers, they are a force for social change and justice. It is critical that they deliver what their shareholders are looking for. The same is true for sports teams. Your brand as a team will be based upon your history, unless of course you have a great deal of money to generate a new brand. That means that if you are a club which develops young players then do that, if you are a dynamic, free-flowing and stylish team then stay aligned with that brand value and ensure that you select and train players who will deliver the goods to your fans – your shareholders.

What does your club represent?

What is your club's history?

What does it mean to wear your club colours and badge?

Are these values reflected in the way you coach, play and are administered?

5. Training and Development.

Development of the whole person is critical. Of course the basic skills will be the starting point, but as people grow and develop they have different needs which must be identified and supported. Training must be made available to them so they can move in the new direction.

Competence assessment is a good place to start. Consider what are the key competencies required to be a second row, a scrum half, a coach or even the chairman of the club. Rate your competency in each area and then identify courses and training to fill the gaps. Don't just sign new personnel.

One of the most interesting changes in business training has been the growth of EQ or emotional intelligence programmes. These courses do not deal with the "what" to do but the "how". More and more companies are looking at key EQ competencies such as motivation, pressure management, rapport, N.L.P. intuition, team interaction and similar "right brain" thinking. In sport we might consider not just the technical and tactical but also the emotional and mental development of our players.

It is interesting that many companies are also moving away from technical training courses which are recognised with certificates and "badges". There is a great deal of self-managed learning on offer through internet based systems which are completed within a trust culture. In business the focus is more upon the learning and its application than the "badges". It is interesting that the RFU Ashridge Programme, developing World Class Coaches, has also moved to a self-developed learning process without a badge at the end.

Do you have a training and development programme in place for your key people?

Are the courses available appropriate to the needs of the Club?

Are you gaining "badges" or learning practical new ways of thinking?

The Future Focus of long-term success

1. Vision.

Every successful company started with a dream – Disney, Marks and Spencer, Carphone Warehouse, even the British Government!

When these dreams were first communicated they may have been considered silly or pointless or, even worse, unachievable as people did not believe in them. This did not matter to the people who did the dreaming and set up the companies on the path to long-term success. They understood the true power of vision and dreams, the motivation that it brings along with it. These successful business starters were not interested in whether it could be done, they simply wanted to do it. They would talk for hours to anybody that would listen and would work for hours to meet the right people, produce reports and plans and seek any opportunity to make the first steps. Visions don't just happen in the bath, you can create and develop them and then most importantly, get the team to understand them and become emotionally involved in their pursuit. As soon as the vision dies so does the desire and the motivation.

Companies spend money re inventing themselves, setting new visions backed by snappy mission statements and videos. Why?

Motivation and long terms success.

What is the vision for your club and team?

Does everybody know about it?

Does it motivate the people?

2. Mission.

Missions are important because they take the dream from a conversation about the future, which is motivational but open-ended, to a specific outcome which is measurable and fixed in time. It gives clarity to the steps towards the vision and enables people to understand the route to success. Missions and visions must be constantly updated to maintain motivation and completion of missions should be rewarded. But beware! If the mission is a great one and it is successfully completed, there will be a natural dip in performance. When this happens live with the dip, work hard on the vision and the new mission, manage the change and allow the performance to return along with the motivation. Be patient, it will come if the process is right.

What is your club or team mission?

Is it clearly stated in a positive framework?

Would everybody in the club be able to tell a visitor what you going to achieve this year?

Would they all be saying the same thing?

3. Goals.

Goals support the mission and clearly identify what has to be done in outcome terms. Businesses spend time coaching their goals so that each member of the team knows what has to be done. The goals are set within the key competencies areas indented for each role. Goals should be realistic and achievable and good coaching enables people to achieve the set goals. Business sets SMART goals which are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Related to the vision and Time based.

Do the key people know what they have to achieve this month ?

Are the goals written down and shared with others ?

Are the goals SMART?

4. Objectives.

Objectives get right into the detail. These are things that have to be achieved as milestones towards the goals and are totally within the control of the individual. For example, the goals might be to increase sales by 20 % within the quarter; the objective is to make 50 calls per day and identify 2 new prospects per day.

Are the objectives clear ?

Do they support the goals to be achieved ?

Is there sufficient resource and support to enable the objectives to be completed ?

5. Responsibility and Accountability.

Business is a tough world where individual livelihoods are at stake. For this reason great companies ensure that everybody is accountable for what they have been tasked to do. There is no hiding place and the data is there to be seen by all. Marconi Chief Executive XXXXX was famous for this. Every Friday he would “do the figures” and anybody who had fallen below the line was followed up and the cause of the problem identified and then rectified as soon as possible. Board accountability, leadership accountability, team accountability, players’ accountability – no excuses culture within a supportive environment.

Does your club have clear roles for each key person?

Do you have a system to measure effectiveness, reward success and manage failure?

Can anybody hide their poor performance in your team or club?

Summary.

This article is a sample of some of the ideas which are transferable from business to sport which will help sports clubs, their coaches, players and administrators.

The key lesson, however, is that whilst you can learn from others and look at their success, your own will ultimately be down to you, your plan, your system, your discovery of what is right for you, your team and your club.

Take what you will but follow the great business success stories and find your own way!

Should any coaches want further information on courses or seminars at the school which might help them in their careers as rugby or business coaches, contact the author at john.neal@ashridge.org.uk