

USING SPORTS COACHING TECHNIQUES IN A BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: CAN WE LEARN ANYTHING FROM TODAY'S FOOTBALLERS?

Coaching associated with sporting activities has been in existence for over 30 years since Gallway, a leading business expert and author introduced the techniques of sports coaching into the commercial arena in the mid-1970's. Indeed the very word 'Coaching' owes its origins to the sports arena, and is now applied to both personal and work contexts for terms such as 'Life Coach' and 'Executive Coach.'

Executive Coaching is now seen as an activity that increases an individual's performance in the workplace. There are many different coaching models on the market ranging from the well known GROW Model (Goals, Reality, Options, Wrap-Up) devised by Sir John Whitmore a former champion professional race-car driver, businessman and sports psychologist to more complex psychological models such as Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching which focuses on behavioural change brought about through the interplay of thoughts, emotions, behaviour and physiology adapted from the psychological arena by Professor Stephen Palmer, Michael Neenan and Gladeana McMahon. Although there are, many coaching models to choose

from, they all share the common aim of improving the performance of the individual.

With the World Cup almost upon us, it is timely to consider whether business has anything to learn anything from the type of coaching used by sports coaches. The importance of sports psychology in football is now established with many professional clubs employing sports psychologists to help team members in their mental preparation as a way of ensuring that peak performance is achieved in every match. Many traditional sports coaches with no training in psychology also incorporate a range of motivational and interpersonal techniques into the more traditional aspects of Sports Coaching.

The aim to achieve peak performance is perhaps the first parallel to be made between first class Executive Coaching and Sports Coaching. A footballer needs to deliver his best performance every time he steps onto the pitch to play a game and it is the same for anyone facing the challenges of the business environment. An 'off day' could mean the difference between winning a contract, handling colleagues or clients in a less than satisfactory

manner or simply not being as productive on a daily basis with the consequent negative effects on the bottom line of any enterprise.

Athletes are highly competitive individuals who want to win and anything other than success unacceptable. In business, many people exhibit the same traits. In essence, sports coaching and executive coaching share the same characteristics when it comes to improving performance.

Sports Coaching techniques used at the highest levels of competitive sport also focus on the area of relaxation. Sports coaches know that to reach and maintain peak performance it's impossible for an athlete to constantly train and be engaged in physical and mental activity. Many sports coaches take a hard line with their charges when it comes to dictating times of relaxation and many athletes have to be forcibly prevented from over training. A Sports Coach sees relaxation as a way of promoting rest, recovery and recuperation to create a physical and mental state of receptivity. Executive Coaches also understand the importance of individual pacing for the very same reasons. However, many business environments do not encourage this vital component and many managers (who could be seen as taking the place of the sports coach with those who report to them) do not subscribe to the same

belief. Coaching for peak performance is a form of '*coaching for excellence*' and, as any successful person knows, achieving excellence means the need to "stay sane and ahead of the game" which means allowing the mind and body time to recharge. Working from 7am till late in the evening on a regular basis may pay dividends in the short-term but research suggests there will come a point where this form of 'over-training' will take a negative toll on the individual and subsequently on his or her performance.

Sports' coaching now uses many of the techniques from what is called 'Positive Psychology' or the art of making what's good even better. To do this, the individual is encouraged to use techniques to identify areas of strength and develop strategies to use these to their best advantage. While aspects of performance that require improvement are subjected to a series of staged training exercises broken down into manageable tasks that can be built on until the desired result is obtained. Again, the emphasis is on acknowledging personal achievement as each stage of the process has been successfully completed and the appropriate skill acquired. In business, the focus has tended to be on what the individual needs to improve rather than on providing a balanced approach which also recognises success.

Sports coaches recognise the value of team working as football matches are won by individuals working collectively and not by individuals alone. In business, effective performance also requires a team approach. However talented an individual he or she is not solely responsible for the success of the business. After all, David Beckham or Wayne Rooney may score the winning goal but could not do so without the rest of the team feeding the right pass. Poor team playing skills (which often take the form of conflict and ineffective communication) can severely hamper collective and individual success. Footballers look for transfers, talented individuals look for other jobs.

A sports coach takes time to get to know each of his players so that he can tailor his approach to that person knowing that this will gain the best results from the individual and for the team. Time spent doing this proving more than economic in the longer-term.

Winning matches is no different to being successful in business, and it would seem that commercial environments could learn some important lessons from the sports arena. The credo of hard work, skill improvement training and team working together with keeping abreast of new

developments and motivating the individual towards success are essential components of effective individual and team performance. However, managers like good sports coaches, need to help individuals and staff teams learn to celebrate achievements as well as appreciating the lesson that ‘over training’ does not lead to peak performance but may actually hamper the long-term financial success of the business as well as individual capacity.

Gladeana McMahon

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Similarities between Sports Coaching and Executive Coaching

Sports Coaching	Executive Coaching
Working with talented individuals who already excel aiming to make the good even better	Working with individuals already providing satisfactory output to achieve excellence

<p>Peak performance to be attained in every game</p>	<p>Peak performance to be attained every day</p>
<p>Using research from a variety of sources such as nutrition, psychology and fitness to improve and maintain physical stamina and mental fitness</p>	<p>Using research from a variety of sources such as psychology and management training to improve and maintain personal performance</p>
<p>Setting realistic achievable short and long term goals. Knowing what you want to achieve and what motivates you.</p>	<p>Setting realistic achievable short and long term goals. Knowing what you want to achieve and what motivates you to excel.</p>
<p>Identifying what behavioural</p>	<p>Using a behavioural contract to ascertain</p>

<p>changes need to take place to achieve and maintain peak performance – for example, specific types of physical, nutritional or mental skills training</p> <p>Focussing on the 4 C’s of Sports Coaching:</p> <p>Concentration – <i>the ability to maintain focus</i></p> <p>Confidence – <i>believing in one’s abilities</i></p> <p>Control – <i>the ability to maintain control regardless of distractions</i></p> <p>Commitment – <i>the ability to continue working to agreed goals</i></p>	<p>your objectives and identifiable measurable outcomes. Working out what behavioural changes are required – for example specific skills training, changes in attitude or thinking style</p> <p>Focussing on helping individuals maintain focus (<i>to ensure the tasks in hand are completed</i>), building and sustaining confidence (<i>so as not to become demotivated with the subsequent negative impact on performance</i>), dealing with practical, emotional or psychological distractions (<i>to ensure focus and strengthening commitment to the task in hand</i>)</p>
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<p>Uses a range of techniques from breathing exercises and mental imagery to understanding thinking style and its impact on performance as well as behavioural change exercises</p>	<p>Uses a range of techniques to assist clear thinking, mental imagery for specific skill outcome generation to understanding thinking style and its impact on work performance as well as behavioural change exercises to ensure maximum performance is reached and maintained.</p>
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