

'Putting Oars on the Walls'

Six secrets from the world of Olympic sports coaching



Title	'Putting Oars on the Walls'
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Document Type	Article
Subject Terms	<p>*EXECUTIVES *HR DIRECTORS of corporations *BUSINESS PEOPLE *COACHING in organizations *EXECUTIVE coaching</p>
Abstract	<p>The 'Henley Group' is a networking forum for HR professionals chaired by 121partners, the leadership transformation practice. Its most recent seminar involved the exploration of Olympic sports coaching. The participants experienced rowing on the Thames with Olympic athletes before listening to Olympic coach, Bill Barry, and Olympic athlete, Alan Campbell, sharing the goals, strategy and techniques that are inspiring their quest for an Olympic gold medal in Beijing. Fuelled with this inspiration, the seminar closed with a discussion focusing upon how goals, commitment and behaviours differ between the two worlds of sport and business. This 'white paper' summarises the learning from the day including the 'six secrets' that HR professionals and business leaders can learn from the world of Olympic sports coaching.</p>
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Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Summary• Coaching an Olympic Athlete• Six Secrets from the World of Sports and Sports Coaching• Next Steps
Word Count	3,790

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1. Summary

In March 2008, over twenty HR professionals from FTSE 250 organisations gathered at the Leander Club in Henley to brave the elements and row in the Thames in the company of Olympic rowers from the GB team. They were hosted by the leadership team of 121partners including Gold Medal prospect, Alan Campbell and his coach, Bill Barry, co-founder of 121partners and ex-CEO. Despite the odd splutter of rain and the choppy waters, this bold team learnt quickly, ploughed through the water and returned safely to enjoy a well earned lunch back at Leander Club.



In the afternoon they had the opportunity to listen to the ‘coaching journey’ undertaken by Bill with Alan which has brought them both to the brink of winning the highest accolade in the sporting world. Under ‘cross-examination’, Bill and Alan fielded questions regarding their coaching relationship, the highs and the lows so far and the possibilities of the future.

Fuelled with inspiration from the sporting world, the group was asked to consider the relevance of the day’s experience and learning to their world of business and their use of executive coaching.

This ‘white paper’ summarises the outcomes of those discussions, highlighting the six secrets that business leaders and HR professionals can learn from their peers in sport :-

‘Putting oars on the walls’ -celebrate success more often and more visibly

‘I want to win an Olympic gold medal’ - ensure clarity of the ‘big goal’

‘Training when others don’t’ - hold people accountable for their level of commitment

‘The many people in the boat’- get coach, line manager and mentor to work as a team

‘The perfect cake’ - value a holistic approach for each individual executive

‘Virtus’ – inspire belief in the individual and the team

But first, let’s hear the story of how Olympic sporting talent is identified, developed and assessed :-

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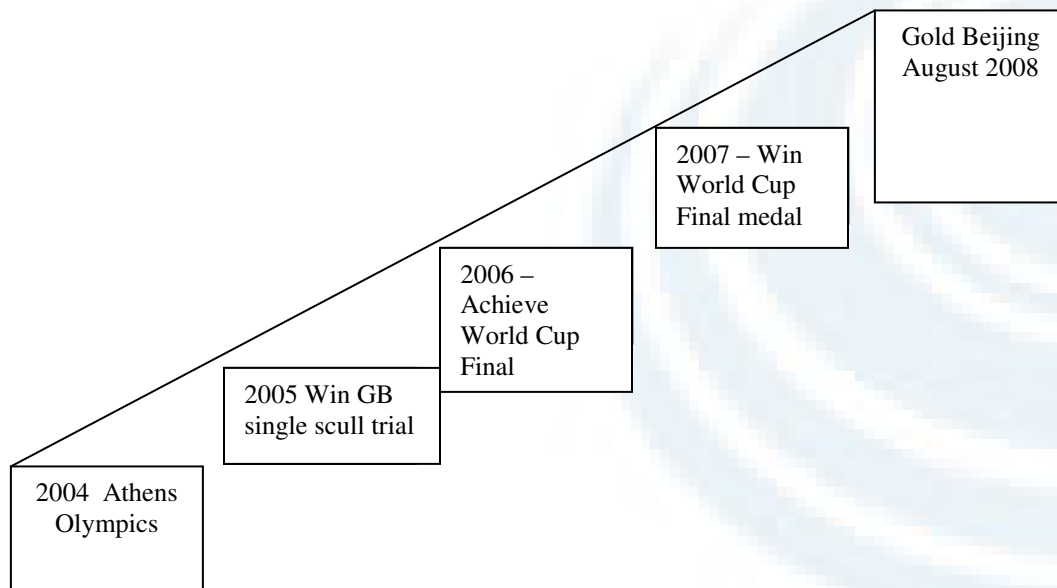
2. Coaching an Olympic Athlete



‘What is your goal?’ – this was the first question that Bill Barry (himself an Olympic silver medalist) asked the novice sculler, Alan Campbell, when the two first met five years ago. ‘I want to win an Olympic gold medal’ replied Alan somewhat cheekily. Yet Bill’s instinct told him that behind this bravado lay someone with unique commitment, focus and determination. Someone he could trust and someone who loved sculling enough to push himself through the pain barriers necessary to achieve the ultimate sporting goal. At that moment a partnership was forged between coach and coachee that has led them, five

years later, to the brink of achieving a shared dream.

As part of this ‘Henley Group’ seminar, the two described the “business plan” for achieving the gold medal in Beijing where the single scull final will be held at 1530 (local time) on Saturday 16th August 2008. The plan started with a simple line like the one below. BUT it had a lot of meanings embodied in it.



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- First of all it represented a line of constant improvement over a timescale of four years
- It was necessary to set clear objectives for each year in order to reach the ‘big goal’
- The line contained clear key performance indicators (KPIs) to provide focus and motivation and constantly improve performance towards the goal:
- The line reflected the need to match and surpass the changing and improving competition. It embodied the belief that everyone can improve and usually improve more than they think. In fact much of the coach’s work is changing and creating new beliefs.
- Each milestone on the line had to be clear and measurable –in other words SMART.
- The line itself is again not so simple since it had to contain all the ingredients to realise the final goal – the training of endurance, strength, flexibility, technique, mental strength, boat, sculls ,diet, rest, finance, stress etc

To achieve these objectives and to stay on the line of continual improvement, Alan and Bill have a strategy that is so clear and mutually shared that one word, or one hand gesture, can sum up one of their key guiding principles. Their guiding principles are simple and yet incisive:

- ‘Training when others don’t.’ - There is a story of Greg Lamond, the Tour de France champion, being telephoned by one of his great rivals Lance Armstrong. Greg was having a meal with his friends on the Champs-Elysees. While enjoying the company of his friends, Greg realised that Lance was on his bike training. Lance Armstrong won the next Tour de France. For Alan and Bill Christmas day 2007 was an example of training when others don’t. Alan was up at 6.30am on Christmas morning to run up and down frost-covered sand dunes on the bleak Northern Ireland coast for five miles before 40 minutes of shuttle runs, carrying 50kg bags of sand back and forth on a 40-metre course before finishing by sawing a felled telegraph pole with a massive cross saw for one hour. Every time Alan ran up that sand dune on Christmas Day, he believed that his rivals probably weren’t doing this and therefore built his belief that he could overcome his competition.



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- ‘The perfect cake’ - When analysing the ingredients necessary to reach the goal, Bill uses the analogy of baking a cake. If you imagine trying to bake the perfect cake then all the ingredients have to be of a gold medal standard. If just one ingredient falls below that level you will fail. So in sport every ingredient that’s needed to achieve the goal has to be analysed and each one has to be honed to that level of excellence.
- ‘Squeezing the cheese’ - Bill talks about an ‘Ironman’ athlete who wanted to lose 4% body fat so he could improve his running time and therefore win the ‘Ironman’ for the record 5th time. In his special diet he even squeezed the fat out of cottage cheese to gain the additional benefit of nutrition and low fat content. As for everything, there is an extra ounce of fat to squeeze, with a little more commitment there is an extra benefit.
- ‘Virtus’ – this is one of Bill’s and Alan’s ‘trigger words’. It derives from Latin meaning valor, excellence, courage, and character. Each Roman centurion was brought up from an early age to believe that they were invincible and that nothing was impossible. This spirit of ‘virtus’ gave each man the belief they had the strength of the entire contingent and could overcome all odds. For Alan and Bill it has inspired their inner individual and team belief that everything is possible and a fundamental belief that they can win the gold medal.

With these plans, goals and techniques in mind, what coaching behaviours are similar in sports and business and where are the differences? What can be learnt from these differences and similarities? What are the secrets from the world of sport that could unlock potential and performance in business?



3. Six secrets from the world of Olympic sports coaching

'Putting oars on the walls' – celebrate success more often and more visibly

In sport the “big goal” is something to be proud of and widely communicated. Being coached is no secret and the whole world knows when there is a successful outcome, with additional recognition of the role of the coach. Whereas in business, goals and objectives at both corporate and individual level can be diffuse, “being coached” can still be a secretive endeavour and there is a less visible celebrating of success when goals are met.

As this topic was discussed in the breakout groups, it was realised that we were sat in a room where the walls were covered with the oars from the winning boats in the Henley Regatta races going back many, many years. In fact, the whole club is adorned with such symbols of success including each bedroom which is themed for a particular crew e.g. Yale, Harvard, etc. Whilst there are some reception areas in business with certificates and awards present, the group felt that this culture of open ‘celebration’ was not as engrained in business and previous year’s achievements were very quickly forgotten when new targets were announced.

When you win an Olympic Gold medal in sport then this accolade stays with you for the rest of your life as does winning an FA Cup final medal or winning the Ashes or lifting the plate at Wimbledon. In business, it is hard to think of similar ‘events’ that have this stature and permanence. Hence there is a risk in business that people go from ‘hero to zero’ with fragile reputations easily shattered by a stray headline or a ‘bad year’. The recent fall from grace of ex-CEO of Northern Rock plc, Adam Applegarth, is a good example of someone quickly swept up with his share price and then dumped ‘like a hot potato’ when the chill winds of the credit crunch struck the business hard.

Tips for HR professionals and business leaders:

- *Celebrate the success of your team and its members*
- *Find the equivalent of ‘putting oars on the walls’ to create visible reminders of past glories*
- *Manage ‘failure’ in a way that does not undermine to confidence of your team*
- *Incorporate ‘celebrating success’ in your approach to executive coaching?*

'I want to win an Olympic gold medal' – ensure clarity of the ‘big goal’

Sports’ coaching is generally framed around extremely clear goals. The timing, for example of key events such as the Olympics or World cup is generally fixed in time and hence contributing factors such as the level of fitness needed to qualify for events is largely known. Once this ‘big goal’ is set, it is possible to devise a plan of intermediate ‘smaller goals’ and follow a clear path towards the bigger goal. Similarly, the goals of your competitors are equally clear and the ‘rules

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of the game’ are very well defined and common to all participants. There is a large element of transparency and predictability in the goals of the sporting world.

The success of this approach in boosting performance is clearly demonstrable, so why is a similar approach not possible in business?



The business coach is engaged in working with employees at all levels supporting alignment between personal and business goals. Similarly in sports the coach is supporting the coachee in such alignment. However in business, coaches are dealing with individuals who may be grappling with a lower level objective or goal, without a clear knowledge (or influence over) the bigger goal. Dealing with ambiguity, internal politics, multiple agendas and conflicting organisational goals becomes the challenge.

Even if the ‘big goal’ is clear at the top level of the organisation, communication down the line dilutes and breaks the link to the individual’s personal objectives and actual job of work. Lastly, regardless of good intention, even if the company’s goals are clear and well communicated down the line, they can still be a ‘moving feast’ as companies and their competitors adapt to the changing business environment.

Tips for HR professionals and business leaders:

- *Name and promote the ‘big goal’ i.e. the equivalent of the Olympic gold medal for your business and your team*
- *Make team and individual goals more transparent, consistent and predictable?*
- *Use executive coaching to align individual, team and organisational goals?*
- *Use a coaching programme to help individuals better define and achieve goals regardless of the changing business circumstances*

‘Training when others don’t’ – hold people accountable for their level of commitment

There is a culture of commitment in sports to yourself, your coach and your fellow team members that does not exist in the same way in business. Is this true?

The group discussing this point agreed that the statement was largely true. Employees often have external factors outside of work such as family, paying the mortgage, hobbies, etc which are a central focus in their lives. In sport, there is a clear focus on one goal such as winning the

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Gold Medal in Beijing. However, in organisations, work can be a means to an end, and so people are committed to what work is able to produce for them (a holiday with their family, a house, etc), rather than being committed to their job as an end in itself. In the world of work, the concept of ‘work/life’ balance is considered important even at the most senior levels whereas in sport the highest performers make considerable sacrifices in other areas of their lives in order to achieve a total focus on their sporting progress.

An Olympic athlete excels at what he/she does and is motivated by being the best or striving to be the best. However, in organisations there are people with varying levels of ability, with many who are content at not being the best at what they do. The result is that there is not the same sense of motivation through achievement.

Whilst it is true that individual commitment levels in business may vary, what is key is that these levels of commitment are discussed and agreed between all parties involved whether these be employee, line manager, HR manager or coach. There is a legal contract but, more importantly, there is an emotional ‘contract’ which needs to be discussed and, where possible, documented so that all can be held accountable over a period of time. The consequences of not meeting agreed levels of commitment can also be discussed and agreed in advance such that there are no surprises as the role is performed or as the coaching programme is implemented.

Tips for HR professionals and business leaders:

- *Understand the level of commitment required from yourself and your team to achieve the goal*
- *Establish the minimum level of commitment you are prepared to accept from the people around you and communicate the consequences of people not meeting these levels*
- *Use coaching programmes to help you agree shared levels of commitment in a team and consistently meet this expectation*

‘The many people in the boat’- get coach, line manager and mentor to work as a team

Whilst Alan Campbell is a single sculler, he often talks about the many people who he feels are ‘in the boat with him’ when he is racing – coach, head coach, nutritionist, mother, father, friends, sponsors. After working with the attendees of the seminar we are hoping that there are another twenty people in the boat with him cheering him on, holding him accountable and lifting his ‘game’.

In business and executive coaching there are also ‘many people in the boat’ – many different sources of support and guidance for the talented executive. Line manager, coach, mentor are all equally valuable roles that can help people reach for the next level on their performance. Sometimes it is the detached, non-directive style of the coach that will bring the best results, sometimes the direct advice from a respected mentor and sometimes the emotional engagement and drive of an inspiring line manager.

What is key is that these roles are orchestrated such they work as a team rather than ‘clashing oars’ in the middle of the race through lack of coordination and lack of clarity of the precise role

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each is there to play. The HR business partner has a unique role to play in ensuring that these three roles are identified, mobilised and evaluated over a period of time.

Tips for HR professionals and business leaders:

- *Design the appropriate balance of line management, mentoring and coaching that will bring the best out in your team*
- *Identify who you need ‘in the boat’ helping you win your race and ensure their roles are clear*
- *Identify the situations when it would be better for a line manager, mentor or coach to engage a team member*

‘The perfect cake’ - value a holistic approach for each individual executive

Both business and sports coaches have the opportunity to take holistic or focused approaches depending on the starting point of the intervention. For example the business coach may be asked to deal with narrow time management issue, which from a wider perspective may involve looking at the coachees entire work/life balance. Similarly in sport, dealing with a particular



performance outcome might require a complete holistic view on diet, lifestyle, finances, and relationships. What is evident from Alan Campbell’s experience with his coach, Bill Barry, is the success of treating the whole individual’ as opposed to fixing ‘one piece’ of him.

Equally, business often takes a holistic approach to talent management, succession planning, social responsibility and strategy which is not as evident in sport. It could be argued that the techniques and tools that business uses to

manage talent, social responsibility and strategy across the whole organisation could have a positive impact if applied to the wider system of sports institutions where there is often criticism that young talent is not identified or developed effectively in our country and where sporting role models are not always positive to the wider community.

Business appears to take a more holistic approach at the organisational level whereas sport takes a more holistic approach at the individual level. Both worlds could learn from each other in this regard. Business leaders often consider it inappropriate to stray into other areas of a team member’s life and to get to know them inside and outside of the workplace. There is a fear that

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getting too close to people for whom you are responsible could lead to a breakdown in respect and authority. It is in this area that the use of an executive coach can help to ‘bridge’ the situation. In a confidential coaching conversation an employee can explore the boundaries between work life and non-work life and understand better how the two might be affecting each other.

Tips for HR professionals and business leaders:

- *Use confidential executive coaching to enable team members explore the links and impacts between their work lives and their personal lives*
- *As a business leader, identify the risks and benefits of getting to know your team members at a more personal level*
- *Use coaching to help a team or an individual focus on the root causes of problems which may be broader and deeper than the immediate task at hand*

‘Virtus’ – inspire belief in the individual and the team

A strong similarity between sports and business coaching is the belief in the coachee’s unlimited potential and capabilities. Sports people recognise that a race can be won or lost even before the starting whistle is heard. During his Q&A session, Alan Campbell was asked by one of the delegates ‘When did you know you had the race won in Munich?’. The question referred to Alan’s World Cup win in 2007 when he overhauled the German, Marcel Hacker, in the last 100 yards of the race with an incredible burst of finishing speed. Alan’s unexpected but totally genuine answer to this question was ‘...over breakfast!’ The answer showed a disarming level of self-belief that was not arrogant but simply honest and (to him and his coach) obvious.



This self-belief can be extended to the belief in a winning team. Delegates were shown the video of the Olympic ‘eight’ that won the Gold Medal in Sydney

for Great Britain when all commentators agreed they were not the best eight individuals in the race by a wide margin. However, their belief as a team allowed the total to be greater than the sum of the parts. This team belief was nurtured by putting effort into not just the physical training together but also the getting to know each other at a more personal level to build trust, respect, maturity, shared values and shared goals.

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In business, the demands of the task in the short term often take over from the need of the individual and the team to build their self belief over a period of time. Investment of time in building the belief of an individual and a team is not a 'one shot' intervention that can be applied once a year in a 'team away day' or an 'individual performance appraisal'. Indeed, many staff can be jaundiced and cynical about such isolated attempts at meeting their development needs. However, if such events and process are integrated within a more strategic programme then people's deeper beliefs and confidence can be unlocked. In such a way, coaching 'programmes' rather than isolated coaching 'events' are likely to promote a deeper and more sustainable level of individual and team belief.

Tips for HR professionals and business leaders:

- *Find the right balance of team coaching and individual coaching in an integrated programme*
- *Invest time in building the self belief of the individual and the team so that they believe that the race has already been won 'over breakfast'*
- *Implement an HR process that monitors and maintains the required level of self-belief in the team over a period of time*

4. Next Steps

To experience rowing in an 'eight' with Olympic athletes and have a personal audience with Alan Campbell and Bill Barry, please refer to our 'Olympic Team Event' details of which can be found at http://www.121partners.com/downloads/F_121_'Olympic'_Team_Coaching_Event.pdf Alternatively, contact Bill Barry at billbarry@121partners.com.