

Going for gold



Olympic rower Alan Campbell and his coach Bill Barry have identified some interesting performance parallels between business and sport. Becky Done went to meet them to discuss their gold medal ambitions and to find out more about their unique partnership with real estate services firm Jones Lang LaSalle

Alan Campbell's story is quite remarkable. Little more than a novice sculler when he first met Bill Barry five years ago, he confidently declared that his ultimate goal was to win Olympic gold. Some would have laughed, but Barry recognised a spark of something exceptional in Campbell, now 25, and decided to take him at his word.

Campbell responded, leaving a career in the army to embark on his ambitious campaign; at times sleeping on the floor of his rowing club with nothing more to eat than a packet of porridge oats. But little over a year later, his persistence paid off and he secured himself a place in the men's quadruple scull in Athens. The crew came twelfth; and it was at this point that Barry took Campbell aside and did something quite unexpected. He drew up a business plan.

The idea of merging business with sport came naturally to Barry. Himself an Olympic silver medal-winning rower, he has enjoyed a successful business career, including time as CEO of a publicly listed advertising company. Now, in addition to coaching Campbell, he heads up business coaching company 121 Partners, and his client list is diverse, global and growing.

Barry recognised that by applying business principles – creating a 'business plan' and utilising SMART objectives – Campbell's goal could be achieved. "I've been a businessman as well as a sportsman," he explains, "so we created a business plan. Clear objectives are the most important thing to have, and that's what we focused on.

"The first milestone was to win the national trials, and he did it. The next step was to get into the world championship

team and after that, to get into a final – and he did both of those. Then the next step was to get a medal, and by then, he was in the race for Beijing. It's like a ladder – if you take one step up at a time, eventually you get to the top.”

Campbell's level of determination and commitment in training has proved formidable. Physically, rowing is the most challenging of all sports, as athletes breathe more oxygen per second than in any other discipline. His routine on Christmas morning 2007 involved running laps of frost-covered sand dunes followed by shuttle runs whilst carrying 50kg bags of sand and culminating in sawing a felled telegraph pole for half an hour on each arm. He did this every day for three weeks over the Christmas period, as both he and

Barry have recognised that in terms of the competition, it is crucial to 'train when others don't' – a principle also applicable to business. Provided the goal is clear, and attainable SMART objectives are in place, individual commitment can be agreed and every member of an organisation can strive together to achieve both individual and company goals.

Undoubtedly, this approach requires great teamwork – something which Barry insists can be achieved with the right culture and leadership. When Campbell underwent a knee operation in June this year, resulting in him walking on crutches for three weeks, Barry involved the whole team to ensure sight of the end goal was never lost. "I got the team working with Alan to recover his knee, his strength and his physiology," he explains. "We had a doctor, a physiologist, a physiotherapist, and a strength and conditioning trainer – and I got all of them involved. I got each one of them to come and watch him skull to understand how it worked; they all came to the physio sessions; and the physiotherapist came to the weight training. When you have a team, you don't single-handedly achieve the objective, your team does, and motivating them is the most important thing any leader can do. That's the way I work with our sports team to get more commitment from them – that extra mile to help Alan achieve his goal."



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Trust plays a big part in this process, as Barry explains: "If your team trusts that you're motivating them and trying to help them achieve their personal and business goals, and that you'll take responsibility should something go wrong, that then inspires the confidence and motivation to go that extra mile."

For Barry, the power of leading from the top cannot be underestimated. He applies the principle to his sports coaching – for example, by abstaining from alcohol in Campbell's presence – but also sees it as fundamental to a successful business model. "In any organisation, everything has to stem from the top," he explains. "The first thing I do when I work with a company is to ask if the CEO is really committed. If they're not, then it's a waste of money."

Work/life balance is another key component to the 'business plan' approach to success. "I think a lot of chief executives today are extremely

a chat with a guy in the pub who works in a different business, and suddenly you're learning about what's going on in finance or IT or publishing.

"Quite a lot of the leaders we've been seeing have been saying, 'I'm worried about the stress levels in my team'. So I work specifically to get people home earlier; to help them take the opportunities to see their kids. At weekends, I try to ban laptops and mobiles."

This must be far easier said than done? "I can't tell them to do it," Barry agrees. "The person has got to be committed to do it. If I say, 'On Thursday you've got to get home at six o'clock', they might do it for one week but they won't have committed to it. So non-directive coaching is important; and I apply it to the sculling as well."

So it's back to commitment – and not just to working hard, but to the whole package. Olympic athletes, for example, know that success is about more than

positive thoughts because he's happy doing what he's doing. That's important, because it stops negative thoughts coming in when it's critical."

Clearly, this is another principle that can be applied to the workplace. "I think leaders and managers are thinking more and more about whether people are happy in their roles and whether they've put round pegs in square holes," says Barry. "If you put a round peg in a round hole, that person will be happy, so the result is more productivity. Efficiency through people is one of the key issues in today's business world."

For Campbell, part of this crucial balance has been delivered through an interesting partnership with real estate services firm Jones Lang LaSalle, after they attended a coaching day at 121 Partners where Campbell was present. Immediately impressed, the company approached Campbell, suggesting a partnership which differs from traditional corporate sponsorship arrangements. Financially, the company supports Campbell in order to enable him to focus on his rowing and in return, Jones Lang LaSalle staff and clients are afforded a personal involvement in the Olympics. Campbell attends dinners, talks to the graduate intake and works with clients, as well as writing a monthly blog on the company website. It is a successful model – the Government is currently encouraging the UK's private companies to adopt similar partnerships with athletes going into London 2012.

"I shared a similar ethos and values with Jones Lang LaSalle," Campbell explains, "and they wanted more than to just give me money; they wanted to bring me into their business and teach me about it, and that's exactly what I was looking for. They also helped me to develop our business plan," he adds, referring back to his objectives timeline, "and they've given me foresight for life after rowing."

This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of the partnership for Campbell. "As an athlete I have a shelf life, but I think a lot of athletes would make great leaders in business.

Jones Lang LaSalle have started to help me develop and they've encouraged me to look at degree courses as well. It's given me a focus outside of rowing," he adds, referring to the all-important work/life balance, "because you can get very wrapped up in it. I've had the opportunity

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worried about work/life balance," Barry confirms. "If you put a torch on the table and turn it on, what happens? Gradually the light dims, and eventually, it dies out. But an Olympic athlete will train for two or three weeks and then have a rest period, and during that time the human body will put back more than was taken out of it – so you can then train harder. That theory of increased workload has been around for years."

So life at the top can be likened to an endurance sport? "If a CEO is going in early and coming home late, sitting on the computer and answering the mobile at weekends, then when will they ever rest?" Barry points out. "Spending time with your family, seeing friends, going to the cinema, listening to music, reading books, photography – whatever it is you do – it's not only restful for the mind and the body but it actually increases your creativity. You might find yourself having

rowing hard. Campbell explains that careful attention to all the components contributing towards the end goal, including personal development and work/life balance, is crucial. He illustrates his point with an analogy that he and Barry use frequently themselves. "We have the idea of the 'gold medal cake'," he says. "For the perfect cake, all the ingredients have to be perfect too. You can't import the flour from Italy if your eggs are cheap battery-farmed ones. If just one ingredient is lacking, it ruins the whole cake."

Another vital 'ingredient' for business leaders to consider is personal development. In sport, this is critical to performance. "We know from research that happy sports people do well when the negative thinking kicks in halfway through a race, when they're feeling knackered and the demons start," explains Barry. "But Alan will be full of

to work with the graduate scheme, with senior staff and also with clients. I get an opportunity to meet a lot of different people and to see how business works – otherwise, when I finish rowing I would be at a big disadvantage, so they're helping me to try and fill that gap and make the transition smoother."

Just as in sport, CEOs themselves have a shelf life – but Barry believes coaching could change all that. "People are too quick to want to change the guy at the top, but to be honest, the company is bigger than the individual, so why do people think they should change the individual so often? Maybe they should

"I have a belief, both in my business and sports coaching, that everybody can improve more than they think, but life – education, social life, family, business – puts constraints on your thinking and your ability to meet your potential. One of the jobs of coaching is to remove those blocks and make that step forward. Then you can start to improve, and often, far more than you think."

In August, Campbell competed in the men's single sculls final at the Beijing Olympics. After finishing fifth, he immediately made clear his commitment to win gold at London 2012, via his next 'business plan'.

"In business as well as sport, something is always bound to get in the way of your objective," Barry confirmed, in support of looking forward to 2012. "But if after you review it, nothing is wrong with the objective, then there is absolutely no reason why you can't go forward and achieve what you set out to achieve."

Good business leaders – just like Olympic rowers – never give up. ■

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Campbell has found this innovative partnership to be extremely successful. "When I spoke to the graduate intake," he says, "I wasn't actually just there to motivate them – I was saying to them, 'you've chosen right, you've chosen a great company'. They're really good – I'm not certain all businesses run like them. I'm seriously thinking hard about wanting to get a job with them, and I think I'm going to have to work hard to do that!"

think more about the company. A CEO's job is a very lonely one and it's difficult for them to open up to the people who work for them. That's why a lot of CEOs have coaches, so they can talk with them, share some ideas and options and get rid of the fears."

Clearly, for Campbell to go from novice to double Olympian in five years is a mammoth achievement. Does Barry think there is such a thing as over-ambition?

