



PEAK PERFORMANCE



Clockwise from above: roundtable discussions; Alan Campbell, member of Great Britain rowing team; Bill Barry, lead partner, 121partners

What can businesses learn from the training and motivation of elite athletes? And how have approaches to coaching and personal development changed during the downturn? *Business Voice* asked the experts at a roundtable hosted in association with 121partners. By **Virginia Matthews**

Motivating a team to maintain top

performance is a daily challenge for all business leaders. But when it comes to understanding what spurs people on to reach their peak – and what holds them back – are there lessons to be learned from the high-octane world of professional sport?

That was the major theme of a recent roundtable hosted by *Business Voice* and supported by leadership development and executive coaching consultancy 121partners. The event saw elite British rower Alan Campbell – who won a silver medal in the single scull at the 2009 World Championships, and was a finalist at the Beijing Olympics – and his coach Bill Barry share their thoughts on the synergy between business excellence and sporting success, and discuss Campbell's preparations to compete for gold at the London 2012 Games.

In a wide-ranging discussion held at the offices of Campbell's sponsor and 121partners' client Jones Lang LaSalle, eight senior clients of 121partners and business managers from fields as diverse as telecoms and accountancy chewed over the thorny problems of turning disaster into triumph, the increasingly corporate nature of business coaching and the importance of reflective thought to both athletes and managers.

To kick off the session, Barry, himself a former Olympic silver medallist in rowing and now a lead partner at 121partners, outlined what he saw as the four key parallels between business and sport.

"First is the setting of clear objectives and critical milestones along the way," he said. "In Alan's case, we began with a business plan of literally one page; with a gold medal at one end and small, gradual

steps beginning at the other. Your progress towards that end goal is like climbing a ladder and each step is another milestone to be celebrated."

Second on Barry's list was commitment and determination. But while that's a given for most business leaders, the third analogy – the subduing of ego for the benefit of the entire team – is more tricky.

"Nobody wants to dilute the sheer drive that propels a manager or athlete towards their goal. But a true leader is the person who does the most for the group, and who gets everyone pulling in the same direction, even at the expense of their own personal status," he said.

And fourth? "Don't change the business plan, just because things outside your control have gone wrong. You may need to make a slight alteration, but on 95 per cent of occasions, the original plan is still great and needs only minor adjustment."

It's a timely observation given that the recession has affected the goals of many businesses. And things did go wrong for Campbell when he needed emergency knee surgery eight weeks before Beijing. He says he was able to pick himself up and compete in the event thanks to the support around him. "Going for gold in three years' time may sound like a huge jump for me," said the rower, who is currently studying for a business degree. "But having Bill and the on-shore team to take the pressure off, and help me channel my energies to maximum effect, has allowed me to concentrate purely on rowing. Surely that level of support is something that every chief executive should have?"

A coaching culture

Although some organisations may have placed a lower priority on coaching in recent times as they have sought to cut costs, Katie Kopec, an international director at Jones Lang LaSalle, who heads a team of 30, argued that this was a mistake.

"Our strong coaching culture runs right through the organisation and although we're quite a competitive bunch, we use that energy to create a positive business output," she said. "Of course there are egos and rivalry, but as a manager, I recognise that the team's success is also my success and I work hard to make it happen."

While Kopec argued that delegation can be "particularly hard for managers", she said coaching allows them to feel better about letting go of the reins. "Allowing others in the team to take responsibility boosts motivation to the next level and it must be encouraged."

John Blain, director of finance and accounting services at IT firm Steria, took a rather harder view of how managers should view a team's emotional well-being. "As business leaders, it is our job to create the right balance between keeping people happy and allowing or encouraging them to perform," he said. "It's about taking away the mundane, trivial stuff that doesn't much matter – the email going wrong, the mobile not working – and assessing people's strengths once all those distractions have been taken away."

"I see my job as getting rid of all the excuses why my people may under-perform and then dealing with any fundamental issues that still remain."

Personal coaching may be a fundamental and accepted element of the sports world, but it is mistrusted and perhaps even feared by many in business. "Coaching is seen as remedial in many large organisations and obliges people to front up to why things are perhaps not going as well as they should be, which can be very demotivating," said Kopec. "But although it may be frightening to admit to others that you are bad at certain elements of the job, by making coaching part of the ethos of the firm and by offering support to those being coached, that innate rawness can be overcome."

In the experience of Jane Nicholson, European HR director for child-seat manufacturer Britax, coaching works best when it focuses on the positive. "It's important to concentrate on people's strengths, as well as work around their weaknesses, and to recognise every single one of us has both elements in our make-up," she observed. "If you see building on strength as the chief aim of coaching, you are more likely to have a happy outcome than if you take the view that it's all about exposing weakness."

Getting under the skin of a business leader or athlete will inevitably involve tapping into the subconscious mind, according to Ian Day, a lead partner at

121partners, who observed that inner motivation is the key to success in any field. "Irrespective of whether you are an introvert or extrovert, a natural leader or even a follower, everyone round this table has the potential to be great at what they do if they have inner drive and the necessary conditions to allow their greatness to emerge," he said.

That led Andrew Baud, managing director at Tala PR, to ask how quickly what he termed "psychological coaching" could bring results. "With openness and trust between coach and coachee, change will happen very quickly," replied Day.

The need to reflect

In sport, where periods of rest and reflection are an innate part of the cycle of competition, athletes take time to mentally wind-down from one event before gearing up for the next. In business, Campbell said, this is far from the case.

"I'm passionate about rowing and that's what motivates me to get up on dark, cold days and train as hard as I do. But where I perhaps differ from people in business is that I expect regular breaks from training or competing and I am actively encouraged to build up a life outside sport.

"My experience is that success in sport directly leads to success in other areas."

To sports coaches, ensuring that athletes

THE GUESTS »

Bill Barry, lead partner, 121partners

Andrew Baud, managing director, Tala PR

John Blain, director of finance and accounting services, Steria

Alan Campbell, member of the British rowing team

Peter Curtis, editor, *Business Voice*

Ian Day, lead partner, 121partners

Phillippa Dexter, HR business partner, Yell Group

Pete Hackleton, senior consultant, sports business group, Deloitte

Katie Kopec, international director, Jones Lang LaSalle

Jane Nicholson, European HR director, Britax

Steve O'Dell, chief executive, Talent Q



Roundtable discussions (left); Phillippa Dexter, HR business partner, Yell Group (centre); Katie Kopec, international director, Jones Lang LaSalle and John Blain, director of finance and accounting services, Steria (right)

are given periods of reflective learning is a vital part of building their mental strength. However uncomfortable managers feel about getting personal with their staff, this element of emotional intelligence is vital in business too, said Barry. "All of us need a period of reflection, particularly if things have gone wrong unexpectedly. Nowhere is this more true than in the recession-hit business world."

Steve O'Dell, chief executive of people assessment company Talent Q, agreed that understanding people's internal motivation triggers is key, but said that setting goals may be more difficult in the business world.

"It seems to me that motivation is fairly straightforward in sport, but in business, people don't always know what their objectives are. In a commercial organisation, where the overall goal may be very different to the individual's ambition, I would think the role of the coach may be to understand how the two things do, or perhaps do not, align."

Phillippa Dexter, HR business partner at directories company Yell Group, stressed the role of intuition in picking up on under-performance or waning motivation.

"Managers don't need to know everything that's going on in someone's personal life, but the better ones will intuitively know when something is wrong and may try gentle probing," she said. "People are really struggling with stress and anxiety in these tough times and at my firm, we are looking at how we can help boost employees' overall emotional health."

"Some of our sales people tell us that the sheer fact of busy managers taking time

to ask how they are would really add value, but good people managers are already tuned in to that need."

Although Barry applauded the efforts of many firms to tackle soaring stress levels with more sabbaticals, flexible working or even role-switching, he notes that the ethos of business coaching is becoming harder-nosed. "Coaching can reduce attrition and show you are a caring employer, but it is increasingly led by corporate rather than individual needs and nowadays involves fairly tough goal-setting," he argued.

Coaching may be an expensive luxury in the current climate, but Kopec believes that the goal of getting closer to your people has, ironically, become easier. "Sharing the pain of clients has strengthened our relationships with them and internally too, it's allowed us to learn far more about our people than we ever knew before."

"Even though our business plan is down to one page - with the word 'survival' running through it - our goals are clearer and our people are more motivated than ever, even though they're working harder for less."

Harnessing talent

As senior consultant at Deloitte's sport business group, Pete Hackleton identified many parallels between sport and business, notably the importance of drawing out talent. "Managers need to recognise that we all have different areas of development and individual strengths and whether it's a case of harnessing one person's project skills or another's talent at presentation, it's the pooling of collective strengths that benefits the individual as well as the team."

Collectivism sounds a good business philosophy, but how do sport and business compare when it comes to giving your all?

"Giving 110 per cent to your job or to your sport has become a cliché," said Campbell. "By telling me to hold back a bit, or to focus on the technical or the mental side, Bill has helped me vary my pace to great effect."

Barry added: "Alan's a fast starter, always has been, but I've told him he must be more measured if he's to hold off challenges and combat early burn-out."

"After all, what all of us in sport and business really want is the stamina and the motivation to sprint to the very finish."

SPORTING CHANCE »

121partners is hosting an exclusive event for HR directors and senior business leaders exploring what businesses can learn from the training and motivation of elite athletes, and how coaching releases the full potential of business leaders, enabling them to deliver business results whilst achieving fulfilment and growth.

The event will be chaired by Bill Barry, a lead partner at 121partners and coach to elite British rower Alan Campbell, who will share his thoughts on the parallels between business and sports coaching. The event will take place at the BT Tower in London on 1 March 2010. It will include a number of guest speakers and a networking session, followed by lunch.

For details, email ianday@121partners.com or visit www.121partners.com