

From The Sunday Times  
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# Manage like an Olympian

**Athletes are always looking for that extra edge. And managers can also learn from the way top athletes will be preparing for 2012**



*Pulling ahead: being prepared gives you the confidence to deal with even the biggest challenges, says sculler Alan Campbell*

Vancouver is over. The next city to be hit by Olympic hysteria will be London. For businesses, particularly those in the capital, it will mean preparing for everything from flexible working — commuting may be more difficult for staff — to corporate entertaining for clients or colleagues from overseas.

Managers can also learn from the way top athletes will be preparing for the competition, said Bill Barry, an Olympic silver medallist and coach of Alan Campbell, Britain's leading single sculler, who hopes to win a gold medal in 2012.

"Every day athletes search for that edge that will make a difference — something they can find that others can't," said Barry, who co-founded 121partners, a leadership and coaching company. "That edge is just as important in business as in sport."

Barry's first piece of advice is work harder than anyone else. Simply knowing that you have done more will build your self-confidence.

He had Campbell spend each day of his Christmas holidays, when other athletes take a bit of a rest, doing an eight-mile beach run, an hour with a cross-cut saw and 40 minutes running while carrying a 50kg sandbag.

“The idea behind it was not necessarily that it would improve me physically but that doing something very tough would give me confidence,” said Campbell. “It means that when I sit in my boat and look across [at my competitors] I know I have done something extra, that I trained when they didn’t.”

In the business world, this translates into preparing and rehearsing thoroughly for everything from formal presentations and meetings through to difficult conversations.

“Make sure you have covered every angle, investigated every route and rehearsed what you are going to say,” said Barry. Thinking through all the possibilities and planning how you would handle them if they come up will mean you won’t panic if they do. You will go into it more relaxed, knowing that nothing can throw you off balance.

Next, don’t let yourself be intimidated by the size of your goals. “Sometimes athletes can think that [winning a gold medal] is impossible, and this will inhibit them from training properly,” said Barry.

Similar inhibitions may, for example, prevent managers from giving the best possible account of themselves in an interview for a much more senior job. Remind yourself what you have already achieved and consider looking for support from a mentor or coach.

“Winning takes belief in yourself but sometimes it takes someone else believing in you,” said Katherine Grainger, a rower who has four world championship titles and three silver Olympic medals. “Sometimes you need someone to give you a bit of confidence.”

The other thing for managers to realise is that they can only be successful with the right team behind them. Athletes take a very pragmatic approach to this.

“It’s important to recognise who will have the biggest impact, the biggest influence, and then use them at the right time and in the right way,” said Campbell.

Top athletes don’t stay with their old coaches or physiotherapists if someone else is better suited to a particular stage of their development; managers also need to adopt this hard-headed approach and recognise when it is time to move on — or to ask others to do so.

Frank van Nistelrooij, a managing director at Logica, a consulting and outsourcing business, decided that his sales managers — traditionally people with a strong individualistic streak — could learn from athletes’ approach to teamwork.

“I took them on a rowing day to show them about how to work together to get results,” he said. “With rowing, if you don’t work together, it’s a big mess.”

He is a strong supporter of coaching, too; if it works for athletes, why not for business people? “We are all living in a very competitive environment and you need to be thinking every day about where you can make a difference,” he said.

“Having a coach can put that mirror in front of you to help make that decision.” It can also help to maintain motivation once a goal is achieved, he added.

Having said that, coaches aren't gods and they won't always get things right — as Sven Kramer, the Dutch speed skater, discovered in the 10,000-metre event in Vancouver.

"I wanted to go on the outer lane," he said. "Then [my coach] Gerard [Kemkers] shouted 'inner lane' and I thought to myself he's probably right and went to the inner lane."

Instead of winning another gold medal, however, Kramer was disqualified for skating in the wrong lane. He should have followed his own instincts, not his coach's advice.

"I was on my way to making the right decision and just before the corner I changed my decision because of the advice from the coach," he said. "But at the end of the day, it is my responsibility."

### **BT GETS THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW IN THE RUNNING**

NIGEL PERKS, the chief human-resources officer at BT Global Services, is using the telecom giant's status as an official supplier to the London Olympics to motivate employees.

BT will need about 700 people to work at 94 venues during the games in the summer of 2012. Staff are already excited about the idea of getting involved and many have applied for the positions.

However, Perks wants to ensure that all of BT's 107,000 other employees have a chance to get involved through the Team BT 2012 challenge. This programme is designed to engage staff and accelerate the pace of change across the business by harnessing excitement about the event. Top performers will win tickets to Olympic events.

"It's about building up pride and making sure people understand we are an integral part of one of the biggest events in the world," he said.

It will also be linked into development plans for potential leaders. "Saying 'we think you are one of our best people and we want you on this project' is a great retention tool," said Perks. "But we have to be realistic — these people will probably be working in a little room watching television screens, not watching all the Olympic events live."

He is also concerned about the possibility of post-event deflation. "I have a real concern for people coming off the programme because that will be a huge dip, but the important thing will be to celebrate the huge success, which is something that business doesn't always do."

Perks also has some advice for any manager with offices in or near London: "Think about how you are going to get your people into work during the games." It may also pay to consider how many people are going to want time off to attend events or to work as volunteers.

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