The corporate athlete



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Jill Storey looks at the lessons tax professionals can learn from the world of sporting excellence

Key Points

What is the issue?

As we move towards the Rio Olympics, we can learn lessons from the world’s top athletes and transfer them to the workplace.

What does it mean to me?

If we regard ourselves as ‘corporate athletes’ we can look to develop our capabilities to full potential and better utilise our time.

What can I take away?

Mental effectiveness is about staying focussed in the object of our choice and consciously choosing our distractions.

The Olympics represent the pinnacle of sporting excellence and achievement after years of dedication and sacrifice with competitors trying to extract that extra ounce of physical or psychological advantage in an environment where the margins between success and failure are miniscule.

According to John Whitmore, author of one of the most well-known business coaching books (*Coaching for Performance*), the concept of business coaching originated from sport. This begs the question: which lessons we can take from the success factors of sports coaches to apply our working environments?

If we regarded ourselves as ‘corporate athletes’ would we feel more open to exploring and developing our capabilities to their full potential and better utilise our time spent in the work environment?

Here we look to see if some of the success factors identified by Olympic and top sports coaches can be used to inspire excellence and raise performance in the office.

Narrowing the mental focus

If the ‘corporate athlete’ can maintain their overall goal in their mind, like a lighthouse in a storm guiding the way, then they can judge whether an action will enhance their performance and direction towards their overall goal. They can control the effort they commit and their fitness. For the corporate athlete this will be their mental fitness.

Michael Cheika, the Australian rugby team coach, focuses his team on being the best they can be at everything that does not require talent. He narrows the attention to issues within their sole control ‘effort’ and ‘fitness’ and asks his players to judge all their actions against the simple mantra ‘does their action enhance performance’.

In the corporate environment there is often a tendency to prioritise technical training over the mental aspects. Frequently the importance of physical and emotional wellbeing is not considered in relation to direct performance in the workplace.

In an overstimulated world, excessive multi-tasking creates a major disruption to our ability to focus and our performance. Stress is increased by the difficulty in switching off from access to emails at any time of day or night or at any place in the world. Mental effectiveness is about focus and being mindfully aware of what you are choosing to focus on. It is essentially about staying focussed on your object of choice and being in control of choosing your distractions.

It may be more effective to schedule e mail sessions throughout the day, deciding how long to allocate. Often seemingly small changes can increase feelings of being in control and determination of where time is focused with a view to enhancing performance. Those in pursuit of excellence need to focus only on what is relevant and to stay focussed for the duration of the task.

Confidence and self-belief

Unshakeable confidence and self-belief are frequently reported characteristics in high achievers both in sport and business. Henry Ford once said ‘If you think you can, you are right; if you think you can’t, you’re still right’.

Research has shown that self-confidence is one of the most important psychological factors in creating high performance. Higher levels of confidence encourage people to cope with pressure and offer the freedom to demonstrate their talent. They tend to work harder believing that they can achieve their goals and set themselves more challenging goals or targets.

In the workplace it is often not only about feeling confident but also looking confident. At a client pitch you will be judged on how confident you and your team appear and your body language. If you are you team are pitching for a significant contract but look unsure of yourselves it is less likely that you will be successful and win the pitch.

If your team’s body language is positive and you are all walking with your shoulders held back, standing up straight and making direct eye contact you will be perceived

as more likely to be successful.

Mohammad Ali captured the essence of this when he said ‘If you are not the best, then pretend you are’.

In business more time should be spent helping promote self-confidence. One simple way to do this is can be by learning more and increasing your knowledge.

Optimal management of energy

Olympic and elite athletes have long relied upon routines around sleep, nutrition, mental and physical preparatory rituals alongside recovery periods to maximize performance.

It is becoming recognised that optimal management of energy is key to the optimal conditioning of the mind, body and spirit which are required to maximum business performance over the longer term. Whilst this may be recognised many executives allow themselves to become run down and deprived of quality sleep.

One organisation that has been ahead of the curve is Optima-life. They focus on a personalised approach to performance, resilience and wellbeing. They bring together experts from the world of sport, business and health to utilise a data driven approach to understanding people. Optima-life, CEO Simon Shepard explains that ‘by blending together technology and coaching Optima-life has developed a range of programmes that shift people on from thinking they know, to fully understanding.’

Scheduling performance breaks is a simple way to manage mental energy more effectively throughout the day. Often many of us do not take a break but rush from one thing to the next with lunch at our desk still reading through e mails. Some days in the office are for our minds are like running a marathon without water for our bodies.

Performance breaks can be as short as a minute or two taking our minds away from the constant state of doing and undertaking tasks to a state of being. Those who practice meditation will know how to give their minds a break. It can be as simple as letting go of your activities and switching your attention to your breath for a few minutes if you do not feel there is time for a short walk outside.

Life-long learning: curiosity and self-reflection

This component of excellence relies on the willingness of individuals to learn from every experience developing a culture of self-reflection. As the future is unknown and pace of change in business increasing, the ability to learn and adapt is likely to be an important predictor of future high performance. A core trait of the successful ‘corporate athlete’ is one of continual renewal and reinvention.

Alongside the permanent curiosity to learn and improve is the preparedness for failure.

Being prepared for failure

John Wooden, the basketball coach who won an unprecedented number of championships at UCLA, is one of the most renowned sports coaches globally. One of his mottos is, ‘If you are not making mistakes, then you are not doing anything. I am positive that a doer makes mistakes.

His view is if you are not trying new things you are not pushing yourself and are just playing safe. For businesses or athletes to succeed they often need to be pushing boundaries, embracing failure and learning from the result.

Positive self-talk

One technique sports coaches use is creating positive images using positive self-talk. For example, in golf it is better to say ‘hit the green’ rather than ‘do not hit the water’. In business it would be better to say ‘stay calm and composed’ rather than ‘do not get defensive and argumentative’.

The technique of ‘positive self-talk can be applied more widely to help improve business performance through helping reduce doubt.

Performance under pressure

The corporate athlete like the Olympic athlete needs to produce a skilled performance when it matters under pressure.

At the Olympic Games athletes are required to perform under extreme pressure. They spend four years or more, often a lifetime, of training for this one moment in time. Sports psychologists have had to learn about the human ability to thrive in these extreme positions and how to manage stress.

Goal setting: clarity, longer term, learning goals

Jenny Rogers emphasizes that as a goal directs attention and hence behaviour the more explicit it is the more effective it will be. Dr Edwin Locke showed that specific and more difficult goals led to better performance than to vague easy goals. In sport goals are clear – ‘to win an Olympic gold medal’. In business there may be competing goals and insufficient time is spent clarifying the primary goal.

Business increasingly has a short term focus. Promoting an appreciation that success does not usually come easily or immediately to champion athletes may help encourage business clients adopt similar longer term development goals and show the same persistence in the face of adversity.

The best sports coaches tend to focus on learning goals rather than performance goals. Executives could do well to focus on their own learning goals rather than short term organisational performance goals based upon factors outside their control.

Mental rehearsal and imagery

Einstein knew that ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge’ and that mental images can exert a powerful influence on physical performance. Imagery is frequently used in sport.

Sports coaches are aware that the brain does not make distinction between what is a remembered or an imagined experience and an actual one - mental rehearsal is virtually as effective as real thing.

Video feedback is another technique used by sports coaches that is often under-utilised in business.

Olympic rowing gold medallist Ben Hunt-Davis assessed everything his team did in their 2000 Games preparation against the question ‘Will it make the boat go faster?’

The lessons learned

It is hoped that at least some of the lessons outlined from the sporting world will resonate with the ‘corporate athlete’ and inspire and motivate them to be the best that they can be in their chosen field.

Indeed, the lessons can be applied by those who are sports fans or not and are not limited to use solely in the workplace but can be applicable to many aspects of life.