

### OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCES

#### Lessons from the Olympics

Did you watch the performance of the British Olympic Cycling team? A client of mine did and then listened to a radio interview with David Brailsford, the team's Performance Director. She rang me excitedly to say that so



many of the points he made rang bells for her that I must listen myself. I did (on the BBC

website) and was very impressed!

Can we learn something useful for business performance from Britain's unprecedented success at the 2008 Olympics?

When I listened to the radio interview I picked out what I believe were the top six lessons for those competing outside the sports arena:

#### 1. Forget luck - It's hard work winning!

Whether its cycling, rowing or any other sport, you have to practice your skills to win. Indeed, recent research has identified the number of hours required to become an impresario or genius at something (music e.g.) - its 10,000! I don't know of any research relating to business skills and 10,000 hours to become an icon of success but I'm sure that practising your key skills leads to excellence!

The difference between business and sport is that you may need to do more preparation to identify the key skills. Also, before you start practising the skills, you need to work out how they can best be honed and replicated to be used in different situations.

Still, the point is that there is no magic bullet - you will have to do 'the hard yards'.

#### 2. Focus on performance not results

Before the Olympics, every news outlet carried predictions about the number of medals that Britain was going to win. But that was NOT the focus of the British Cycling team, as David Brailsford was at pains to explain. 'We didn't work to medal targets. We didn't set any targets,' he said in the Radio

5 interview. Instead, the team focussed on individual performance, deciding for each team member what speeds they would average - and then go on to plan the power they would need and the bikes that would work best. 'It's not what other people think or expect. It's very much an inward thing. What happens externally shouldn't really make any difference,' he said in the interview.

That may seem surprising - and it's a difficult lesson for many of us in business. Far too many companies focus on results to the detriment of reflecting on the people performance that will achieve those results. The problem is that you don't have control over the results. You can never guarantee results that rely on others (customers e.g.) doing what you wish. But you can take full responsibility for your performance so that it increases the chances of reaching that goal. My game plan for companies is to visualise the goal (results) but then analyse and stay focused on the elements of a winning performance.

#### 3. Have regular performance reviews

Debriefing at the end of the day was a four-year long routine for Britain's Olympic cyclists - an essential 'drilled discipline' to discover both the success factors and problems that had surfaced that day and to plan for the next.

Sadly, too few companies have a performance debrief on a regular basis. Yet it's vital for everyone to understand what the targets are and be aware of any issues that are causing problems or indeed creating



success. It's just as important that employees get feedback (not just praise) about good

performance as well as any problems.

Finally, when the performance reviews take place that the review is of just that, - the performance - not just the results so far. (see 2 above!)

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#### 4. The 'aggregation of marginal gains'

'Once you understand this phrase, it'll change your life' David Brailsford told the radio 5 interviewer. The cycling team's success was: 'the desire of every member of the team to achieve an aggregation of marginal gains.' What does that mean? asked the interviewer.

'It means breaking down cycling competitions and events into all of its component parts – and then trying to get improvements in every single area that may affect performance,' Brailsford explained – and it's a key lesson for industry.

It may be tempting to look for the one big change that will improve success in a tricky market. Alternatively, what could be the many marginal gains you could aggregate into a success formula for today's market?!

#### 5. Goal setting doesn't mean you won't fail

Sport is all about winning – and losing. 'Its horrible when you lose,' David Brailsford explained in the Radio 5 interview. 'But you've got to allow the failure to drive you on.'

That doesn't mean you HAVE to lose in order to win. 'But if you want to win big you have to be prepared to lose big, You can't hold back because you can't face up to not winning, because you know that if you lose, your whole world will fall down. You have to accept the disappointment of not winning before you start. To do that, to give it that level of commitment, takes some doing. But unless you are prepared to do that, you probably will never win.'

It's a lesson everyone can learn from. Of course you're going to be down in the dumps when you don't hit a target or get that promotion. But failure is part of success: learning how to handle failure gives you the self-confidence to set big goals

knowing success is not guaranteed. Indeed this relates back to the point about setting big result-type-goals but then recognising you have less than total control; so stay focused on the controllable - your performance. (Next hire a coach to work on learning optimistic thinking styles in face of disappointment!)

#### 6. Remember coaches don't win races

The British Olympic cycling team made the individual athlete responsible for his or her own training – something that

*"If you want to win big you have to be prepared to lose big too"*

David Brailsford told Radio 5 was 'different and inspirational'. It's exactly the same for industry.

Brailsford explained that Olympic coaches 'work very carefully to provide ownership to the riders about their own programmes, their own training. That goes against the grain of conventional wisdom for many coaches who are used to telling the athlete what to do day in day out rather than the athlete being totally responsible for their training.

'But there's a great improvement when you broaden out the discussion and sit down together and say: "What would work for you? It's not about us. No coach or performance director has ever won a medal. It's all about the athletes. When you acknowledge that, it is just inspirational the difference that makes.'

What more could we possibly add!

### **Credit Crunch—and that's like what?**

Jane Corrigan explains how finding the right metaphor has changed her life.

After half dozen or so coaching sessions with Mike Duckett, I'm aware that metaphor has been of great use to many of his clients. An exploration of the metaphor, it seems, can lead to a better understanding of limiting beliefs and behaviours and perhaps the development of a healthier, more positive metaphor that can bring change for the better.

Like many people, I was feeling terrified by the credit crunch – partly as a freelance with no job security, partly as the head of a family that I felt could increase its demands on me so much that I wouldn't be able to cope. To the question what does it feel like, I said it felt like a jungle (as in 'It's a jungle out there', I suppose), and soon found myself describing a dark dangerous place overgrown with tangled, toxic plants that throttled, swamped, threatened to pull my feet from under me.

It was sometimes difficult responding to the subsequent questioning from Mike – what would you like to have happen? What else is there about the jungle? After all, the jungle was only in my head. But I kept going and gradually found that the jungle became both more real and less scary. I noticed some light shining through and I had a pair of secateurs..... I was a horticulturalist not a victim. And there were kindly eyes glinting in the gloom – this wasn't a jungle full of killers but kindly 'animals' that would help me as long as I was sufficiently in the moment to be aware of them.

It may sound fanciful but the words have made all the difference. I'd recently spent a day helping to clear a garden and had found it very grounding and satisfying. Instead of feeling stressed about money and panicking about a worrying future, I'm physically and mentally energised. For one thing, I'm sensitive to the many people in my life who want things to go well for me. And though nothing much has changed in the economy, I feel more peaceful, a serene horticulturalist, seeing the big picture but focussing on patiently and carefully disentangling knots and complications, cutting back here, nurturing there and already, only a couple of weeks later, feeling safer, more in control and optimistic.



## And finally.....

### It depends what you believe

Research reported in *Current Directions in Psychological Science 2008* shows that managers who believe personality and ability are fixed (“He’s just not the type”; “He’ll never amount to much”; “You either know how to do this or you don’t”) are less likely to notice evidence to the contrary.

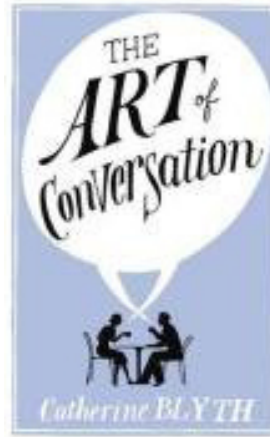
They are even less likely to believe in the value of coaching (aahhh..!).

However, help is at hand in the study showing that this fixed managerial view can be changed so long as the evidence is scientific

### Imagine this

Researches at Sheffield University have reported that imagining yourself taking an action increases the likelihood of you going through with it (*B.J. Health Psychology*).

Whilst we work day in and day out with clients who envisage achieving their goals, this research found that people who imagined the actions involved in giving blood - making the appointment, driving there etc - were much more motivated to give blood than people who didn’t imagine it, or even those who only imagined the final outcome.



Every day we use our mobiles and computers to communicate, but ironically we are losing touch with face-to-face talk. Catherine Blyth reveals the endless possibilities of conversation and shows that when it works it can come close to heaven.

With examples from Elizabeth I to Tommy Cooper, courtesans to nomads, *The Art of Conversation* is full of tips on listening, talking shop and surviving conversational bores. Be it sharing a joke with a

stranger, sparking a new idea or just letting off steam with a friend, there are infinite adventures to be had if you break the ice and say hello . . .

Many clients at some point decide they need to improve their networking skills but find the whole prospect so daunting. This little book may help. It is good light reading and doesn’t take itself too seriously.

It opens with “We need to talk. When did this become a threat rather than a statement of fact?”

However it is still quite practical with lists of do’s and don’ts and rules to help you make easy conversation, which can be vital for career success!

Whether you find this in your stocking or not (you can buy it directly through our website):

## Have a very Merry Christmas!

### Coaching for Success

#### *Releasing your potential.*

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## About us

Coaching for Success provides executive and personal coaching that helps individuals perform to their maximum potential.

Our corporate client list covers a range of industry sectors, including pharmaceutical, retail, finance and construction, and high profile names such as John Laing, Novartis, KPMG, Abbott and Johnson Controls.

Our coaches work with company personnel, on a one-to-one basis, enabling them to recognise the choices and opportunities available to them, to make decisions about career and personnel development and then to create and implement a plan of action designed to achieve success.

We provide professional coaching in the areas of:

- Executive Coaching
- Life Coaching
- Performance Coaching