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Part 1

Leading through Transformation

What can business
leaders learn from
competitive sport?



Author: Tennis to leadership consultancy

This is a two-part series exploring what Business leaders can learn from elite athletes and competitive sport. This article is written to help leaders step back from the busyness of their day-to-day, to reflect on their leadership role and to prompt thinking on bringing out the best in the people they work with, both personally and professionally.



Jennifer Hadjieva
Author, Leadership Consultant
Former professional athlete

Jennifer started playing tennis at the age of seven, and later at the age of 18 transitioned to playing tennis full-time and playing tournaments all over the world. As she later moved into psychology studies and leadership consulting, she saw that the lessons learnt from sports often are directly transferable to the corporate world and its people.

Jennifer



What can business leaders learn from competitive sport in times of change and transformation?



What can business leaders learn from Roger Federer or the New York Mets?

Today's businesses are continuously threatened by complex and challenging issues that, without the appropriate leadership and strategies, could jeopardise their success, and sometimes even survival. Shifting customer expectations, fast changing workforces and technology, and the increasingly competitive nature in most industries make it difficult for leaders to elevate and reimagine their organisations. On top of this, we have just experienced an unparalleled period of time in which we have come up against the extremes of disruption, change, resilience, despair and hope.

As a former athlete, these feelings are not new to me. Competitive sport brings constant change and uncertainty, and with that, feelings of disappointment paired with determination to succeed. The same is also true for leaders. After retiring from professional sports and entering the world of management consultancy, it is evident to me that the lessons learnt from sports are often directly transferable to the corporate world¹. Change and transformation is constant and inevitable, and thus we need strong and authentic leaders to guide us through it.

The question is, what can business leaders learn from competitive sport when leading through transformation?

1 - Research indicates that there is generalisability of leadership strategies to both sports and business across a wide range of organisational fields (e.g. Adcroft & Teckman, 2008; Burnes & O'Donnell, 2011).

The role of the team leader

The roles senior leaders play are many and complex, but in today's environment they all need to be able to inspire, support and lead through change and transformation.



Finding and developing good leaders is as crucial for organisations as it is in elite sport. Our own Deloitte Leadership research indicates that the single greatest barrier to high performing teams are the behaviours of team leaders. In contrast, leaders in the top 10% of ratings, as rated by their managers, subordinates, and colleagues, produce twice as much net revenue to the organisation compared to their peers (Zenger & Folkman, 2009).

In line with this, our [Leadership Premium](#) research shows that the gap between the value of a company with good leadership and that of a company with weaker leadership could be more than 35.5%. Therefore, it is essential that organisations get leadership right and invest in leaders that inspire and motivate their people.

Leaders should be able to set out the collective vision and mission of their team to serve as the North star through transformational journeys. This needs to be much more than the words on a page and must provide a focal point on which teams and individuals can rely, align and feel connected, providing a sense of purpose and belonging. From my personal experience, being able to trust and feel inspired by my coach was invaluable. When motivation was low, I needed someone there to remind me of my vision and help me link the everyday work to the end-goal.

“The single greatest barrier to high performing teams are the behaviours of team leaders.”

[Deloitte Leadership research](#)

Success is a bumpy road



Even so, a clear vision does not guarantee immediate success. Take for example the New York Mets who won the World Series in baseball in 1969. Prior to the season they had been the laughing stock of baseball, going in with 100-1 odds before the season and never finishing higher than ninth place in the ten-team National League. However, ahead of the 1969 season their momentum started to change. It was a combination of bringing in new talent with skills that had previously been missing along with a new manager, that ultimately resulted in new motivation and a refocus with one main priority: Winning. Almost everyone agrees that Gil Hodges, the new manager, brought the attitude and winning mindset that had been missing for so long. In one season, a team that was a perennial loser in the World series, won with a team with mostly unknown players, showing that a complete turnaround is possible.

Another example where success isn't linear is Kieran Behan who was just a young boy when he told his mum that he was going to be an Olympic gymnast one day. At the age of 10, his path of adversity which lasted over 8 years, began and included a tumour in his leg leaving him in a wheelchair, a training accident causing him brain damage that prevented him from training for three years, and breaking both his knees just as he transitioned to a senior gymnast.

In interviews Kieran repeatedly spoke about his friends, family and coaches and how they kept him motivated and supported along the way, indicating that even in individual sports, a sense of team effort is an essential component. Kieran's dream and persistence finally took him far, and he advanced so well into his 20s, that he qualified for the Olympics in the 2012 games. I was told 'you're never going to be able to walk again let alone do gymnastics' to find out I'm going to the Olympic Games is something that dreams are made of", he told BBC.

Success is a bumpy road



Recently Laura Kenny, gold medal winning cyclist and Team GB's most successful female Olympian ever, shared on [Deloitte 'The Green Room' podcast](#) how she overcame a broken shoulder and arm just before the Tokyo Olympics were postponed. Listen [here](#) for Laura's perspective on what the business world can learn from elite sports.

Business leaders need to help connect the wins and losses, the ups and downs, the good and the bad to the longer journey. They need to be able to embrace the setbacks that will invariably come, evaluate and re-evaluate their plan, and refocus and re-energise when required. Most importantly, they need to get their teams onboard by motivating and inspiring them – because no matter how much of an expert you are, no one can do it by themselves.

Failing brings success

The journey is never what we expect, and failing is essential to succeeding.



Failure enables self-improvement as it provides an opportunity to reflect and to discover new innovative ways to face the challenges ahead. Over the pandemic, disruption has forced teams to increase the speed of working to deal with continuous challenges, and a culture of quick wins has almost become the norm. People need to succeed fast all the time, meaning there is little room for failure. But it is through failing and bouncing back that we learn and build resilience – critical attributes to the success of leaders and their teams. Therefore, leaders need to be the ones who create a culture in which their people and teams feel comfortable failing...and bouncing back.

Failing indeed is a key part of success, both in the corporate world and in elite sports. The Canterbury Crusaders were crowned Australasia's best team of the past quarter of a century.

Gainline Analytics analysed 122 teams over 14 competitions since 1993 and announced the nine-time Super Rugby champion top of the class. The team represents a geographical area smaller than Richmondshire in the UK, but nevertheless kept recruiting from their local area and continuously won game after game. Ben Darwin, ex-international rugby player and Gain Line Analytics director, emphasises the importance of the longevity of relationships as a common factor among successful teams.

"People make the mistake of thinking that to build a successful club is bringing together talent, but building a club is about building understanding. The teams that think long term are the teams that win everything."

Ben Darwin

Moments that matter

Every moment matters.
Or does it?

In tennis for instance, you can win more points than your opponent and still lose the match. A prime example is in 2019, when Roger Federer won more points than Novak Djokovic in the Wimbledon final, but still failed to take home the championship. What matters is which points you win; you need the deciding ones! In today's organisational climate there is an overwhelming sense of busyness, and consequently a large number of competing priorities. Leaders and their teams need to have a clear view of where to focus and put the effort in order to achieve long-term success. It doesn't necessarily matter if you win the first few games, you can still lose the match. This is especially true in significant transformations.



"In our executive labs a common challenge we see is leaders wrestling with the busyness, placing too much of their time and focus on the now, and not enough on the future."

Euan Isles, Head of Deloitte Leadership, UK

Choose your battles wisely



Creating a high performing team and a sense of oneness requires a relentless focus on the strategy and end-goal led by the leader. It is crucial to identify the things that, if done right, will make you come out on top. Equally, it is important to identify the things that will not bring benefit, and therefore can be dropped.

How can you focus your efforts to bring the best value to your clients and customers in your market, your industry, your geography? Knowing this will provide clarity and pinpointing priorities will become easier. Once the team is aligned on the strategic priorities, it is the leader's responsibility to create a protective shield around the team to avoid distractions and "firefighting".

Clearly, being a leader is multifaceted, but here are a few challenges to think about from competitive sports.

As a leader, are you doing what you can to inspire your people?

Do you give them space to fail and learn?

And do you carefully choose where to focus your energy?

[Look out for Part 2 of this article for more lessons for business leaders from competitive sports.](#)



If you would like to find out more about how we can partner with you to develop your leaders and create high-performing teams in your business, please get in touch with us.



Tim Clayton-Ball
Global Leader Deloitte Leadership

 tclaytonball@deloitte.co.uk



Euan Isles
Head of Deloitte Leadership UK

 eisles@deloitte.co.uk



Jennifer Hadjieva
Author, Leadership Consultant

 jenniferhadjieva@deloitte.co.uk



Joanna Lockard
Leadership Consultant

 jlockard@deloitte.co.uk

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