



The ultimate team: Winning after winning

Teams come in many forms, and the team behind the athlete is no less critical than those who line up next to one another on the field of play.

By Natalie Benjamin, Marketing & Communications Director

Recently I spent time with Charlie Unwin, a distinguished performance psychologist and Lane4 Associate Consultant. We discussed his work with elite sportspeople and what that can teach us in business. In particular, we talked about the common traits of top sportspeople and the challenges of achieving sustained success – winning after winning!

NB: What are the chief characteristics of sportspeople that enable them to achieve high levels of performance?

A CLEAR VISION FOR SUCCESS

CU: A clear vision for success is the first one. All successful athletes have one and it's simple and compelling, like winning a gold medal or performing in a certain competition.

When I'm working with business people, I'll often get push back that it's not as possible in business, but I challenge that perspective, asking what would need to be true to get that same clarity because it impacts commitment and focus when you do achieve it.

Visualisation of success is the next level down from a clear vision. Top performers can break down their vision for success into smaller everyday micro-behaviours and the research that supports this is compelling. There is research in swimmers to show that once they had reached national standard, those most likely to move on to Olympic standard were those who could recreate their best performance in their head. They can imagine themselves swimming their race to the best of their ability and visualise success within a few hundredths of a second. That's great internalisation of good performance and the day-to-day version of a clear vision for success.

Visualising as a tool is part of human nature and I believe it's just as relevant for business. Take back-to-back meetings for example. Arguably, you are not prepared for the next one as you haven't had time to prepare properly. Have you considered if you will need to listen, comment or be assertive? Visualisation can be used in business to prepare us mentally for good performance. An athlete doesn't just dive into a pool, they prepare themselves even before day-to-day performances. Without that mental process, we compromise the quality of everyday performance.



I approach everything I do in a business context as I would have in sport. I think it's the same principle and, too often, people don't take time to define performance in a business context. A new business pitch might be an example of an easily defined performance and we see people 'train' for it. It demonstrates that people understand 'performance' to some degree, but what about the same type of discipline when the stakes don't appear so high. Going through the motions is a danger for business people as much as it is for athletes. Doing relevant tasks with appropriate focus and intensity can separate the average performer from the high performer.

A FOCUS ON MASTERY NOT JUST THE OUTCOME

Top sportspeople focus on mastery, rather than the outcome. Of course, they care about the overall outcome, but mastery becomes a key focus because they can control it better. I help athletes to understand the relationship between winning and mastery - which leads to winning.

Sport is necessarily more single-minded than we can afford in business but in business I do believe that people need to be more selective about what they need to master. Too often, business metrics focus on outcomes and not technique. We see goals such as 'increase sales by 20% ...' but less about what technique people will use or what they will need to master to achieve that.

To achieve mastery, the best athletes are comfortable with repetition. That

doesn't get acknowledged in the same way in business. People want to show they have done it and move on or get promoted. This makes me think about organisations' talent pipelines. To what extent is mastery rewarded and recognised? Not enough in my view.

SELF-AWARENESS

Top athletes tend to be relatively young but are often mature beyond their years. Their self-awareness comes from the need and encouragement to self-reflect at an early age. Research shows that people become more self-reflective with age but positive coaching and mentoring of young athletes helps them to become reflective earlier. The link to performance is that when you're self-aware you're more aware of how your thoughts and feelings impact performance. Top athletes are therefore more in tune with themselves and their impact.

NB: Are there any differences between the psychological approach to achieving high performance once, and doing it repeatedly year on year in sport?

CU: The biggest obstacle is the shift in identity when you have experienced huge success. When you are successful, it's like validation or completion of the story you've told yourself about yourself for years. You've always believed in your ability to win an Olympic gold medal, for example. It's been your reason to get up in the morning. It's been the ultimate why.

When success has been achieved it challenges our whole identity. The move from rookie to expectant champion is tough. It's the difference between being the underdog with limited external pressure to being expected to perform by all of those around you. You become more aware of the athlete you were meant to be.

Once you have achieved something significant, a fundamental change happens to the reward mechanism in your brain. So far, you have been trying to master something to an end goal. Therefore, you have been rewarded intrinsically by day-to-day progress. Now you have become Olympic champion, you become aware of how you are perceived. The reward mechanism becomes much more extrinsic. So, the risk is that you focus more on projecting an image of yourself rather than the intrinsic one that got you where you are today - of technique and mastery. It's too simplistic to say, 'there's just more pressure'. It's all about working with our reward mechanisms. When questioned about when he will retire, Roger Federer has told reporters that he will retire when he stops getting excited about improving his backhand. In some ways it's a comical response to fend off obvious questions but, on the other hand, it's a great statement about intrinsic motivation.

I have been fortunate enough to work with British skeleton racer Lizzie Yarnold for two Olympic cycles, in which she achieved double gold medal success. Most certainly we recognised, because of everything I've

just mentioned, that the challenge of defending her Olympic title was greater than winning her first.

The danger for any performer, in sport or business, is that once you have experienced winning you might just go through the motions rather than exploring the art of learning and that your identity shifts too far. Identity is rife within business. Imagine your goal is to reach Partner in law firm. When you reach that level, it's not a given that you will maintain the same motivation and focus on learning and improvement, which is necessary for sustained performance

NB: How do those who need to sustain high performance for long or intense periods 'recover'?

CU: The better we recover the more we can train. It's no surprise then that enhancing the quality and intensity of training through good recovery is the focus of much research and performance-enhancing drugs! I feel so strongly that we need to adopt a similar focus on recovery in business as we do in sport. Instead, I see a relentless focus on what we do rather than the state we need to be in to do it. This context precipitates us going through the motions and is a pre-cursor to overtraining or burnout. One of the overwhelming messages from elite sport is that an athlete's ongoing physical performance and productivity is only as good as their recovery. If we don't recover physically and mentally, then our performance degrades over time, potentially leading to increased anxiety and reduced focus, motivation and

productivity. If it gets bad enough it will lead to illness and burnout. This is one of those areas we give little thought to from a business perspective and yet it is easy to address by getting into the right habits.

NB: What lessons does this give us from a business perspective?

CU: For performers in any domain I see the importance of macro and micro recovery. Macro is the two-week holiday after a prolonged period of performance. The micro version is how we can be better at recovery on a day-to-day level. Engineering recovery into the framework of our day and being more savvy about that is so important. The best way of understanding recovery is working out what takes our energy and what gives it to us. Certain people can drain us of energy. We need a way to recover psychologically from that! Some people give us energy and that can give us the same type of effect.

In today's technology-driven world we find ourselves permanently wired, but with our attention diluted aimlessly across multiple streams of data.

This is the antithesis of focus and therefore performance. In order to develop a better 'on' switch, we must create a better 'off' switch. For example, sleep is the most important component of this and is the single greatest contributor to poor performance in the workplace. This is something which most athletes now work on as they would do any other aspect of training.

Charlie has a distinguished background in the field of performance psychology.

His clients include Olympic champions, Premiership teams, global businesses and military special forces. Charlie's passion for human performance has been uniquely shaped by a varied career to date. A platoon commander on the front-line in Iraq, Charlie learnt about leading people in complex and dangerous environments. As an athlete with Team GB he discovered the art and science of learning, competing and performing at the highest level.

Combined with his academic foundation in psychology and award-winning research into Performance Mindset, Charlie has a deep understanding of the individual differences that make us all unique in how we define and achieve success.

