

# Business Athletes Need Coaching Too!

Kevin Lohan

Sport requires athletes to train five or more times every week so that they can play only once. Yet in business we require our 'athletes' to 'play' five times a week and train just once, or maybe not at all.

Sport coaches recognise that physical ability and fitness are both perishable. If not constantly renewed and practiced then skills and fitness are gradually lost. In business, where the key to 'fitness' is knowledge, we have to remember that it too has a shelf-life. Like physical fitness, it too is perishable.

Business coaches, like their counterparts in sport, need to constantly renew the 'fitness' of knowledge workers.

How many times have we seen a sports team, combining players with average talent, make it to the championship rounds and even become champions? One of the secrets to their success is that they are well coached? There are some useful lessons for business coaches in the way sport coaches create that kind of success. Here are a few simple tools to help you coach a winning team.

## 1. Don't play

It was once common for a sport team to have a 'captain/coach'. Someone who coached the team but also played with them. Rarely does it work. The coach is so wrapped up in the game that he or she cannot see the wider picture.

It is the same for too many business coaches. They are wrapped up in the daily grind of getting things done and they forget to take a step back and observe their 'athletes' at work. I know of one CEO of a major corporation who personally signs off for the purchase of new telephones. This captain/coach cannot possibly have a sufficiently broad grasp of the playing (business) conditions and the way their athletes are responding to them because the coach is too busy being in the game too. Remember you are the coach – not a player.

## 2. Acclimatise new team recruits

Imagine for a moment a basketball coach who recruits a point guard to the team. Do you think that the basketball coach would simply throw the point guard into a game without making sure that the player can fit into the team plays? Of course not. The new recruit would have lots of opportunities to get a feel for the way others in the team go about their roles. The new player would learn all the plays for the team before taking to the court so that they could perform well?

Now imagine a business coach who appoints, say, a new receptionist. What level of acclimatisation does the average new receptionist get to a business? Step inside the reception area of any business and ask the receptionist how much coaching they got before they were thrown into the game. They simply cannot run the plays if they don't know who does what. They'll take the calls, sure - just like the basketball point guard. However, where they next pass the ball is going to have a big impact on the game. A good coach will spend time with a new recruit and help them understand the team plays and who does what.

## 3. Practice simple drills.

While we're talking about basketball coaches, think of the way they ensure that the team's skills are kept finely tuned. Every week they practice simple drills like how to shoot, pass and dribble. Most players have been doing these things for many years and yet the coach still has them practice.

By contrast, in business, we often train someone once and assume they are capable for all time. It would be useful for our business athletes to have regular drills too. As the coach of a sales person for example, you might have brief discussions with them about product knowledge or go through some practice sales meetings with them. You might debrief them about unsuccessful sales calls.

What happened? What created resistance on the part of the customer, and so on?

#### **4. Work on the mental toughness of business athletes.**

In “The Inner Game of Tennis”, author Timothy Gallwey reports that ‘the opponent within one’s own head is more formidable than the one on the other side of the net’. It is important for coaches therefore to help a player overcome personal limitations.

Gallwey now works with business coaches and says many of the same rules apply. Business coaches need to help their athletes go beyond their personal limitations. One way to do this is to teach them to be *learners* rather than simply teaching them everything you know. After all there are limitations to the coach’s knowledge too. If all we do is teach our athletes all we know we are simply reproducing our own limitations. If we think of our athletes in terms of their potential instead of their performance, we can help them achieve greatness.

#### **5. Watch the video replays**

Many sport coaches sit through video replays with their athletes to analyse their strengths and weaknesses. The coach discusses the various plays and how they might have been handled differently.

In business we rarely have video replays but we can still simulate that process by regular debriefing sessions with staff. This can be especially true when something has gone wrong. As one sports coach once said; “My players need me more when they lose than when they win.” Take time to talk with your business athletes to debrief what happened. The way you question them is crucial. For example, imagine a football coach asking these two questions and then ask yourself which of the questions would be more effective in getting the athlete to understand an error and ways to correct it.

Q1. Why did you kick the ball over there?

Q2. What was happening in the game in the moment before you kicked the ball?

The ‘Why’ question can often create defensiveness as the person tries to justify their performance. Even worse, sometimes it generates guilt as the person recognises the implicit criticism in the question. The second question maintains a sense of openness and objective analysis. Rather than asking a salesperson, “Why didn’t you outline the benefits of the product?” you might ask, “What was the customer asking as you began the sales meeting?”

#### **6. Get the veterans to share their talent**

Champions in sport eventually retire.

However a good coach will make the most of their talents while they are around. The coach will set up routines in which the champions share their wisdom. How often have you heard someone say that a player has an ‘old head on their shoulders’?

The knowledge management movement of today is largely based on the notion that ‘information workers’ accumulate information but that knowledge workers share their information and facilitate corporate wisdom. Let’s get ‘old heads on the shoulders’ of our business athletes. Get your veteran champions to share their wisdom with those who have less experience.

Finally, ask yourself this question: Why do all of the best athletes have coaches?

So that they can reach their full potential.

Our business athletes are each like an acorn with all the potential to become an oak tree. Coaching will ensure that our players are fit and able to perform. Take responsibility for the development of your business athletes and coach them as you would a sports athlete and you too will experience the joy of winning a championship.