

Olympic lessons for business

21 Practical ways to boost results



A management guide from
Today's Agenda



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Introduction

From the spectacular opening ceremony, watched by 27m people in the UK, to the individual events, the London 2012 Olympic games provided compelling viewing and for many, a magnetic desire to attend in person.

What is the draw? What mobilised so many people to actively or emotionally support the event? Maybe it's that desire to feel part of something successful; to share in the excitement of the challenge knowing there's a reasonable chance of witnessing the elation of a win.

So what can we learn from the Olympic experience that will help us to mobilise our team, create a hunger for success and produce the energy to achieve it? Here we share 21 lessons from the games.





1. Create Expectation

From winning the bid in 2005, the Olympic Committee started to build expectations. The launch of ticket sales and the final weeks running-up to the event saw heightened publicity but it was the opening ceremony that really set the scene.

For most businesses, each new year is much like the last – same products, same customers, same economic challenges. But even if we don't have a new, exciting product to launch or a high-profile marketing campaign to announce, we can design a platform for building expectations.

The key is in finding a way to share your own passion and enthusiasm for the business whilst clearly setting out how others can contribute. A

great way to do this is with a 'year-start' conference. Choose calendar year or financial year to suit your business and put on an event for the whole team to enjoy. Combining serious business messages with light-hearted, interactive sessions will start to win support and provide you with a more informed, engaged team, with the shared expectation of a successful year.

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2. Use Strategy

In any sport, understanding what it takes to win is fundamental.

In one-to-one contact sport, such as taekwondo, the best performers were those studying video footage of their opponents in order to develop effective offensive and defensive techniques ahead of the contest.

Often the most effective business strategies are the simplest ones. Firstly, we need to understand what it takes to win the business of the customers we want to serve. We can do this by asking them through a survey or more engagingly, by empowering our team to find out at point of contact, and to share their insights back into the business.

Secondly, it is important to know our competitors. What are they currently doing to win the business we want and how might they respond to our actions in the future?

You can use this knowledge to define what you will do to win the business you want, succeeding despite the competition.

Understand what it takes
to win with
customers
and know
the competition.



3. Set Goals

All those participating in the Olympics had goals. For some it was simply to be a credible competitor, whilst for some others, Gold was the only goal. Each person knew why they were there and what they expected to achieve. Their personal goal was the driving force behind the Olympian effort they each displayed.

Our business needs goals and our team needs to know what those goals are.

Without goals, we have no driving force. We are leaving the level of effort being put in by each member of the team, to their own discretion. By setting goals, we have a clear and consistent way of defining what

we are aiming for and what is required from everyone. We can make relevant plans and we have an effective way to assess our performance

Identify the top four or five goals for your business, quantify them and put a time-frame for achieving them. Arrange a team briefing to share the goals with everyone. Cascade into personal objectives for individuals.

Identify the top
goals
for your business,
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for achieving them.



4. Establish the Measure

Measuring performance is central to competitive sport. Whether its distance, speed, weight, difficulty, execution or points won, each sport has its own measure of success. In this way medals are awarded, but also performance can be benchmarked against various records and personal bests.

For individuals in our team, knowing how their performance is going to be measured is a fundamental requirement. Clarifying the measure is sensible management, being the basis of performance assessment. When people know the level they are reaching they are in a position to adjust their behaviour to change the level.

Identify the measures for each role by thinking about the 5 most important things that will indicate that a person is being successful. Decide how and when you will monitor or calculate these measures. These 'Key Performance Indicators' can be included in the individual's personal objectives, so everyone is clear about the measures.

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5. Maintain Focus

For many Olympians, success in their sport is their sole focus for the 4 years preceding the games. This single-mindedness produces the high-performing champions who are not only ready to compete but who are placed to win.

With numerous distractions in the workplace we need to work hard to maintain a level of focus within our business. A key part of this is being consistent in our message. Whilst we are not working towards one single event in 4 years time, we do need to reinforce and reiterate our longer-term goals.

Find new and engaging ways to communicate the importance and ongoing relevance of your longer-term goals, and illustrate how

activities need to change in the light of current performance and market conditions. In this way you can help your team to maintain that all-important focus and deliver results.

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6. Train, Constantly

Even with significant natural talent, Olympians spend most of their non-competing time in training. This constant practice, of an activity they are already performing at above-average levels, ensures that they are at their peak when it counts – when they come face to face with other world-class players.

Whilst we cannot spend unlimited time in formal training, we can establish a learning culture in the workplace. This would enable us to be improving our competitive performance continually, increasing our chances of winning against the best in the market.

Supplement your organised off-site training activities by including in everyday work processes simple ways for people to identify ‘learning

points'. Formalise the communication of these learning points, maybe through an Intranet, so they are shared with others and encourage people to adapt their behaviours accordingly. By recording this in a 'learning log' the business will become stronger and more effective day by day.

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7. Innovate

As new competitors enter the various sports, some experienced Olympians find themselves needing to develop new techniques.

When we have a tried and tested way of doing something in our business, innovation seems like an unnecessary distraction or simply a waste of time. This might be true if we were operating in complete isolation, unaffected by the world around us.

In reality, we are in a world of constant change and are largely unable to influence either the extent or pace of that change. Our only chance of long term success, and even survival, is to embrace innovation and adapt. Make innovation an integrated part of your business, encouraging ideas from the whole team by posing challenges and

questions related to your specific goals, at every opportunity. Always acknowledge the ideas and don't feel guilty about saying 'no thanks' but give a brief reason. Make sure you say 'yes please' to the best ideas, and give the development of these a high profile across the business.

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8. Show Dedication

Listening to Olympians talking candidly of their training regimes and lifestyle commitments, the sacrifices made and dedication required to perform at this level is awe-inspiring.

We cannot and should not expect our workforce to have an all-consuming passion to perform their jobs, but we can desire a degree of personal commitment and dedication to the business. Dedication grows where there is a compelling cause to which we can devote our time and energy. For some enterprises such as charities, the cause is self-evident and has served to attract employees but for other businesses, there is a need to give people a sense of purpose beyond that of making a profit.

One way to express this higher sense of purpose is through a company mission statement. Think about what the business exists to do in terms of the key stakeholders, for example, for customers, for employees and for suppliers and capture the essence in a succinct paragraph. This becomes the catalyst for dedication to grow.

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succinct paragraph.



9. Set Pace

Many sports require speed, but an all-out sprint rarely works beyond the 100m. For most track events, appropriate pacing is the secret to winning.

At work we need our teams to adopt a considered pace, balancing quality with quantity. This doesn't always happen. A common issue can be complacency, where there is no apparent requirement to act with any speed – things work OK as they are.

It is likely that you see the business in a more holistic way than your team, enabling you to spot market opportunities and anticipate the potential actions of competitors. Your vision and viewpoint provide the incentive and justification for un-delayed action.

Be a pace-setter for your business, role-modelling a sense of urgency appropriate to the work. Share your views on the need for more speed. Use 'meeting action points' with clear target deadlines, as a way to drive action and follow-up implementation within your desired timeframe.

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sense of urgency.



10. Foster Teamwork

We can look to any team sport for ideas about teamwork, but the Paralympic teams, such as blind football, demonstrated an uncommon degree of trust and mutual support.

The synergy created by true teamwork adds value to all involved. Without teamwork, at best we have a group of people working independently and at worst, our resource is tied up in internal competition.

The multiplying effect of strong teamwork comes from, amongst other things, mutual support, a wider skill-set, different perspectives, and a sense of belonging.

Be a catalyst for teamwork, engendering loyalty by acting for the greater good. For example, initiate a customer care programme or become a customer champion. Find a unifying factor such as a genuinely shared goal. Identify opportunities for people to work together, developing mutual respect and deeper understanding of each others' contribution to the team or business.

Identify opportunities
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developing mutual respect
and deeper understanding
of others' contributions.



11. Develop Endurance

When it comes to the Marathon, the challenge is having what it takes to stay the course. But it is not just the marathon that tests endurance. Olympians by nature hate having to give up, to the extent that many of them are reported to be competing whilst injured, tolerating the pain to see something through.

Some business challenges can be very hard on the team, such as selling non-essential products during a recession. We need our people to persevere with the challenges, not give-in and put their energy into finding excuses to justify their action.

To help the team develop endurance, highlight success stories, sharing how difficulties were overcome. Recognise effort not just results,

especially when the latter is genuinely harder to achieve. Constantly give encouragement, strengthening the team in their resolve to achieve results despite the challenges.

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12. Share Progress

One of the triumphs of the Olympics was the great media coverage, which kept the momentum going and indeed, built on it, as we saw with continued demand for tickets well into the games.

At work, we want people to feel engaged throughout the year, to feel part of what we're trying to achieve. We don't want the excitement of the new vision or this year's goals to fade away a few days after we've announced them.

Ongoing sharing of progress leads to a feeling of inclusion. Use a variety of media and channels, to maximise your chance of connecting with everyone in the team. Share the highs and the lows, the activities

and the results. Select the most appropriate things to communicate and do it regularly to build confidence in the process and keep that momentum going.

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13. Be Creative

Success in one Olympic sport that relied on the creativity of the athlete, is dressage. Combining creative moves with well-known patriotic music proved a winning formula in both the Olympics and Paralympics.

For some businesses such as advertising, creativity is the life-blood, but for others it may seem inappropriate or useless in the quest to achieve goals.

Applied in the right way, creativity has a valuable role to play in securing business success, whichever field you're in. By giving people what they want, but making the familiar surprising, we can start to stand out from the crowd, strengthening our brand identity.

Ask the team to think creatively, identifying ways to differentiate your products and services from those of the competition. In addition, use creativity to solve problems for customers, allowing the team to challenge the way things are normally done.

Use creativity to solve problems for customers, allowing the team to challenge the way things are normally done.



14. Take Pride

Everywhere we looked during the Olympics we saw pride at its very best. Pride for being chosen to represent your country, pride in your sports or support team, pride at having done your best.

We want our people to take pride in their work, to maintain quality and to maximise the contribution that each can make. For an individual to take pride, they need to understand the importance of their role in the context of the overall business. They also need to believe that they can influence the results.

Give people ownership of their work, creating a mechanism for everyone to have a say about how their job is done. To do this you could set up a

'suggestion scheme' with a focus on 'improving the value of your contribution'.

For the main processes in your business, form a project team to review and improve them, allowing the team to lead the implementation of agreed changes and demonstrate the improvements to colleagues.

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15. Be Multi-Skilled

Watching the pentathletes and the multiple distance medalists was a great reminder that we are able to excel in more than one field.

Whilst there may be work benefits in specialisation there will be an element of multi-skilling required in many roles. For example the customer service person who helps out with sales when it's busy, the spreadsheet analyst who needs to write reports. By encouraging an attitude of flexibility and facilitating the development of skills in different areas we strengthen our resource pool and provide growth opportunities for our people.

To increase multi-skilled capabilities, ensure role titles and profiles reflect the range of skills required. Identify areas of strength and support development in weaker relevant skill areas. Maybe allow existing staff to participate in a 'graduate' style programme, spending a couple of weeks in each department or team. This is a great way to strengthen relationships and to give people a fresh perspective on the business.

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16. Cheer On

The Olympic medal table showed the huge difference made by home-crowd support. Many overseas competitors commented that they really appreciated support and encouragement from the UK spectators.

Encouraging people is one of the simplest yet most effective things we can do. A word or two can make all the difference to results, but it's easy not to bother or to think 'it's their job'.

Giving encouragement to continue a piece of work, to try something new or to develop an idea is a powerful stimulus to influence behaviour. It ignites self-motivation, one of the greatest challenges of managing people.

Make it part of your daily management routine to encourage as many people as possible. Even if they are on the wrong track, point them in the right direction first, then leave them with words of encouragement such as telling them how much you look forward to seeing their results.

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17. Use Power

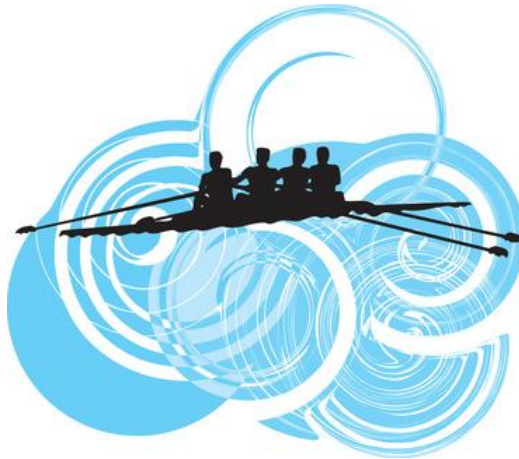
The Olympics showed us what could be achieved when using your power to the full. From weight lifting and javelin, using physical strength, to table tennis using mental power of concentration, every competitor deployed every ounce of power at their disposal.

As we look within our business we will see areas where we are not using our power to its full extent. Higher performing companies are those cleverly identifying and effectively applying their various sources of power to achieve results.

An internal review of your business will help you to identify areas of untapped power. Think about knowledge held within the business and

look at your team in a different light identifying people with unusual previous experience, skills used outside work or particular personality traits. Use this additional power to win against the competition for example, having increased customer focus or by developing better products and services.

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of power.



18. Deal with Disappointment

We saw many different responses to disappointment during the Olympics, but for most people, whether it was their initial reaction or after a period of reflection, the stages were: accept it, learn and move on.

Disappointment at work is likely to be a feature, especially if you are pushing really hard for success and setting challenging targets for all involved. Dealing positively with disappointment increases opportunities for success and reduces the time wasted in apportioning blame and in depressed productivity.

Role model how you want your team to handle disappointment, sharing a personal experience and the approach you are taking. Resist the

temptation to show anger when others experience failure. Instead help them to put right any issues and to learn for next time, by asking what worked well and what would they change. Once you've dealt with the practical aspect of disappointment, pay attention to the emotional side. Reminding someone of past success or reaffirming your confidence in them will help them regain motivation.

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19. Share Glory

A notable feature of many of the post-event interviews was the athlete giving credit to coach, trainer and support team. These were not just votes of thanks but genuine acknowledgements of the vital role played by others, in their success. We also saw glory being shared when the guides of partially sighted athletes, having become eligible, received medals.

On reaching a performance milestone, as the leader, we should not forget that our success is derived from the performance of our team. Sharing the glory can be a challenge for some, however the business benefits far exceed the joy we may feel in those few moments of basking in the light of our own success.

By doing more than simply giving credit where it is due, by involving others in any public recognition and conveying an attitude of true partnership, loyalty and trust grows and motivation is boosted. Let others play a part in communicating good news and sharing in the limelight.

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20. Report Results

Throughout the Olympics, reporting of results was constant. With all main media channels being used, it was easy to keep up to date with the latest news. The real-time coverage and interviews gave a feeling of being present and enabled us to share in the emotions of the moment.

For many businesses, reporting results is on a 'need to know' basis, happening when necessary for accounting purposes, setting targets or performance management. For others, when results are good they will get reported for publicity or internal motivation. When not so good, the policy may be to keep quiet to prevent concerns arising.

Reporting results frequently and fully to those directly influencing them increases the emotional connection between performance and results and creates a shared interest in achieving more. Challenge yourself and the culture by finding ways to report results in real-time and in a variety of ways that will inspire motivation and positive action from the team.

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21. Celebrate Success

The closing ceremonies were fitting celebrations of the outstanding success of the Games. Just when you thought it had finished, another pop-icon appeared or a further round of fireworks was released. Across the UK, the 'gold' painted post boxes were a source of interest to many young sports fans.

A feeling of being taken for granted or simply over-looked can be one of the most de-motivating experiences at work. Whilst we do pay the team to perform their jobs, celebrating success, at a business or personal level, is much more than a nice touch. It makes total business sense.

The positive energy created by a true celebration of work achievements can be substantial and long lasting. Create memories for your team,

through events and recognition, that demonstrate a clear link between performance success and fun, tapping into the power of the subconscious and building stories for people to share.

Celebrate performance success,
creating positive memories and stories
for people to share.