

When Okay is not Okay

There are many lessons for business leaders in the sporting arena, as Genesis Strategic consultant Brian McNeice and Adrian Burrell, former coach of the Irish Cricket team demonstrated at a recent MBA Association Guest Speaker event at the University of Ulster. Anna Mooney reports....

Action replay: it is a rainy St Patrick's Day 2007 in Kingston, Jamaica. The crowd around the cricket pitch is roaring its excitement as Ireland's cricket team produce one of the biggest upsets in world cricket, beating previous World champions Pakistan by three wickets. It is a euphoric moment for the team and their Irish fans halfway around the world.

Rewind five years, to a grim rainy Saturday in the North of England, where the same team have finished a game that's lackluster, shambolic, and where they were roundly trounced. They're okay with it, though, their expectations geared to a low, comfortable level. Their coach, newly appointed South African Adrian Burrell isn't wearing it: "Okay is not Okay" he intones sternly. Complacency, he insisted had no place in Irish Cricket. The next five years saw Burrell and his team transform themselves and cricket in Ireland. So what effected the transformation and how can businesses learn from the sporting experience?

At the recent MBA Association Guest Speaker event hosted by Genesis, the Dublin and Belfast based strategic performance consultants who have worked with some of the most ambitious businesses and sports organizations across Europe (RBS, Diagio, Enterprise Ireland, IRFU, Football Association of Ireland, The Football Association, and the International Cricket Council) it was a chance for Adrian Burrell and the Genesis team headed up by Brian McNeice to tackle some of the on pitch strategies that can translate to the business arena.

Roy Keane reckoned okay wasn't okay either when it came to team preparation and training facilities at Saipen in the 2002 World Cup. His stand against complacency and perceived low

standards saw him depart the Ireland team in what has to be the sporting controversy of the decade. Irish rugby fans have similarly questioned the lukewarm performance standard of the national team throughout the IRB Rugby World Cup last year and the 2008 RBS 6 Nations championship.

Both Brian McNeice and Adrian Burrell concur: group performance is as much – possibly more, a product of the culture created by the leadership (or coach) as it is the sum of the individual player talents and capabilities. In other words, you can have a competent set of players who can be motivated and coached to achieve brilliant things as a team. On the other hand, the most superlative talents can languish in an unsupportive environment and at the mercy of misguided coaches and managers.

Genesis highlights a number of lessons business and individuals can take from the best in international sport on how to create a performance culture that will get the best out of people .

- Engage people behind a clear inspiring purpose: Clive Woodward, former England Rugby international coach and now Director of Elite Performance for the British Olympic Association, has talked about having "unreasonable ambition". Lance Armstrong, in remission from cancer, was inspired by his coach to not only to undertake the Tour de France, but to set his sights on winning. Such clear vision and unreasonable ambition propelled him to his unparalleled record of seven wins. The same applies to business – give people a vision that inspires and they will rise to the challenge and achieve extraordinary things. Take the case of the BBC's Digital Team, who, faced with the



challenge of Sky's erosion of their viewing audience, were galvanized by a ferocious ambition – to put 50 years of archive on line for BBC Digital. Big Vision energizes people.

- Define what success depends on. If you want the gold medal, what do you have to do to get it? Sonia O'Sullivan succeeded by focusing on where she can be the best - mental strength and physical fitness. Companies, too, must identify what it takes to be the best in their sector, and translate the required standards into key performance indicators in each role. For Amazon, success rests on speed of delivery – otherwise customers would just go their local bookstore.
- Set high standards to drive innovation and continuous improvement. Roy Keane had a point. The Ferrari F1 team succeeds because it understands the danger of complacency; they know that a 1 second lap advantage (which is massive) will be eroded in about six weeks on the circuit if they stand still.
- Give people responsibility. What makes high performing teams so hard to beat is that individuals at all levels take responsibility for performance. They create leadership at all levels by giving people responsibility that will challenge them to bring out their full talents, and supporting them with coaching and mentoring. The 2006 Ryder Cup is a great example of this – the cup was won by each player taking responsibility for both their own performance and doing what ever they could do to support the performance of the team. Ian

Woosnam's role as the captain was to create that culture in the team.

- Feedback: If high standards create the drive for continuous improvement, feedback is what makes it possible. Sports approach to the use of feedback is possibly the area where business can learn most. In business, how often do people get feedback that's detailed, analytical, while encouraging and motivating them to do better? Without feedback how can you expect people or teams to improve?
- Teamwork: People need to see their part in the bigger picture, and think about their individual performance in terms of their contribution to the shared objectives of the team. British Cycling's phenomenal rise to dominance of the sport (winning half of the gold medals on offer at the recent World Championship) can be largely explained by the teamwork between their coaches. Their commitment to the common goal of British Cycling's dominance supercedes their own ego as a coach and this leads them to collaborate more. To create the conditions for teamwork in business, we need to emphasise the importance of joint goals and encourage (even reward) collaborative behaviour.

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To get a full summary of Genesis' research paper on the lessons from sport, email performanceinsight@genesisconsult.com

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