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inspiring success beyond expectations

Spring Ezine 2008 - Creating a Winning Environment



Recent news has highlighted the political unrest which has taken place in China and the impact that this is having on the Beijing Olympics. The stories have paid particular attention to China's human rights record. As the debate rumbles on, our Olympic athletes must control their environment so that performance is optimal as they head into the Games. The ability to control the environment is crucial to success in sport and that is also paramount in business.

Consciously or unconsciously, leaders cultivate the environment in their workplaces. In sport, the environment that is created is vital to the development of sustained long term success. Sir Alex Ferguson is into his 22nd year of management at Manchester United, during which time he has been allowed to create a culture which mirrors his leadership but also the demands of the club.

Some climates are lush, where leaders flourish and thrive, while others are toxic environments where leaders either leave or wither from the pollution. Here we pose six questions about your high



1. "Are my expectations crystal clear?"

We all deal with the impact of expectations in 3 dimensions:

1. Expectations we have for ourselves.
2. Expectations we have of others.
3. Expectations others have of us.

Leaders clarify expectations in every dimension, and they frequently revisit them to make adjustments or to realign team members to the expectations. Expectations, if not managed effectively can destroy the confidence of your team. Too high, and they are unattainable as the England Football Team have often found out. Too low, and boredom will set in. It is vital that you regularly review your expectations as often what you don't know, you don't know. Uncertainty then creates anxiety which then leads to poor performance. It is vital that the communication lines remain open at all times and these expectations are communicated with consistency. So, are you clear on what is expected of you? If not, what can you do about it?

2. "Do I understand what it takes to be a team?"

Without effective teamwork, an environment is doomed to fail. A collection of individual contributions will never compare to the synergy of a cohesive team. A successful team displays:

- Tolerance of one another's weaknesses.
- Encouragement of each other's efforts.
- Acknowledgement that every person has something to offer.

Each of these factors helps to develop trust. This is considered to be the most important factor in developing a high performance team. The all conquering GB Rowing team believe that change happens quicker when trust is present therefore they continually work to develop it both as a collective team and also between individual team members. In business, change is a constant factor, so what are you doing to develop levels of trust between your team, so that change occurs more smoothly?



3. "Does my team understand the goal?"

To create a culture of high challenge – high support, it is vital that everybody from the kit man upwards clearly understands exactly what the goals are. In sport goals are really clear, specific and easy for team members to buy into. In business this can be more of a challenge but when we understand what world class looks like, it becomes much easier to have the right conversations based around performance issues.

In sport we play to a ten, our performance is measured in black and white parameters against ability to help the team achieve their goal when it matters most. When performance expectations are this clear our goals become a benchmark for all behaviours and a high performance culture is inevitable. So, how clear is your team goal? What can you do to bring it to life?

4. "Am I holding people accountable for performance?"

In the work environment, what doesn't get inspected, won't be respected. If there's no accountability in an area, then there's no incentive to perform with excellence in it. It's incumbent upon a leader to design scorecards and benchmarks to evaluate performance. Care should be taken to include measurement of both results and behaviours.

Accountability starts with a look in the mirror. The all conquering GB Cycling team hand over the responsibility to the athletes. The athlete is the king and their support staff (i.e., coach, sport science team) are there to support them. They are solely responsible and they set their own performance parameters. This helps to create a tremendous degree of empowerment. To create an environment such as this takes several years of commitment to the cause and a high degree of support and self efficating behaviour from the leadership team.

Do you accept personal responsibility for your own performance? If not, what can you do about it?



5. "Do I seek out barriers and remove them to make the team's job easier?"

Trailblazers remove tree limbs, boulders, and overgrowth so that future travellers may safely navigate a path through the wilderness. Leaders are trailblazers. They go ahead of the pack to scout out barriers to progress. When they find a road block, they remove it from the environment. When they discover a pitfall, they carefully mark it, and redirect the trail around the hazard.

Leaders should be on the lookout for specific environmental hazards. These include the following:

1. Lack of communication.
2. Formation of silos and cliques.
3. Distrust among team members.
4. Bad attitudes.
5. Inexplicable under-performance.
6. Unwillingness to change.

Any of the aforementioned landmines, if not unearthed, can blow apart a healthy team. Leaders have the duty of identifying and removing landmines before they wreak destruction.

As we prepare for the Beijing Olympics, The GB Sailing team are currently undergoing this process, to remove what they call 'noise'. At present there is huge political unrest which is threatening to spoil the Games and the performance of the athletes. Therefore, their support team are currently designing a number of preventative strategies to try and minimise the impact of these issues on the athlete's performance.

What landmines are evident in your environment? What can you do to remove them?

6. "Do I give people the freedom required to learn, grow, and deliver?"

Secure leaders give power to others. If a leader doesn't know his own strengths/weaknesses, he will not hand off responsibilities to his team. If a leader doesn't know his team's strengths/weaknesses, he cannot hand off responsibilities to his team.

In sport, the athlete is at the centre of the hub, whilst surrounding him are the specialists from each different field. It would not be uncommon that an athlete could have upto 10 different specialists all feeding in different information to him/her. No one person has all of the answers. It is about a shared mission so that performance can move forward.

So, what are you doing to create the high performance culture? Performance starts with the culture that is created. Ensure that you are taking the appropriate steps to create the culture that you want. Let the culture determine your performance. Don't let your performance determine your culture.

At Raise the Bar we work closely with International sports men and women to bring the very best of sport to the workplace creating innovative programmes that help businesses to become 'great places to work'. We are proud to announce the recent appointment of Yvonne Gilmour as our head of training and development. Yvonne brings with her a wealth of experience within the world of business and is ready to help you to create a winning environment through - leadership development, personal responsibility, developing individuals to become superior coaches and driving results through the creation of a high performance culture. For more information call 0151 426 0110.

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