

WORTH A TRY

After 17 years as an RAF pilot and 12 as a star of the national rugby team, England's record try scorer **Rory Underwood** MBE knows all about performing at his peak. Now combining his role as assistant coach of Leicester Tigers with a career as a management consultant, Rory explains how coaching can play a vital role in inspiring team performance both on and off the pitch.

In the course of their career, everyone will face challenges where they have to perform at their peak under intense pressure. It could be a crucial sales pitch, a presentation to the board, a final job interview or a fast-approaching deadline. At times like this only the very best will do. And timely and constructive preparation or intervention by the coach can make all the difference.

I've had more than my fair share of challenges in my career. Imagine yourself standing on a rugby pitch at the end of the line of backs. The ball is passed out: it is coming to you. All you have to do is catch the ball, run 20 yards and put it on the ground. Sounds easy? But this is Twickenham; this is the World Cup. Opposite you, ten yards away, stands Jonah Lomu - all 18 stone of him - trying to stop you. You are being watched by 65,000 people in the stadium, 13 million on TV. And everyone is expecting peak performance at that point in time. Could you do it?

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OK, rugby is not everyone's speciality: we all have different talents. But the route to peak

Word from the Pitch

'As a coach, how you think is everything. Always be positive - think success, not failure.'

'Never stop learning, go back to school, read books or get training and acquire skills. Be persistent and work hard, success is a marathon, not a sprint. Never give up.'

'Learn to analyse details, get all the facts and learn from your mistakes. Focus your time and don't let other people or things distract you.'

'Be innovative; be different. Deal and communicate with people effectively. Learn to understand and motivate others.'

Quotes from Rory Underwood

performance is the same across all disciplines. I didn't just wake up one morning, knock on the door at the Rugby Football Union and ask to play for the country. As in all walks of life, a selection process took place. I had a natural sporting talent which was nurtured and developed throughout my career by coaching. The higher the level of rugby I played, the more important coaching became, because everyone has talent, particularly the opposition.

At the top level the pressure is immense and so mindset, as well as tactics, skill and talent, is paramount. Put simply, coaching is all about releasing potential and helping people to find that little bit extra when needed. In sport and in business, it offers a distinct competitive advantage, boosting your organisation's chances of success by preparing the workforce for the challenges ahead.

I have been fortunate enough to work with some of the greatest sports coaches around and, without doubt my place in the England Team for almost 12 years can be attributed to their expertise and belief in my abilities as a rugby player. I have since gone on to apply the skills I learnt from them, both as assistant coach with Leicester Tigers and as a business coach with UPH. For me, coaching is all about changing mindsets. Of course, we can all

attend conferences and listen to great motivational speeches. But a motivational speech is like eating a Chinese meal: when you've had one, you need another three hours later. In contrast, coaching provides a balanced business and person 'diet' that is the most powerful business tool out there.

Make no mistake, real change comes from within. A coach simply provides the key to unlock that potential. I have repeatedly witnessed the benefits of coaching on mindset, attitude and ultimate goals. Many people with the necessary skills and capabilities simply don't appear up to the challenges they face in work and life. As the manager of one of these people, be it in sport or business, it can be highly frustrating. In such situations, a coach can help encourage under performers to go outside their comfort zone and succeed.

If you are lucky, you may work for a company that already has a coaching programme, with access to a professional system of performance. Unfortunately, most don't. Alternatively, you may work for such a company, but feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about asking for support internally. If you don't believe how effective coaching can be, just ask someone who has been coached. Good and effective coaching is unbiased, giving objective support that identifies an individual's abilities and helps to develop them; it helps people see which hurdles are hard to overcome and find ways to get over them, or bypass them when appropriate.

Both in and out of sport, a good coach is someone on the touchline who has your best interests as a priority. Take Geoff Cooke, the England rugby coach for much of my time in the squad. In 1995 the Rugby World Cup was being held in South Africa, very few of the players had been there and we all had concerns about the altitude and humidity affecting our performance. Geoff listened well, then went off and organised a team tour of South Africa the year before the competition started. This gave us valuable experience of the environment, which meant we could concentrate on the matches during the competition rather than on the conditions. As a manager by listening to and addressing your team's concerns, you let them know they have someone on the touchline they can trust to look out for their best interest.

Coaching can be generally grouped into working on four mindsets: concentration, confidence, control and commitment.

Master Your Focus

If a sportsman lacks concentration then his athletic abilities will not be effectively or efficiently applied to the game. Of course, the concentration levels required vary between sports: sustained concentration is required for endurance events such as distance running and cycling, short bursts of concentration are called upon for cricket and athletic field skills, and intense concentration is needed for sprinting events and skiing.

Methods for improving concentration are very personal. Johnny Wilkinson, for example, always stubs his boot into the turf before kicking for goal. One way to maintain focus in sport and at work is to set short-term goals and develop a structured routine to aid concentration.

It is impossible to maintain 100% concentration throughout a rugby match. Instead, you have to focus the mind at certain key times, blocking out the crowd, the conditions, the occasion and any other distractions that might affect your performance. In between these times, you must rest and relax your mind, but not so much as to allow yourself to become distracted. A rugby match is constantly evolving. Players need to snap in and out of a state of extreme focus as required - a truly valuable skill. Likewise, in business you cannot maintain 100% concentration throughout a working day. People must cycle between high and low focused states as the day progresses. The ability to focus the mind and get rid of mental clutter, all in an instant, is an important skill to master. Coaches can help in this. As a manager, you can boost team performance by working with individuals to help them realise when, where and why they must focus their energies.

Inspire Confidence

The next mindset is confidence. A team must believe in its ability to achieve its goals before it can do so. Confident people are enduringly positive and tend to persevere even when things are

not going to plan. They are also more responsible for their share of the team's success or failure. To improve individual's self-confidence, coaches should encourage them to visualise a previous good performance to remind themselves of the look and feel of success. By encouraging people to imagine various scenarios and how they would cope with them, a coach can ensure the team are prepared to react to problems with confidence and consideration.

As a coach or manager simply looking confident yourself will have a huge impact on those around you. But when it comes to instilling confidence in your team, it's important to ensure that individuals are not hiding their fears behind a confident façade. Under pressure, that façade will disappear and their performance will suffer. Instead, you should talk people through their fears and rationalise them. Facing up to the Haka war dance performed by the New Zealand team before every international can be pretty intimidating, but when you really think about it, it's

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nothing more than a group of men dancing and chanting. It's the same in business. A challenge will only have a negative effect on your team if you fail to address their fears. Encourage team members to respect and accept the challenges they face, and the confidence you exude will permeate the team.

When it comes to dealing with team members' individual mistakes, it's vital that coaches take a positive and encouraging approach. If not handled correctly, a members' mistake can prove to be the first step on a vicious circle towards failure. They generally become angry or upset with themselves and lose focus on the task at hand, which affects their performance. Poor performance further dents a person's self confidence, which in turn affects future performances, reinforcing the vicious circle.

This happened to me in 1993. England was playing Wales at the Cardiff Arms Park in the second game of the Five Nations championship. With ten minutes to go to half time we were in the lead. The ball was kicked deep into our half and as I ran to collect it I totally misjudged the distance, allowing Ieuan Evans to kick it on past me. Jonathon Webb then slipped and Ieuan went on to score between the posts what proved to be the winning try. I blamed myself. The England players were great and rallied round to ease my disappointment, but I still felt I had let everyone down. The press reports that weekend were damning and I went into hiding ashamed to show my face. After seven glorious years I felt that my international career was about to end. I was sure I would be dropped from the team. The following weekend Geoff called me aside and not only told me that I was still in the England team, but that he was also considering me for the British Lions tour to New Zealand that summer. 'Some of the other selectors don't think you are in good form,' he said, 'Can you raise the game next week and really show them.' I was shocked, I thought I was in for a massive telling off for the previous week's episode. When I told Geoff this, he laughed, and said: 'After all the good things you have done for England, did you really think that I would drop you for one mistake?' I felt seven feet tall.

Geoff had given me the confidence I desperately needed at that time. A true coach in every sense of the word, he knew just how to treat me in that situation and he tempered his pitch to hit the spot. The following week I scored a try and set up my brother Tony to score another, thereby creating the world's second most famous mother. We won the match with style.

Emotional Control

For any team to succeed in sport or business, it's vital that everyone stays in control of their emotions. If even one team member loses control, it affects the whole team dynamic, and therefore performance. A good coach should ensure that team members never get emotionally detached from their goals. Anxiety and anger are the two most notorious performance-killers for coaches to overcome. Rugby is a highly physical sport played within a strict set of laws. But sometimes players deliberately overstep that mark with a 'cheap shot' to either intimidate or provoke opposing players. In either case, the aggressor has succeeded if he distracts the victim

and affects the opposing team's dynamic. In business, competitors will often use a 'cheap shot' to try and derail your organisation. As in sport, the best way to retaliate is not to reciprocate, but to focus on achieving the targets you set yourself. For me it was scoring a try and winning the game.

Confidence is Key

The final coaching mindset is commitment. Top performance depends on being fully committed to numerous goals over many years. During top-level competition, you will still have many aspects of daily life to manage. A good work-life balance is essential to realising peak performance or improving on a perceived lack of progress. Setting goals will improve your feeling of value, give you joint ownership of the goals and help you become more committed to achieving them.

Tackling is perhaps the most difficult skills to learn in rugby. A player has to get over the initial fear of pain – because if you get a tackle wrong it really can hurt – and realise that the more committed you are to a tackle, the less likely you are to be injured. That commitment is vital if you are to become a peak performer, whether in sport, business or life. Unless you are committed to achieving your full potential, you never will perform to your best.

On of English rugby's all-time greats, Rory Underwood scored a record 49 tries in an international career spanning 12 years from 1984 to 1996. He won a further six caps for the British Lions on tours of Australia (1989) and New Zealand (1993). He was awarded the MBE in 1992 for his services to rugby. Currently an assistant coach at Leicester Tigers, he enjoyed 18 years flying aircraft in the Royal Air Force where he introduced crew resources management training into the RAF, which looks at how aircrew teamwork is affected in stressful situations.

I managed to play for England for 12 years because of my total commitment, passion and determination to be the best winger in the country. The coaches I worked with motivated me to keep achieving my personal best in each and every game to reinforce my place in the team. For me the aim was clear – England. As a coach you have to ask your team what their England is. Your job is to help them identify their own personal best and realise how they can achieve it.

Rory Underwood is a founding partner of UPH Ltd, a management consultancy specialising in inspiring performance. His fellow directors include Gulf prisoner of war, John Peters and international survival specialist and business performance coach Martyn Helliwell.
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