THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE

N° and issue date : 100415 - 15/04/2010
Circulation : 78230
Frequency : Daily
WSTR_100415_10_25.pdf
Web Site: http://www.wsj.com
Page : 10
Size : 95 %
375 cm2
PRESS INDEX

Learning lessons from sports

Schools say successful athletes can teach leadership and motivation

BY BETH GARDINER

Business schools don't teach the fancy footwork of soccer or the smooth swings of golf, but they are increasingly seeking to train students who want to be part of the huge global business of sports.

A number of M.B.A. programs for working executives and full-time students focus on the management and branding skills needed to keep teams and leagues running, and the marketing expertise behind big endorsement and sponsorship deals. Other courses look to the playing field for lessons those in non-sporting sectors can learn from successful athletes.

John Weeks, a professor of leadership and organizational behavior at the Swiss school IMD, brought Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt to campus with his coach to talk about the discipline and other mental skills that helped him win three gold medals at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

"Many of us in business schools are a little bit wary of sports because of the overuse of sports metaphors," Dr. Weeks says. "So you want to be sure that you're doing more than just feeding this desire for metaphors."

ESSEC

Thierry Lardinoit of France's ESSEC

He says Mr. Bolt and his coach, Glen Mills, had a lot of practical ideas to offer. Mr. Mills says that when Mr. Bolt was discouraged by injury, he told him it was important to know how to lose before learning how to win and to accept setbacks as part of his journey. On the day of a meet, though, he told the runner he should stop thinking about failure and visualize only success.

"The ability to fail without breaking, I think, has direct applications for organizations," Dr. Weeks says.

An athlete who dominates his sport also has something to teach those who are searching for new goals to stay motivated, whether they're extremely successful entrepreneurs no longer in need of money or late-career workers stalling without the obvious goal posts that kept them moving forward when they were younger.

"Once those easy markers go away, how do you find motivation to continue to develop?" asks Dr. Weeks. Mr. Bolt, he says, found the answer by setting his sights on a new goal—transcending his sport by becoming one of the greatest athletes ever.

At Ashridge Business School in England, faculty in the Sport Business Initiative train businesspeople in the strategies of successful athletes while also schooling sports coaches in management skills that help them better lead their teams.

The program started in 2001, after the Rugby Football Union, the governing body of English rugby, approached the school for help with coach development, says John Neal, director of the initiative. Faculty began examining the management strategies of successful coaches, and offered lessons based on business skills like leadership, initiating and managing change and working in teams.

"Sports is very much about outcome, and what they've started to realize is if you understand process you get better outcomes," Mr. Neal says. The Sport Business Initiative has since worked with coaches from sporting organizations including the British Olympic Association, the Welsh Rugby Union and the English Cricket Board. "It was clearly a gap in the market," Mr. Neal says.

The Ashridge program also seeks to help business executives learn from professional athletes. One idea that transfers well to the boardroom is closely managing high achievers as well as poor performers, Mr. Neal says. Managers in the business world often leave top workers to their own devices while focusing their efforts on boosting those who do poorly. Coaches, on the other hand, also work closely with the best players, and are comfortable letting them focus mainly on their strengths, without wasting time on improving areas in which they are competent but not excellent, Mr.

Copyright (Wall Street Journal Europe)
No reproduction without authorisation

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE

N° and issue date : 100415 - 15/04/2010
Circulation : 78230
Frequency : Daily
WSTR_100415_10_25.pdf
Web Site: http://www.wsj.com
Page : 10
Size : 95 %
375 cm2
PRESS INDEX

Neal says.

"Unless something you're not so good at is a fatal flaw, we don't even bother with it," he explains. "When it comes to the really top level and the pressure's on, your top players do what they're good at, and that's why you win." Most companies, on the other hand, "are risk-averse, they would select someone who is OK at most things," he says.

Such programs are gaining popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. Top American schools like Wharton offer sports-business programs, and MIT's Sloan School of Management runs a Sports Analytics Conference along with the television network ESPN.

John Clendenin, a visiting professor in the executive sports management master's program at IE Business School in Madrid, says the sports world and B-schools were a natural fit. "Sports is a very significant market space now, and the world of business needs to address it directly," he says. Event management, promotion, ticket sales and sponsorships have all come to require sophisticated business expertise, and moving former athletes to the front office without training no longer makes sense, he says.

At France's ESSEC Business School, the executive sports marketing program often numbers retired athletes and coaches among its students, says European Sport Marketing Chair Thierry Lardinoit. "They know that if they want to be relevant, they have to increase their" business skills, he says.

Copyright (Wall Street Journal Europe)
No reproduction without authorisation