

## Corporate Athlete

*Who gives a bigger performance, an athlete or a manager?*

The environment of large companies in many ways replicates the world of professional sport. Intensive competition and a lot of physical and psychological strength required for success exist in both. At work, as in sport, intensive training and coaching are necessary for success. More than ever before, in my opinion, professional people can learn from professional athletes.

Does the likening of today's employees to top athletes seem exaggerated? Let's try to compare them.

Athletes usually train 90% of the time so that they can give the remaining 10% to a peak performance. I don't know how much time we spend training at work: it's maybe somewhere from 1-5%. From my point of view as a worker in an educational company pharmaceutical companies are the "most trained", in which their (mostly sales) representatives spend more than 20 working days a year on training. So, in comparison to athletes we hardly train at all – however, don't our bosses ask for a 100% performance from us?

We can liken our employment career to running on a treadmill. At the beginning of our careers we slowly warm up, but the higher we climb the ladder the faster the treadmill goes. We don't rest much, whether we like it or not, as the treadmill keeps going and if we simply can't go on, we can only "jump off". By contrast, an athlete spends only 10% of their career on the treadmill, for the remaining 90% they regenerate and train in order to give a better performance next time.

Athletes also always know how they are doing. It's an extremely motivating thing. They either won or lost, were the fastest, jumped or threw the farthest, etc. Feedback on their performances is constant – from the trainer, competitors, spectators and journalists. I believe that the environment of intensive feedback is the basis for success both in sport and work. If we look at us, we're worse at recognising that. So let's look at it: how often do you get feedback on your performance from your boss – once or twice a year?

Most professional sports people annually have about a six-month break between competitive seasons. That doesn't mean that they don't do anything as they are not competing and "only" training. That break serves for the regeneration of their strength after a period of intensive competition and for shifting their performance to a higher level. Let's look at us. As opposed to athletes our "break" is limited to a few weeks' annual leave per year. What's more, we often don't take more than two weeks at once. Hand on heart, how many of us are able to completely switch off on holiday and not pack the Blackberry or laptop? In comparison to athletes we are, as in the first example, considerably worse off.

The career of top athletes at their peak lasts five years, in exceptional cases maybe ten years. If they're sensible, they'll save enough money for their sports retirement. In comparison with them we work for somewhere between 30 and 40 years without any right to a longer break. Only relatively recently did firms start introducing unpaid leave after a certain number of years worked.

*Where does it lead?*

This imbalance between work and rest has, in our case, certain consequences. It's a tough period (it'll get worse!) and companies these days want a better and better performance from their employees. These try to comply and mostly it ends up that they spend more time at work. They simply have their tempo and when it's necessary to do more, they have to speed up the treadmill or spend more time at work. People go to work in the morning angry, somehow despondent, they put out fires and, before they hoped, it's evening and they go home to their families in an angrier state than in the morning. They find out from their managers that they have to improve their time management, maybe they'll have a course paid for, which in most cases won't solve anything. On the long-term horizon this state is not maintainable and leads to exhaustion, frustration and in the worst case it leads to burnout. And

of course the final consequence is that the employee leaves for a better or healthier working environment somewhere else. It might seem that I'm exaggerating but from my own experience I meet hundreds of "angry" young people on courses who are tired with life and work. I would even stick my neck out to say that it's most of the Czech corporate population.

### *Can we learn something from athletes?*

If we compare the facts, in relation to athletes we come off significantly worse. The demands on us are even disproportionally higher! How do we, therefore, retain our health, taste for life and sparkle in our eyes in this environment? Are we able to give a top performance in this environment? Can we learn something from professional athletes?

The most basic difference you see between athletes and employees is work with time and energy. We mainly work with time and energy in such a way that we don't pay attention. With athletes it's exactly the opposite. Usain Bolt has four whole years to prepare for the moment when he has to be "charged" to the maximum with energy and explode in one 10-second sprint.

Non-distinction between time and energy is the core of our problem and at the same time a big opportunity to improve our current state.

Time is not recyclable and therefore a limited resource. The expression *time management* illustrates this well; basically nothing like this exists. Time simply lapses and we are not able to control it. But as opposed to time, the energy we utilise is a recyclable resource with which we can work properly. We should therefore learn energy, rather than time, management.

### *Working with energy for athletes*

So, how do athletes work with energy? It's possible to observe four procedures which they try to apply in training and performing.

#### *Procedure 1: It's possible to draw energy from four sources*

Athletes try to draw energy from four sources. All four are important and do not function in isolation. It's actually similar to Maslow's pyramid of needs. In order for you to exist you first have to have sufficient physical energy for your body to function. Athletes draw this from regular sleep, training and rest, a correct diet and drinking regimen. They draw emotional energy from their hearts, where enthusiasm, a positive approach and self-motivation are born, but also depression and negative energy. It's also important to engage your brain as a source of mental energy, from where you take concentration for things and the push for the goal. At the peak of the pyramid is spiritual energy, which gives us the answer to the main question of why and where we are going. It also maintains balance between our personal values and conduct.

What can we take from this as employees? Recharge your energy regularly. Eat something light every three hours. It protects against the reduction of your physical energy below the minimum level leading to chronic tiredness. Top up your fluid levels every hour. Avoid modern multitasking, which eats away your time, preferably work on one thing continually and then take a short break. Take a short break away from your office/desk at least once every hour and a half. Answer your email and voicemail only at a certain time of the day (if it's possible). Every evening define one priority for the next day and get stuck straight into it in the morning when you're full of energy.

#### *Procedure 2: Rest must follow performance*

Athletes know when they need to perform and when to rest. The oscillation between performing and resting is the key to the enduring sustainment of performance. In our work environment rest is looked upon as something unbecoming and undesirable. When did you last have a nap after lunch? That's

exactly what athletes do. Periods of intensive training are alternated by periods of similarly intensive rest. Long-term it doesn't work any other way.

What can we take from this as employees? Blocks of full-on work, lasting up to an hour and a half at most, should be alternated with planned rest periods. 10 or 15 minutes are enough for you to "switch off". We basically do it unintentionally when we chat by the coffee machine, go for a cigarette, etc. in our office foosball fulfils this function. Every hour and a half the male crew gets up and goes to play. We don't view it as a device of the modern era, but as an instrument of regeneration and, paradoxically, sustaining working performance.

*Procedure 3: The way to a bigger performance is through a bigger training load.*

Athletes know that they have to increase the intensity of their performance in such a way that they can get to the highest level of performance. So they regularly put their bodies under the target "stress" in the form of larger training doses. After the following rest period they are able to give a better performance than before. In sport it's called the principle of supercompensation.

What can we take from this as employees? Although this procedure is mostly used for building physical sturdiness, figuratively it's possible to use for building our working capacity. I used to be afraid of giving public presentations. The fact that I've pointedly given tens of them in the last five years means that although I exposed myself to considerable stress (those sleepless nights!), that stress has now completely disappeared: presenting has become routine. Stress isn't our enemy. As long as we deal with it well, it advances us. It requires a lot of self-denial and self-discipline but it works.

*Procedure 4: Daily rituals help build and sustain energy*

Have you ever watched an athlete on a break between performances? Tennis players check their racquet strings, volleyball players give each other five on every changeover, weightlifters spit into their palms, before every third ice hockey players slap the goalkeeper on his shin pads, baseball players are always chewing something and spitting around them. These rituals help them sustain energy, performance and concentration. Their pulse during these intervals is reduced by about 30% for their body to regenerate quickly and prepare for the next performance.

What can we take from this as employees? Try to think about what rituals help you sustain energy. Often a hundred-times-repeated gesture or reminder of last year's Christmas party can become a ritual, a ritual which eases the atmosphere for a while, retunes your emotions to another wavelength and reduces your heart rate. And all of a sudden you and your problem are moved a step forward.

We have constructed a course on the basis of the abovementioned principle, which we have called Company Athlete. It is a unique product created on the basis of the parallels between sport and management of work. The objective of our programme is simply to achieve higher satisfaction levels in employees with their work and life situation and to transfer the responsibility for personal satisfaction to individuals and their lifestyle.

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