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High Performance Leadership – Under pressure and on demand

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The moment of crisis - every executive or business leader faces it at some point. Whether it's a critical negotiation or an economic downturn, it's the moment when your knowledge and abilities are put to the test, and your response will impact the future of your organization.

Some leaders fold under such pressure. But high-performance leaders take charge, inspire their team and make the right decisions. They are not distracted by fear or excitement. Whatever the situation, they maintain focus as other executives freeze, struggle or come apart.

Why are high-performance leaders able to perform at their best under pressure and on demand? These leaders, much like the world's best athletes, have trained extensively for such moments.

In recent years I have had the opportunity to be a coach for Canada's Olympic and Paralympic sailing teams. As a sports psychology consultant, I ensure athletes are well prepared for competition by looking at the decisions they make, how they execute them and the outcomes. Based on my experiences, I can say that a comparison of business leaders to elite athletes is more than just a useful analogy. Indeed, there are many fundamental lessons business executives and leaders can learn from the world's top athletes, given that both face high-stakes situations.

For example, most athletes build an Integrated Support Team (IST) to help them achieve maximum performance. Typically, their IST consists of nutritionists, coaches and technicians, all of whom are specialists in their respective fields. I've found that athletes more frequently turn in medal-winning performances when they have highly developed relationships with such teams.

The same is true for high-performance business leaders who have built strong ISTs typically with Finance, IT, Operations, Marketing and HR leaders. As part of the process they ask, are these the right people for these roles? Are they aware of my expectations? Do they work well together? Do

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they deliver the right information on time? What is their feedback on my performance? The more highly developed the team and relationships are, the more support leaders can draw on to navigate complex situations.

The other major similarity between professional athletes and elite leaders is how they train for high-stakes situations. Athletes tend to break their sport down into small components, looking at each one for opportunities to improve performance. The goal is to refine and increase consistency in how they do what they do. Similarly, top executives and leaders break down their decision-making process, analyzing the factors or patterns that lead to negative outcomes.

Having identified factors that compromise performance, elite athletes customize their training programs to target those vulnerabilities. The same is true for business leaders. The result is a proven decision-making process for addressing challenges. When issues arise, the leader knows what to do, where to focus attention or energies, and what to set aside. And they adhere to their process because they know, through training and use, it works. Moreover, because these leaders forged highly developed relationships with their IST, they trust the team will do its job so they can focus on theirs.

Much like elite athletes, leaders who have reliable processes and strong teams tend to stay in the zone in the midst of challenges, giving them considerable advantages over ill-prepared competitors. For example, they typically possess the necessary self-awareness to judge the effectiveness of their process as a situation unfolds. Over time, they incorporate these observations into their training and process, assess the results and make further refinements for continuously enhanced performance.

Leaders who stay in the zone also have the confidence to take calculated risks and be creative when conditions change or are unfamiliar. Trained leaders know their process inside out and can successfully adapt with confidence as situations evolve. That ability to remain calm, focused and aware gives them the capacity to learn from these situations, even as they're forced to tweak their process on the fly.

Any athlete will tell you that training is not a one-off action or quick fix. How many of us have been to business seminars and forgotten most of what we learned by the following week? Just like the great athletes, the high-performance leaders become and remain so by committing to ongoing training. So when the moment of crisis unfolds, they turn in a medal-worthy performance.

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