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A tale of two cleaners – but who’s in the team?

By Professor Jim Saker

So in the space of just over two weeks, Great Britain became a global sporting power. The success at the Rio Olympics, coupled with the different time zone, meant millions of people learned the intricacies of the keirin, the omnium and team pursuit. Never has there been so much interest in women’s hockey, kayaking and other random sports in which we as a nation are now leading the world.

Working at Loughborough, I am embedded in an organisation that is fanatical about sport. Having won the Universities Championship for the past 36 years, inevitably top athletes and their coaches have been drawn to train at the world-class facilities available on campus. Adam Peaty, the world record holder for the 100 metres breaststroke and the winner of GB’s first gold at Rio, trains alongside many other swimmers at the pool in Loughborough.

You don’t have to walk over hot coals

One of the themes that came through in the Olympics was the impact that can be achieved when people work together as a committed team. The problem in many businesses is that this concept of the sports team has been taken on board but has simply spawned a whole range of dreaded team-building courses. These often involve people building rafts or even walking on hot coals – two skills that I have yet to find transfer particularly well into a business context (unless one feels that when a business is sinking some form of makeshift raft might help). The problem is that we see the power of teams but struggle to see them work in hierarchically-based businesses.

Some years ago, I asked the director of sport at Loughborough who could make the most impact on the performance of the GB swimmers. I was expecting him to say the coaches, the sports psychologists or medical staff.

He simply replied: “The swimming pool cleaner.” If the cleaner didn’t do their job properly, an infection could get into the water, which could have a dramatic effect on the swimmer’s ability to perform. The impact of a viral infection would be far greater than any marginal gain that a coach could produce.

I looked shocked at his response, but he went on to say that is why everyone knows the cleaner; he is well known to the swimmers and the coaches, he is part of the team and without him they know they can’t perform. He knows it and they know it too.

Some are more equal than others

In business, our teams are often made up of people working in some form of hierarchical structure. This often makes it more difficult to function smoothly as there is a pecking order for decision-making, and people are aware that although they have been told everyone is equal, some are definitely more equal than others. This leads to a slightly odd level of interaction. The group may have bonded when their raft sank on the team-building exercise, but to a large extent that is the limit to which they want to engage.

A classic example of this came some years ago and involved another cleaner. A large motor manufacturer had set a number of dealer training standards based on courses that the dealership had to attend. The whole basis of this was that if a number of course attendances was achieved, the dealership was then in line for a series of bonuses based on the performance in other areas of the organisation.

This pattern of dealer training courses happened every year and there was usually a rush at the end to ensure that the business had met its quota. One year I had occasion to observe some of these manufacturer modules and spotted one of the delegates looking slightly bemused at the back of the room. A couple of days later, I spotted the same delegate now sitting in on the next module which appeared to be on customer handling. I thought nothing of this until the following week when this same character suddenly appeared studying human resource management. After some casual questioning, I ascertained that he was in fact the dealership’s cleaner, who had been sent to Loughborough on behalf of the dealership for two weeks to attend sufficient modules to meet the manufacturer training requirements. He said he had found it interesting but had struggled a bit on the finance module!

At the end of the two weeks, a very educated dealership cleaner left Loughborough about two stones heavier, wondering who had been doing his job for the past fortnight. He said: “It’s been good and I’ve enjoyed being here, but I do think that I have taken one for the team – though I don’t think that I am actually in the team…”

For the sake of our hopes at the Tokyo Olympics, let’s hope that the pool cleaner remains a key part of the team.

“Team-building courses often involve building rafts or walking on hot coals – two skills I have yet to find transfer well into a business context”