

Playing to win

The growing emphasis on behavioural skills as a source of competitive business advantage has prompted a new interest in the coaching techniques employed in the sporting arena

IF YOU NEEDED evidence that sport is a metaphor for both life and business, you need look no further than the language of sport. Words like goal, penalty, attack, defence, teamwork and coaching are as common off the pitch as on it, and are as pertinent to the games of life and business as they are to sport. In all cases, the ultimate objective is to win.

Yet sport is also different from business and life in that success in the first is very easy to quantify, but in the second and third far less so. Nevertheless, sports managers understand instinctively what business managers struggle to grasp – the critical importance of people. And because the most significant business challenges these days are to do with behaviour rather than technical skill, interest in sports coaching techniques is rising inexorably.

The management approach of Sir Clive Woodward, dismissed by some as 'the mad professor' when he was appointed as the England rugby team's head coach in 1997, was being dissected in lecture rooms even before the team's victory in the World Cup in Australia last November. Meanwhile, the thoughtful leadership of Arsène Wenger, who has galvanised Arsenal Football Club since becoming manager in 1996, winning the League and FA Cup double in 1998 and 2002, has earned him comparisons with the 'quiet leaders' identified by Jim Collins in his respected work *Good to Great*.

Yet other great sporting coaches, such as Frank Dick, British Athletics' Director of Coaching between 1979 and 1994, now preach what they used to practise: Dick is a sought-after speaker on the lecture circuit and his workshops and masterclasses are always over-subscribed. Studying successful sports managers demonstrates the futility of attempts by business to identify the ultimate management style, points out Chris Brady, Professor of Management and Public Policy at London's Cass Business School, and co-author, with David Bolchover, of *The 90-Minute Manager**. "You've only got to look at the different styles of Dick, Wenger and Woodward to realise that all personality types can produce great teams demonstrating the same characteristics," says Brady.

Bolchover, a consultant on management and leadership in business and football, agrees. "In the narrow field of football alone, you get successful managers who are at opposite ends of the management spectrum, like Wenger and Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson," he says. "But though the media like to play up the differences, their similarities are actually much more significant. They are both winners, learners, obsessives and meticulous workaholics."

Brady believes the best football managers could be great business chief executives, and vice versa, because leadership skills are becoming increasingly generic and universally applicable. "Provided they had some contextual knowledge, Sir Alex Ferguson and [Tesco boss] Sir Terry Leahy could run each other's businesses," he believes.

But Bolchover thinks that the lessons from sport can be most usefully applied to the role of middle management, which he believes needs to be "completely readdressed". He says: "Surveys show that the most important success factor in business is people's relationship with their immediate boss. That is something football has known for generations."

* *The revised edition of The 90-Minute Manager (Prentice Hall Business) will be published on 31st May. To purchase this title for only £12.75 (RRP £14.99), inc P&P, visit www.pearson-books.com/impactexecutives*

Frank Dick

Frank Dick is fond of quoting Arie de Geus, the guru of organisational learning, who said: "Our only sustainable competitive advantage is our ability to learn faster than the competition." And we learn faster as part of a team than on our own, says Dick. "Working in a team turbo-charges your learning. You grow as a team or as a business through inter-dependence, which implies that we are all players and coaches at different times."

As Dick points out, this interdependence is at odds with the need for independence instilled in us as we grow up, and is reinforced by the trend towards increasing personal responsibility for our own

careers. "But declaring independence is a sign of weakness, not strength, because you are putting yourself beyond help," he says. "Even when you are primarily a coach, you have to remain coachable throughout your life. The cult of the individual is perhaps stronger than it has ever been, but that makes enriching, informing networks more important than ever."

Given the climatic change in the business environment that has relegated technical skills to the status of a given –

"they can be taught and enhanced very easily," says Dick – the poet John Donne's assertion that "No man is an island" rings truer than ever: the all-important behavioural skills are unlikely to be learnt in a classroom. Knowing this, enlightened companies are increasingly turning to coaching to help their managers transcend their technical skills and grow, develop and perform to the best of their ability.

Yet the nature of the coaching relationship has changed, says Dick. "In the past the coach would dispense advice

or instructions. These days the relationship is more of a partnership, with the coach acting as the synthesiser of many solutions to the coachee's many different needs."

Frank Dick's new book, Winning Lines, is now available from all good bookshops.

Arsene Wenger

Never an outstanding footballer, Wenger was always credited with remarkable perception, analytical and tactical abilities, talents that he was determined to exploit as a manager from an early age. While still a player, he did an Economics degree at the University of Strasbourg, passing his coaching diploma in 1981 in his early thirties, before being appointed as Strasbourg's youth team coach. He became manager of Monaco in 1987, moved to Grampus Eight in Japan in 1995, joining Arsenal a year later. One of his greatest skills is spotting and developing talent. He has switched the positions of several players during his career, including, most famously, Thierry Henry, who, when he arrived at Arsenal in 1999, was a winger who had failed to impress at Juventus. Rather than attempting to iron out his deficiencies as a winger, Wenger correctly identified those talents which would make Henry an explosive and world-renowned striker. Not surprisingly, Wenger commands enormous loyalty and respect from his players, a respect reinforced by a certain distance, a quiet watchfulness. He is also succinct in his communications, making a point in ten words that it might take someone else ten minutes to convey. Neither a 'joiner-in' nor 'clubbable', Wenger is a shrewd psychologist. When he took over at Arsenal, rather than appointing a

number two he had worked with previously, he chose Pat Rice, a long-time Arsenal player who had worked for the previous manager for years. Not only did the appointment signal continuity, it helped Wenger win players' trust and implement changes more easily. What's more, Wenger's famed *sang froid* complemented Rice's extrovert passion, to the overall benefit of the club.

A strict disciplinarian and revolutionary innovator, Wenger introduced new diet and training regimes at the club. But the new state-of-the-art training facilities opened in 1999 were designed not just to improve existing players' skills, but also to help attract other players to the club. Wenger believes strongly that personal development both develops and motivates. He says: "If [footballers] feel deep down that you are only interested in them as a number in the team, or to fit into a tactical style, they won't be happy and may not play so well."

Wenger's philosophy is summed up in the following words: "All great successes, all great lives, have involved the coincidence of aptitude, talent, but also the luck of meeting people who have believed in you. At some point in your life, you need someone who will tap you on your shoulder and say 'I believe in you'."

Sir Clive Woodward

The England rugby team's success last November in Sydney's Telstra stadium had nothing to do with luck, chance or serendipity; it had been plotted with military precision by Sir Clive Woodward during his six years as head coach. His appointment was seen by many as a massive gamble, but Woodward was convinced that the skills he had deployed in business could be used to transform an under-achieving side into the world's greatest.

An innovator and iconoclast, he set about shaking things up, challenging the status quo and creating a sense of

excitement. 'Ideas', 'ambition' and 'change' were the new buzzwords. Some ideas proved long-lasting, others fell at the first hurdle, but he was never afraid to try new things. He pushed the players harder than they had ever been pushed before under fitness coach David Reddin, and he dispensed with players who couldn't perform at the desired level. "Your job as coach is to switch over energy-sappers to energisers, and you have to do everything humanly possible to do that," he says. "But there comes a stage that if you can't switch him he's got to go."

In the past, England had concentrated on the attacking game, but Woodward put a new emphasis on defence, turning to American football for inspiration and hiring defensive coaches. He hired coaches for everything else too – including eyes. But as well as peak physical fitness, he demanded

an unprecedented level of discipline from the England squad, who responded with near-evangelical zeal. The basic commandments were set down in the famous 'black book' – the players themselves discussing what these should be and Woodward merely signing them off. Punctuality, seen as a critical discipline, was defined as being ten minutes early.

One of Woodward's key strengths as a manager is that he enjoys winning because it is good fun, and he tries to instil the same joy in others. He believes that happiness is a cornerstone of success, challenging anyone to name a sporting or business team that has been unhappy yet has succeeded.

He also has huge self-belief, a quality interpreted as arrogance by the Australian media during the World Cup, who saw merely the public manifestation of the positive thinking he was at pains to engender in his players. Despite numerous setbacks over the past six years, Woodward has always focused on success rather than failure. As he points out, in business, if you are winning, you tend to go down the pub or crack open the Champagne. When you lose it's the 8am crisis meeting. "To me, it should be the complete opposite," he asserts. "When you've done something really good, have an 8am meeting, find out why. If you lose, go down to the pub and have a beer and stay cool about it. If you keep losing, you've got to change things dramatically, but if not, then carry on doing things right and believing you can win next time."