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Winning Mind Games Counts in Business as Well as Sports

Athletes' mental strategies can create workplace all-stars, counselors say.

Before Dan Reeder was ready to tackle the corporate world, he trained for a seemingly more modest goal: A spot on a midget league football team.

He may have appeared like a guy in the mailroom setting his sights on the presidency of a Fortune 500 company. Ten-year-old Dan, the scrawniest boy in his class, had already been cut from the team once.

"So I charted a course for the next year," he recalled. "I set goals, concentrated on skills—and I accepted that I was going to have to work very hard."

Reeder's regimen of focus and discipline carried him beyond the midget leagues to the Pittsburgh Steelers as a running back in 1986-'87.

The mental techniques he learned in football paved his career path later, as Reeder became a vice president in the competitive field of commercial real estate, at a firm in Wilmington, Del.

Increasingly, people intent on winning in the workplace are acknowledging the importance of the mind game.

In the corporate arena, "the mental skills of a winner are even more important than they are in sports," said Dr. Jim Taylor, a psychologist who counsels performers in sports, business and the arts. Corporate careers are cultivated over decades, far longer than an athlete's youthful burst of glory. And competition in the marketplace knows no boundaries or seasons.

"It's even more competitive in business than in sports," Taylor said. "There are more companies in any given field than there are, say, professional baseball teams."

A marathon runner and former world-class skier, Taylor heads Alpine/Taylor Consulting, with offices in San Francisco and Aspen, Col. Psychologists such as Taylor have made a practice of adapting principles that produce star athletes into strategies for success in business.

'Aiming Toward a Goal'

The first step toward attaining a goal, psychologists say, is to define it: Reaching a specific level of production, for instance, or selling a certain number of products. The goal could be as sweeping as a new direction for a corporation or as detailed as a daily quota for a single worker.

"Everything is about aiming toward a goal," said Dr. Jim Mastrich, a sports psychologist in Kingston, NJ, "If you don't have a goal, getting there is simply a coincidence."

On the way to the winner's circle are "process goals," which Mastrich described as "the things we need to do, day to day, to achieve the higher goal."

Some of those interim steps are what people should do to prepare themselves to take on any challenge, such as eating well and exercising regularly. Other process goals are fine-tuned to attain a specific result.

For people in management, that might include scheduling weekly meetings with staff or investigating equipment purchases to improve products. For staffers, a process goal might be taking a class to learn skills or arriving at work 30 minutes early every day for a week to complete an important project.

Clearly defined goals help managers and employees focus on results and filter out distractions, Taylor said. The big picture becomes crystal clear when everyone knows their role in the company's success—the way football players are drilled so they'll know exactly how and when they're expected to block, tackle or catch a pass.

Mapping a game plan remains an important part of Reeder's corporate strategy.

“Today, I am super-big on business plans,” he said. “I believe in laying the groundwork and developing the good skills—and when opportunity falls in your lap, you’ll know what to do.”

That insight is a learned behavior rather than instinct, said Dr. Shane Murphy, former sports psychologist for the U.S. Olympic Committee and a business coach in Trumble, Conn. Often, the ability to plan and make judgment calls is learned from a mentor. Reeder’s guiding light, for instance, was his father, a football coach.

“Nobody can learn everything he needs to know all on his own,” Murphy said. “Everyone needs help.” He cited Earl Woods, father of golfer Tiger Woods, as a mentor.

Murphy also admires baseball managers Joe Torre of the New York Yankees and Bobby Valentine of the New York Mets. Torre and Valentine succeeded first as players, not because they were athletically gifted, but because they “thought a good game,” he said. “They were marginal players who worked hard.”

Mastrich cited Torre as the ideal manager, whose style who could easily be applied to business. “He had a respectful engagement with each player on an individual basis, rather than a cookie-cutter approach,” he said. “It’s a wise and prudent way to deal with people in both sports and business.”

Benefitting from Criticism

Athlete or employee, one of the biggest hurdles in gaining insight from a gifted leader is an aversion to being coached.

“When managers offer suggestions, people often respond with an emotional-threat reaction—a perception that the manager thinks they are not worthy of respect,” Taylor said. “A typical reaction is fight or flight—to argue with the boss or to quit.”

Taylor recommends avoiding emotional reactions: “Don’t think of it as a personal affront,” he said. “Instead, look at it as a fork in the road—and make a conscious decision to go down the good road by finding a solution to the problem.”

As in sports, even stars on workplace teams drop the ball occasionally. Mastrich recommends:

- Banishing thoughts of failure
- Avoiding naysayers in favor of positive thinkers
- Adopting affirmations of self-worth.

“Tell yourself: ‘I can achieve this task. I trust I will succeed in this task,’ “ he said.

Mastrich also suggests contemplating people who’ve overcome obstacles and dealt with failures to become champions. (Even Babe Ruth had more strikeouts than home runs, he noted.)

That technique was also espoused by Reeder’s father, who encouraged his son to study the lives of people who surmounted adversity. His favorite was Rocky Bleier, who became a great running back for the Steelers after he nearly lost his leg in an explosion in Vietnam.

But not every story has a happy ending. “We need to accept that loss is part of the game,” Mastrich said. “If we don’t win a contract, we’ll get one next time.”

Motivation can be rekindled with thoughts of rewards such as money, status or respect. True success is attained by getting into what Mastrich calls “the groove.” That’s the sublime state of feeling the joy of running rather than the burn of overtaxed muscles and lungs. It’s also the thrill of closing a deal that might be six months, and many long nights at the office, in the making.

“In sports, it’s when an athlete is maximizing his or her talents without hesitancy,” he said. “When people get beyond hesitancy and into total confidence, that’s when the answers to problems become apparent.”

Source: Smith, E. (Reviewed 2017). Winning mind games counts in business as well as sports. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Give Your Plate a Taste Lift

Consumers will choose taste over nutrition to buy one food over another. It makes sense. We eat the foods we enjoy the most.

So make taste a priority when preparing nutritious meals, suggests Joy Dubost, speaking on behalf of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. She offers this cooking advice to enhance flavor.

- Choose high-quality ingredients at their peak of quality.
- Intensify the flavors of meat, poultry, and fish with high-heat cooking techniques such as pan-searing, grilling, or broiling.
- Pep it up with peppers. Use red, green and yellow peppers of all varieties—sweet, hot and dried. Or add a dash of hot pepper sauce.
- Try grilling or roasting veggies in a very hot (450 degree F) oven or grill for a sweet, smoky flavor. Brush or spray them lightly with oil so they don't dry out. Sprinkle with herbs.
- Caramelize sliced onions to bring out their natural sugar flavor by cooking them slowly over low heat in a small amount of oil. Use them to make a rich, dark sauce for meat or poultry.
- Simmer juices to make reduction sauces. Concentrate the flavors of meat, poultry and fish stocks. Reduce the juices by heating them—don't boil. Then use them as a flavorful glaze or gravy.
- For fuller flavors, incorporate more whole grains such as brown rice or quinoa, or experiment with amaranth and wild rice.
- Add small amounts of ingredients with bold flavors like pomegranate seeds, chipotle pepper or cilantro.
- Add a tangy taste with citrus juice or grated citrus peel: lemon, lime or orange. Acidic ingredients help lift and balance flavor.
- Enhance sauces, soups and salads with a splash of flavored balsamic or rice vinegar.
- Give a flavor burst with good-quality condiments such as horseradish, flavored mustard, chutney, wasabi, bean purees, tapenade and salsas of all kinds.

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Smart Recipe Swaps

You can reduce fat and calories without sacrificing taste by swapping out a few ingredients in your favorite recipes, according to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension experts. Try these:

- Using two egg whites in place of one egg can reduce the cholesterol.
- Use low-sodium, fat-free chicken broth in your mashed potatoes to add flavor and cut back on added butter or margarine.
- Substitute applesauce for oil, margarine, or butter in muffins and quick breads such as banana bread. Try substituting a small amount at first, as the more you substitute, the more the texture of the finished product changes.
- For dips, sauces and pie toppings, use fat-free yogurt, sour cream and whipped topping.
- Sliced almonds make a delicious, crunchy topping in place of fried onion rings.
- Choose reduced-fat or low-fat cheeses for salads and casseroles.

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Evaluating and Choosing Financial Advisors



If you know a lot about money, you probably also know when you need help. Just like being a good podiatrist doesn't qualify someone to do their own tonsillectomy, knowing a lot about personal money management doesn't necessarily mean that you are also an expert at managing things like retirement accounts.

Money is a very large subject, and it is unrealistic to think that everyone knows everything there is to know about money management, credit use, and investing. Most people, no matter how much they know about money, likely will need financial help sometime in their lives. Managing your finances can be like putting together a puzzle; all the pieces need to fit in order to be rewarded with the "big picture." If your financial picture is less than clear, make a resolution to assemble a financial team; working with one or more of these financial professionals can help put the pieces in place.

- **Tax advisor.** Tax advisors provide tax advice and assistance to consumers. Tax advisors can help you to navigate tax laws, prepare complete and accurate returns, and develop a strategic tax plan. While consumers can file their own taxes, many consumers benefit from hiring a tax professional.
- **Budget and debt counselor.** Budget and debt counselors help consumers develop a plan to tackle debt. They can also help you create a spending plan. Budget and debt counselors advocate smart consumerism and believe strongly in the value of saving. Consider contacting a budget and debt counselor at the first sign that your debts are becoming unmanageable.
- **Financial planner.** Financial planners are professionals who offer investment advice. A financial planner may also be able to help by analyzing employee benefits, discovering insurance needs, and developing a system to manage cash flow.
- **Lawyer.** Lawyers can help consumers by preparing important legal documents such as a will, living trust, and durable power of attorney. An attorney can also be very helpful if you need to consider bankruptcy. Couples facing a complicated divorce can also benefit from an attorney's advice. Lawyers can also assist consumers when a violation of the law has occurred. For example, if you feel that a creditor has violated the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, a lawyer may be able to help.

Before working with any financial professional, be sure to check their credentials. Ask specific questions about their history and areas of expertise. Finally, be sure that you are comfortable with the advisors you choose; ideally, you will be financial partners for life.

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