

Unlocking our potential and enhancing performance

By Chris Parsons, Director 7days

The recent headlines of 'doom and gloom', 'financial meltdown' and 'credit crunch' don't do much to encourage you to get out of bed in the morning. Unless Yoga is your thing and you get up to 'greet the sun' each morning, generating the energy and excitement for the day ahead can be tricky.

With one bad piece of news after another, each with heavier consequences, and none of them seemingly your fault, it is easy to feel done to, put upon and frankly tired. The 'challenge' as we consultants like to position it, is how can we reframe the situation and work our way out of it.

Now I am not talking about big political initiatives focused on fixing the global economy and kick-starting some form of growth. I am talking about what everyone of us can do to harness our potential and make positive things happen. For business the link is clear, with everyone harnessing their potential and, most importantly, aligned to business goals; better performance is guaranteed.

Limiting Beliefs

If there is one thing as a nation that we excel at, it is limiting beliefs. In our self-deprecating manner we learn to accept second-place, entrench the view that performance can not be improved and live with our lot. Since the end of the Second World War, the 'rightful' retreat of Empire and the austerity of the late 40's and 50's, we have come to see ourselves as 'plucky losers' or 'gallant triers'. Despite the hype, we don't really expect our national football teams to win trophies – in fact, if you are English, you have learnt that players who are the best of their generation for their clubs never reach their potential whilst playing for the national team.

Similarly, just ahead of the recent Olympics and Para-Olympics, the general feeling in the population was that we would not perform well. Look what happened; the best Olympic medal haul for 100 years and second place in the table behind the hosts in the Para-Olympics. Quite exceptional performance from all the athletes involved and I bet none of them suffered from 'limiting beliefs'.

Limiting beliefs are the mental restrictions we put on ourselves and our performance. We believe that we can only do so much...so when we achieve it we are satisfied regardless of whether we could have done more.

The new head of UK Athletics, the Dutchman, Charles Van Commenee, who famously coached Denise Lewis to Heptathlon gold in the Sydney Olympics, is equally famous for calling Lewis' successor, Kelly Sotherton, a 'wimp' for settling for Bronze after not, in his eyes, running hard enough in the final event, the 800 metres. Van Commenee has recently been quoted in relation to the Sotherton incident as saying:

"Had she (Sotherton) finished fourth and that had been her potential I would have walked off as a happy man. But she should have won silver. It is about getting the best out of athletes and there is no time to waste. The word is bullshitting and I don't do that." 1

Van Commenee will not accept people who don't realise their potential. His challenge, is dismantling the mental barriers to performance.

Breaking through the barriers

Athletics is a good place to explain the impact of limiting beliefs. If we think back to May 1954 at the Iffley Road running track in Oxford, Roger Bannister became the first person to run a sub four minute mile. Many had tried and failed and indeed, it was believed to be physically impossible to achieve this feat. Experts had held the view that man could not physically go that fast. Bannister did not believe them. He believed that he could and he did.

1: "Ruthless approach will bring medals, says Van Commenee" – Michael Philips, The Guardian, 24th September 2008

2: "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore" – The Walker Brothers, 1966

3: "The Empire Strikes Back" – Yoda, 1980



Having stood as a barrier for so long, between 1954 and 1956 over 250 people also broke the barrier – because people now believed that it could be broken. In fact in 1998, Hicham El Guerrouj dropped the record further to 3:43.13. Breaking limiting beliefs can open the floodgates to enhanced performance. As Henry Ford is reputed to have said:

“If we believe that we can or can’t – we are right”.

What causes limiting beliefs?

Our brain is made of millions of cells all of which connect together. Our thoughts are these connections and as we have the same thoughts over again, we create neural pathways through these networks. The more we tread the paths, the more established they become. These become our habits.

Naturally, we have the choice not to follow these paths, but we become comfortable with these habits. In a way what we are most familiar with become the things which limit us. We have a choice to tread new paths, or stick to where we are comfortable. Breaking out of un-helpful habits is often a case of just believing that we can.

In effect, we limit ourselves because it feels easier to do so. We may not be doing so consciously but through our thoughts and beliefs we limit our actions.

Proving that limiting beliefs can be broken

We run a simple exercise with our clients to enable them to break out of old habits and enhance performance. We ask them to stand up whilst keeping their feet in a fixed position, shoulder width apart, and put their right arm pointing horizontally in front of them. We then ask them to move their arm, still pointing out, to the right as far round as they can go. When they get there we ask them to remember how far they got. We then run them through a visualization exercise to do the same again but in their mind, forcing them to see their arm going beyond the point they reached first off. Finally, we get them to do it again for real. Everyone goes further than they originally did really proving that we limit our physical performance through our subconscious beliefs of what is possible.

Translating this into business performance

Now visualization without talent or capability is not going to achieve anything. However, unlocking the potential of ourselves, our teams and our employees can make a difference. If we can harness collective talents and break through the limiting beliefs that are restricting potential, we can achieve productivity gains.

The take-away is this refusal to accept the mental limits to performance and a strong belief in the ‘art of the possible’ is essential for businesses struggling to keep afloat in today’s economic climate. Leaders and managers need to break through their own barriers and enable their teams to do the same.

At a time when it is hard not to feel like the “sun ain’t gonna shine anymore” (2), it is worth opening up your mind to achieve its full potential. As Yoda once said, in a galaxy far, far way:

“Do or do not do, there is no try,” (3)

1: “Ruthless approach will bring medals, says Van Commenee” – Michael Philips, The Guardian, 24th September 2008

2: “The Sun Ain’t Gonna Shine Anymore” – The Walker Brothers, 1966

3: “The Empire Strikes Back” – Yoda, 1980