

Trends in Management 2014

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Triathlon and business – What does mental strength in sports has in common with team building in business processes?

1. Triathlon & Business – vice versa

What about usefulness of this business model in sports – especially in a non-team discipline? What can we learn from the triathlon in business and vice versa? Everything seems to be so easy in the beginning but as Plato already said: “*The beginning is the most important part of the work.*” The equipment is easy: for a triathlon we only need a bathing suit, a bicycle and the running shoes from the cellar. That’s quite sufficient, but only when you organize a cross-country run with friends for the fun of it, but when you wish to compete with the great and professional sportspeople, it takes quite a lot more.

2. The Approach

The Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2016 are just around the corner and this with an Olympic distance for a triathlon. We are therefore talking about 1.5 km swimming, 40 km cycling and 10 km running. How can we prepare ourselves perfectly for this? To have a training plan seems to be the most important thing. Without a plan no medal. However, when we take a look at the Olympic Games it is, in point of fact, a business. Without a professional coach, perfect training plans and the perfect equipment one can hardly overtake the opposition, let alone take a place on the rostrum and parade around with a gold medal. This applies to business in the same measures. Everyone working in commerce needs to be highly trained these days because without good technology and management training we are not adequately steeled for global cooperation with the whole world as competition. The times where we came out victorious with mediocrity are definitely over. It takes more than just a bit of luck, birthright or good connections. So, take the initiative and get on with mental and physical training:

The disciplines in the Triathlon with swimming, cycling and running can be compared with “Forming, Storming, Performing” from the Tuckman Model. In its entirety the model consists of even more stages, and to illustrate this tangibly in this format, we will make use of a fundamental business model for simplified application. First, the Tuckman model is presented in the theoretical context.

3. The Tuckman Model in the theoretical context

The US-Psychologist Bruce W. Tuckman (*1938) created in 1965 a 4-phase team development model, which he enlarged in 1977 by adding a fifth phase.

- **Forming**– the starting and finding phase (contact)

The first phase is characterized by uncertainty and confusion. The first thing is that the team members get to know each other and secure their membership in the group. First goals and rules are defined and the group slowly turns towards the task, but the relationships of the team members among each other are still not clear.

- **Storming** – the confrontation and dispute phase (conflict)

In the second phase, the storming, there are often disagreements about setting priorities when team members follow different goals. There are power struggles for the leadership role and the status in the group, this creates tension between the team members. The relationships are more likely conflict-laden and in the worst case even hostile, but first arrangements are made concerning the work organization. In this phase the performance of the group is rather low.

- **Norming** – the regulation and agreement phase (contract)

In the norming phase, standards and rules are discussed or found by tacit consent and are complied with. The team members have found their roles and there is increasing cooperation. The relationships are more harmonious, the mutual acceptance rises and the team turns increasingly towards its task.

- **Performing** – the work and performance phase (cooperation)

In the performing phase the performance of the team members levels off on a constant level. The team acts as an entity and orients itself at the joint goal. There is an atmosphere of recognition, acceptance and esteem. The team members work together successfully. Roles can switch flexibly between persons. The team members are open with one another, cooperate and help each other out. For this reason, task processing runs successfully.

- **Adjourning** – the dissolution phase

The fifth phase, adjourning, was added to the phase model by Tuckman in 1977. The fifth phase is not relevant for all teams. The adjourning phase refers to the groups who work together long-term but who go separate ways after completing the order. For example, members of a project team, who switch to another project team after completing a project or who take care of their tasks from their day-to-day operations are affected by the adjourning phase. Team members are often sad about the upcoming end, and worry about the time after their work in the team. It is advisable that organizations prepare a final documentation about the work of the team, which will help other employees in the future to find and correct possible errors or to transfer successful processes to other tasks.

4. The Tuckman Model in the context of Triathlon and Business

In the continuation the Tuckman model will be used for the analysis of the research topic – in the context of Triathlon and Business.

4.1. The Forming Phase

Swimming – here we're still fresh and awake – stands for the starting and finding phase in business. Swimming demands a very focused approach with plenty of endurance training. However, it's a fact that people who are strong swimmers will, unfortunately, never win the whole competition. Ergo – swimming is not the most important and result-achieving discipline, yet it applies in every case that a good start creates a good initial position and the motivation level is pleasantly high. That's how we feel when we get up in the morning in good spirits and have a smile on our face the whole day. Swimming is the most elegant

of the three sports, requiring balance and supple implementation. This balance is composed of an athlete in top form and optimum coordination between arms and legs. But this is not enough: nothing goes without well-coordinated and precisely adjusted breathing. We often forget the details which allow us to be successful. The same applies when we put a team together. The details are the most important elements when assembling a team which, in its diversification, should also match technically.

4.2. The Storming Phase

Next discipline: Cycling. Here we need plenty of technical knowledge and our speed is put to the test. When we think of a bicycle chain, we know that this needs to be well lubricated, it must be durable but not too loose as you would otherwise lose this chain on the hill. If we now think of a team, this would be the storming phase, in which some disputes and conflicts may turn up. We can win the race with cycling: so this phase is most likely the most important one in both sports and business. If we have a team, which also hits if off in difficult situations, then we have almost completed the project successfully. Hardly anything is more important than having a good team which understands conflicts, technical and human aspects and can cope with them.

4.3. The Performing Phase

Running, as supreme discipline, appears to be more a run into an arena in ancient Rome, there where most of the spectators are. The athletes are almost at the end of their tether, and the spectators love to be a part of this sportive competition which also tends to have a masochistic side to it. This corresponds to the work and performance phase in the Tuckman Model. The team works like a well-greased entity and runs harmoniously towards the finish. It is a victory run without any further obstacles. We can see the finish line and are satisfied with our training plan, the team leader, the coach and also with ourselves.

It's really quite simple – we're tempted to say: but, as we know from experience everything which looks simple is not simple at all. Paper doesn't blush, the theory and training models

are easy to read, but the athlete has to battle with many more external influences. Being a triathlete is definitely not easy: an enormous endurance hunger, specific focus and in particular a bite for competition has to be there – otherwise it's advisable to follow this sport on TV!

4.4. The Transition Phases – Flexibility in Change Processing

As triathlete we are aware that even more elements need to harmonise with each other. What is often forgotten are the transition phases in which the body needs to adjust to the respectively other discipline. What happens mentally in us? Have we prepared well athletically? And with preparation we do not just mean mental preparation but also preparation for the new discipline with new outfit. From swimming in the water we emerge clothed in the neoprene suit, which still clings to the body like a leach. In some cases there are helpers on site who can help to get us out of this totally constricting, breath-restricting, bondage suit. This can be compared with the norming phase in business. Norming is enormously important; standardisation and quality management position themselves here. When we lead a team, we want to avoid all errors (Six Sigma). We therefore want a neoprene suit which fits well but is also easy to take off.

These transition phases are very important in the triathlon because we don't train these enough. We only ever think about the individual kind of sport, the time, the finish, the victory, the medal But these times in the transition zones are probably the phases where we have grass or sand in our socks, resp. in business when our most costly interfaces occur which we miss in the project planning stage. It is precisely these details where a coach or consultant has the eye for details, which really only an insider in the business can supervise. A coach or consultant has great experience with the smallest details, which are partly brushed under the carpet and hidden away. The consultants have lived through many Mergers & Acquisitions and know exactly where holes need to be plugged or errors corrected, that is to say those that occur repeatedly. At this point, trained change management thinking is helpful.

In the triathlon the change management is the coupling training. We practice one or several sports together. We ride 100 km and then we run for 2 hours. We reach a mental

limit. This is precisely what we want. We want to see where our limits are. Can we plan or train this in business? This question is relatively difficult to answer: of course it is possible to conduct a “stress test” by determining data but what’s the story with people who work in a team? The people reach a mental point where they are exhausted and their grey cells no longer participate. We as leaders are responsible for seeing who we can put a greater burden on and who need a lesser one.

5. From Sports to Business – Another way of Transition

This is where the “Healthy Lifestyle” comes into play. The healthier we live, the easier it is to stress our body. Studies have shown what it’s like when we people eat healthier: We feel better, are more resilient and active sport is part of our lifestyle. However, when we look at the average person who will eat a hamburger once in a while, or even eats MacDonald’s every day, we have a totally different picture. For the future we want that they also participate so that humanity as a whole lives a healthier life. Healthy food in moderation, regeneration with enough sleep and a good balance in the whole life is demanded and should be promoted.

Therefore, as managers and leaders we are responsible for bringing together the right people to be successful. In sports we need a good training plan, a coach who drives the athlete. We can only learn from one another. For all training, both in sports and in business, an excellent coach is indispensable. Ideally, this coach will have both sound sports and business thinking. When we as coach don’t think like a businessman, then we don’t earn any money. It is very honorable wanting to help someone but a coach also needs material resources to supply his cells with energy. We are often subject to the misbelief that our fathers or mothers are a sports coach and do this part-time to support the children. Those who believe this, will now be very disappointed – it’s a definite “NO”, the coach has an important role, perhaps even the most important role in this game. The coach sets goals (SMART goals) with the athlete which are achievable but also high. When we have goals which are too easy to reach, we don’t put enough effort into them.

Conclusion, resp. final thought at this point is that we as employees, managers, leaders or athletes are well advised to get a good coach by our side in time. Without this support, we stand alone and often don't know how to tackle the three disciplines correctly. We train incorrectly, are injured and finally frustrated as we simply can't compete. As leader and coach we are like cheerleaders who motivate and whip the team into shape so that it can sail on the course of success.

Now we have a fundamental system and the training can start! Bye, we'll see each other soon, in Rio de Janeiro, 2016 at the awards ceremony, hopefully with the gold medal!

Swimming	Elegance, Balance	Starting and finding phase
Cycling	Technique, Speed	Storming phase
Running	On success/Medal course	Work and performance phase

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