

# Leadership lessons from Sports

**Harvard Business Review**

# Alex Fergusons 8 leadership lessons from Man Utd

1. Start with the foundation
2. Dare to rebuild your team
3. Set high standards and hold everyone to them
4. Never, never cede control
5. Match the message to the moment
6. Prepare to win
7. Rely on the power of observation
8. Never stop adapting

'I am more interested in how far I can push myself than focused on beating a competitor' -  
Greg Louganis, diving champion

If you are a mentee – have a plan, be patient.

If there is one thing athletes and executives share in common, it is the of pursuit of sustained high performance.

Sustained high performance doesn't come from just the basics alone, it is not about the serve or the backhand. For executives, it is about endurance, flexibility, self control and focus.

Energy is simply the capacity to do work.

The power of rituals is most observed in tennis, in between points. Many of the players don't even recognize it, but they do it, They have mannerisms, they focus, they look at the court, these are all rituals.



High performance in business has often been presented as a matter of sheer brainpower. We recognize that it is a combination of

- Physical capacity
- Emotional capacity
- Mental capacity and
- Spiritual capacity

When athletes are asked to describe how they felt when they were at peak performance, the words they would use are:  
calm, challenged, engaged, focused,  
optimistic.

# 5 basic strategies for renewing physical energy

1. Actually do all those healthy things you know you ought to do.
2. Go to bed early and get up early
3. Maintain a consistent bedtime and wake up time
4. Seek recovery every 90 to 120 minutes
5. Do at least two weight training workouts a week

Focus is energy concentrated in the service of a particular goal.

Rituals that encourage positive thinking also enhance the likelihood of accessing the ideal performance state.

Visualization is a ritual that produces positive energy

Visualization is very good if you were to think about meetings, or speeches or presentations.

The toughest job for a coach is to take a team that's performing poorly and turning it around.

In any turnaround, you have to be honest,  
brutally honest with people.



To lead, you need to have confidence.

If you want to get the most out of people, you have to apply pressure - that's the only thing all of us respond to.

Creating pressure in an organization requires confrontation. It can get very intense, very emotional.

There are two types of pep talks in sports and companies – one is the emotional one and the second one is about facts and logic. You need to know when to use which one.

‘To excel, you need both talent and practice ‘  
Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

Preparation is key to winning. Coach Wooden would emphasize it.

You learn to appreciate your teammates since you know you cannot win on your own ability.

Sports teams under salary caps rely on balancing performance and potential.



Professional sports require dedication and performance under pressure. Sometimes self belief can become unhelpful ego.

Business like sports is a roller coaster. Success is high profile, failure higher still.

Every business team will have brittle stars,  
loyal servants, prima donnas and high  
potentials.

You cannot stay at the top if you aren't comfortable in high stress situations.

Managing pressure is a lot easier if you focus on your own excellence.

Much of star athletes ability to bounce back from defeat is the intense ability to focus on the long term.

If you want to be the best at something, then you will need to train with people who will push you. You cannot train with minnows. Olympic champions train with other Olympic champs.

Dwelling on success far too long in a corporate quarterly results life cycle can lead to complacency.

Celebrate but push on.



What makes individuals and teams good, also makes them difficult, sometimes.

The desire to identify an area of improvement can contribute to a joyless, soul destroying environment

Very good people can be very bad too. In effect when someone is self confident, they could become more decisive, this could lead to domineering, all in the space of a 90 minute game. The same is true in business.

“In tennis, regardless of the score, it is your ability to play the next point right that matters” – Andre Agassi.

## Why sports are a terrible metaphor for business- Bill Taylor

1. The logic of competition and success is completely different
2. The dynamics of teamwork and talent are completely different.
3. The creation of economic value is completely different.