Performance Excellence: A Personal Perspective on the Link Between Sport and Business

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This article provides a personal perspective on the link between excellence in sport and business. It traces the author's transition from sport psychologist to business consultant before identifying specific areas in which direct links can be drawn between the two domains. Specifically, five major areas are addressed: organizational issues, in which a demands, supports, constraints approach is outlined; stress, including a model of stress in leaders and a model of stress and coping; leadership, in which a model of leadership and how it relates to performance is presented; high-performing teams, based on a create, unite, perform (CUP) model of team building, team work, and team effectiveness; and one-to-one coaching/consulting, in which common areas across sport and business are identified. The general conclusion is that the principles of elite performance in sport are easily transferable to the business context, and also that sport has a considerable amount to learn from excellence in business.

THE TRANSITION FROM SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST TO BUSINESS CONSULTANT

A number of years ago, when I was still a full-time university academic engrossed in research into the area of competitive anxiety (see Jones, 1995) and consulting with elite athletes (see Jones, 1993), I was approached by a senior executive (David) in a large global company. David was seeking a sport psychologist who would give him an insight into the psychology of coaching and implement a coaching intervention that would help his already successful senior management team to achieve even higher levels of performance. Although the request provided an intriguing challenge, my initial response was one of apprehension about becoming involved, because I believed that my relative naivety and inexperience of the business world meant I would be unable to deliver real value. After all, this was a huge, well-respected orga-

nization with a well-developed human resources department that surely must have ample internal knowledge and experience of the basic principles of setting goals, providing feedback, asking effective questions, and so on. David, on the other hand, was convinced that I could help his team, citing sport as the breeding ground for the world's best coaches. We agreed to work together, and I embarked on a huge personal learning experience. Fortunately, my input with his team over a period of approximately 12 months was received well and with positive results.

This proved to be one of the most significant landmarks in my career to date. Here was what appeared to be another type of environment hungry for the basics of performance psychology. This was a very responsive environment ready to experiment with many of the key principles of elite sport performance, and the important factor was that the majority of the key principles seemed to apply well to the business environment.

In the meantime, I had met a former Olympic swimming champion, Adrian Moorhouse, during my work with the British Olympic Association in helping to prepare the British team for the 1996 Olympic Games. In addition to Adrian's Olympic gold medal success, even more impressive was the fact that he had been ranked officially as world number one for six consecutive years before retiring from swimming in 1992. He had been applying his vast experiential knowledge of achieving at the highest level in sport to business. We teamed up as theorist and practitioner, and the positive feedback on our work with business organizations encouraged us to form a company, Lane 4, along with a third partner who specializes in sales and marketing. This was followed shortly after by my departure from the world of academia, although I have since taken up a part-time appointment as Co-Director of the Institute for the Psychology of Elite Performance (IPEP) at the University of Wales, Bangor.

Lane 4 has now been in existence for seven years and has grown significantly during that period. At the time of writing, we have 30 full-time employees, comprising elite sport achievers, sport psychologists, and office-based support staff. Lane 4's attraction to the business world has been based on the potential to provide companies with a different perspective on performance, whether it be from elite sport performers who have achieved at the highest level or from sport psychologists who have both generated original knowledge in their respective areas (see, for example, Bull, 1991; Campbell & Jones, 2002; Hardy, 1990; Swain & Jones, 1995) and consulted with elite performers. The most powerful perspective on performance, of course, emanates from the combination of the two. That, coupled with the availability of a pool of associate consultants from the business world who specialize in such areas as culture and change management, has provided a compelling proposition for companies committed to achieving their potential through their people. When these groups of experts are brought together, the result is a wealth of experience, knowledge, and understanding of performance, which is applicable across numerous contexts, particularly business.

THE SPORT–BUSINESS LINK

My work in the business world has tended to be with the top levels of management, including chief executive officers and their boards. Working at this level means that key organizational issues can be addressed firsthand. I have found myself at the core of large-scale initiatives around culture change, mergers, global roll-outs of people development and coaching programs, and more basic senior executive development projects. Much of this work has involved one-to-one coaching with board members, often accompanied by workshops on specific needs. My research background has proved invaluable in not only enhancing my credibility in this environment but also providing clients with an option that few other consultancies can offer at this level. The collaboration between Lane 4 and IPEP is important in this respect

because it means that clients are able to commission applied research and diagnostic development that are underpinned by strict scientific rigor to address a wide range of issues and factors impacting the organization. Lane 4 and IPEP currently are involved in a number of research projects focused on key performance issues in the work environment, a number of which can be reapplied in the sport environment from which they emanated.

In my experience, several commonalities and links can be drawn between sport and business. These are encapsulated below within five major areas: organizational issues, stress, leadership, high-performing teams, and one-to-one coaching/consulting.

Organizational Issues

The links between sport and business have been nowhere more evident than in my work with athletes at and in the lead-up to major events. My early expectations as an applied sport psychologist were that I would be dealing with performance-related issues such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation. Although there has been no shortage of such cases, the majority of the challenges I have encountered can be described as organizational issues similar to those found in the business world (e.g., lack of resources, poor communication, and failure to delegate). These issues can be embraced within a simple framework that has been of great help in my work in both sport and business. The framework is presented in Figure 1 and is based on research in the occupational psychology literature, which distinguishes between demands, supports, and constraints (Janman, Jones, Payne, & Rick, 1988; Jones, 1987; Payne, 1979). Demands are simply the requirements of a job, whereas supports reflect those factors in the environment (natural, physical, intellectual, technical, financial, and social) that are made available to help satisfy the demands. Conversely, constraints represent the degree to which the environment confines, constricts, or prevents demands from being satisfied (Payne, 1979).

My own experience is that organizational issues in both sport and business fall largely into the constraints category and often are a major, unwanted focus for performers in both domains
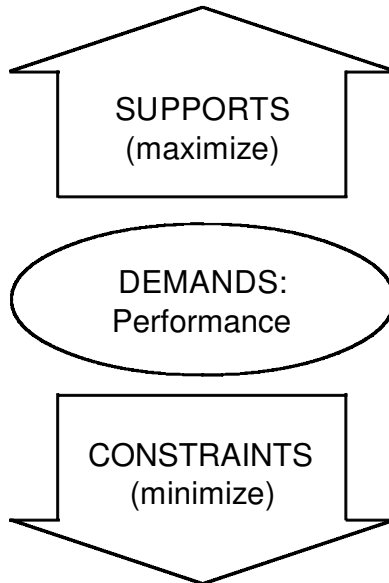

Figure 1. A demands, supports, constraints approach to dealing with organizational issues (© Lane 4; reprinted with permission).

(also see Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Indeed, the focus on constraints often can distract performers from their supports so that they do not use them to their full potential. However, the starting point in this model is the demands. They are represented in Figure 1 as simply performance, but I have found that it is important to identify all aspects of performance demands, whether they be actual or perceived. The next step is to identify all supports and constraints (with the possibility of a support also being a constraint). The end point of any such exercise, of course, is to identify and implement an action plan to maximize supports and minimize constraints—a classic case in sport of controlling the controllables.

This framework and related situation-specific exercises have proved useful in my work with several companies, either in one-to-one or in group sessions. The framework is particularly helpful for people who have lost sight of how to move their performance forward and who are focusing on the obstacles and a perceived lack of control. On the other hand, it has also proved beneficial to high-performing teams and individuals who want to maximize their potential and performance.

Sport organizations also have been able to relate closely to this approach. In my work with elite teams, the focus has been not just on the performers themselves but also on the performance environment within which they operate. My (confidential) work with performers has inevitably unearthed perceived performance constraints that the management have either been unaware of or ignored. Using the framework in Figure 1 in structured sessions with all, or at least representatives of all, parties in a sport organization has been an enlightening and constructive process in helping those parties to see how performance can be maximized, and by everyone in the organization. Such work has gone far beyond mental skills training.

Stress

Elite sport has represented a fertile vehicle for research into stress for a number of decades. The highly visible and public nature of performance outcomes, together with the associated intrinsic and extrinsic consequences of success and failure, means that sport provides the ideal laboratory for examining the stress response and its effects (Patmore, 1986). However, sport does not have exclusivity on stress; I have encountered levels of stress in some companies that would rival the most extreme levels I have come across in elite sport—and with potentially more catastrophic consequences at organizational, team, and personal levels. My experience of dealing with stress in sport and business, and the common factors, can be divided into two main areas: stress in leaders and the need to develop a basic model of stress and coping.

Stress in leaders. I have been particularly intrigued by my experiences of working with the most senior executives in organizations, including managing directors and chief executive officers. It has been fascinating to compare their demands with those of head coaches of high-profile teams with which I have worked in sport. These are the people held responsible for the performance of organizations and teams; they get sacked and hired based on their people's performances. There is no hiding place for leaders at this level. As shown in Figure 2, their job is to establish a clear vision for the organization and to formulate a strategy that will deliver the vision. The vision and strategy must then be communicated to the whole organization. As part of this process, the leader must exhibit a level of rational thinking sufficient to satisfy some and convince others that logic has prevailed. In communicating the vision and strategy, leaders also need to exhibit emotive aspects of themselves, which will inspire everyone to follow. Such a process makes leaders highly visible and exposed (see Kakabadse, 1982; Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 1999).

Many of the people with whom I have worked at the highest levels of leadership are so continuously visible and exposed that they are highly vulnerable and often feel isolated and

lonely. They often are unable to identify who their true friends and allies are, and are therefore able to gain great value from an external agent who can offer independent help, support, and advice behind closed doors. Whether it be with chief executive officers of blue-chip companies or head coaches of national teams who appear every other day in the sports pages of national newspapers, I have experienced enormous commonality among the issues, challenges, and subsequent approaches I have adopted (see the later section on One-to-One Coaching/ Consultancy).

A basic model of stress and coping. Stress extends beyond sport and business leaders, of course, and a considerable amount of Lane 4's interventions in business have involved working with stress in lower levels of management. As in sport, increasing people's awareness of stress and its effects, together with helping them with appropriate coping strategies, has been the key. The model shown in Figure 3 has proved particularly helpful in facilitating sport and business performers' understanding of the stress-coping process. It has a strong intuitive appeal but also is based on sound theory and research findings. Specifically, the model is based on a person–environment transactional approach to stress (Cox, 1978; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), involving appraisal of a stressor as either a threat or opportunity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and leading to a multidimensional response in cognitive, physiological, and behavioral terms (see Lacey, 1967). Coping strategies then can take three different forms: (a) deal with the mental, physical, and/or behavioral symptoms (i.e., emotion-focused coping); (b) reappraisal; or (c) eliminate or minimize the stress source (i.e., problem-focused coping; see Billings & Moos, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This simple model emanates mainly from theory and empirical findings from the mainstream psychology literature that have been applied successfully in the sport domain (see Gould, Ecklund, & Jackson, 1993; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996) and apply equally well in the business world. The raised awareness of the stress response and the various coping options open not only to individuals but also to organizations provide a structure and framework within which stress and its effects can be easily understood and tackled in a systematic manner. The model is now employed in numerous organizations with which Lane 4 has consulted.
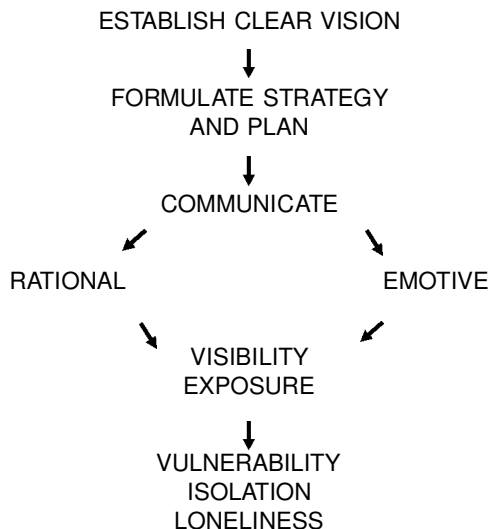

Figure 2. No hiding place for leaders (© Lane 4; reprinted with permission).

Leadership

There is a huge literature on leadership in occupational psychology and organizational behavior. Although the literature on leadership in sport is not as voluminous, its importance is equally as evident at the applied level. Whether it be the leadership displayed by the top level or the leadership behaviors adopted by empowered individuals, effective leadership is the lifeblood of both sport and business organizations. Wherever Lane 4 has consulted, leadership has emerged as a key area to address. Wading through the different views and approaches to leadership in the literature has proved a major task; arriving at an intuitive model applicable in sport and business, and which also has sound underpinning theory and empirical support, has been even more of a challenge. The model shown in Figure 4 represents an amalgamation of research findings from the organizational and sport psychology literatures, and also the sense I have made of my own related experiences in the two contexts.

The most notable aspect of the model is that performance is at the top. In business, there is continual reference to "bottom-line" performance in terms of a company's turnover, profit, and so on. In sport, goals and targets often are viewed as something to which performers are aspiring and "working their way *up* to." Indeed, athletes often are encouraged to visualize their path to success as a staircase to be climbed, with ultimate achievement sitting on the top step (Gould, 1993). Hence, my experience in sport has been influential in positioning performance as something that sits above everything else. Leadership (and associated behaviors), normally positioned at the top of any organization's structure, forms the base of this model; performance targets are unlikely to be achieved in the absence of effective leadership, which forms a solid foundation for success.

The organizational behavior and occupational psychology literatures have identified an important distinction between *transactional* and *transformational* leadership. Transactional leadership involves using rewards for good performance and tending to maintain existing work
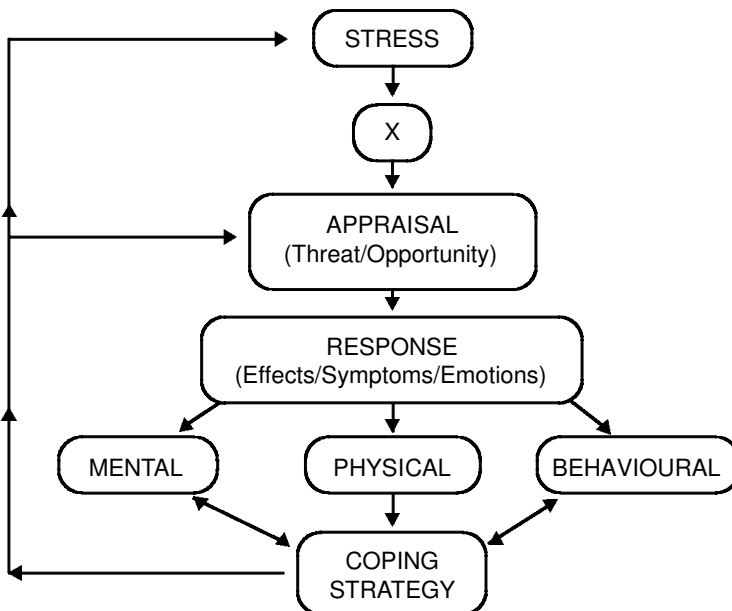

Figure 3. A basic model of stress and coping (© Lane 4; reprinted with permission).

Figure 4. The link between leadership and performance (© Lane 4; reprinted with permission).

methods unless performance goals are not being achieved. Transformational leadership augments transactional leadership by developing, inspiring, and challenging the intellect of followers to go beyond their self-interest in the service of a higher collective purpose, mission, or vision (Arnold, Cooper, & Robinson, 1998; Burns, 1978). Although these two forms of leadership are not mutually exclusive, the distinction is an important one. Transactional leadership is more appropriate to relatively stable conditions in the performance environment, in which management by exception and a reliance on bureaucratic processes can prove functional (Bass, 1990). However, the legacy of transactional leadership can be overcontrol and risk-aversion (Adair, 1990). In transformational leadership, the emphasis is on leaders with vision, creativity, and innovation who are capable of getting people to share their dreams. This form of leadership is effective and required in organizations that are responding to a rapidly changing environment (McKenna, 1994; Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

Research by Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990) showed that six transformational leadership behaviors (identifying and articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, fostering the acceptance of group goals, high performance expectations, individualized support, and intellectual stimulation) and one transactional leadership behavior (contingent reward behavior) predicted employee behaviors, but only through the employee attitudes of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and trust in and loyalty to leaders. Thus, leadership behaviors do not impact directly on behaviors and subsequent performance in the model, but they do have a direct effect on people's attitudes (see Russell, 2001). Research from the sport psychology literature suggests that coaching is an important leadership competency because it also has been found to have important effects on performers' attitudes (Smith & Smoll, 1997).

In summary, the model shown in Figure 4 emphasizes the extent to which leaders are dependent on their people to deliver, and how transformational leadership, in particular, impacts people's attitudes. Of course, already enlightened leaders do not require this "evidence," but there is an abundance of leaders in both sport and business who do. This model is being employed in a number of Lane 4's business and sport clients as the foundation for large-scale interventions around culture change, leadership development, and coaching initiatives.

High-Performing Teams

> Ten years ago people didn't talk about teams. They existed, but they were conventional, func-
> tion-bound things—accounting, finance, production, advertising teams, all made up of spe-
> cialists in those functions or "silos." But a team revolution has occurred since then. . . . There
> are lots of kinds of teams and each has its own unique potential to fall on its face. (Robbins &
> Finley, 1998, p. 7)

   With this increasing realization in the business world of the importance of teams has come
the demand for consultants with expert knowledge and experience of working with them.
Sport has been an obvious area for business organizations to begin their search for such ex-
perts. One of the important learning points from sport relates to the countless examples of
teams with reputably the best individual talent and ability which have fallen short of perfor-
mance expectations. High-performing teams, therefore, do not necessarily have the best indi-
vidual talent and ability available, which means that other variables—such as motivation, re-
spect, responsibility, and communication—are of paramount importance.
   Lane 4 has received innumerable requests from business organizations to work with teams
of every imaginable type. Their requests have ranged from helping to build newly formed
teams to working with already high-performing teams to make them even better. These two
different scenarios are, of course, far from being mutually exclusive, and the simple create–
unite–perform (CUP) model shown in Figure 5 has been developed to illustrate how newly
formed teams can be developed into high-performing ones. The basic principles of the model
are that high-performing teams have members whose talents and abilities are complementary,
and whose effectiveness is underpinned by continuous team building that facilitates high-
quality teamwork.
   Team building.   The CUP model begins with the premise that the key to team building is
to *create* a positive psychological environment, which forms the foundation for sustained
high-level performance. There are a number of components of the team-building phase that
conceptually—and also in my own experience with sport and business teams—are fundamen-
tal to the team building process:

Perform

⇧

Unite

⇧

Create

Team
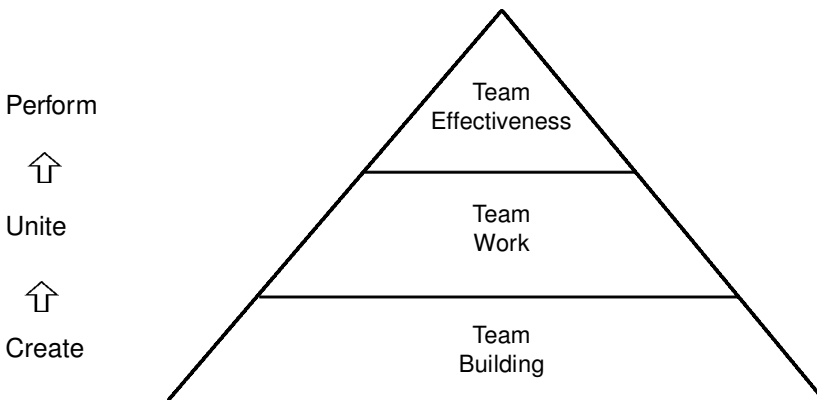Effectiveness

Team
Work

Team
Building

Figure 5. Create, unite, perform (CUP): The essence of high-performing teams (© Lane 4; reprinted
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- Awareness, clarity, respect, and acceptance of team members' *individual differences* (e.g., values, personalities, priorities, skills). This is a key factor in the team being able to balance individual and team needs (Crace & Hardy, 1997).

- Clearly defined *roles* that are accepted by all team members (Carron, Spink, & Prapavessis, 1997).

- Structured methods and boundaries of *communication* that are agreed upon by all team members (Carron, 1988).

- An agreed upon and shared specific purpose in the form of *vision* and *mission* and long-term *goals* of the team (DePree, 1989; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Yukelson, 1997). This, in turn, facilitates task cohesion within the team.

- A fundamental *shared understanding of the performance environment* in which the team is operating, and what is required to satisfy its demands (see Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Smit, 2001).

- *Reward systems* that provide incentive to the team as opposed to individual members (Yukelson, 1997).

- *Social cohesion,* established through a team identity and distinctiveness, which leads to feelings of pride in team membership, a sense of togetherness, and loyalty to one another (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Carron et al., 1997). Team charters or covenants, which comprise agreed upon values that subsequently guide team behaviors, also are a powerful means of enhancing cohesion.

- *Leaders* who develop and share a clear vision, blend the talents of individuals into a smooth-working unit, are aware of and accommodate individual differences within the team, and inspire collective efficacy (Yukelson, 1997).

- *Participation* by team members in important decisions about the team's future, such as team goals, team values, and strategy (Latham, Winters, & Locke, 1994; Widmeyer & Ducharme, 1997; Yukelson, 1997).

Team work.   Teamwork is about the synergy of the team and how it goes about its day-to-day activities. Key areas that underpin how high-performing teams *unite* are these:

- *Leaders* who, on a day-to-day basis, make people feel valued by *involving* them in the decision-making process, and also consistently recognizing their contributions to the team. Their behaviors have a major influence on team climate, satisfaction, and interpersonal attraction (Smith & Smoll, 1997). They are able to combine this *people focus* with high performance expectations and a *results-driven* structure that sits comfortably in the team which has been created and is now in the process of uniting (Larson & Lafasto, 1989; Russell, 2001).

- *Mutual accountability, cooperation, and effort* in pursuit of the team's goals (Carron et al., 1997; Yukelson, 1997), and based on a fair division of labor (Wiley & Brooks, 2000).

- *Role conformity,* in the sense of individual members gaining satisfaction and fulfillment from performing the roles identified and agreed to in the team-building phase (Dawe & Carron, 1990).

- Constant *monitoring and reviewing of team goals*, with associated team rewards for successful progress (Widmeyer & Ducharme, 1997).

- *Social support* in the form of tangible (e.g., extra-role behaviors in the form of helping another member of the team complete a task), informational (e.g., informing a team member of available support networks/resources), and emotional support (e.g., providing a team member with comfort when under stress; House, 1981; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997).

- *Team spirit* derived from a commitment to shared values and a common purpose, and reflected in behaviors and attitudes such as positive peer pressure (e.g., ensuring the team is continually adhering to agreements made during the team-building process), collective efficacy, and putting the welfare of the team before personal goals (Gilson, Pratt, Roberts, & Weymes, 2000; Yukelson, 1997).

- *Open communication* based on trust and honesty, which allows interpersonal conflict to be addressed and support to be provided where appropriate (Yukelson, 1997).

- *Participation* by team members in day-to-day decision making (Carron et al., 1997; Latham et al., 1994; Wiley & Brooks, 2000).

Team effectiveness. Of course, teams are judged externally not on how they *create* or *unite*, but on how they *perform*. The critical criteria for judging the performance or effectiveness of teams according to the CUP model are as follow:

- Continual assessment of and response to changing internal (e.g., team composition) and external (e.g., the organization's goals) demands (Hanson & Lubin, 1988; Hardy & Crace, 1997; Smit, 2001).

- Creativity and innovation (West, 1994).

- Consistent achievement of internally focused goals (e.g., adhering to agreed upon behaviors, productivity norms; Riley, 1993; Yukelson, 1997).

- Consistent achievement of externally focused goals (e.g., customer satisfaction, "beating the opposition"; Mannix, Thatcher, & Jehn, 2001).

The key principles of the CUP model have proved useful to both sport and business organizations in helping to simplify the apparent complexity of team functioning. The model has helped to clarify some basic differences between team building, teamwork, and team effectiveness. This, in turn, has facilitated the process of identifying specific strategies and interventions that can be established and implemented to help teams realize their full potential.

One-to-One Coaching/Consulting

The reference to both coaching and consulting in the title of this section reflects a basic difference in terminology between the sport and business contexts. A one-to-one session involving an athlete and a sport psychologist is commonly referred to as consulting; the same process in business is more commonly known as coaching.

The last few years have witnessed a rapid growth in the use of one-to-one business coaching (Jones, 2001; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997). A recent survey reported by the British Psychological Society (see Lambert, 2001) stated that 70% of organizations in the United

Kingdom are using one-to-one coaching of some form, and Carter (2001) estimated the number of executive coaches operating in the United States as upward of 1,500. Among the reasons offered for such growth in a recent study by the U.K.-based Institute of Employment Studies (see Carter, 2001) are the knock-on effects of the downsizing and delayering of the 1990s resulting in "lonely" and isolated senior managers, and the increasing demand by organizations for senior managers with key "soft skills."

Executives eager to find new ways to develop personally and enhance their performance generally have seen great value in applying the coaching analogy. Just as the best athletes still need and employ coaches, so too do business executives. Indeed, my experience as a business coach in one context and as a sport psychology consultant in another suggests that it is a good analogy, because there are several common issues I have encountered (see Figure 6). Stress management, confidence, motivation, and focus are well-documented in the literature as being key to performance in sport (Hardy et al., 1996), but my experience is that they also are key to business performance, particularly among the highest levels of leadership and management (see the earlier section on Stress in Leaders). Dealing with performance issues around organizational factors, such as frustrations surrounding poor communication or how to minimize some of the organizational constraints and maximize the supports referred to earlier, also forms a significant proportion of the coaching/consulting process. Finally, interpersonal relationship issues also figure prominently in this work, often linking into teamwork, leadership, and management issues.

SOME RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article includes a number of models and frameworks that reflect an attempt to translate theory and research findings into a form that is meaningful to a broad audience across any performance context. The models and frameworks also are presented as forming the foundation of applied interventions that can *make a difference* to performance. These models and frameworks require rigorous investigation, in addition to some specific research questions that emanate from them, including these: What are the key common characteristics of and differences between high-performance environments in sport and business? What is the precise
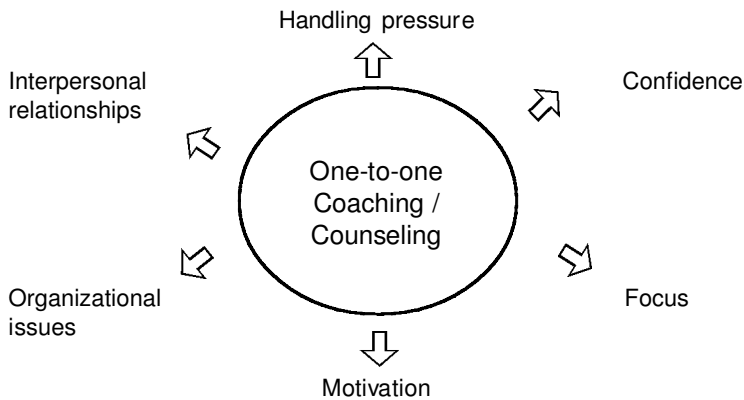
Figure 6. Some common themes in one-to-one business coaching and sport psychology consulting (© Lane 4; reprinted with permission).

nature of the relationship between leadership behaviors and performance? Do transformational and transactional leadership styles have differential effects in sport and business? How do the leaders of large organizations cope with the visibility and exposure associated with such positions? What are the key common characteristics of and differences between high-performing teams in sport and business? What are the key mechanisms through which one-to-one coaching in business and consulting in sport have their beneficial effects?

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article represents reflections on my personal experiences over the last several years in applying skills and knowledge of performance excellence in sport to business. Although there are some differences that have not been addressed due to space limitations, there are many more commonalities which have made the task of applying elite sport principles to business a relatively easy one. Among the most significant conclusions I have drawn from my experiences are that performers in both contexts are very challenging, and also very rewarding, to work with; performers in both contexts are highly driven to succeed and thus hungry to find new ways of moving forward, the previous point that means you do not have long to make an impression—they are busy people with no time to waste. Perhaps the most significant conclusion is that organizational issues probably have the biggest impact on performance in both environments. Gone are the days when sport psychologists, whether working in sport or in business, dealt solely in mental skills training. All in all, my experience is that the principles of elite performance in sport are easily transferable to the business context, and also that sport has a considerable amount to learn from excellence in business.

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