

HOW TO WIN – Tapping the Power of Discretionary Effort

The British Olympic 4 man rowing team decided to set themselves a goal for the Beijing Olympics – it was simple, clear and compelling – ‘we have to beat the Australians’. They knew that by doing this they stood a great chance of winning Gold. They did not stop there however, but framed a potentially behaviour modifying question, ‘*Will it make the boat go faster?*’, and they consistently applied this question to all of their actions in the year leading up to the Olympics. So, when Christmas came around and the punishing training regime had a scheduled ease down, talk of a ‘quick drink to celebrate the season’ was challenged with the key question – ‘*Will it make the boat go faster?*’ The answer was clearly ‘no’ - so abstinence won the day. More remarkably, when the day of the Beijing opening ceremony finally arrived bringing the chance to proudly parade with their Team GB colleagues waving the Union Jack – surely one of the highlights for any Olympic athlete – once again the key question was applied. Once again it was met with the same response. So, instead of attending the opening ceremony the rowing team headed for the rowing machines and put in one more punishing training session. The team came from behind in the last 200 meters of the race to beat the Australians by 1.28 seconds to win Gold. The key question then disappeared, its work was done.

The dedication of the rowers, and indeed all Olympians, is genuinely inspirational. Such focus, such drive, such passion – where do they get it from? Well, at Sensei we happen to believe they, along with the rest of us, are born with it. We

come into the world naturally curious, passionate and genetically programmed to learn by asking, trying, succeeding (or failing) and growing as a consequence. What happens to this curiosity, passion and natural energy source in the corporate world is often unfortunate. It is all too often dissipated and quashed under a barrage of ‘activity and action’, without any reference to a compelling vision of success.

The current challenging times are exacerbating this problem in many organisations. Far too many leaders are soaking up the gloom and simply amplifying the despair in what they say, how they say it and what they spend their time focusing on. We hear daily about what we cannot or should not do anymore: cut this, stop that, delay here... Where are the leaders telling us what we can and should be doing?

This is first and foremost a leadership challenge. Now more than ever we need leaders who are capable of giving a clear and compelling message to their organisations and who are able to engage their people in robust conversations that create new opportunities to deliver value adding results.

The questions we have for you to ponder are:

- What are you spending most of your energies and time talking about at your leadership team meetings?
- What is your message and tone when you communicate to your people?

- What mechanisms have you put in place to get people throughout the organisation talking, sharing and collaborating to counter the negative energy propagated by the daily news bulletin?

As a consequence of these questions, what potentially game changing question can you frame that will modify daily behaviour to ensure everyone is focused on delivering activity that really counts?' In short, what is your equivalent of the rowers' question '*Will it make the boat go faster?*'

Without such a key question, you will get a version of a conversation between two business leaders that I heard recently. They were talking about the latest corporate instruction to 'cut all unnecessary spending'. The first said they really should half the training budget this year but she



Sensei is an international consulting firm that helps their clients deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

We focus on areas where companies can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit. We ensure that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business outcomes of value to the organisation, so that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ... **'We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.'**

was worried this would send out a 'negative' signal to her team. Her colleague replied, 'well I agree, so I am not doing this, I will simply half the number of candidates I approve for training this year'. I was astonished that these clearly capable and highly talented leaders thought this was an acceptable way forward! It is but one example of how the focus on cost reduction hits both 'good' and 'bad' costs without really appreciating where the real gold mine is, buried deep in every organisation. The extra effort that is unleashed when a compelling call to arms is announced, one that stirs the heart as well as the head and can counter the unfocused dissipation of discretionary effort that saps people's energy and soul. If you can tap this discretionary effort for more productive use then you can unleash some astonishing results.

So as we face challenging times, do we summon Olympian energy, dedication and inspiration from our team, or not? We summon it by realising it is largely an inherent gift. We come into the world brimming with curiosity, passion, spontaneity, a desire to learn, a willingness to be challenged and more. These are often quashed in school and in corporate life... certainly we will get precious little inspired commitment by just telling people the world is tough, they may not get paid, they shouldn't travel, etc. Our people are adults and can accept the fact they may have to sacrifice (as our Olympians did) as long as they know *what it's for*. As leaders we have to make sure there's a sane and compelling answer to that. As compelling as '*beat the Australians*' and as clear as '*will it make the boat go faster?*'

We invite you and your team to spend some time with Sensei to consider how to release and focus passion at this crucial time to deliver *real business results*. It needn't take long and the value will measurably and demonstrably outstrip the investment. At Sensei we'd love to help you identify *your question* and then help you bring that to life in your leadership team and throughout the organisation.

Malcolm Follos, April 2009