



# CULTIVATING EXCELLENCE

*The* ART, SCIENCE, *and* GRIT  
*of* HIGH PERFORMANCE  
*in* BUSINESS



## DARRYL CROSS

*with* WILLIAM CROSS

## Why and how do world-class leaders and great performers consistently beat their competition?

They realize they cannot go it alone. They use teams and coaches to amplify their results. Many performers who have already surmounted exceptional tests and challenges and have succeeded in business, sports, the military, or the arts well beyond their peers think performance is only up to the individual. Many become frustrated when hours of hard work, years of experience, and expensive educations don't lead them to the top of their domain. They are already among the best, but they want to be *the* best.

The elite realize there is only so much they can do on their own to achieve that status. They understand they need coaches, colleagues, and competitors to provide the collaboration and competition that serve as a constant push to keep forward momentum going toward attaining that next level.

In *Cultivating Excellence*, Darryl Cross uses thirty years of experience to show top performers that the key to continued enhancement of performance and success is an exceptional coach and team. They guide the elite performers to see situations and challenges in new ways (art), to perfect their craft to the *n*th degree (science), and to commit to deliberate practice that eliminates performance gaps (grit) and puts the summit within reach.



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## HOLDING A WHISTLE DOES NOT MAKE YOU A COACH

*“The best way to inspire people to superior performance is to convince them by everything you do and by your everyday attitude that you are wholeheartedly supporting them.”*

— HAROLD S. GENEEN

*“Each person holds so much power within themselves that needs to be let out. Sometimes they just need a little nudge, a little direction, a little support, a little coaching, and the greatest things can happen.”*

— PETE CARROLL

*“Most people get excited about games, but I’ve got to be excited about practice, because that’s my classroom.”*

— PATRICIA “PAT” SUMMITT

*“There are two ways to do something: the right way and again.”*

— ANONYMOUS NAVY SEAL INSTRUCTOR

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The blessing and curse of working with people who are the best at what they do is that, many times, they are not doing the best they can do. Many of us leaders, managers, and coaches are charged with making these people perform at a higher level. Leaders inspire confidence, managers guide

results, and coaches develop people. While all three roles are necessary to run a productive organization or team, it's the coach's role to develop better performers.

We've explored characteristics of high performers and how they need to balance the elements of art, science, and grit particular to their domain and craft. They also need coaches to help them.

### **PAT SUMMITT'S COACHING GENIUS**

If you are an NCAA women's basketball fan, you know the University of Tennessee's Lady Vols. This team has won more NCAA national championships than any other women's program in any sport. The Lady Vols have also made it to the national semifinals, the Final Four, twenty-four times in thirty-eight years. Suffice to say, a betting person would put money on this collegiate powerhouse to add yet another trophy to the case in Knoxville, Tennessee.

This statistic becomes more impressive when considering that, in college basketball, players leave every four years. Teams are constantly changing, which means that the stars, chemistry, and flow you count on one year can completely change the next. Teams that build dynasties have one thing in common: great coaches. At the University of Tennessee, that coach was Pat Summitt.

Summitt, a great player in her own right, started at University of Tennessee-Martin and later became co-captain of the United States Olympic basketball team. Her lasting impact—on players, the sport, and coaching as a profession—came after she retired as a player. However, Summitt's road to greatness wasn't a smooth one.

Summitt was a twenty-two-year-old graduate assistant when she was suddenly thrust into a major university head-coaching job. The existing coach had quit. Summitt was barely older than some of her players, and the job was far from glamorous. She washed uniforms, drove the players to games in a van, and even slept in opponent's gyms from time to time. Her first two years

were full: she coached, completed her master's degree, and prepared to play in the 1976 Olympics. Summitt was a driven person, and her players soon found out what that meant for them.

After winning the silver medal in the Olympics, Summitt dedicated herself to full-time coaching. Within two years, she had begun running up impressive winning records, soon establishing the Lady Vols as a perennial powerhouse.

Over the course of her coaching career (1974–2012), Summitt set records for most Final Four appearances, most tournament wins, and most total wins (to name a few). She is also notable as a coach who made sure that every single player who completed her eligibility also completed her college degree.

*All of them.*

No one is this lucky. This success over decades, with hundreds of players, and against dozens of opponents comes from an established philosophy, system, and process thoughtfully designed to maximize individual performances. All of her players were highly recruited; they were some of the best at what they did. After they joined her team, Summitt had to make them the absolute best at their game and improve upon that performance daily. That is the essence of coaching.

When it comes to people's feelings, Summitt's personal style has been compared to that of General George Patton. She used icy stares, headshakes, and a raised voice to make her points. She had only to point to the rafters of the basketball arena where all the championship banners hung to remind her players that adhering to her system and methods were the key to success.

Summitt insisted on mastering fundamentals and countless drills. She planned for every situation and scheme the Lady Vols might face from an opponent. She simulated real-life game conditions. She insisted that players reflect on what they were doing well and identify their deficiencies, demanding continuous improvement to fortify those strengths and eliminate weaknesses rather than accommodate them. While she was obsessed with winning, Summitt included losing in her philosophy:

“I have a love/hate relationship with losing. I hate how it makes me feel, which is basically sick. But I love what it brings out. It forces our players and coaches to improve and to make better decisions. Only through adversity do we arrive at a more complete perspective and understanding of the game.”<sup>1</sup>

Even though Summitt’s job was winning basketball games, she understood failure’s proper place in the big picture of life. She insisted her players sit in the first three rows of their classes and said that a class was always more important than a game. She believed that her players’ dedication to bettering themselves over the course of their lives was the most important aspect of her coaching role.

Summitt also understood that her own learning was never complete. She constantly reviewed other college and professional coaches’ styles. She adopted their defensive schemes, practice drills, and offensive plays. She realized that, to get the best out of her players, balancing the art, science, and grit of her own performance as a coach was crucial.

After thirty-eight seasons, Summitt retired in 2012. She’d been diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s, and on June 2016, the disease took her life.

Summitt’s legacy is secure in many ways. She has records that many believe will never be broken. She helped hundreds of players get degrees and grow from awkward teenagers to successful women who would be ready to meet the challenges of career, family, and life. Perhaps her biggest legacy will be from what she did for coaching. At least forty-five of her former players, about a third of the total players Summitt coached, have become coaches themselves, sharing their knowledge from youth to professional leagues.<sup>2</sup>

These former players will be passing on pieces of Summitt’s style and philosophy, helping others achieve greatness just as Summitt helped them realize their potentials.

Coaching lasts. Great coaches last forever.

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE AVERAGE

Take a moment to recall the worst coach you ever had. Do you have the mental image? Most of us picture someone with a whistle, wearing bad polyester pants, and barking out orders and random barrages of criticism. This coach believed bad performances were best remedied with punishment: wind sprints, withholding water, or publicly ridiculing offenders in front of their teammates. Most will never forget them . . . but not because they made anyone better athletes.

Now, think of the best coaches you ever had. You probably remember their name, and thinking back on them causes you to smile. Playing for them might not have been a walk in the park, but there was a method to their approach. Toughness and support were administered equally. They demanded the best from you and were able to get it. You regarded these coaches as mentors and positive influences on multiple areas of your life. They made you a better performer, a better person, and a better influence on others.

Coaches have this lasting impact. Out of the many people who populate a child's life, teachers and coaches tend to be the ones remembered. We are readily influenced and most vulnerable in these formative, early years (and in formative phases of our adult lives). Whether we encounter coaches in sport, business, or other areas, they positively—and negatively—push us, maximizing or snuffing out potential. When you think of the bad coaches, your memory of how they looked, what silly things they said, and how they acted may be almost cartoonish. When you remember the great coaches, you remember the lessons, support, and sense of confidence derived from unlocking capabilities that would characterize your entire life.

Bad coaches only want wins. Great coaches want to create winners.

Now, think about an average coach you have had, someone who wasn't that bad or great. Perhaps that coach was adequate, sometimes even very good. Can you remember a name, recall a face? Probably not. These "simply OK" coaches performed their task but left no lasting impact. At that point in life, mediocrity

may have been acceptable. Once we focus on areas that ARE important, however, there's no room for merely adequate. We must have great coaches.

Great coaches are the difference between generating a win and becoming a perpetual winner.

## LEADING, MANAGING, AND COACHING

Leaders are neither born nor made. At too many organizations, leaders seemingly appear out of thin air. Young go-getters with promise become hard-working members of a team. They start down a progressive path of promotions and create a reputation, mostly on their own, based on results, work ethics, and skills, becoming known as people with great potential. The boss asks them to serve on some key committee or task force, and they are then known as a rising star. Then, one day, the boss's boss needs someone to be in charge; someone should step forward. The rising star doesn't notice that everyone else immediately took one step backward. Uh oh.

Now this up-and-comer is head of a team, division, practice group, or geographic area and suddenly responsible for delivering products and services, supervising others, and building a growing and profitable business. These responsibilities simultaneously require a leader, manager, and coach. While that rising star was being promoted based on individual contributions, none of this work prepared them in any way for being responsible for another's performance. *Being a great individual performer does not mean success as a leader, manager, or coach.* When you are in charge, you have to master all three domains (leadership, management, and coaching) and you may have to leave your old domain (whatever got you the promotion in the first place) behind.

Many people will mistakenly blend leadership and management or debate the proper definition of each. Vineet Nayar, founder of the Sampark



Foundation and former CEO of HCL Technologies, stated that the difference is that “management consists of controlling a group or a set of entities to accomplish a goal. Leadership refers to an individual’s ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward organizational success. Influence and inspiration separate leaders from managers, not power and control.”<sup>3</sup>

**Leadership inspires confidence. Management guides results.  
But coaching develops people.**

People in charge are expected to produce new business, increase revenue, and secure higher profits. Many leaders fall into the trap of thinking that by managing results they are concurrently coaching their people to develop and sustain business. Thus, they assume a command and control approach that emphasizes the inspecting and auditing aspects of management without any of the guidance of true coaching.

Successful coaching is dependent on the proper approach and attitude about creating better performers. Coaching is particularly hard for rising stars to accept. They must suddenly rely on the efforts of others instead of the yoke they used to proudly wear on their own backs.

## **WHY DO HIGH PERFORMERS NEED COACHES?**

It is a fair question—why in the world would the greatest talents in their domain need a coach? If they are the best in the world, what can a coach or anyone else possibly add to their status?

Let’s first address this question by defining coaching:

*Coaching is the art, science, and grit of repetitively helping others become better than they were yesterday.*

“Coach” is a verb. It implies action and present tense. It’s also a noun. However the word functions in language, “coaching” isn’t happening if the person being supported isn’t improving. In fact, don’t get too tied up in the title; “coaches” may also be called mentors, teachers, advisors, instructors, and even parents. The defining characteristic of coaching is whether the performer improves. Progress comes from interactions between a performer and their coach and as a result of the coach’s planning, counseling, and monitoring of the performer’s results.

Frankly, it would be hard to find a performer or leader at the top of any field who has not used (or is not currently employing) a coach. Even the best reach plateaus where they become content and confident in their achievements. Plateaus can quickly lead to complacency and arrested development. Research has shown that avoiding complacency is an essential component of success. Coaches accelerate the process of learning new skills, offer critical and candid feedback, and show performers what is needed to perform at their next level.<sup>4</sup>

## **RESISTANCE TO COACHING**

However, some performers do not want candid feedback or to be pushed. They have reached a comfortable level of performance and are content to remain there as long as possible. Insecure performers may feel they are already operating at a level beyond their actual ability and fear incompetencies might be “discovered.” Another reason why some above-average performers are resistant to coaching is that they feel they don’t need help. Having completely mastered one domain, these performers assume the other domain couldn’t be as difficult. Finally, in some organizational cultures, performers who reach out for help may be perceived as weak and unable to maintain success on their own.

While all of these are understandable reasons to resist formalized, persistent coaching, it is almost unheard of for performers to reach the top of

a specific domain without a coach. When you are already in the top tier, the difference between where you are and where you want to be is infinitesimally small. The coach's job is to monitor and manage that gap for the performer.

We've talked about Usain Bolt, the fastest sprinter to set foot on planet Earth. Glen Mills, a legend in Jamaican speed coaching for decades, has been Bolt's coach since 2004. Bolt looks to him for guidance both on and off the track. "He has always made the right decisions for me," said Bolt. "He is a guiding light in my career, and he has shown me the way to improve myself both as a person and as an athlete."<sup>5</sup>

About fifteen months before winning her first Olympic gold medal, swimmer Katie Ledecky's coach, Yuri Suguiyama, completely overhauled Ledecky's stroke. He'd noticed that her unique body mechanics, including a better than average hip rotation, would support a "gallop" stroke. The gallop stroke, more common among male swimmers, is so named because one arm takes a longer stroke than the other. Suguiyama also helped her revise her kicking style. This responsive coaching pays off; Ledecky has *never* lost a major international meet.<sup>6</sup>

Eric Schmidt, Google's former chief executive officer, was once told by one of his board members that he needed a coach. Schmidt was already the leader of arguably one of the world's most successful companies, so he was taken aback by the suggestion. At first, he saw the suggestion as an affront to his achievements and a suggestion that he was not doing as well as he should. Later, he realized that this was not a punitive suggestion. It was a tool to make the best even better. After a reluctant start, Schmidt acknowledges that everyone needs someone to watch, observe, ask questions, and see themselves as others do.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to what some believe, top business performers actually *do* want coaching. Seeking it out, though, might not always be their idea (21 percent of the time, someone else suggested coaching). In a 2013 Stanford University study, almost all CEOs said they were open to being coached; only 33 percent of them, however, actually were.<sup>8</sup>

There is clearly a disconnect regarding coaching that appears to be discipline related. Domains such as performance arts, sports, and other team-related activities have culturally accepted the idea of coaching as an acceptable method for performance enhancement. Business, finance, law, and medicine are usually less likely to utilize coaching due to the individually oriented aspect of these professions. In all cases and no matter the discipline, coaching resistance is usually based on three things: culture, receptiveness, and coaching quality.

Culture is extremely important to coaching success in any organization. If seeking help and requesting feedback is looked upon as weakness, they will be shunned. Elite performers find the top to be an exceptionally lonely place, and they are often expected to be responsible for their own success. However, no one would argue that it is against the best interests of the board, management, employees, customers, stockholders, and vendors for the top performers to be successful. If coaching has been shown to improve the performance of everyone, including the elite, the culture must embrace it.

Therefore, steps must be taken to make coaching an acceptable and even mandatory practice for all top performers—and *not* when one is failing. Coaching should be introduced during high-growth mode, and it should include as many performers as possible. It can also help performers accelerate uphill during hard times. Thus, coaching is of the utmost strategic importance for any organization that seeks the greatest return on all investments.

Receptiveness to coaching is critical. Ironically, many top performers have reached elite status thanks to an elaborate network of coaching and support. Their parents spotted their natural gifts and then hired tutors or private coaches. They later went to specific schools or training camps due to the faculty or coaching staff. People constantly pushed and provided them feedback until they “made it” to the big time. Then, suddenly, they stopped needing coaching (in their opinion). To stay on top, these high performers started relying on past accomplishments, raw talent, and status (their selection by a great

organization, being surrounded by outstanding performers, and so on). They are no longer “coachable.”

Professional coaches often lament potentially great performers who, because of their resistance to coaching, will never reach their potential. These players lack *coachability*—a willingness to take feedback and critique from others and then act upon it to improve performance.

Expert August Turak boiled coachability down to five key characteristics:

1. Humility
2. A bias towards action
3. Purity of purpose
4. Ability to surrender control
5. Faith in the unknown<sup>9</sup>

The common thread here is that performers must accept that they cannot do it all on their own. Coaching and performing are two different domains, and no one can competently manage both while simultaneously being the subject.

Organizations have a responsibility to encourage coaching, just as the individual has a responsibility to be coachable. The coach has a responsibility, too: to work in the best interests of the performer and deliver improved outcomes. When great performers have the proper resources and still fail to improve, that’s not a performance problem. It’s a coaching problem.

Many of the problems related to poor coaching come from leaders and managers who *think* they are coaching but are not actually affecting their followers’ performance in a positive manner. Ineffective coaching is usually found in a few common manifestations. Perhaps you’ll recognize someone in your organization (or even yourself) in these descriptions.

## **SIX FALSE COACHING PERSONAS**

### **Preachers**

These leaders stand in front of an individual or group and proclaim the direction to be taken, importance in following, and gains derived from following their vision. They state the expected results and communicate full confidence that all will carry their own weight. Preachers expect that the power of their words, indefatigability, and boundless charisma will inspire effort. The shared end goal is the motivation for success. However, as soon as the preacher leaves the room, no one knows what to do next.

Good coaches inspire. They place a vision of success in performers' minds. Performers take a leap of faith to follow coaches into new ways of thinking, acting, and winning. Like good coaches, preachers appeal to the heart, and this is a critical part of success. However, inspiration and vision alone do not equal coaching.

### **Drill Sergeants**

Drill sergeants believe that no one will work as hard as needed unless they are constantly being pushed. In many cases, Drill Sergeants believe people are soft and that they won't find the business the team needs nor work as hard as they did when they were younger. The default position is that the key to success derives from more effort and greater difficulty. Drill Sergeants usually tell people to try harder and put in more hours.

Good coaches hold people accountable for their effort and intensity. They check that performers are doing what is required for them to improve. From time to time, Drill Sergeants push people beyond their self-limitations. However, driving people into the ground day in and day out is not coaching.

**Reminiscers**

These coaches talk about how they used to do things. They expect everyone to basically become their clone, mimicking what worked for them in the past as they rose through the ranks. They believe if everyone would just do things that worked before, success will appear in the future. You will hear phrases such as “back in my day” or “when I was getting started” included in a long-winded trip down memory lane. Not only did this coach walk to work uphill both ways; the Reminiscer lived in a simpler, more genteel time while doing it.

It's true that past successes and wisdom can help a performer who needs coaching. However, unless this type of coach happens to own a time machine, much of that advice is irrelevant. Good coaches know that current competitors are totally different, rules may have changed, and what worked thirty years ago in almost any domain is not as applicable today. Looking back to the past and sharing what helped someone succeed gives perspective. However, it is not coaching.

**Backseat Drivers**

This type of coach never fully lets go of any opportunity to direct other performers. No one will do the right thing without their guidance, so Backseat Drivers micromanage every part of performance. They make performers memorize processes and scripts and get upset when those are not followed to the letter. They frequently act as “player-coach,” skeptical that winning can happen without their direct involvement. In sport, when people are not performing well, they want to run onto the field and show “how it's done.” In business, they take over and handle all the difficult discussions and meetings because the stakes are too high to trust an employee to do it correctly.

Good coaches, who are experts in a domain and channel that knowledge into coaching, are great assets to any performer. They fully realize their role is not to be the best performer. The coach's role is to help others succeed, which cannot happen when performers are never trusted to learn and improve on their own. Being able to perform at a high level can generate respect from people, but it is not coaching.

### **Monday Morning Quarterbacks**

Monday Morning Quarterbacks spend most of their time critiquing efforts and results after the fact. They point out what people should have done or what *they* would've done in a similar situation. These armchair critics only see what went wrong and may obsess over specific details; often, because these items were never mentioned in planning or preparation, those mistakes may seem overblown to the performer. Most coaching attempts come across as negative feedback and may be accompanied by some form of punishment, revoking of rewards, or verbal lambasting.

Frustration often arises when the coach doesn't believe that performers or employees are doing exactly as instructed. This coach neglects to see that performers had not been properly prepared for certain situations or did not know how to adjust when the situation did not follow the coach's "perfect" plan. Exceptional coaches know that feedback and reflection are critical to improving performance. They also know that, when feedback and reflection *aren't* linked to an ongoing enhancement plan, it is not coaching.

### **Bean Counters**

These cerebral coaches spend all of their time tracking metrics, numbers, angles, hours, dollars, trend lines, and any other science- and math-based



measurement they can get their hands on. They champion a manufacturing approach to generating higher performance: volume, intensity, six sigma (quality improvement), or lean (eliminating wasted steps).

They use formulas, technology, and modeling to predict performance improvement. They grade past efforts. They communicate in very specific and precise ways. This type of coach tells a sprinter to come out of the blocks with body at a 44-degree angle and shins at a 24-degree angle and expects performers to know exactly how to do it. When the performer fails to follow through, they're frustrated. They figured out the perfect method—why won't the performer just do it?



Technology and hundreds of years of research have allowed coaches to share best practices and techniques. They must not forget they are dealing with *people*, not robots. Humans have variances to deal with, emotions to manage, and limitations to how much they can do. Perfection of technique, eliminating wasteful effort, and modeling the ideal effort have their places. However, when focus is on detached measuring and monitoring of facts instead of on tools to help people improve through a systematic, incremental approach, it is not coaching.

Many performers and organizations instantly envision people who fit these personas. Some of them are closely related to each other.

Bean Counters and Monday Morning Quarterbacks are obsessed with numbers, plans, scripts, and smooth trend lines. They despise variance and surprises. All performers, in their minds, are interchangeable, if only they would all just follow the plan. Reminisces and Backseat Drivers cannot let go of being a performer; they want to do it themselves and don't understand why performers can't simply copy their efforts. Their own past success is

their only blueprint for the success of others. They may not count the numbers, but they have a gut feel for what works. Preachers and Drill Instructors think people need to be inspired and pushed or they won't do anything for themselves. They believe that people have to be extrinsically motivated and rewarded if they are to ever achieve greatness.

One common characteristic of all the false personas is an insistence on managing one aspect of the process of performance improvement instead of viewing it in a holistic manner. Ineffective coaches are just monitoring the desired end product (success) and, when there is a gap in achieving that success, they have just one or two intervention techniques to manage the process (development).

The ideal coach should be able to use some of the traits of the above personas and incorporate a variety of techniques and methods at appropriate stages. It is perfectly acceptable to be tough on people when needed, but this cannot be the only method. Sharing past experiences is helpful, but they are not always applicable to new situations. There may be times when you have to step in, but if you always do so, you have become the performer and not the coach! Remember, the word "coach" should not be viewed as a noun. It is active. And what we are stressing here are the actions of the coach. Successful coaches continuously improve the individual performer. If responsible for a team of performers, they may have an overall infrastructure that supports all of them. But that infrastructure does not eliminate the need for each performer to be coached in a specific way. If coaching is handled properly, success will be the natural manifestation of efforts.

## **WHAT MAKES A TRUE COACH?**

Most leaders talk about end results and vision. They may offer a general path for "how to get there," but this path is often lacking step-by-step details. It would be like people trying to convince their neighbors during the

California Gold Rush (1848–1855) to pack up everything they owned and head to California to seek their fortunes. They would talk about the possibilities, the limitless rewards, and chances for a better life for their families. “Head West, young man!” is their call to action. But a true leader would also accompany them all along the way because, after a few weeks in a wagon, enthusiasm would be sure to wane. A leader keeps people going by focusing on what is ahead.

Managers spend the majority of their time inspecting and auditing. Inspecting involves monitoring activity and approaches, while auditing is reviewing performance after the fact. A manager in the gold rush example would calculate miles per day, average repair times, food consumption, and return on investment per settler. A manager optimizes performance by looking backward at what has occurred and trying to improve results.

**Leading and managing are the beginning and end of the performance development process. The middle portion is coaching.**

## **ASSESSING THE PERFORMER**

True coaches look at each performer and coaching situation to ask the following questions:

- What is the desired end result?
- What performance is needed to reach that result?
- If the performer is not yet capable, what performance gap should be addressed?
- What causes and factors create this performance gap?

- What strategies, tactics, and interventions will narrow that gap?
- How will performance plans be managed and monitored?
- At the end of training, how will the performance plan be evaluated? How will the gap between actual and desired performance be measured?
- How can the program be periodically adjusted so that performance gaps continue to decrease?



Any domain shares this process. Coaches address performance gaps between actual and desired results, shrinking the functional reserve. You can't accomplish this without a great coach.

These assessment questions are part of a systematic process known as the Human Performance Improvement (HPI) model.<sup>10</sup> Developed by the Association for Talent Development (ATD), HPI is a systematic process that focuses first on results, not needs, wants, activities, or efforts. It is a combination of multiple disciplines: organizational development, analytics and evaluation, instructional systems design, management, behaviorism, and programmed instruction. HPI was designed to help the corporate and professional worlds improve organizational performance, but its lessons can be applied to any coaching situation.

HPI has a simple, circular model: identify goals; ascertain and quantify the gap between actual and desired performance; identify causes for the gap; develop and recommend specific solutions; evaluate the results. This process, designed to raise potential, shrink functional reserves, and adapt to new demands, continues *ad infinitum*. Since competition, conditions, and situations are always changing, performance gaps will always need to be addressed.



## THE OCTANE HIGHPER COACHING MODEL

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As we know, improvement for a performer without a coach, instructor, or teacher is usually a very time consuming, frustrating, and expensive game of trial and error. Individuals and organizations can spend countless hours and dollars on unproductive activities and approaches. We discussed earlier how setting goals, modeling others, and engaging in basic training methods raises performers' potential, not their actual performance. The net result: if improvement occurs, that improvement is by sheer luck or at a high cost that cannot be sustained over time or when conditions change.

However, a high-performance coach can bring best practices to the table and identify the critical fundamentals that can be incessantly repeated. These coaches help design programs to push people beyond their current limits so they do not plateau. They manage competition and dynamic simulations to get the most out of their performers. This shrinks the functional reserve—the largest portion of the performance gap—and improves results.

The Octane HighPer Coaching model consists of five key elements: fundamentals, situational planning, simulation, reflection, and continuous improvement.

Like HPI, the Octane HighPer Coaching model is an ongoing process that emphasizes the art, science, and grit of high performance and allows for periods of feedback and review to fine-tune continuous enhancement of the program.

## START WITH SIMULATION

We are first going to give special attention to the third element, simulation. This element is by far the most important aspect of coaching, but it is often the most neglected in domains where engagement doesn't put lives, property, or careers at stake. However, when results count—and you may only get one chance—simulation, regardless of domain, is always the most critical coaching component. It identifies gaps and evaluates performance in the most realistic way possible, guiding coaches and performers as they continuously achieve and maintain high performance.

Some believe that simulation is a more advanced stage of coaching that should only be introduced after a period of training, drills, and practice. However, we believe that conducting simulations is essential throughout the performance improvement program *including at the beginning, when followed by immediate reflection between the performer and coach*. (A more detailed description of the specific method, *reflective coaching*, will be described in detail in the next chapter.) Even if there is limited risk involved or plenty of time to prepare, simulation should happen immediately to ascertain performance gaps created by skill weaknesses and self-imposed limitations. Effective simulation shows the performer's exact level of operation.

Obviously, if the skill to be coached is learning to fly a plane, we are not going to recommend learning how to land the hard way (on a very hard runway). Computer programs and other exercises can simulate tasks without introducing undue risk. Likewise, new lawyers or law students would not conduct an actual closing argument in a murder trial when an actual client's life is on the line. They would practice in the comfort of a conference room at their law firm, with people playing the roles of judge, client, and opposing counsel. Business executives trying to land a multimillion-dollar client should not be learning on the job when such a deal could make or break the company's year; they should be simulating closing complex deals in a training environment until ready to go into the field.

However, in all cases, simulation should be conducted in a safe, yet realistic, environment to establish a baseline of performance necessary to begin working on the individual skill components to improve over time.

### **Whole-Part-Whole**

This technique is championed by USA Rugby, the national governing body for the sport of rugby union in the United States. The Whole-Part-Whole method involves some very basic instruction followed by immediate immersion into a simulated event. Mistakes and experimentation are to be expected and encouraged! After a period of time, the simulation is ended and performers can ask questions. Coaches give feedback about what they thought were the more challenging aspects of the simulation; this identifies fundamentals to work on and future situations to plan for. Coaches then work with the individuals on improving specific skills (e.g., passing, catching, alignment, etc.). After practicing and integrating key skills together, the simulation is run again to see how performance has improved and what gaps remain.

While this coaching method is based on sport, it is used in many high-performance settings where performers need to develop the ability to think and rapidly adapt to changing conditions.

Let's say business executives wanted to improve their ability to win multimillion-dollar deals. You could start by having them read sales books or attend training sessions. However, how would you know where they should start and what areas they need to improve? You need to start with the simulation. In this case, you offer the executives ten minutes of instruction and a basic description of a client conversation. Someone plays the client role (a demanding one), and the simulation begins. Most likely, the executives will not do exceptionally well. After fifteen minutes, the simulation would be paused and the executives and observing coach would discuss what happened. They both may agree on areas that need improvement: public

speaking, handling price objections, and rebutting false claims by competitors. These are the fundamental skills and situations they would need to work on to address the performance gap. When the simulation is run again, the executives should do much better. They should gain confidence and evaluate where their performance gaps still exist.

This simulation-evaluation-improvement cycle defines the Whole-Part-Whole coaching method, which is the core philosophy of the Octane HighPer Coaching model. Improvement always starts with simulation, a recurring element throughout the performers' ever growing mastery of their domain.

### **The Opening Simulation: Scrimmage**

The best coaching should always start with an introductory simulation, known as a scrimmage. Only afterward will the coach proceed to the other elements of the Octane HighPer Coaching model.

Scrimmage is defined as “a practice session or informal game between one or more teams.” The word has its origins in the late Middle English word *skirmish*, which means a “confused struggle between players.” That is why we chose scrimmage to describe the critical opening simulation and periodic evaluations designed to ascertain how individuals and teams perform in an informally structured event that mimics actual competition. The scrimmage is a type of simulation, but it has a specific purposes and limitations.



### **PURPOSES BEHIND TRAINING SCRIMMAGES**

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- Evaluate and rank talent
- Assess specific skills and abilities
- Judge performers' handling of pressure
- Observe decision-making capability
- Allow for innovation and creativity
- Introduce unknown situations and scenarios
- Test limits with fellow competitors and colleagues

### **LIMITATIONS**

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- Informal setting with modified rules and resolutions
- Controlled, reduced intensity and duration
- Unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations and positions
- Lower reliance on plans and standard procedures
- Reduced incentives and rewards for winning
- Identified weaknesses and strengths

As shown, many characteristics of the scrimmage differentiate it from other training methods (including full-scale dynamic simulations, which will be detailed in-depth later in this book). True dynamic simulation replicates the conditions of the actual competition so closely that it is almost impossible to tell the difference between the simulation and the real thing. The opening

scrimmage's main goal is to determine the participant's present performance level in an event that has a more simplified structure and less formal rules than the real thing.

Think about the first day of tryouts for the women's US national soccer team. The players arriving in training camp have already established themselves as great college, professional league, or even World Cup players. However, hundreds of these prospects are now vying for one of the twenty-three slots on the roster. Coaches and trainers will conduct physicals, run some drills, and administer other skill-based tests. As soon as possible, though, coaches will split the prospects into teams to start a controlled scrimmage.

This is not like a true game simulation. The two scrimmaging teams have not gelled as a team yet. In fact, they are competing against "teammates" for roster spots! Coaches may periodically stop the scrimmage to give feedback and change the conditions to suit the evaluation process. Players hoping to make the team must demonstrate their abilities, show willingness to work as a team, make good decisions under pressure, and demonstrate how they react to unknown conditions and competitors.

After the opening scrimmage, coaches will have gathered a basic profile of each player's strengths and weaknesses. They will meet individually to offer feedback and get perspective on what each player needs to work on to generate a mutually agreed upon performance plan. Over the next few days and weeks, they begin more detailed testing and work to determine if physical or behavioral coaching can improve performance gaps. Coaches may run more scrimmages to determine if any of the players deserve to be a member of the final twenty-three-player team. In the end—as well as in the beginning—how each woman performs in a game situation will be the final arbiter as to who makes it and who doesn't.

Likewise, in a business or non-sports discipline, coaches can run an initial scrimmage to see how people with at least some form of familiarity with the task or skill perform in a controlled setting. For example, as a coach, you

may be trying to help lawyers, doctors, or tech entrepreneurs develop new clients for their businesses. They are expert practitioners in their craft (e.g., law, medicine, writing code), but finding new sources of revenue is not an innate skill. It is a domain to be mastered. To kick off a training program, you would gather together these smart experts, offer some basic instruction, set expectations, and start running a scrimmage.

Now, let's be frank. These performers, especially the senior executives at the organization, are going to hate this approach. They will say these sorts of things:

*"Wait a minute! You haven't taught us anything yet!"*

*"Let me watch a couple of other people first."*

*"I don't need to do this. I already know how."*

*"I'm an expert in X. This can't be as hard as that, so we don't need to go through all of this nonsense."*

*"How can we do this when we haven't completed the training?"*

*"No."*

Remember, high performers have been used to being the best at what they do since they were young. They have been told they are special, and their lifetime of being selected, promoted, and applauded reinforces this perception. The last thing they want is to be put in a situation where they might look foolish or inept. However, metaphorically throwing them in the deep end of the pool is the best way to see how well they currently swim.

Coaches who lean more toward training to solve every performance issue may think this approach is overly harsh or risky. However, they should think through the realities of the scrimmage. First, the situation is safe. There is no risk of losing life, limb, or liberty. Second, the scrimmage allows us to

see how people perform at their current level and identify any performance gaps. Third, and most importantly, many of the performers may *already be doing this task on a regular basis*. They are probably not doing it as well as they could, and that is exactly the point of starting a coach-managed performance enhancement plan.

In the earlier example, the same people who are resisting the opening scrimmage today are the very ones who go see a potential client tomorrow and ask for a big contract, discuss a crucial engagement, or deal with an important matter. They try to do their best without first training or watching other people. They are going to wing it. In essence, they are conducting scrimmages with real prospective clients! As hard as it is to believe, many performers would rather screw up a meeting with a client by themselves than screw a scrimmage up in front of their peers. Coaches who spend too much time teaching concepts and not enough time simulating real situations are doing their performers a disservice.

While an argument can be made for learning by “just going out there and doing it,” winging it is an exceptionally risky and expensive alternative to controlled simulations. There’s a reason that pilots and astronauts don’t train that way. I think you can figure out why.

In short, the scrimmage is a controlled, limited simulation used to evaluate current skills and identify individual performance gaps. A properly conducted scrimmage has the following benefits—

#### SCRIMMAGE PAYOFFS

- Identifies specific traits and tendencies for each performer
- Individualizes performer plans, instead of working with generics that may be too remedial or advanced
- Uses realistic environments to better predict real results

- Provides constant feedback, reflection, and performance ownership
- Shows baseline performance measurements and demands continuous improvement

After the scrimmage is complete, it is important to debrief. Performers should be mentally exhausted from applying developed (and underdeveloped) skills in a new setting. After some reflective group feedback and individual meetings, performance gaps have been established and agreed upon. Then the coach will develop plans to improve performance.

Now it's time for the coach and the performer to get to work.