

Developing teams capable of sustained success

When I first started coaching in a team sports environment, I naively thought that the success of teams was a result of having talented individuals with superior skills. I focused my time on developing game-specific skills, hoping that improved performances would come as a result. After my first year in charge of that team, and having only won 3 games all season, I was forced to re-think my philosophy and improve my understanding of what facilitates team and individual performance.

Seven years later and I have overseen my most successful coaching season yet. Heriot's Cricket Club - where I fulfil the role of Director of Cricket - has won the domestic double of the Scottish Cup and the Eastern Premier League to become the best team in Scotland. Add to that: an unbeaten season in 2020; Scottish Cup Champions in 2019; National T20 Champions in 2018; and Eastern Premier League Champions in 2017 – and there has been a sustained period of success over the past five years.

Additionally, Carlton CC Women - where I took over as Head Coach at the start of this season - have won the domestic double in the women's competitions. Players who had previously been underperforming more than doubled their output this season to put in match-winning contributions. This was mirrored in the Cricket Scotland female regional programme where, in my role of Lead Coach, I oversaw a change in the style and brand of play, leading to better individual and team performances, which ultimately contributed to the Scotland Women's team becoming European Champions.

So, what has changed? Was my initial belief about team success relying on the skill and talent of each individual, wrong?

Not wrong, if anything just incomplete. Highly skilled and talented individuals are a definite asset to any team. However, my experiences over the past seven years have taught me that great teams are more than the sum of all their parts. Great teams understand and buy into a higher purpose, they are filled with individuals who are clear on their strengths and who understand the roles they are required to fulfil. If you get the right people in the right positions, with everyone moving forwards in the same direction towards a shared goal, amazing things can happen.

After that first year of coaching at Heriot's CC, I changed my approach. I still spent time developing players' skill levels, and through experience was able to refine what skills we needed to achieve success. However, I started



to put considerably more effort into developing people and creating a sustainable environment for success.

I now spend more of my "coaching" time working on player-management, helping individuals to understand themselves and trying to develop positive relationships where the players start to see how they fit in to the big picture. We spent deliberate time at Heriot's talking about what we were trying to achieve and were prepared to have open and honest conversations about whether what we were doing was helping us move towards our ambitions. Not all the discussions were easy but being able to have difficult conversations in a constructive fashion is an essential trait of high-performing teams.

Positively negotiating challenge also creates an environment of trust. If people feel valued and supported, and they know that they have the backing of the team even if they make a mistake, they are more likely to take risks, take responsibility, and perform when they need to.

Ultimately, this creates a group of leaders who are prepared to take initiative in key moments.

Whilst my experience has come in a sporting context, most of these concepts about developing successful teams can be applied across the board in other domains. Investing time and energy to develop and put the team first can ultimately lead to consistently great outcomes and a future of sustained success.

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