



THERE IS

ANTI

**WHAT ELITE ATHLETES AND
COACHES REALLY KNOW
ABOUT HIGH PERFORMANCE**

IN TEAM

MARK DE ROND

Foreword by Richard Hytner, Deputy Chairman, Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

THERE IS

AN I

What Elite Athletes and
Coaches Really Know
About High Performance

IN TEAM



MARK DE ROND

Harvard Business Review
Boston, Massachusetts



Copyright 2012 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rond, Mark de.

There is an I in team : what elite athletes and coaches really know about high performance / Mark de Rond.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4221-7130-1 (alk. paper)

1. Teams in the workplace. 2. Teamwork (Sports) 3. Performance. I. Title.
HD66.R648 2012

658.4'022—dc23

2012003196

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

Praise for *There Is an I in Team*

“I’ve long held the philosophy that to best educate we must first entertain. Mark de Rond achieves exactly this through his insightful, well researched, and witty look at high performance through the eyes of sport.”

—John Eales, Rugby World Cup-winning captain and businessman

“Mark elucidates what anyone who sits on a sports team or manages a business knows in their gut to be true—talented individuals matter. His value is in moving beyond this simple statement and showing, through anecdote and evidence, how to actually benefit from this knowledge.”

—Kip McDaniel,
Editor-in-Chief, *aiCIO*

“As a sportsman, my significant gains often came when challenging and being challenged by the competitive nature of my teammates. As a businessman, I have spent a couple of decades modeling my coach. The best leaders have the ability to create a performance environment where talent can thrive. In this book, Mark has shown how to do this and gone straight to the heart of my world and my identity.”

—Adrian Moorhouse, Managing Director, Lane4 Consulting, and Olympic Gold Medalist, Swimming

**THERE IS
AN I
IN TEAM**

There may not be an I in Team . . .

but there is in Win.

—MICHAEL JORDAN

For Roxana
(Who else?)

Foreword

Brimming with insight for anyone privileged to lead or work as a member of a team in business, this book sheds new light on the inherent conflict between the team and the individuals comprising the team—there *is* an *I* in team—and explores the profound implications of this simple idea for managing team performance.

There Is an I in Team is not for the faint-hearted. It debunks many of the long-held assumptions that we've built into our development of teams and performance, and outlines a set of guiding principles for how to approach team performance differently.

I first encountered Mark de Rond's work when I heard him give an inspiring talk on the subject of team leadership to partners at a prestigious law firm. Mark was sharing some of his latest findings on team performance from his recent study of the Cambridge University Boat Club.

What could his lengthy and intimate study of one of the oldest sporting events in the world—the annual Boat Race between Cambridge and Oxford on the River Thames—possibly suggest to people in all probability more driven by billable hours than by

Foreword

the time it might take a couple of Blue Boats to get down the Thames?

I had particular reason for paying close attention. I failed my trial as a St. John's College coxswain in 1978 despite, at the time, weighing in at a mere 8 stone (112 lbs.). Mark would surely offer clues as to where I had gone wrong.

I observed the teams of lawyers as Mark mesmerized and challenged them: How much confidence did they have in their own judgment versus that of their colleagues? Did they think it was more important to be competent or likable? Why might emotion and intuition trump analysis and reason, even with teams of lawyers?

Even the most rational in the room were persuaded by Mark's insights from the world of sports showing that significant improvement in performance could be catalyzed by a better understanding—and management—of the inherent tensions between the individuals and the team.

The Boat Race study, and other studies that Mark has undertaken among scientists, engineers, and comedians, for example, equips him with abundant wisdom on the subject of individual and team performance. His credibility, conviction, and inspiration, in my view, can largely be attributed to his research method. Very similar to the Xploring research we use for Saatchi & Saatchi's clients, it is based on the simple idea that, if you want to know how a tiger hunts, you don't go to the zoo, you go to the jungle.

Mark's enlightening, ethnographic exploration into teams and how they perform has led him to live—literally—with diverse teams in extraordinary contexts, like the Cambridge University Boat Club preparing for the annual race down the Thames and, most recently, in Helmand province with a team of military surgeons. He has no predetermined discussion guideline, no series

Foreword

of set questions, no idea, in fact, where his exploration will lead. He merely takes with him an intense curiosity and a willingness to get involved. Combined with knowledge of the latest research on teams in organizations that you'd expect from a Cambridge business school professor, the result of Mark's close-up observation is a volume of actionable learning, steeped in stories and rich in revelation.

At Saatchi & Saatchi, a purpose-inspired creative company, the ideas in this book are especially relevant. We employ highly creative people and need them to be able to perform at their individual peak, while at the same time embracing our team values and collective aspiration—to help our clients fill the world with “Lovemarks” (Saatchi & Saatchi's term for those brands that earn “Loyalty Beyond Reason”). Guided by a theory of peak performance championed by our chief executive, Kevin Roberts, we have used the ideas in *There Is an I in Team* to reconcile the tension between the *I* and the *We* in our daily activity.

For example, without some very clear articulation of an inspirational dream, a shared set of beliefs, and a daily focus (an answer to what Mark calls “The Stephens Question”), our diverse collection of creative talent might well wreak havoc on the organization: we do, after all, invite our people relentlessly to pursue world-changing ideas, and we encourage them to embrace our belief in the unreasonable power of creativity.

So there is plenty of express permission given to the *I*'s in our teams and the unreasonable behavior that our ambition demands.

Significantly, however, we also choose to preface our famous spirit, “Nothing is Impossible,” arguably the greatest alibi for the *I*, with the words, “One Team, One Dream.”

The inherent paradox between the two phrases is no accident, and we have used the ideas in this book to manage and profit from it. What matters to individuals, Mark argues, is something to

Foreword

care about more than themselves, what we at Saatchi & Saatchi call a lovable purpose. What also matters is an environment in which the *I* can flourish; without it people may still understand the greater purpose, but they can, and will, choose to withhold their discretionary effort.

In our competitive industry, we would simply not be able to transform our clients' businesses without the brilliance of those flawed creative people—all those magnificent *I*'s—riddled with insecurity and resistant to being overtly led, and not always performing at their best on the team.

There Is an I in Team gives us a new and invaluable body of inspiration with which to further excite our people to live the Saatchi & Saatchi purpose, as well as to help them create and articulate their own personal purpose.

As to my own abject failure to win that place as a college coxswain, I now realize why those making the selection had impeccable judgment on that occasion.

The likability card that I played (as you will see, one of the book's key insights is that a person's likability can trump competence in his effect on team performance) was wholly insufficient to mask an extraordinary incompetence in the cox's seat. There is no place for that on any team.

—Richard Hytner
Saatchi & Saatchi

Preface

This book is about talented individuals and the challenge of fashioning them into a high-performance team. Chances are that you know what I am alluding to: however brilliant and well intended your colleagues may be, natural team players they are not. Yet teamwork is imperative to their success, and to yours, too.

This book tackles the leadership challenges of harnessing and then optimizing the influence of individuals on teams. It is written for the kinds of people I teach: clever, purposeful, tenacious, inquisitive. Despite good intentions, they can find it difficult to make teams add up to more than the sum of their parts. They work hard and expect others to follow suit. They routinely compare themselves to their peers and suspect this is reciprocal. They are hungry for feedback. They are busy. Their need for achievement has become an addiction. Many were part of successful teams in the past but struggle to achieve that same level of performance with their current peers. Their underlying questions are always the same: Why isn't my team performing to its potential? Given our pool of experience, talent, and ambition, why are

Preface

things not what they could be? How can I get talented people to work together more successfully?

This book will offer some answers to these questions. But they are not the typical answers contained in other business books. For one, it looks at teams through the lens of sports. Through first-hand accounts of elite athletes, elite teams, and their coaches, it develops a deeper, grittier, real-world understanding of high performance in teams than is commonplace. It augments their experiences with the very best scholarship in social psychology, organizational behavior, and the economics and sociology of sports, extracted from the desks, classrooms, and experimental labs of the world's top universities: Harvard, Cambridge, Stanford, Berkeley, and Chicago, among others. For despite an abundance of books on sports and business, few have drawn explicit comparisons between the two. Fewer yet have done so with the rigor expected by today's professional, which is somewhat surprising insofar as sports and business have long been bedfellows.

A recent survey of a hundred randomly selected CEOs of the United Kingdom's five hundred largest companies found that 46 percent of the CEOs had won awards for their athletic prowess (by comparison, only 23 percent had accumulated awards for academic achievement). Seventy-one percent believed that compulsory sports at school shaped their business acumen in a positive way.¹ Scott McNealy, Jack Welch, Vera Wang, Meg Whitman, and Phil Knight have all publicly acknowledged their debt to sports as vital to their commercial success.² Real estate magnate Thomas Barrack Jr. never realized his ambitions to play football for the University of Southern California, and was relegated to playing rugby instead. Film, television, and stage actor Hill Harper dreamed of playing for the Dallas Cowboys or San Francisco 49ers, only to be told, during his college years, that he wasn't big enough. Fashion designer Richie Rich never made it

Preface

to the Olympics as a figure skater; neither did Vera Wang. Marcus Samuelsson succeeded as chef and restaurateur but failed as a soccer player. Editor-in-chief Lucy Danziger was too short to make crew. Donny Deutsch, chairman of Deutsch Inc., never got beyond Little League baseball. NBC's president and CEO Jeff Zucker never made it to Wimbledon; Nike's Phil Knight was never on the Olympic running track team. Without fail, all of them hated the experience of finding themselves at the short end of the stick, whether through injury or lack of ability.³ All hung on to the lessons they picked up in their sporting days to help them make good commercially.

This book will dip into the experiences of some of them, as well as into the stories of elite athletes and coaches such as Michael Jordan, Phil Jackson, Magic Johnson, Bobby Fischer, Joe DiMaggio, Bill Hartack, Billy Beane, Bill Walsh, Pete Carroll, Eric Cantona, Zinedine Zidane, John Eales, David Whitaker, Sir Alex Ferguson, Adrian Moorhouse, Seve Ballesteros, and Brian Clough. Their experiences challenge commonplace ideas about teams and provide fresh insights into high performance.

Also, this book focuses unashamedly on the individual in the context of other individuals. Much popular business writing on teams risks missing the trees for the forest and, in doing so, masks genuine insights that sporting teams offer their counterparts in the workplace. Pick up almost any popular business book or article on teams written over the past two decades. Their principal unit of analysis has often been the team (the forest), and not the individual (the tree) in the context of other high performers. They focus on what matters to the organization, assuming the organization matters to individuals. With few exceptions, you will find their authors emphasizing the importance of interpersonal harmony, having assumed this to be a stimulant to team performance rather than its consequence. They have often

Preface

focused exclusively on the importance of cooperation without considering the relevance of competition within teams. They looked to recruiting stars from outside instead of growing theirs in-house. Their interest has become focused on statistics at the expense of intuition, and on the import of change rather than stability. This book seeks to correct all that.

My concern with trees and forests stems from my academic fieldwork. For the past fifteen years, this has involved studying teams close up, in many cases by living with them for extended periods for up to two hundred consecutive days (and nights) at a time.⁴ I began my research while a doctoral student at the University of Oxford in 1996 with a three-year study of life scientists in pursuit of new medicinal drugs. Next up was a study of engineers collaborating in virtual teams at one of the world's largest telecommunications companies, a collaboration with a colleague from MIT. We're both still a little self-conscious about never having produced a single piece of writing on what amounted to a good two years of study. But both the engineers and a subsequent team of improvisation comedians bear on the arguments in this book. So too do observations from an ongoing study of military surgeons, begun in early 2009, and culminating in six weeks of predeployment training followed by a six-week "tour of duty" in Afghanistan's Helmand province. Nothing comes close to the experience of watching surgical teams at work in the world's busiest, and bloodiest, war hospital. Camp Bastion's fifty-bed hospital uses more blood than all of Scotland combined. It also has the highest survival rate of any war hospital in any previous war.

More germane to this particular volume, however, is a two-year study of the Cambridge University Boat Club squad as it prepared to race Oxford rivals in the quintessential Boat Race, first rowed in 1829 and followed by an estimated 120 million around the world via their television screens. The squad's trials

Preface

and tribulations were the subject of another book, *The Last Amateurs: To Hell and Back with the Cambridge Boat Race Crew*. Controversial but extraordinarily candid, it was enjoyed not only by sports enthusiasts but by those struggling with their workplace teams. Bits of the research appeared in *The Economist*, *Time*, the *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Week*, most of Britain's national broadsheets, and on BBC radio. Drawing from that book, I reproduce here some of the most inspiring of the squad's experiences along with unpublished interviews and analyses. Their stories, along with those of Olympic gold medalists and World Champions, are included for one reason only, namely to provide a genuinely close-up, visceral experience of the graphic and uncompromising reality that characterizes everyday life in teams of high performers.

This book develops some of the themes buried deeply (too deeply perhaps) in what my Cambridge colleagues teasingly refer to as “the rowing book.” In contrast to *The Last Amateurs*, this book is deeply embedded in scholarship, and in combining cutting-edge research with firsthand accounts of top athletes, coaches, and corporate executives, it explains:

- Why there *is* an I in team—and why that matters
- Why the best team rarely ever comprises the best individual performers
- Why conflict happens even as intentions are perfectly aligned
- Why likability can trump competence in even technically sophisticated environments
- Why a focus on interpersonal harmony can actually hurt team performance

Preface

- Why the availability of data and sophisticated statistical tools are unlikely to ever eradicate the role of intuition

These are but a few themes lifted from the chapters that make up this book. Each chapter is intended to tease out a particular feature of teams—usually a commonly held, but false, belief—and then show the evidence, from the world of sports, for a better, alternative way to think about elite individuals and team performance.

As for the use of examples, each chapter typically invokes some high-profile athletes, before broadening the illustrations to sports and teams that are less well known, but not any less instructive. North American readers will be less familiar with the examples from soccer, rugby, and field hockey. But they'll be acquainted with the likes of Michael Jordan, Phil Jackson, Pete Reiser, and Bobby Fischer. For the rest of the world, the less familiar examples might include football, baseball, basketball, and ice hockey. Their acquaintance is with such stars as Zinédine Zidane, John Eales, and Adrian Moorhouse. Beyond these examples, each chapter also includes one in-depth piece of analysis from my own ethnographic work.

My greatest worry in writing this book was always that sports might seem a spent metaphor. After all, sporting metaphors are now such a conspicuous feature of the management vernacular. We “level the playing field” by “sending in heavy hitters” who happily “step up to the plate” and will “take one for the team.” We “keep our eyes on the ball,” aim for the “sweet spot,” “take a free throw,” or perhaps a “Hail Mary pass,” while reckoning “there’s still time on the clock” and “the goalposts have moved.” Meanwhile we are told “there’s no I in team” or else we’re “shown the red card” in what seems like “a new ballgame” where “the odds” of “a knockout blow” are more likely to make us feel