



TEAM SPIRIT

Ireland's Paul O'Connell takes the ball in the lineout against Italy at the RBS 6 Nations Rugby Championship match on 6 February 2010

'When each player on a team plays to their absolute maximum ability, the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts, and the team can achieve things it never thought possible'



Irish sporting legend of the game **Tony Ward** evaluates the nine characteristics that make a successful workplace from a rugby perspective, emphasising the symbiotic relationship between leadership and teamwork

FORMER Irish rugby player Tony Ward is a living legend. Reading through his biography, even the most die-hard couch potato couldn't fail to be impressed by his Herculean athletic achievements, which include representing Ireland internationally for almost a decade in rugby as well as playing soccer for both Shamrock Rovers and Limerick United. To give a flavour of his body of work, between 1978 and 1987 Ward won 19 rugby caps for Ireland and also inspired Munster to a legendary win over New Zealand in 1978, a match famously dramatised in the play *Alone It Stands*, and an achievement that has never been repeated. These days, Ward works as a rugby commentator and director of rugby at St Gerard's School in Bray and he also writes a regular sports column in the *Irish Independent*.

If anything can be gleaned from Ward's extraordinary roll call of achievements, it's that he knows a thing or two about achieving success within a team. For this article we took the nine main traits of a successful workplace as identified by the Great Place to Work® Institute and asked Ward to evaluate the importance of each trait in a rugby context in order to highlight the similarities between the qualities required for successful leadership in sport and in business.

INSPIRING: GREAT LEADERS MUST INSPIRE THEIR EMPLOYEES AND HELP THEM TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEIR JOB/ROLE HAS MEANING FOR THE WIDER ORGANISATION AND SOCIETY

How do the best coaches forge a group of individuals into an effective team?

There are three things that I think make an effective sporting leader: the ability to communicate, organise and motivate. The thing about rugby is that it is the least individualistic sport there is – it is completely based on team effort. It's not like soccer or GAA where you can run around the pitch; you must retain your position at all times. That means you are entirely dependant on your teammates to feed you the ball. It's a point the coach has to re-emphasise week in, week out, both during training and while motivating the team: that everyone is dependant on each other. Communication is absolutely key.

Why is the unspoken code of conduct in rugby – for example, not answering back the referee – so important in terms of inspiring both players and fans?

There definitely is a moral code in rugby, and it's about respect for referees and decision-making. It is linked in to the idea that over the course of a match or a season, these decisions will even themselves out, so it's not the end of the world if one goes against you. In rugby, it's very much a case of perhaps not liking a certain decision, but accepting it. I really believe in the value of school sports, and I think the values you learn in rugby will stand to you later in all walks of life.

SPEAKING: GREAT LEADERS MUST BE COMPLETELY OPEN AND TRANSPARENT IN THEIR COMMUNICATION

How do great leaders – managers, coaches, captains – effectively communicate not only strategy and tactics but also the reasoning behind them?

One of the greatest leaders I ever worked under was Ciaran Fitzgerald who captained Ireland to two triple crowns in the Eighties. He was a fantastic captain because he was a fantastic communicator. In the days running up to a game, he would talk to each player individually and get on the right side of us. Then, when he had to press that collective button on the day of the match, he was confident he could do that. He had done the groundwork and it meant we all rowed in behind him. If a leader can do all those things, then he can really be inspiring. He can bring the team with him.

LISTENING: GREAT LEADERS HAVE SPECIAL SYSTEMS FOR INCORPORATING EMPLOYEES' IDEAS, FOR INCLUDING PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING, AND FOR AIRING CONCERNS AND WORRIES

How does a leader seek input, suggestions and feedback from the team?

Being a great communicator is an art in itself, and I think listening forms a really large part of it. Too many coaches just talk, but never listen to what their players have to say. Declan Kidney, for example, is great at listening. Essentially, it's all about trust. It's about not being afraid to let your players or your management in. I think it's the reason why Kidney has been more successful than Eddie O'Sullivan at leading the Irish team to such incredible success. Kidney has got total trust. And it's a two-way street. He trusts his senior management; they trust him, and I think it has a trickle-down effect to the players. With O'Sullivan the door was always slightly closed, but with Kidney it is more open.

How does a sports leader communicate bad news, ie that a player has been dropped from the team for a match, without losing that player's trust?

One great thing about the professional game is that there's great transparency in choosing players. In my days, there were far more people involved in the selection process, all of whom would inevitably go into hiding when the team selection was read out before a match. These days the coach alone selects the team, and there's an honesty and consistency to the practice. If players are in good form and are playing well, they will be rewarded and picked; if they're in poor form, they won't. That consistency and transparency allows people to accept these decisions more easily.

THANKING: A GREAT LEADER RECOGNISES AND REWARDS GOOD WORK AND EXTRA LEVELS OF EFFORTS, AND WILL STRIVE TO CREATE A CLIMATE OF APPROVAL

How important do you think it is to have a climate of approval and positive affirmation within a team?

I very much believe in accentuating the positive. These days coaches will go through the negative parts of a player's performance using video analysis, and they usually get that out of their system fairly soon after a match is over. And, of course, it is valid that you analyse problems and weakness in order to improve. However, after that it is important that you move on and focus on the positive stuff in order to motivate individual players and the team as a whole for the next match.

What are the motivational techniques of great leaders?

A great leader has to have great people management skills. Someone like Declan Kidney is excellent at this – perhaps it goes back to his former career as a teacher. He really tries to get inside players' heads and make sure they are as happy as



Former Irish rugby player Tony Ward, now a rugby coach and sports journalist

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they can be. If they're having problems in a personal capacity he will try to help them. He really works very diligently at finding out what makes people tick. I'd also have to come back to someone like Ciaran Fitzgerald, who was able to deal with every single player and their individual traits. You'd also have leaders like Brian O'Driscoll and Paul O'Connell. O'Driscoll wouldn't be in the dressing room shouting and screaming; he tends to lead more by example. He leads from the front, and there's a real sense of moral courage there. He's not afraid to do things. O'Connell, while possibly more vocal in the dressing room, would be very much cut from the same cloth: lead by example. The thing Kidney has done is created a number of leaders on the team and I think that has also made a big difference to its performance.

DEVELOPING: A GREAT COMPANY WILL FOCUS ON NURTURING INDIVIDUALS' GIFTS TO FOSTER PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT, AS WELL AS OFFER JOB-SPECIFIC TRAINING

How strong is the commitment within Irish rugby to developing skills for when players hang up their boots?

I think it's still in the embryonic stages because you have to remember that rugby only went professional globally in 1995. I know the IRFU has a course in IT Carlow, which could help a player continue to work in the world of rugby even after their playing career is over. So I'd say, definitely rugby is improving in terms of player development.

CARING: A GREAT COMPANY WILL HAVE MANY SYSTEMS AND PROGRAMMES IN PLACE FOR CREATING A CARE-TAKING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE EMPLOYEE AND HIS OR HER FAMILY

How important is the infrastructure – appropriate training

facilities, proper transport and accommodation, medical care – to the success of the team?

Infrastructure is extremely important and, in fairness to the IRFU, it has really embraced the professionalisation of rugby, and all the infrastructural needs of the players. The training facilities these days are state of the art, and medical care is provided to the nth degree. But they need to be because this is a professional sport.

HIRING AND WELCOMING: A GREAT LEADER WILL FOCUS ON HIRING FOR POTENTIAL AND CHARACTER, AND NOT JUST ON SKILL SET. GREAT ORGANISATIONS WELCOME NEW EMPLOYEES INTO THE TEAM AND ASSIMILATE THEM THROUGH ORIENTATION PROGRAMMES, ETC ...

Q. What role does the coach play in ensuring that new players are made to feel welcome when they join the squad?

It's very important, but of course human nature being what it is, people are sometimes suspicious of new players because they feel threatened. That person could take their place. And when you're dealing with professional rugby, that means there's money and sponsorship at stake too. In terms of what the coach must do, it's a difficult and delicate balance to keep both the old guard and the new arrival happy. But it goes back to having excellent people-management skills.

CELEBRATING: A GREAT ORGANISATION WILL BUILD CELEBRATION OF PERSONAL MILESTONES AND COMPANY SUCCESSES INTO THE WORKPLACE CULTURE

How important is it to celebrate success?

It is important of course. Certainly in my day, we enjoyed celebrating a victory with a good night out afterwards (although there's absolutely no truth in the rumour that some of the players celebrated before winning!). Someone like Declan Kidney celebrates his successes with great humility. But, having said that, he knows the massive achievements of his team, like anyone else.

How do teams define what success is when they know that the ultimate prize is out of their reach?

The main thing is to perform to the best of the team's collective ability. You can't ask any more than that. You also have to set yourself realistically achievable goals, ie getting to the quarter final rather than the final. Sometimes, when each player on a team plays to their absolute maximum ability, the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts, and the team can achieve things it never thought possible.

SHARING: EMPLOYEES SHOULD SHARE IN THE FRUITS OF THEIR LABOUR IN A VARIETY OF WAYS, AND THIS SHARING SHOULD ALSO EXTEND TO THE COMMUNITY

How good a job has Irish rugby done in sharing its rewards among the rugby community first of all, and the wider community leading out from that (sharing the spoils, donating to charity, etc ...)?

Some people will have differing opinions on this, but I think the IRFU has done a pretty good job, and its charitable trust does tremendous work. It has also been great in sending out the various trophies Ireland won last year (Heineken Cup, Grand Slam Trophy, etc) to the clubs around the country to help them raise funds. The great thing about Irish rugby in comparison to, say, soccer is that almost all the players are based in Ireland, so it's great for the fans. The kids in Ireland can touch their heroes. It's not surprising to see Brian O'Driscoll walking down Grafton Street – which is a wonderful thing for fans of rugby.