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Is it really *that* bad to be second best—in the whole world?

In the middle of the fireworks and celebrations at the closing ceremonies for the Olympic Games in Beijing, it surprised us to see the following statements in the press: “Her Olympic hopes were dashed in Beijing last night,” “Some sports officials were fretting about a likely second-place finish and wondering what went wrong,” “She walked off the stage absolutely devastated,” “I was totally disappointed.” No, we’re not talking about the last athletes to cross the finish line. These comments concern Silver Medal winners!

Funny times we live in. We all strive to be the best in our professions (and there’s nothing wrong with that. Simply put, if you think you have no chance of winning, get out of the way). The problem is we all think we ARE the best in the world. When confronted with the fact that someone else walked away with the gold medal reality sinks in and we face shock and disappointment. Why? Two factors come to mind: unrealistic expectations (ignoring the fact there is someone better than you, regardless of your training and resources); and unrealistic assessment of competencies (lack of self assessment and honest feedback).

Well, let’s leave the Olympians for a moment and concentrate on the corporate environment. What’s the difference? None. Just substitute the gold medal for the yearly bonus, the silver medal for a promotion, the bronze medal for your yearly merit increase—and so on. You get the picture.

David McClelland, the late Harvard psychologist, stated that people are motivated by three social motives: achievement, affiliation and power. His research showed that all three motives were present, to some extent, in everyone. In his classic article he concluded that “Power is the great motivator,” as he equates power mostly to influencing others. Another classic article to touch on the subject is “Leadership Run Amok.” The subtitle says it all: “The destructive potential of overachievers.” Over the last years, the authors working with the Hay Consulting Group have noticed a substantial increase in the achievement motive for managers, while power as a motive had

dropped. While achievement can be good for Olympians competing in individual sports, the authors concluded that “the challenge for managers today is to return some of the balance that McClelland has advised: seeking an approach to leadership that uses socialized power to keep achievement in check.”

With overachievement in place, and only one gold medal available, the results are not good: frustration for athletes, demolished morale for staff, and in extreme cases the drive for results regardless of how they are achieved. (Performance enhancing drugs, anyone? Unethical procedures in the corporate world, does Enron ring a bell?)

Here are some ideas to ensure we keep on track:

Ensure that policies and procedures are clear

Every athlete, from every country, regardless of the sport in which he is competing, is perfectly clear on the rules: there is no medal for fourth place. This doesn’t happen in the corporate world. Employees (and most managers) show a deep lack of knowledge about compensation policies.

Spend more time in front of the mirror

Ask yourself: who is this person I see reflected there? What are his/her competencies? What is his/her potential? Know what your game is. Michael Phelps does. He didn’t compete in every swimming competition, yet he left Beijing with eight gold medals!

“Motivating” your employee is not the same as lying to them

A great number of managers do not provide honest and direct feedback to their staff members (regarding both performance and potential) because they are afraid they will be demotivated. By not providing a clear picture of the current and future situation, managers are allowing employees to live an “ignorance is bliss” scenario. At the same time, by omitting the truth, managers are allowing employees to create unrealistic expectations that a



promotion is coming up, he or she is entitled to a bonus at the end of the year—and so on...

Establish clear and concrete performance standards

Even the aforementioned overachievers are clear that someone else was a hundredth of a second faster and therefore deserves the medal. That does not take care of the disappointment but it takes care of the fairness of the process. That clarity is also missing in the corporate world. Employees seldom have clarity of their performance level when compared to their peers. Managers can help by establishing clear and concrete performance standards which are visible to everyone in the team. Envy will not disappear, but who told you that good managers can fix human nature?

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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