

Overlapping principles of top corporate leadership and professional sports coaching: Paddy Upton Speaks to ET-ILC Members

Synopsis

Paddy Upton, Coach, Author, Speaker and the former mental conditioning coach of the Indian national cricket team explains how corporate India can manage problems in cricketering terms, and fundamentally define the components of what it means to bring one's A-game to work every day.



Play. Review. Plan. Practice. It's the exact chronology of events followed by both professional players and by the corporate world. Winning in the marketplace or on the field, analyzing the competition, keeping the team motivated and weeding out toxicity- these are just a few of the many things that business and professional sports have in common. **Paddy Upton**, Coach, Author, Speaker and the former mental conditioning coach of the Indian national cricket team could translate all of corporate India's management problems in cricketering terms, thus fundamentally defining the components of what it means to bring one's A-game to work every day.

Happy Work Environments

As per Upton's theory - foremost in getting people to bring their best to work, is creating a happy team environment. Unfortunately, no CEO or coach is mandated to create a happy workplace, their goal is defined in terms of game wins or profits. But it's proven time and again that a happy atmosphere, leads to better performance and thus, better results.

"To bring your A-game to work, do your best in every context, stay resilient and don't get cynical irrespective of the situation."

— *D Shivakumar, Aditya Birla Management Corporation*

Collective Intelligence

Winning in sports or in the marketplace involves the use of data, analytics and expertise. And today, no one person can be the ultimate expert on anything. That is now an Industrial era concept. Today, in a professional set up, to get the best results one must harness the collective intelligence of the group. Upton for example in some formats of the game refused to have a professional batting and bowling coach on the team. Because the IPL team he was coaching had star players from multiple countries, he chose to harness their collective intelligence to lead the team. What you will discover is that either in your chosen group, either somebody knows how to solve the problem at hand or someone knows where to look for the answer.

"Attitude is far more important than skill. You can skill a person with right attitude, but the converse is not always easy."

— *Rajen Vagadia, V-P & President, Qualcomm India & SAARC*

Defining Relationships - Family vs Sports Team

And while success in business and in team sports depends on how well the team performs, there is a place for individuals to thrive. Instead of looking at our work colleagues as "families", we should view them as teammates on a professional sports team. That way, we'll never let anyone cross professional boundaries and while everyone will work towards the common goal, nobody will ever support a player who has been found to be morally bankrupt or unethical.

"Paddy beautifully explained how he created the 'brains trust' in the IPL team he coached, to arrive at collective decisions aligned to goals and operating principles."

— *Ashwini Tewari, MD & CEO, SBI Card*

Individual vs Team Success

There are a few scenarios where individual success is not aligned with company or team success. For those circumstances, employees and players must be taught to strike a balance. If the entire team is aligned with the common purpose of the company, then decisions like these become easier to make. However, for employees who are high performers but toxic, for them there is no space on any team because they ruin the environment and must either transform or leave the company. Most leaders find that such individuals rarely change and must be let-go.

"We've followed Plan, Review, Do, Review, Plan cycle during the pandemic. We implemented practices which became benchmarks in the industry"

— *Gautam Khanna, CEO, PD Hinduja Hospital & MRC*

Counting Your 1s and 2s

Sometimes it's the small wins that count the most. Even if one reads the book "Atomic Habits", it's making small daily changes that lead to big wins over time. In cricket, if a team doesn't have players who can hit the big 4s and 6s then you have to adopt a strategy to hit and then run for 1s and 2s. It's not a popular strategy but it has delivered wins even to the weakest teams. In business this would translate to brain-sprinting effectively, meeting the small weekly and quarterly goals so that annual and 5-year-targets can be achieved.

"An individual is more likely to bring their A-game if they see their career progression as an outcome rather than their core objective. One can't succeed in long run, if they can't handle setbacks"

— *Kalyan Ram Madabhushi, CEO, Aditya Birla Group (Chemicals)*

Optional Training

Very often as leaders we think we know what our team needs and how they need to be trained. Extra courses, workshops - we guide them on everything. In a professional sports team, the coach tells players when to practice, what to work on and when to do it. Upton turned all of this on its head. His approach is more open, where players themselves decide whether or not they want to practice, what they want to do and how they want to do it. This makes the players think about their game, puts the onus on them and trains them for quick decisions that may have to be taken on the field.

"Gary and Paddy's contribution to India's success in the 2011 World Cup was immense, Paddy brought innovative thinking that guided the players and the team towards success."

— *Sachin Tendulkar*

Playing on the Front Foot

Once the basic guidelines have been laid out, everyone on the team must be allowed to attack a work situation or an oncoming ball head on in the style that they think is appropriate. Micromanaging players or employees, is almost never a good strategy.

Play to your Strengths

Now, if Sehwag is not a defensive player, there is no reason to get him to work on that technique. Instead, as he focused on his natural style, he served the team and himself better. Similarly, in the corporate world, one must play to one's strengths. If one is not good at some parts of the job, no point getting bogged down with them, better to gain excellence in what one is good at.

Be a Good Person

There is a reason why **Google's** motto is "Don't be evil" and why the one of the best rugby teams in the world, the All Blacks, have a saying, "Better People make Better All Blacks." No CEO or coach gets paid for goodness or to help transform his team to better people, but the truth is that good people perform well.