

What men can learn from women on the sports field

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Different gender traits could make the difference between winning and losing on the sports field and in the workplace.

England, 1999. Cricket World Cup. Semi-final. South Africa vs Australia. The Proteas, with one wicket remaining, needed one run off the last three deliveries. One run and South Africa would secure their place in their maiden Cricket World Cup final.

Lance Klusener was facing; Allan Donald his partner. Australian Damien Fleming bowled ... and chaos ensued. Klusener struck the ball and ran. Donald was watching the ball and didn't hear Klusener's call, then he dropped his bat as he stood rooted to the spot. The Australians fielded the ball, completed the run out and South Africa lost. No first World Cup final appearance. No celebrations. Just devastation.

Now imagine the same scenario with two female cricketers. Would they have successfully completed the mission and seen South Africa into the final? We'll never know, but an examination of the psychological makeup of male and female athletes might suggest that the outcome could have been positive for South Africa.

Jeff Janssen (Janssen Leadership Centre in the USA) studied the differences between coaching male and female athletes based on their psychological differences.

Priorities

According to Janssen's research, a significant difference between coaching male and female athletes concerns how they prioritise what is required of them to succeed in sport. Female athletes favour a more "social cohesion" approach – positive relationships within the team. The research shows that many female athletes need to feel good to play well. The binding factor is communication with one another: sharing fears, concerns, ideas, suggestions, innovations and concern for one another's wellbeing, and making an effort to understand each other. This aspect is illustrated by Proteas women cricket captain Dane van Niekerk: "It's always good to have the team together.... The girls are always excited to see one another, and it always has that family reunion feeling to it."

Get-the-job-done mindset

Male athletes, on the other hand, seem to prefer a more task-oriented approach – a get-the-job-done mindset. While this can pay dividends, a potential problem occurs when male athletes find themselves in challenging situations. In such circumstances, they tend to put their heads down and try to make the situation work on their own. Simply getting the job done becomes paramount. The problem with this is that each individual male can be pulling in a different direction as they execute what they feel is required in that particular situation. Enter Messrs Klusener and Donald.

If we apply these psychological characteristics to our case study, it suggests that two female cricketers may have slowed the situation down by meeting in the middle before the ball was bowled and talking about what was required. There may have been calming communication between them, messages of support and reassurance. This pressure release would have been crucial.

Janssen notes other differences between coaching men and women. Females tend to be a lot more "coachable" than males, often because male athletes are a little deluded (his word) about their own sporting prowess. Men also have more natural confidence based on internal factors such as their strengths and past successes. In this way, their confidence tends to be more stable and durable. Females tend to rely more on external factors for their confidence – namely other's opinions of them."

The choke effect

A study by researchers from Ben-Gurion University in Israel claimed that male athletes were more likely to “choke” under pressure than female athletes.

They analysed game-level data of the first sets of all four Grand Slam tennis tournaments to determine to what extent men’s and women’s performances improved or deteriorated as the stakes rose.

The results? Women performed better under pressure – they choked less than men. “If women choke, it is about half as much, or 60% as much, as the choking that exists among men,” said researcher Alex Krumer.

However, The Tonic wellness website (USA), as well as a few other sports websites, dismiss this theory. “The problem is that the study authors didn’t analyse the perception of pressure under their definition of ‘high-stakes situations’ — they assumed that all players perceived that they were under pressure in high-stakes situations. That’s a strategy Southern Methodist University professor Derek Marr says is flawed, because it doesn’t consider the individual’s perception of competitive pressure.

From the sports field to the boardroom

The sports field scenario holds important lessons for the boardroom, suggesting that combining a task focus with social cohesion will produce the best results. For this to occur, men would need to accept that it’s okay to acknowledge when they’re struggling instead of shutting down and carrying on “because that’s what we do”.

In a recent article titled “Good sports: why business needs more sportswomen” on the EY website, it is asked: “Can women’s sports help improve gender parity in the workplace?”

The writer says, “The connection between sport and business may seem more metaphorical than literal. But it turns out that playing sport is a good indicator of women who’ll go on to achieve high levels of professional success.”

The EY Women Athletes Business Network and espnW did a survey which found that 94% of women in C-suite positions had played sport at some stage in their lives. The survey also noted that 74% of the women interviewed said they thought a background in sport could accelerate their careers.

EY spoke to 22 high-powered female entrepreneurs, who highlighted five qualities they had learnt on the sports field that could be useful in the boardroom: confidence; single-mindedness; the passion to succeed; the ability to lead a team; and resilience from setbacks.

The survey also says that, due to a focus on male sports, boys have been given a head start in acquiring the transferrable skills sport can provide. But the greater prominence given to women’s sport is starting to change that.

There’s no doubt in my mind that men still have a lot to learn about the social cohesion factor in sports and the boardroom.