

By Simon Hartley, MSc

Two Lengths of the Pool

A case study of what a leading U.K. law firm learned from elite sport

For many years, parallels have been drawn between sporting success and success in business. Sports coaches have been employed to help businesses develop a 'winning mentality.' There are numerous books on the market that also aim to translate successful formulas from the world of sport into the commercial world. The question is, does it really work? Is there a direct and tangible benefit to the business? Could businesses feeling the challenges of the current economic climate actually benefit from the experiences of elite athletes?

The commercial climate in the U.K. is particularly tough for professional firms such as accountancy and legal firms. Noticeably some well-established and well-respected firms have gone out of business recently. This trend has made some leading firms sit up and take note. They realize that to survive and grow in this climate, they need to become smarter and more effective.

Recently, a leading law firm in the U.K. has started to use the principals of sport psychology and the experiences of an Olympic athlete quite literally. They have

“He was a 100-meter swimmer in a 50-meter pool. His job was very very simple.”

employed the services of an Olympic swimmer from Great Britain (G.B.) and his sport psychologist to help the senior partners boost the effectiveness of the firm. In fact, they are using the very strategies that helped the athlete to win medals and break records.

In 2001, the athlete was a decent National standard swimmer who had just competed at the World Student

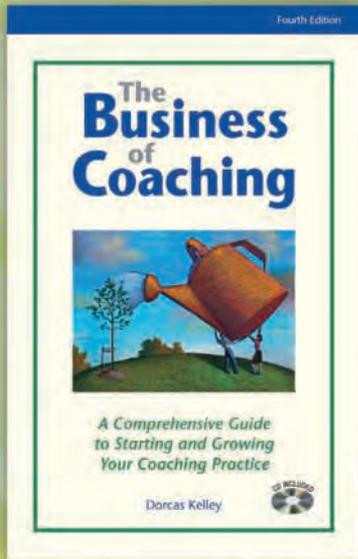


Games. He was ranked 32nd in the world and had not yet won a full international cap. Between 2001 and around 2004, he worked in a slight fog. Although he was making progress, the plan he was working with was a 'best guess.' He was a little bit reactionary. It almost felt like he was navigating in very poor visibility and was reacting as things appeared. At the time, he was working to a set of goals that included 'making the G.B. team,' 'securing funding,' 'securing sponsorship,' 'qualifying for championships' and 'winning key races.' After about three years, he and his sport psychologist came to a stark realization. Until that point they had made a fundamental error. They had gotten the job wrong. The swimmer's job was not to make the G.B. team. It wasn't to secure funding or sponsorship. It wasn't to qualify for championships or win races.

He was a 100-meter swimmer in a 50-meter pool. His job was very very simple. The job was to swim two lengths of the pool as fast as he could.

That realization was like a blinding flash of light. It made an enormous impact on how he worked, his effectiveness and the end results. Immediately he started to identify exactly what he needed to do, in order to swim two lengths of the pool as quickly as he could. He pulled together a team of specialists including his coach, physiotherapist, performance analyst, nutritionist, physiologist, strength and conditioning coach, and lifestyle

**New, Expanded
4th Edition!**



What are the book reviews saying?

“An invaluable resource and a ‘must read’ for anyone interested in building a coaching business!”

*Karen Kimsey-House, Co-Founder,
The Coaches Training Institute*

“... provides a thorough examination and rigorous immersion into the professional skills that will allow a good coach to run a successful coaching business... I highly recommend her book.”

*Julio Olalla, President,
The Newfield Network*

**READ MORE AND
PURCHASE AT:**

**[www.TheBusiness
ofCoaching.com](http://www.TheBusinessofCoaching.com)**

**Use code CHOICE to
receive 10% discount!**

corporate leadership

advisor. Everyone was challenged to help him swim two lengths of the pool as fast as he possibly could. His whole outlook changed once he figured out what his real job was. It became a benchmark and a filter. Before doing anything, he would ask, “will this help me swim two lengths of the pool quicker?” If it would make him quicker, he’d consider doing it. If not, the idea would be discarded. He also started asking whether it was likely to knock a whole second off of his time or 0.000001 seconds off. Obviously, the things that made the biggest impact had a higher priority. The swimmer actually identified the five key processes he required. These were the processes that had the greatest positive impact on his performance. Once he had identified these, he focused his time and energies into delivering his key processes. The results were dramatic. Within two years, the swimmer was a double Commonwealth Gold medalist. He became an Olympic finalist in Beijing 2008 and ended his career as the 7th fastest in history in his event.

The U.K. law firm is now using exactly the same principle to enhance its effectiveness. They have found their own ‘Two Lengths of the Pool.’ This is not a mission statement or a vision. It is simply a statement of their job in the simplest possible terms. It provides them with the clarity and simplicity that gives them complete focus. The senior partners have also agreed upon the most important processes required to achieve their ‘Two Lengths’ successfully. As a result, they can cascade this clear focus throughout the business. They can

also establish their own filters and benchmark their effectiveness. To ensure that this new way of working starts to live, breathe and become part of the culture, it has also become embedded in the performance management structures. Everyone’s job is aligned to the ‘Two Lengths’ for the firm and the

“Before doing anything, he would ask, ‘will this help me swim two lengths of the pool quicker?’”

processes required to achieve it. As a result, every member of the firm has a clear focus, which is completely aligned to achieving the ‘Two Lengths’ of the firm.

Obviously, the process doesn’t happen overnight. The project spans nine months and includes several reviews along the way. Results from the early stages of the project show that the effectiveness of individual members of the senior management team has increased significantly. The partners realized that before the project, there was a significant amount of time spent on ‘garbage.’ The garbage, or distractions from their core job, was reducing their effectiveness.

As the senior partners become more focussed, they become more effective. The firm knows that as the effect of the project permeates across the rest of the team, that benefit will be multiplied. In a tough commercial climate, ‘Two Lengths of the Pool’ could make the difference between dying, surviving and thriving. •