

CREATING THE NEW

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From the very outset as a team of human performance experts, we championed three core attitudes characteristic of high level performers: Talent is not enough, a desire to improve and embrace change.

The 'embrace change' element has always been a particularly important attitude to explore and to nourish; every organisation we've worked with has had a huge desire to improve and there are two important features that make that desire a productive one:

- 1. Knowing how to create the helpful change you so deeply desire and***
- 2. Responding to the inevitable change around you in a way that serves your intent***

In embracing change, leaders with ambition for themselves and their organisations have been wary about remaining the same, or being normal. For these leaders, remaining the same or being normal has been a signal that things are failing.

Getting "back to normal" is a concept that seems to fly in the face of creating something new and better whether that choice is internally or externally driven.

For a few years now one of our customers has had a strong theme in their business - 'Create the New' and this has been a powerful calling, as well as a challenge. It's been an aspiration focused on creating change where perhaps people weren't expecting it or had imagined it and while it's an approach that predated Covid, it's now more important than ever.

The world of sport has always celebrated those who create the new, and find ways to re-write the rules or have the rules re-written because of their innovation. They've imagined new approaches and redefined what is possible. These shifts in how we understand how the game can be played and what can be achieved free

people from previous beliefs that may have been limiting and inspire new permissions to explore what great really looks like.

Over 2020, instead of individual brilliance and imagination being the source of 'Creating the New', the new was created around us. 'The New' became the stimulus to re-imagine how we work, how we educate, how we share, how we consider our health, how we understand our obligation to society, and so much more. While there are regular, uninspiring calls to find the 'new normal' (even typing that depresses us a little!), we've been taken by the opportunity for us to 'live the new' and keep focused on the power of 'renewal', but on our own terms, rather than as a response to a collective necessity to do it.

So, with the permission to Create the New much more freshly in our minds, two questions arise:

- What role can this outlook play for us in 2021?***
- How can we focus on a New that we're inspired to create, rather than feeling obliged to implement?***

A New View - Coping as a Team Sport

Right at the beginning of the pandemic we saw wonderful responses across so many organisations of people just collaborating, with no agenda other than getting done whatever needed to get done, whoever you were and however it could be done. We believe this sets the bar for what collaboration should look and feel like within organisations, where the greater good is the focus of why anything is being done.

When no one is bothered about who gets the credit for a success and there's no personal agendas to navigate, we can all just focus on coping together and looking out for everyone's welfare. The "how can I help?" and "how can we help each other?" questions drive a great sense of collaboration which removes much of the normal interference present in every day work and life.

We've seen great examples of coping as a team sport outside of work too. There's no better example than the recent "Zoom Ergos" where you can join a zoom call to do a rowing machine workout led by Olympic medallists and other experts. The power of knowing you're working out with dozens of other people has created a great environment of support for anyone, however experienced to stay fit and connected during lockdowns. Who'd have thought doing workouts on a rowing machine via video conference could be so engaging and inspiring. Peloton's entire approach seems based on a community, a tribe, helping themselves and each other at the same time, connected virtually around the world.

Creating - and living - 'the New' means if we're going to compete in any way from now on, it will be on the basis of who can be the most collaborative person in any endeavour. When competitive collaboration is the norm, we will have added some really valuable DNA into the spirit of work and we'll all know that by us helping others, our own ability to cope and feel valued will grow.

New Questions

We've been running a new programme that is all about how to win when there is no finish line - Playing from the Heart. The programme was designed before the pandemic, but has taken on way more relevance because our certainty about future rhythms and rituals has been, well, a lot less certain.

There's a great article by Alex Hutchinson (@sweatscience) about the role of 'teleoanticipation' in sport, which studies the science of how finish lines affect physical and mental performance. The article contains a link to the Playing from the Heart, a programme which creates:

- 1. A new way of defining success**
- 2. An understanding of how to look after your body when there's no finish line**
- 3. An insight into the importance of ignoring finish lines, even when there are ones.**

The article highlights the importance of asking the simple question of "Can I keep going?" as the key to managing yourself when there is no finish line. This replaces the question of:

"Can I get to the finish?" which in turn leads to other questions like,

"Will I be happy at the finish line?" or

"Will I get there quick enough?" or even

"Will everybody else be happy with me when I get to the finish line?"

The questions we ask ourselves instantly give us a different take on what it means to be successful.

Interestingly, when we ask "Can I keep going?" our heart rate and perceived effort drop, meaning our body is being more efficient.

When we ask “Can I get to the finish?” the opposite happens, meaning we’re instantly under more stress mentally and physically.

In Creating the New in 2021, it seems like we have the ideal opportunity to define success based on how well we can keep going, one day at a time. Think about that . A world where being great at getting ourselves ready, mentally and physically, to keep going by doing each day as well as we can, becomes our new focus. If we can combine this with working collaboratively, then collectively we can reduce how hard things feel, as well as actually taking the strain off our bodies.

Finishing lines will become something we just pass by as we keep going in a way that keeps us all happy, healthy and maintaining sustainable progress. Our individual and collective sense of success will be based upon how well we can simply answer “yes” to the question of “Can I keep going?”.

One of our team is a multiple Ironman finisher and tells us in many races, the run leg takes you past the finish line 2-3 times before you can cross it. So you are presented with the finish line towards the end of a long and arduous event and then told to turn round and go again, moving away from the finish line you’re desperate to cross.

The focus has to be on keeping going, not just finishing. Knowing you’re giving yourself and those you lead the best chance to use your talents and energy wisely will consistently give you the confidence you need to progress with purpose and togetherness.

That way, instead of us being in a race to burnout, we’ll be competing for the title of most efficient and sustainable performer. That’s the New we want to help create - for ourselves, and our customers.

None of this is to say that finish lines don’t matter. The nature of some events, in work or in sport, demand a finish line. They are a reality of that world. Becoming ever greater at combining keep going with delivering on the finish line, however artificial or meaningful those finish lines may be, is what will provide personal and professional success in a way that nourishes us, not depletes us.

We are determined to Create the New. For us, this is much more than a slogan and it starts with the work that we do. We promise that in working with us, we will emphasise the importance of keeping going as much as we do the importance of finishing brilliantly.

We want to ensure that the happiness in keeping going is as nourishing as the happiness of crossing the finish line.

Culture, mental fitness and resilience - through a performance lens

For many years we’ve been asked by lots of organisations to help their teams and performers to be more resilient. That’s not too much of a surprise as we’re human performance experts and there’s a perception that high performers seem to demonstrate greater resilience than many. Whether it’s injury, disappointment or defeat, top performers seem to bounce back quicker and stronger than most.

Since the start of the pandemic, those requests have only increased and again, that’s not too much of a surprise. Covid 19 has changed all our lives and has presented us with personal and professional challenges greater than most of us can ever remember. The conditions in which we have to perform have been tough and have placed unprecedented demands on us mentally, emotionally, physically. Technical skills have had to be revisited to ensure they are relevant and tactical know-how has also had to adjust significantly.

So, as you lead yourself and others into the New, perhaps you're thinking of working on resilience too. If you are, then we have some thoughts we'd like to share.

Recent research published in the Harvard Business Review and carried out during the pandemic shows that "Overwhelmingly, respondents reported mental health declines, challenges with meeting basic needs, and feelings of loneliness and isolation."

85% said their general well-being had declined during the pandemic and 89% reported that their workplace well-being had declined. If we make the reasonable assumption that the majority of HBR readers are not without resources, these stats are compelling. The primary reasons stated for this decline were lower levels of mental health, increased demands at home and work and a loss of connection.

It's also worth noting that some people reported an improvement in well-being during the pandemic, which only goes to show once again, that a diverse and inclusive approach is what's required here.

If the sentiments outlined in the research apply to you, your team or your organisation in the same way, then maybe you're thinking of working on improving resilience in order to help people "cope". On the face of it, that sounds like a fine and caring thing to do. However, there is something that troubles us deeply with all the resilience talk.

That something is this; in many cases, it seems to us that organisations are looking to improve levels of resilience as a response - an antidote if you like - to their culture.

If the culture is causing or contributing to the requirement to be resilient, then perhaps instead of being great at giving people armour, we could focus on making work less of a battlefield for them. That means looking at changing aspects of your culture that mean people have to be resilient.

That doesn't mean your culture has to be "soft" or low performing, so long as everyone is "happy". It's about making sure you are clear on:

- 1. Your purpose and ambition - as a leader, a team or an organisation**
- 2. The culture and internal brand that you'll need to support that ambition, aligning high performance, culture and mental health**
- 3. How you will support people to be fit and ready to perform in that culture**

If you and your team are not clear on your answers to those questions, then we'd recommend getting clear before you embark on resilience training. It may not only save you time, money and effort; it may also be the right thing to do both from a human and performance perspective.

Creating a mentally healthy high performance culture means seeing resilience as a proactive quality to support high performance, not an antidote to things in the current culture that may be damaging and contributing or causing declines in health and performance readiness. It means creating a culture which is not contributing to any decline in a sense of Control, Confidence and Connectedness.

Once you've answered the questions above, you might want to get into the detail and potentially change some structural aspects of your approach, including how some of the following habits, rhythms and rituals that impact mental fitness and readiness to perform are working in your organisation. These may include:

- The coaching questions asked and the spirit with which they are asked
- The nature and quality of performance reviews
- Clarity on what is acceptable and unacceptable success, and failure, given your ambition

This means that as a leader, you are primarily responsible for creating a culture that supports good mental health and changing anything that your organisation is doing, wittingly or otherwise, that isn't promoting and contributing to good mental health.

Finally, we know that many organisations have been doing some good work around developing mental health first aiders. Success though is about being specific to you and your culture and how your support structures are going to work in your specific context.

We want to change the conversation from "being resilient to our culture" to "being performance ready in our culture".

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