



Note on a work life (qualifying as a new sport for the Olympic Games): When performance management and contemporary work life are in perfect harmony

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Introduction

I often wonder whether contemporary work life could qualify as a distinct sports event for the Olympic Games? Once in a while, I catch a glimpse of indications that this might be the case. This note is an allegory of contemporary work life as an elite sport told by high profiled management consultants.

Several of the management consultants I have interviewed during my career as a researcher, have a past within elite sport. Q is one of them, and at some point in the interview she talks about meeting one of four Danish rowers who won Olympic gold in 2004. She explains:

They were a team because they were the best rowers and not because they liked each other. However, elite rowers are also very special and their psyches are very special. Because one thing is that they need to push themselves so much, but they also really have to want it. And there is no money in rowing. In a way, I can identify with them, but when you hear what they've sacrificed to get there. Well then, rowing always comes first. Family and friends comes next to training and food and everything comes next to training. All other things are paused. It is very interesting indeed. It really is a different world. They also need to lose weight. They are allowed to be a little over their ideal weight, and then just before they are weighed for the Olympics, they take an extremely hot bath. The baths affect the fluid balance so they lose the last bit of weight.

This consultant easily relates her work life to the rowers work life, showing striking similarities between basic ideas of elite sport and consultancy. The ideas of very

special psyches, setting the strongest teams, considering work as primary and everything else secondary, constantly pushing to improve, and the fundamental personal will and desire to succeed. Performance management and continuously measuring one's work are essential and integrated parts of working life within elite sport. These are ways to ensure constant improvement.

Tom Kristensen, a Danish rally driver belonged to the absolute elite within his sport. He has won the prestigious Le Mans race more times than anyone else. Le Mans is known as a hard and exhausting race. Completing the race requires talent and fine technical skills but also the will to victory, extremely good physical shape, strength and endurance. Just after regaining the championship in Le Mans in 2015, he victoriously pronounces:

Within football, you say that a player is never better than his last match is, whereas, I do not think of myself as being better than my next race. (Ud og Se, 2015)

The difference is crucial. When value is constituted by the last performance measurement, the gaze is retrospective and directed backwards, whereas, when value is constituted by the next performance measurement, the gaze is directed forward towards the future. The difference is whether a completed achievement is an objective and a goal and thus an ending, or whether a completed achievement is the beginning of the next potential achievement. The latter points to the fact, that a position among the elite requires persistent hard work. One victory is not enough. As one of the Olympic winning rowers explains it, the victory is at the starting line and not as they cross the finish line. The consultant Q unfolds:

I've actually talked to one of them, who won gold in the 2004 Olympics, and he told me, that it was that feeling you get right at the starting point. It is an indescribable great feeling to just sit there knowing that you are so amazingly well prepared that the race with certainty will turn out fantastic. So, it was this feeling of adrenaline right before the race begins. Thus, it was not the feeling of being the first crossing the finish line, although they would probably have become quite annoyed if it was not a gold medal, they had won.

When you constantly and convincingly must prove that you can conquer the next victory, the overall objective is constant improvement, and these improvements must necessarily be specific, measurable and comparable. Hence, performance measurements are an essential and integrated part of the elite. They measure victory and this simultaneously means to ensure that improvement occurs. So how does modern work life function as an elite sport, where the goal is constant improvement? Is it a working life continually driven towards new beginnings and without endings? Ready, steady, go!

High performers and performance management

The main characters of my allegory are successful management consultants working within the financial sector. They all work in one of the largest international consulting firms residing in Denmark. Like elite athletes at the Olympics, they are all excellent within the consultancy discipline. They are all among the top 5% of their respective peer groups. If modern working life were an accepted sports discipline at the Olympic Games, they would all qualify. In other words, they would all belong to the elite's elite. It is claimed that little is known about the work of such management consultants (Meriläinen et al., 2004). Similarly, I know very little about the actual work of my consultants. Despite hundreds of hours of personal and intense interviews about their work and lives, the practical content of their work seemed insignificant. But, as in the Olympics, *performance matters*.

This note is based on 25 interviews with consultants at all hierarchical levels working at the Danish office of one of the largest international consulting firms. What characterizes this type of organization is an indisputable 'high-performer' culture (Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). As my goal was an in-depth understanding of the respondent's work life, I used qualitative interviews as the research method. The subject matter of this research method is to understand how the respondents experience and make sense of their specific worlds and contexts (Kvale, 2000). The depth of the material was strengthened by interviewing some of the respondents up to three times each. The interviews were explorative, taking the particular consultant's career, desires, dreams, hopes and ambitions as a point of departure. All the interviews have been recorded and transcribed.

When talking to high-profiled management consultants within the financial sector, extremely high ambitions and strategically building up a strong career seem essential. Career progression commensurate rewards for specific levels of performance and particular demonstration of character (McKinley, 2002)

For a number of years, major multinational consultancies have topped the list of first choice employer by business students. Junior consultants are exclusively recruited as graduates with the highest grades. Hence, consulting is considered by bright and ambitious graduates to be a professionally appealing and rewarding job choice (Meriläinen et al., 2004). Accordingly, consultancies recruit only the best graduates with top marks from the universities, and only keep top performers. Multinational management consultancies are organized as hierarchical pyramids with strict formal rules (Meriläinen et al., 2004) The pyramid's general base consists of consultants and the peak consists of partners, and the hierarchy consists of five career levels: consultant, senior consultant, manager, senior

manager and partner. In average, consultants stay 2-3 years at each level. This means, that either you move upwards in the hierarchy, or 'you will be asked to find another job'. This 'up or out' organizing principle ensures a constant dynamic movement. In 2-3 years, you must improve so much so that at the final year at every level, you perform as required at the next career level. This proves that you are ready to move up a level. Hence, the continuous display of being high performers is integrated in the pyramidal structure and in the performance management systems. Thus, in this up or out culture the competition gets harder as the consultants progress to the next level.

At the same time, the wage increases through promotion, and most significantly for the very few reaching partner level. The company has defined clear and highly nuanced guidelines for what is expected of the consultants at each career level, and to evaluate whether these targets are reached, there are ingenious systems to measure the performance on various internal and external parameters. Primarily this relates to the consultants' sales, which significantly increases between career levels, but also demands on development of and participation in social activities, project management, perfection and accountability are measured factors prior to promotion.

Performance management systems are socio-ideological control mechanisms (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004). The desire to be elitist and successful is an outcome of social processes. Hence, the idea of being successful is linked to specific criteria and constraints (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004). This company uses a 'forced distribution management system', a performance management system by which individual performance is evaluated relative to the performance of others (Blume et al., 2013). Hence, all consultants are once a year ranked in peer-groups as the top 5 percent or the worst 5 percent. The 5 percent at the bottom of each peer are to leave immediately. The top 5 are rewarded, appraised and likely to advance. Accordingly, it is shown that high performers are significantly more attracted to organizations utilising forced distribution performance management system than others with a lower aptitude (Blume et al., 2014). Practically, using forced distribution performance management systems is a way to create an organization that attracts and retains the highest performers (Blume et al., 2014).

The HRM literature has provided extensive evidence, that HRM practice and design can impact organizational performance (Sheehan et al., 2014), but there is more uncertainty about when HRM systems pay off (Marescaux et al., 2013). Hence, despite several discussions regarding how performance management systems work (and fail to work), empirical insight lack (Blume et al., 2014; Sheehan et al., 2014; Subramony, 2009). Accordingly, this note aims to contribute

empirical insight into how performance management works among elitist management consultants.

Although the fewest are top athletes or excellent high profiled management consultants, it may nevertheless be helpful to turn to extremes, as extremes often reflects normality, in a manner where normality appears clearer and brighter. Thus, it is my hope that the consultants' work can reflect more general terms in modern life viewed in perspective of the increasingly widespread tendency of performance management as co-creator of a work life as an intensifying quest into the creation of new beginnings.

Consulting two consultants

Several of the interviewed consultants have a past in elite sport, and there is no doubt about their gaze being directed at strengthening their performance for the next task, like Tom Kristensen. In addition, the allegory of working life as an elite sport is obvious and captivating for other reasons. As professional athletes love their sport, consultants love consultancy work. They tell vividly about how they would die in a regular 9-5 job, and how it would simply bore them to death. They tell unanimously about how they love to face challenges that seem unsolvable and yet solve them. Easy tasks are boring, and boredom is, by all means, best avoided.

The following are two consultants' personal narratives about performance management. I have chosen a narrative form in order to unfold the empirical insight into how performance management works and makes sense for this specific group of people.

Mr. B

B is tall and toned. His suit fits him perfectly. Mr. B has played football at the national youth team. Unfortunately, he had to give up his football career because of a serious knee injury. However, he still plays a few times a week:

When I am not injured, I try to play Mondays and Thursdays from 6pm to 8pm. Then I am gone from 5:30pm to 8:30pm, but of course I come back to work again, if I need to. And you get so damn fresh from playing. People in here are runners, they are in really good physical shape. Because you cannot be fucking focused in your head if you're not physically focused, I think.

When Mr. B started as consultant, he was like a tense bow:

I was exactly like a tense bow, ready to be dispatched. And luckily this was what happened when I started. I was shot off like an arrow with an extremely steep learning curve.

B must win, and he is willing to perform at his maximum every day to achieve victory:

Well, I cannot play a game of Monopoly, without wanting to win. If you do not play to win, you might as well not bother. This is what I like here, because it's a bit of the same going on. If you do not want to do your maximum in your work every day, you might as well not bother. It's this competitive spirit that gives me a lot. I refuse to lose.

Although the consultancy company right from the start provides the guidelines, the rules are not explicit as in Monopoly. Mr. B explains that he spent his first years to appropriate a 'general knowledge of the game, the rules and dynamics'. He explains that the first year was particularly tough because it creates an uncertainty not knowing the rules of the game. Yet, it is impossible to win, if you are not familiar with the rules, and victory is very important for B:

It is important to win, that is indisputable. That is totally cemented in me. There's nothing better than winning. I think that the important thing about winning is that it leads you to win. Winning makes you so much stronger. Because if you do not care whether you run 10 kilometers in under 40 minutes, then you probably will not make it under 40 minutes. But if you really want it, then you can wring the last minutes out of you.

But one thing is the game, another is the victory. The winner wins according to comparative measurable parameters. Therefore, performance management and the continuous measurements are something he appreciates about consultancy. It is reassuring and Mr. B could not live without it:

I could not live without being measured. I find it extremely important. One of the things that appeals to me as a consultant is that you get measured and remunerated by your performance. In sports, measurements are important, because the coach needs measurements to build most the powerful team. Hence, like in sports you always know as a consultant whether you've played a good match or a bad match.

According to B, performance management identifies individual winners, while also ensuring collective powerful teams of winners. However, performance measurement guarantees the favorable certainty for the consultants to constant improvement and moving up:

I think, if you are passionate about something and really perform well, then you will be rewarded. That's at least how it works in consulting. I do not think that you are in consultancy, if you do not have great ambitions. So, basically everyone is ambitious, although someone is at the very top. But everybody is ambitious, otherwise they are in the wrong business. In principle, what consulting offers are guidelines available for consultants to ensure moving: up, up, up.

In this way, performance management is a key method to guarantee that Mr. B can pursue and redeem his own ambitions, moving ‘up, up, up’ and building a strong career in the long term:

My ambition is to become so valuable to the company that I can add value here. But in the long term it is obviously my ambition is to create a personal value so valuable that I can get a really attractive position somewhere else.

Mr. M

M is manager, and you can easily tell that he once belonged to the elite world of sailing. Mr. M is number one at his career levels. Mr. M explains that he is driven by opportunities. What ever he finds exciting, he participates in. He has never had a ‘golden goal’, he says, and he has not one now. Instead, he keeps all doors open and creates windows of opportunity. Mr. M works at his maximum capacity every day:

I work in the manner that engages all of me. I must be where I fully devote myself, to perform my best. I know myself well enough to know, that this is the way I operate. I engage myself in what I do. I invest myself 100%. That’s why I deliver what I do. That’s why I’m good.

M is competitive, and he competes all the time. Hence, consultancy suits him well, due to the fact that ‘there always is something to chase’, ‘new steps to climb’ and ‘new fields to conquer’. He often compares himself to a professional cyclist, because in that particular sport there is ‘always someone up front that you must catch up on’. But this catching up must be measurable:

In marathon it is easy to measure progress. You can measure your time, and immediately see whether you have improved. It’s all about knowing whether you have improved. You can improve in sports, or by transmitting the improvement to your work. You can exploit competition at work, and then you’ll get better at work. If you want to be the best, you will become good. If you have that competitive gene, then you will also be good.

M operates with a color scale to ensure that he delivers his best. The scale is related to work intensity. He has been at all levels of color, so he knows exactly what different levels feel like and where he feels most comfortable. Mr. M explains his color scale:

I use my own color scale, where gray is at the bottom and with green, yellow and red above. If you are down in the gray area, you are bored, and in the green zone you work in a manner where you generate energy. When you move further up in the yellow and the red zone, you spend more energy than you have, and more than you create. So you work with a deficit of energy by spending resources to be paid back later. So if you’re in the red zone, it is too much. But in return, it is probably in the yellow zone that you perform your best. But it is also where you start to cut

down on all leisure activities. Actually, it is at the top of the yellow zone right by the border to the red that you perform best.

According to M, the yellow and red zones are preferable to the other zones, despite the costs involved by being there. Grey is the worst, 'it feels like in a straitjacket'. However, most fatal is that degeneration happens in the gray zone, you lose your excellence:

Every time I have worked without full speed, I have been bored to death. But worst of all, pace is slow, so you lose your high speed and you perform lousier, and you are not as gifted and talented. You lose your edge.

Thus, it is important for Mr. M to work with maximum intensity. Improvements never occur in the gray, on the contrary. Mr. M himself has learned that there is some physical distress and deprivation connected to being in the red zone. On the other hand, the red zone pays a positive return, as this is where improvements may occur. Mr. M explains the positive benefits of returning from the red:

It may well be that it's really hard to be up in the red zone. But simultaneously you have achieved something that generates a really good feeling. You have become slightly stronger in work. And it may be that the barrier you have exceeded expands your green field, or makes it shine brighter green. So in that manner the red zone may bring some positive returns.

When the end is the beginning

The elitist work life creates a sophisticated logic by which the consultants constantly evaluate their current and future value related to potential career opportunities. The consultants strive to constantly do their very best because of personal aspirations and ambitions and in order to reach the performance management goals from the consulting house. It is striking that the consultants do not discern between personal aspirations and the performance management system. Thus, when the consultants explain: 'I cannot perform mediocre', 'I want to be the very best', 'I can't stand losing', 'I do not need to be the best at everything, but in my professional field, I would like to be the one you are thinking of', 'I'm ambitious, so I always perform 110%', not only do they express personal norms but also professional norms. The personal and professional norms are integrated. Mr. M and Mr. B use different methods for improvement, but neither of them could live without performance measures; they do not distinguish between themselves and their measurements. Accordingly, marathon and good performance measurements create the same feeling of happiness:

You feel that you are rewarded in some way. The reward is that I become happy, and that I am satisfied with myself. It's the same feeling you get by running a marathon.

Thus, the elitist working life is clarified through the allegory of elite sport. Mr. M and Mr. B have a passionate relationship to working. Through working, they acquire their greatest joys. Their lives are all about working. They are determined to maintain a place in the elite among the very best. They work methodically and strategically to extend their physical and mental limits in order to improve their efforts. It requires talent, a strong will, overcoming pain; and last, but not least, it requires long intensive working days. The similarities between the rowers' work life and the consultants' work life are striking.

As the rowers, Mr. M and Mr. B organize their lives so the exercise premises are always optimal. The elite consists of the best of the best; of those who can endure the greatest desire, will and pain. Lactic acid and blood taste in the mouth. When you want to win gold in the Olympics, you must constantly be at your best and be ready to cope with the next challenge. They challenge and push themselves to be better. They transcend themselves in order to perform their most outstanding. Only if you really want to win, you will win. You are co-creator of your own victory. But you need to want to work hard. If you want to remain in the comfort zone, you will never improve. You have to want to improve. Mr. M and Mr. B seek improvement that are systematically measured on various parameters. Their improvements are guided systematically and strategically on intricate performance management systems. There is no time for relaxation. Relaxing in the gray zone is for losers. Relaxation creates decline and degeneration. Their improvements are systematically measuring various parameters. Their improvements are guided systematically and strategically through intricate performance management systems. There is no time for relaxation. Relaxing in the grey zone is for losers. Boredom is the enemy. Relaxation creates decline and degeneration. Improvement requires reaching the red zone. Grey zone is not just for losers. Grey zone creates losers, just as red zone creates winners. They strive for the red zone. No breaks. Rather extreme relaxation. The consultants talk about relaxation in terms of: marathon, iron man, mountain climbing, river rafting, hiking in the jungle, crossing deserts on a motor bike. Their relaxation, is contributing to improvement of their work superiority (see also Johnsen et al., 2008).

It is impossible to win the Olympics once and for all. Therefore the contract is more than economic, it encompasses the whole person. The dynamics epitomizes the reflexive self at the heart of the modernist project: We are what we make ourselves (McKinlay, 2002). The victory must be repeatable. Otherwise, the place in the elite is lost. Otherwise, they are just a former elitist. So immediately after the Olympics, the gold medal loses some of its value. Thus, continuous victories are important as they are necessary markers indicating that the performers are on the right quest previously formulated as going: up, up, up. Q, the consultant who knows the Olympic gold rowers, explains:

I do not know why I want to win. But if I did not win, I would clearly feel like a failure. I would certainly feel that I was heading downward.

Between victories, a downward motion must be avoided and upward measurements works as visible proof of it happening. Thus, the very content of the performance management system is not substantial. It is not of great importance, what is measured. Rather, it is essential that the system is designed to measure improvement, excellence and victories. It is essential for the measurements to determine who belongs in the elite and who does not. However, performance management is an essential and integrated part of the consultants' work life. Subsequently, performance management systems evaluate individual performance relative to the performance of competitors and this is a welcome and necessary component of a modern work life heading towards qualification as a discipline for the Olympic Games. Without performance management, it would simply be impossible to achieve the goal. It enhances and reinforces a working life based on constant improvement. No rest, breaks or serenity. A working life organized towards new beginnings and without endings. A working life organized as a moral project without end or hope of completion (McKinlay, 2002). In that light, performance management and contemporary work life works together in perfect harmony. However, it is a perfect harmony, which comes with major implications. Ready, Steady, Go!

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