

Converting Skills from the Rugby Pitch to the Boardroom

Ireland rugby star Peter O'Mahony's insights from years at the top tier of sport can be applied to high performing entrepreneurs writes Pete Smyth

I often say that you must see the world to see what world class looks like. But the 60 entrepreneurs attending the 2019 Entrepreneur Experience last weekend got to witness it on their door step.

Over the past nine years this annual event, organised by Cork BIC, has helped shape the development of over 250 of Ireland's brightest emerging entrepreneurs. Having global ambition alone is not enough -- the entrepreneurs selected for the Experience are carefully chosen because we see their world class potential.

Great entrepreneurs are always on the lookout for insights to help them improve and make their businesses better. Sometimes, it can come from a fellow entrepreneur. Sometimes, however, it can come from an entirely different field. In this case, it came from the rugby field.

I was lucky enough to interview Irish rugby legend Peter O'Mahony at this year's event, seeking insights from his journey and successes that our entrepreneurs could benefit from. His CV speaks volumes. He captained Ireland at all under age levels and Munster at age of 21 before advancing to captain both Ireland and the British & Irish Lions. He has played more than 120 times for Munster, and has 57 Irish caps – and he has yet to turn 30.

Sometimes insights from great sports people are relevant to high performing entrepreneurs, other times they aren't. When I spoke to him in the lead up to the event I knew we were onto a winner. Behind the serious, cold and direct exterior I got to see the confident, yet humble, athlete who placed team at the centre of his whole philosophy.

It wasn't the old cliché "it's all about the team not me" because the insights were deeper and he looked at everything he did in the context of the wider group and their goals. I felt it was lucky he picked a team sport when he was a child as an individual sport would never have gotten the best out of him.

O'Mahony came to speak to us the morning after a tough home victory for Munster against the Cardiff Blues where he was named man of the match after being taken off injured after 75 minutes. A real workhorse, he squeezed us in before celebrating his son Theo's christening and his daughter Indie's third birthday.

He gave us some insights that would be as valuable in the world's most successful boardrooms as they are in some of the world's leading rugby dressing rooms.

Values over Goals

O'Mahony spoke about some of the changes that Joe Schmidt introduced with the leadership team when he became Ireland's Head Coach in 2013. He believed having goals were important

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but they needed to function within an overarching culture that is dictated by shared values and beliefs to have maximum impact.

The leadership team sought to clearly define the group's values and achieve true alignment with them. They need to figure out "what they stood for". It was personal, it had to have meaning for them as a group and it was clearly more than words on paper or slogans on walls that quickly become invisible.

They weren't talking about boring mission statements that portray utopian visions to insiders and outsiders alike. They were talking about searching deep inside to find a common set of tangible values that would govern the beliefs and actions of the whole team. The language wasn't going to be wordsmith to death by outside communication agencies. It was simple, they were going to be defined by them and lived by them. They wanted it to be simple but that didn't mean it was going to be easy.

The self-reflection didn't just focus on rating themselves but also on rating what other teams thought of them. The key was to simplify the complexity and arrive on something that everybody could stand for and live by. It centred on standards, consistency and personal responsibility which are now at the heart of everything they do. The process of simplification was painful but the process crystallised the alignment and unification of the team's leadership and has been the cornerstone of its subsequent success.

The take away for companies is clear: work hard to distil down your value set into its purest form. Then, more importantly, develop an environment where people live by these values and hold each other accountable to them. Winning teams in sport and business are usually aligned to clear and tangible values.

Extreme Openness & Honesty

True accountability is only possible within environments where high levels of openness and honesty exist. O'Mahony described their forums as being direct and, to the outsider, extremely harsh. O'Mahony first experienced this degree of openness and honesty as a youngster in the Munster camp where he saw the benefits of receiving and giving honest and straight feedback.

While initially uncomfortable, the Munster captain now feels this transparency is essential to progress. Having it eliminates whispers, conversations behind closed doors and "camps within camps" forming. If it needs to be said, it is said. Everybody has a voice.

The degree of openness and honesty effectively democratises the group facilitating higher degrees of objectivity, awareness and personal responsibility. Most people in life (and business is no different) would feel they are very open and honest and the questioning of this would personally offend them.

What I learned from O'Mahony is that extreme openness is being very, very open to criticism, learning, changing ways, taking personal responsibility and deep levels of self-reflection and assessment.

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Extreme honesty can only be delivered within an environment of extreme openness. It was clear that within the high-performance camps of Munster and Ireland that performance is very “personal” but with their openness and honesty people don’t take critique and criticism “personally”. How powerful would work environments be and how much easier would the job of an entrepreneur or business leader be if similar levels of extreme openness and honesty existed. Beating around the bush on issues in business is draining and unproductive for everybody.

Everybody is a Leader

Every team has a Head Coach and a captain but O’Mahony believes that leadership is a responsibility that everybody must embrace. With clarity in goals and strong values, performances are delivered by having leaders in all positions on the pitch. Leaders know the meaning of responsibility and don’t shirk it.

A number of times during the interview O’Mahony confidently acknowledged that Ireland could beat any team if everything went to plan and people played to their full potential. I could see now the significance of consistency in delivery and everybody assuming full responsibility for their position on the pitch. One person, one mistake could be the difference between success and failure in a game or even a season. With such high stakes everybody was responsible.

O’Mahony spoke of the layers of leadership from coaches, captains, leadership groups and players. His insights on the last two intrigued me most. The leadership group is a player appointed group of senior players who form a vital part of the structure. He referred to these players as the “Standard Bearers”, they are tight, respected by all and lead by example. They are the players who teammates go to, they sort problems and ensure standards are achieved. There is usually a correlation between how the leadership group perform in both training and games and how the team performs. They are appointed to set the example and the standard. This is a big responsibility.

While initially sceptical of the concept of all players being leaders, I quickly got to understand the concept and its benefits. Individual leadership at a player level would result in greater levels of empowerment, ownership and responsibility. The philosophy of “Everybody being a Leader” is rare in business but I believe with little downsides companies could benefit hugely from adopting it.

Friendships Work

In the world of business, people tend to work with colleagues and have friends outside work. For O’Mahony, it is different. He spends an enormous amount of time with his team mates, particular during training camps for Six Nations, World Cups or Lions tours. As a result O’Mahony is very close to some of his teammates, enjoying their company, wanting to journey together with them, wanting to win for each other and has formed bonds that unite them. This unity is particularly important in difficult times.

Remarkably this closeness never compromises the openness and honesty they have with each other. In business, people usually become less honest and objective about the performance of colleagues the better they get to know them. They don’t want to have uncomfortable

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confrontations that will hurt feelings or result in fall out. This can make employees reluctant to get to know their colleagues personally at all. It was clear that O'Mahony looked at this totally differently and he saw closeness as something that facilitated radical openness and honesty with team mates.

Business could certainly take this leaf out of O'Mahony's book as it would enable companies to avoid a lot of the heart ache and pain that goes with avoiding the necessary and often difficult honest conversations.

Be Very Coachable

One of most interesting insights was his statement that he was "very coachable". From the outside you see a world class athlete who is at the top of his game while on the inside is a very driven player who is always looking for areas for improvement. You can sense he is constantly in search of improvements. He was exposed to high performance environments from a young age starting with Cork Constitution where he gained inspiration from world class players such as Ronan O'Gara and Donncha O'Callaghan before moving to the Munster Academy where he learned from Paul O'Connell and the late Anthony (Axel) Foley among others.

These environments and people have clearly had a lasting impact on him. Change can be uncomfortable and sometimes painful for people. In O'Mahony, you can see somebody who relishes the opportunity to change if it will make him better. He doesn't fear change and has a level of openness to change you would associate with somebody learning a sport for the first time.

If businesses could develop environments that are this open to and excited by change, they could develop and grow faster. These businesses and management teams would also be more agile in responding to market changes or shocks. It's a very interesting question for us all to reflect on – How open do we genuinely feel we are to being coached and making personal changes? If we think we are, have we been doing it?

Love

I wanted to go beyond the team and get deeper personal insights into the real Peter O'Mahony. I asked him what he would attribute his success to? It was very important I got this answer clear as my four boys were going to quiz me on it when I got home. It started with "I love what I do". As the old saying goes "if you find a job you love doing you will never have to work a day in your life". Behind the glamorous façade of professional rugby, however, is a lot of hard work, pain, sacrifice and risk.

It is very clear that he has always loved the game and everything that goes with it. He is very driven and relishes the challenge. He is haunted by the defeats, recollecting them far more vividly than the victories. He works hard in training but has a particular focus on always delivering in games.

His love of the game and commitment to it sets an example and is the reason he is respected by players and coaches. I believe high performing companies just like sports teams need to attract people who will love what they do. If leaders can successfully attract talent who share a

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common love for their companies they are at a huge advantage. People will go the extra mile and in a world where we are all looking for an edge the extra miles counts.

Develop Instinct

The game of rugby gets more physical every year and the challenges of player welfare have never been more topical. I envisioned Munster and Ireland training sessions as being very physical, hard hitting, bruising encounters where players proved their worth and fought for their places. I was wrong. Contact in training is now minimal and training weeks may not include any contact.

He summed it up well when he looked at me with surprise and said “there are some freaks” referring to the physicality of some players, stating “you couldn’t have them hitting you every day”. In the absence of tackling, tackling improvements are now made through visualisation. Visualising twenty tackles in detail enables players to sharpen their insights while protecting their bodies. When asked about game plans he spoke of maybe having three to four phases planned at any time.

He spoke to the importance of instinct and awareness in games in subsequent phases. You can imagine they almost develop a sixth sense from their knowledge of each other. They sense lines people are going to run and position themselves in the right place at the right time to capitalise on opportunities. Developing good instincts is an important for business leaders. They need this skill to make the right business decisions fast. After many years of information based decision making I have developed a strong gut instinct based on all my experiences to date. I see my gut as my mainframe and I trust it implicitly and this enables me to make quick decisions.

Change when the rules don’t change

Rugby as a sport hasn’t changed that much since I was a child. Played on the same size pitch, with the same size ball, by the same number of players who are playing to mostly the same rules. Yet from the conversations with O’Mahony it was clear that their approach to the game changes every year.

The approach today is radically different to five years ago. The use of data and video analytics has spiralled. So much can now be measured using GPS data including: meters made in training, impacts in training and speed over distance. Video analytics is used extensively to help with opponent player profiling and to explain learnings. Mindfulness and visualisation are common place.

Coaches now look to simulate the intensity of play to make sure players are in the right cardiovascular shape for 20-30 phases of play. This simulation tests the performance of both the body and the mind while under significant pressure. Businesses need to realise that just because a sector or company doesn’t appear to need to change that this is always the case. Keep changing and improving even if competitors don’t. Stay hungry and never stagnate.

Switch off

O’Mahony realises the importance of downtime and switching off. It’s intense and you need outlets which let you switch off and mentally recharge. With a young family he acknowledges

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this can be harder. He has a love of gardening and weirdly chopping wood. One of the attractions of wood chopping with chainsaws is the need to concentrate to avoid losing a finger.

This level of concentration appeals to O'Mahony as it provides him with no choice but to switch off fully and concentrate. For entrepreneurs and businesses leaders rest and recharging are important. By keeping a healthy body and mind you are in a position to bring "the best you" to both your work and families. It's important to take a little time to achieve this without feeling guilty. Life is long you have got to mind yourself.

The biggest insight for me was how relevant many of the values and philosophies that O'Mahony spoke so eloquently about can be translated into the world of business. It explains why so many top tier athletes migrate seamlessly into business. Having spent time with him, I believe O'Mahony would be able to make that transition look easy.

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