

Training a team calls for an individual approach

Businesses looking to motivate staff and enhance performance can learn from how athletes are managed. By Wendy Taylor.

For a country with only 20 million people, Australia achieves phenomenal international success in sport. And in a wide range of sports — swimming, cricket, tennis, athletics, volleyball, netball, hockey, golf — the list goes on.

This success could be considered simply a by-product of a population obsessed with sport and a climate conducive to outdoor training all year, but according to performance psychologist Gavin Freeman, it also stems from elite athletes and players being coached and managed by people who understand how to motivate people and how to help people consistently perform at their best under pressure.

Mr Freeman has worked with elite athletes on Australian Olympic and Paralympic teams, rugby players, golfers, and basketballers. He is completing a doctorate in performance psychology.

Increasingly, through his Business Olympian program, he is taking his understanding of human behaviour, gained through 10 years' experience with athletes, into workplaces, where he's helping executives and managers understand how to inspire and motivate staff to excel.

Last week at a breakfast for managers and human resource professionals organised by global recruiter and human resources company Hudson, he explained his approach.

The focus on managing performance in

might as well not play them on that day," Mr Freeman says. "Different people respond to different styles, and that is the same in a business environment."

Trust, honesty and continuous feedback are also crucial if you want people to perform, and staff need to know that their manager will support them. "People need to know they will be backed or there is no incentive to be innovative or creative," he says. "(And) if people are to excel, they can't be frightened to critically analyse their performance."

David Reynolds, Hudson's general manager, human capital solutions, and a part-time swimming coach for 20 years, agrees with Mr Freeman that many performance management systems fail to inspire people to perform to their full potential. This happens for a variety of reasons, he says.

"Often goal setting is done at the start of the year and goals are never reviewed," says Mr Reynolds. The problem with doing this is that things change quickly in a business environment and if a goal is no longer achievable in light of external changes, such as the emergence of a new competitor, this can place enormous stress on an individual or teams, he says. "Then some performance management systems, instead of motivating people and enhancing the bottom line, can do the opposite."

He says the approach used to manage elite athletes highlights the value of and need for regular analysis of performance in business. "In sport, the performance of a person is looked at after each game as well as in the longer term," he says.

In business, one of the most common weaknesses of performance management systems is the lack of feedback staff receive between formal review processes. How often, Mr Freeman says, does business step back and ask, "What did we do well?" and "What could we do better next time?"

