

Beyond Excited – An Olympian Perspective as Business Takes Its Rightful Place

By Marilyn King



Marilyn King is a two-time Olympian, who after an automobile accident rendered her unable to train physically for her third Olympic Team; she was able to train mentally and place second at the Olympic trials in Moscow 1980.

This extraordinary experience has led to a 30-year career as an expert in the field of exceptional human performance. Her work is a powerful example of applying skills learned through sports to three specific areas: business, education and peace

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Yes, a very exciting time. There is a new normal emerging and it is a good one. When given a choice, people will choose not to work for or do business with companies that exploit, harm the environment or are corrupt. Like it or not, the new normal includes a level of transparency and accountability in all areas of your operation. It includes taking responsibility for the life cycle of your product, your impact on the local community, partners and those who work for you. It includes recognizing that business is the most influential player on the planet and fast becoming the lead educational organization, educating more people over more years than schools and universities.

These and other systemic changes in how business is conducted make it beyond exciting to be in business leadership right now. In terms of the future well being of the planet, there may be no more important role on Earth at this time than effective leadership!

I bring a particular vantage point to this moment in business, a perspective that recognizes that when individuals and organizations excel, three things are always present. I see that two of the three are present, and leaders have a particular responsibility to provide the third element. People everywhere have tremendous desire for things to work out, and they are willing to act, but often cannot because of their mindset. In order to thrive in an era of continuous, systemic change, managing the collective mindset is the critical success factor for the ongoing shifts required in our organizations.

When change is happening so quickly and people are willing but unsure of what to do, moving confidently into the unknown is a question of leadership. After three decades in the field of exceptional human performance, I have found that our ability to shift from old ways of thinking, doing, and being which are no longer viable requires leaders to:

- ◆ Know and communicate what “The Gold Standard” for business in their industry entails; and
- ◆ Be equipped to tell the fully informed, compelling “Story of Now” that makes meaning in the midst of chaos.

Then our organizations can provide the infrastructure to support people in the ongoing identification of the highest level of strategic changes needed, and the means to shift quickly to engage with the new story and achieve the ‘gold standard’.

While leadership competency frameworks abound, the vast majority of the identified traits of effective leaders are the same qualities required of good managers and good sales people. Being a good listener, being open minded, and recognizing others are important qualities for all people including our leaders. But I believe that at this time, the unique and critical responsibility of leaders, is to establish those conditions for a gold medal mindset through “The Story of Now” and the articulation of ‘The Gold Standard’ and then modeling the ability to “speed-shift”...the art and science of knowing what to change and how to change quickly.

My initial schooling in mindset management came through athletics. As an ordinary person with just slightly above average athletic ability, I became an Olympic Pentathlete competing in five events at the highest level on two Olympic teams. I succeeded because of my ability to manage my mindset and speed-shift, or literally learn on the run. In athletics I saw legions of highly talented athletes who did not achieve their potential because of what and how they think. For every Tiger Woods or Michael Phelps, there are thousands of physically gifted athletes who never achieve their potential, because of their mindset. Current research indicates that more than

80% of the people who wake up on Monday morning do not want to go to work. If that mindset is prevalent in your workforce, if your team is anxious, tentative or uninspired, that is a recipe for organizational stagnation and perhaps even extinction.

Upon retiring from athletics and early on in my work with senior executives, I was astonished at how poorly equipped our organizations were to provide what is necessary to establish and maintain key elements of a high performance mindset. While in the past, organizations may have been able to post a profit and perhaps even be seen as successful without effectively addressing the mindset within their organization – that era is gone. Now, and in the future, they will be left in the dust by organizations that effectively access the energy and creativity that comes from a “gold medal mindset” and unleashes the collective wisdom that lives in their organizations. As leaders, we provide the essential elements for sustained high performance when we take responsibility to “make meaning in the midst of chaos”, identify what to change, and provide the means for how to change quickly. These are now core competencies essential for survival in this next chapter of business.

In order to lead in an organization that “makes meaning out of chaos”, maintains a gold medal mindset in the midst of ongoing strategic change, and has the ability to “speed-shift”, leaders must develop and model those competencies at the personal level. Through challenging direct personal experience I have discovered that building these competencies starts upon awakening – every day. Looking back at my athletic career and learning from athletes who are the best in the world, it is clear to me that the most important moment in determining who makes it and who does not, in athletics, in business, in every area of endeavor, occurs when we first wake up in the morning.

Each and every morning, upon awakening, when we move from asleep/unconscious to conscious, the first thing that happens is we re-set our minds. We literally “re-mind” ourselves of our story: where we are, what day it is, what is going on, what we are up to and what we need to do that day. As we awaken, we tell ourselves a story and then move in to action as a player in that story. Our actions that day fall into alignment with our story, with what our mind has been set to. For most people their morning reset is to an old established mindset, an autopilot. “Oh yes, it’s Monday, this is what is going on and I have to...blah blah blah.” They are automatically snapped back into the mindset they had yesterday when the world has moved on.

I remember the day I went from a mindset that said, “I am an average, hardworking athlete and I hope to someday make the relay team that goes to the national championships” to the outrageous thought that “I could be in the Olympics.” That new mindset immediately changed my behaviors, created new thoughts that led to different strategies which precipitated new daily practices and took me to two Olympic teams. That kind of shift in mindset most often happens by accident or is crisis induced. Because people can change their minds in a nanosecond, as leaders, we must be clear and consciously manage our own mindset as a core practice in undertaking responsibility to guide the day-to-day mindset of the people in our organization. Awareness of your own mindset is an essential first step.

Begin Your Day the Olympian Way- A Daily Practice

I would like to suggest a powerful daily mindset practice that is a first step in aligning the three elements that are always present when people excel. High achieving individuals and organizations are:

- ◆ “Passion-Powered” – which allows access to unlimited energy and creativity

- ◆ “Vision-Guided” – which provides a compelling context and focus
- ◆ “Action-Oriented” – providing the infrastructure to effectively guide daily mental and physical practices

If you are a “rookie” and new to paying attention to your own mindset and recognizing how it impacts your energy, creativity and effectiveness, take this first step:

- Set your clock five minutes earlier than you normally do and pay attention to where you mind goes. What thoughts occur, seemingly unbidden?
- For just five days when you awaken, notice where your mind goes. Do not try to make any changes; just notice your “autopilot”. You will be amazed at what you discover.

Then, take “The Ten Day Challenge”. For the next ten days whether your goal is harmony at home, productivity at work, or as President Barak Obama has stated, “a more perfect union”, I recommend what a former training partner has allowed me to call “The Bruce Jenner Technique.” For four years Bruce Jenner, the 1976 Olympic gold medalist in the Decathlon ran five miles every morning, envisioning that in Montreal he would win the gold medal, set the world record and retire. This practice aligned his highest aspiration with new thoughts, strategies, and daily practices that led him to the gold despite the fact that he was not the most talented athlete in the field of world-class decathletes.

To apply this kind of Olympian Thinking TM in your life, I recommend that instead of running five miles each morning as Bruce did, set your alarm clock five minutes early; run a mental movie of your goal, your gold medal. (Can you imagine eight gold medals?) See your gold clearly and in great detail as Bruce did, and as all great champions have done.

Through this intentional mindset practice you will quite naturally begin to look at your day and notice what actions and behaviors are moving you toward that goal and what actions are inhibiting your progress. You will begin to focus more attention on the behaviors that contribute to your goal and naturally move away from the behaviors that detract. Like Bruce envisioning the victory stand in Montreal, you will find yourself energized by these new images and new creative strategies will emerge to support your desired outcome.

This simple, powerful, daily mindset practice is a first step in aligning the three elements common to all high achievers. As this mindset practice becomes a habit, it forms the foundation that allows you to make meaning and guide the mindset of your workforce by role modeling what it takes to speed-shift.

Business is the most influential player on the planet. Business impacts everything, from the economy and the environment, to international relations and community well-being.

Business leaders are a high leverage strategic key to our collective future. Engage in Olympian Thinking as one new leadership skill “to become the change you wish to see”.

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