

# Ahead of the Game

How Business Can Learn  
from Top Sportspeople

**smart  
group**  
corporation

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# Foreword

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I've always loved sport; both as a player and as a spectator, as a child and as an adult. Sport is part of my life in many ways; it helped me form an incredibly strong bond with my father, and it's now doing the same thing with my 9-year old son. It has also helped me advance my career: discipline, team work, goal setting, persistence are just some of the attributes that come to mind when I think of the impact of sport in my work.

”

Some of my fondest memories and key life lessons come from sport. And I am lucky to live in a country that is “slightly obsessed” with it!

As soon as I set foot in Australia in 1999 - and one of the many reasons why I love this country so much - is because of Aussies' passion for sport ... from stadiums heaving with the fervour of fervent fans to the legions of parents and kids that cross towns and cities on weekend mornings, kitted out for competitive action on tracks, courts and ovals. But we love sport for more than the final score line. Sport teaches vital skills, such as leadership, motivation and fostering a positive team culture. Skills that are not only integral to the success of a sporting team, but are critical to creating and sustaining high-performing businesses as well.

In this series of videos and thought-leadership pieces, titled **“Ahead of the Game”**, Smartgroup has delved into the sporting world to examine how sport and business intersect, and uncover core values that apply to each sphere. We are uniquely placed to tap into the insights and experiences of sports luminaries thanks to our ongoing relationships with three of Australia's best. There's Sharni Williams, co-captain of the Australian Women's Rugby 7s Team (the Wallaroos), who won gold at the Rio Olympics, a former Australian Women's Player of the Year and recipient of the Order of Australia. Also, Jamie Whincup, seven-time Supercars champion, four-time winner of the Bathurst 1000 and

record-holder of the most wins in the Australian Supercars Championship. And last but not least, there's Brad Thorn, head coach of the Queensland Reds Super Rugby team and one of the most decorated cross-code players of rugby league and rugby union, who has won both the Rugby World Cup with the All Blacks and an NRL Premiership with the Brisbane Broncos.

Alongside these extraordinary athletes, Smartgroup is very grateful for the assistance and strong relationships with their parent organisations, the Queensland Rugby Union, Jamie Whincup Racing and Rugby Australia.

Talking to our three ambassadors, we found that there are common personality traits and qualities it takes to lead and succeed, that an elite team culture can be developed and that motivation influences success and failure. We also talked to a range of successful businesspeople to find how they applied these themes in the business world.

While we all know that each team and business is different, this series shows that the wisdom and learnings from the high-performance professional lives of our sporting brand ambassadors can be applied to almost every team in the business environment. I hope you are inspired by these three wonderful individuals and take away some critical lessons to excite, embolden and galvanise your own teams.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dave Adler'.

**Dave Adler**  
Smartgroup Executive

About this white paper: Smartgroup Corporation commissioned the research and writing of this whitepaper to help us, and our clients, learn more about the similarities between sport and business teams and the methods they employ to produce optimal results.

# Introduction

In this series we investigate the three key ingredients ladder-topping sports teams share with successful enterprises. Are you on the winning side?

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“The worlds of sport and business have been closely linked for as long as anyone alive today can remember,” wrote Robert Keidel in *Game Plans: Sports Strategies for Business* in 1985. More than three decades later, those links have not only intensified, they’ve also become more sophisticated. Teams in both sport and business are investing more time and effort to create cultures in which camaraderie comes naturally, balance is nurtured and winning is about more than the scoreboard or the bottom line.

The importance of well-led and united teams cannot be underestimated. While every team will have its own culture, every team that has a shared set of beliefs, expectations and values can create a truly effective culture. Teams with these ingredients boast deep cohesion, skills for smooth conflict resolution and an openness that lends itself to innovation and flexibility. Creating and maintaining high-performing cultures also delivers enduring, performance-enhancing change that traditional interventions in group dynamics and training in psychological skills cannot match.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most stunning examples of cultural change in sport involves the Leicester City football team in the UK’s Premier League. In 2015, the team’s woeful on-field performance and off-field indiscretions had it pegged for relegation. But just a year later, Leicester City pulled off a remarkable turnaround to become Premier League champions.

Pundits called it a ‘fairytale’ or a ‘miracle’, but the appointment of a new coach, Claudio Ranieri, and the sweeping changes he inspired, had much to do with the

turnaround.<sup>2</sup> “The most important ingredient is team spirit,” Ranieri said at the time. Savvy businesses everywhere are now seizing upon the key ingredients of team spirit: positive culture, motivation and leadership.

As these parallels between sport and business are increasingly incorporated across the corporate sector, Smartgroup has tapped its sporting ambassadors and uncovered valuable insights for business. Drawing on the knowledge and experience of Queensland Reds rugby union coach Brad Thorn, Australian Rugby Women’s Sevens co-captain Sharni Williams and V8 Supercars champion Jamie Whincup, Smartgroup has revealed how the techniques used to forge success in modern sporting environments can be applied to all team structures.

## Positive team culture

For Whincup, fostering a positive team culture rests on the principle of equality – creating an environment free of superstars.

“There’s no hierarchy,” he explains. “No one’s better than anyone else. Everyone’s got their job, and they get paid accordingly. Obviously, the manager gets paid more than the chef. But the manager is not more important from a results point of view than the chef. Everyone’s equal.”

Williams agrees. She says connected teams consider many perspectives, not just the leader’s. But while everyone has a voice, Williams says teams need to be aware of what she calls the ‘cancer effect’.

<sup>1</sup>A Cruikshank and D Collins, Culture change in elite sport performance teams: Examining and advancing effectiveness in the new era, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>BBC Sport, Leicester City win Premier League title after Tottenham draw at Chelsea, 2016.



### **Brad Thorn**

QLD Reds Headcoach

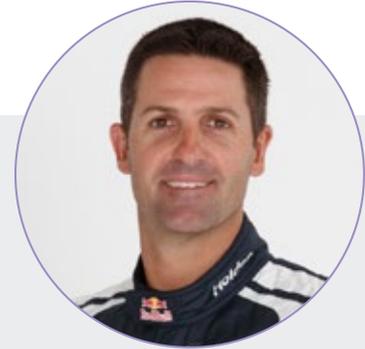
Rugby World Cup Winner  
Super Rugby Winner  
European Cup Winner  
Three NRL Premierships  
Two State of Origin titles



### **Sharni Williams**

Australian Wallaroos & AU 7s

Olympic Gold Medallist  
Two World Series Rugby 7s  
Championships



### **Jamie Whincup**

Red Bull Holden Racing

Seven Time V8 Supercar  
Champion  
110 Race Wins –  
All time record holder



“As soon as you’ve got one rotten egg in that team, they’re going to affect everyone,” she explains. “But if you can get people on your side, then that positive effect can really roll on.”

## **Motivation**

Spurring a team on is not a set-and-forget exercise. It requires constant attention and relies on all members working towards a shared vision. This is easier when team members are not overinvested in one task. For Thorn, keeping motivated is unsustainable without a proper life balance. “Balance is a massive thing,” he says. “Some people think to achieve something you just work hard, but if this is all you do, you can burn out.”

## **Leadership**

Leaders propel teams forward, lifting them when they’re down and bringing them back down to earth when egos take

over. But the best leaders are not overt in their teachings, Whincup says.

“Just lead by example,” he says. “There are plenty of leaders out there who are all talk. There are so many people out there who are so influential and they’re just massively respected for their speeches, but don’t deliver.”

Leadership qualities are encouraged at all levels of sport, and these are developed through two-way mentoring: senior members support and guide juniors, who in turn impart what they learn to their mentors.

Great teams don’t just magically happen. They are the result of strategic planning, careful leadership and finely tuned communication skills. Embedding the elements that make up a successful team comes from a learning journey full of wins and losses.

# Positive team culture.

## Developing dedication to drive results

A strong team culture underpins every success, but the recipe isn't always easy to pin down. We seek out the crucial ingredients from those in the know.

**Your team has to know that not only do you believe in them, they also need to have a belief in each other, and it needs to be within a culture of safety where they can speak up and put forward their ideas.**

Building team culture is an integral part of any good business. But building a truly positive team culture involves more than the odd staff-development day or free tea and coffee facilities. It means showing real care, support and compassion for employees and colleagues and increasing their resilience to inevitable challenges.

Sporting teams have long understood this – and now businesses are translating team culture from sporting success to corporate success.

### Care is crucial

“When organisations institute positive, virtuous practices, they achieve significantly higher levels of organisational effectiveness, including financial performance, customer satisfaction, employee engagement and productivity,” writes Kim Cameron in the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*.<sup>3</sup>

But it's one thing understanding that this is what a business needs and another achieving it. Inspiring an enduring commitment in members of a team leads to sustained action and results, experts believe. What's more, people who are committed are loyal and devoted to the cause and each other.

For coach of the Queensland Reds Super Rugby team, Brad Thorn, the crucial ingredient in developing commitment is care. “Any good business, any good sporting organisation around the world ... have teams that feel like they're working hard for a cause,” he says, “And at this club, I've really driven care. Caring about each other, caring about the cause and who you represent. There will always be tough times but if people don't care, they'll bail out and look after themselves.”

V8 Supercars champion Jamie Whincup also believes that care is at the core of a successful team. “To be there for your teammates, you have to care for them,” he says, “And you need to spend the time to get to know that person outside of the sport. Then, if you care for that person, they'll be there when the tough's getting tough.”

### Develop devotion

A deep-rooted sense of dedication drives what researchers call discretionary effort – when team members go above and beyond their job descriptions by volunteering for additional duties, taking the initiative to help others or investing in opportunities to learn.

This often involves making sacrifices, says Sharni Williams, Australian Women's Rugby Sevens co-captain. “We've sacrificed everything, we've put things on the line,” she says of her team. “We miss out on birthdays, we miss out on weddings, we don't see our families very often. You're here to do a job and you want to make every single day count.”

This wholehearted work ethic is at the core of every elite team. Thorn also says it forges a bond between members who know they must work hard to keep their position.

<sup>3</sup>K Cameron et al, Effects of positive practices on organizational effectiveness, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 2011.



“When we talk about team culture, it’s not all happy high-fives,” Thorn says. “It’s a work ethic, a humility to keep learning, to keep growing and caring about each other and what we represent.”

## An even contribution

Of course, teams work better when they are linked by strong relationships. Everyone knows the old saying that there’s no ‘i’ in team, yet egos may get in the way of common sense. Inspiring a team to deliver at a level that is greater than the sum of its parts is underpinned by people knowing that they are contributing. Even if it’s not an overt acknowledgement, the best teams are those that make people feel like they have played their part in the success of the team.

Creating an environment in which everyone understands their importance to the team is critical, says Whincup. “When we win and I’m standing on the podium looking like the Lone Ranger, if everyone in the team thinks it’s all about me, it’s no good,” he says.

“If the driver’s mentality is, ‘Hey, my job is to accept this trophy on behalf of the team’, that’s fine, somebody has to go up there and do it. The value of this bit of silverware is probably \$100, but it’s more what that represents – and that should be equally shared with your teammates.

“It’s massively important that the team understand that and if they don’t believe that, they’re not going to last long.”

Transparency and good communication also inspire an understanding among team members so no one is left in the dark. They enable a supportive network through which members can voice their ideas and provide open feedback.

The power of a safe and supportive team environment creates a feeling of equality, the chief executive of Extend Before and After School Care, Darren Stevenson, says.

“Your team has to know that not only do you believe in them, they also need to have a belief in each other, and it needs to be within a culture of safety where they can speak up and put forward their ideas without being anxious about finger-pointing or being victimised,” Stevenson says.

## Celebrating the wins

In reward for their hard work, high-performing teams also need to take time out to acknowledge their achievements. John Bishop, co-founder of non-profit organisation PetRescue, plans regular reward days away from the office.

“We’ve fallen into traps in the past that a lot of small, high-intensity organisations do, where we’ll be working on a project and we’ll finish that project and literally in the next breath we’re onto the next thing,” he says.

“We found ourselves not taking the time to acknowledge and celebrate the projects we’d completed and the wins we’d had. We’ve become a lot better at doing that now.”

Whincup agrees that teams need to stop and enjoy their success. “You need to love what you do but also achieving something as a group,” he says, “In my life, I’ve been able to do some things individually, but there’s no better feeling that achieving things with a group, especially if they’re good friends.”

Teams operating with an unshakably strong culture are more equipped to deal with challenges and more prepared to move with agility when change inevitably occurs. Building the right structures for such a team to flourish is dependent upon all members – something that is equally true whether you’re pulling on a suit or donning a team jersey.



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DELTA  
CENTRE  
INNOVATION



Red Bull



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Vodafone nbn  
MODESCO

Malibu

TOSHIBA

Red Bull

“

For us what's important is diversity, of different minds, different personalities to bring their opinions to the table. It's massively encouraged by the senior people because there's always a better way to make the team stronger.

*Jaimie Whincup*

”

# Motivation.

## How teams maintain momentum

The best teams nurture a strong will to succeed through thick and thin. We find out how the tough keep going.

**Everyone's motivator is different. Why I go to work might be different to why you go to work, and you need to know what motivates your staff so you can tap into that.**

One of the fundamental elements of success in business and sport is motivation. At its most basic, motivation is the will to succeed. Whether it's delivering the best outcome for a client or winning gold at the Olympics, developing and maintaining motivation is vital for ongoing achievement.

Co-founder and managing director of social enterprise Thankyou, Daniel Flynn, likens motivation to fuel in a car. "You might have a high-performing race car, it might be an awesome machine, but if it hasn't got fuel in it, it isn't going anywhere," Flynn says. "You've got to keep your motivation tanked up, because it's fuel for leaders, for businesses, for teams."

### Staying on track

Goal-setting is key to any effective personal or organisational motivation plan. Clear and specific long and short-term goals set the course of action and prevent teams from becoming distracted or disillusioned. But motivation levels can take a hit when teams fail to achieve goals. And this is when business leaders need to step in and assess the best course of action.

Sharni Williams, who co-captained Australia to its first Rugby Women's Sevens Olympic gold in 2016, says the trick is using

losses to your advantage and not making the same mistakes twice. "I'm a big believer that if you lose you have to learn from it," Williams says. "If you don't, you're going to keep losing."

Team morale can also sink during times of stress and this is when motivation is needed most. Australian V8 Supercars champion Jamie Whincup says it's critical to maintain a healthy perspective at all times. "Win, lose, or draw – get away from the sport and recharge the batteries," he says. "Reflect on the things you did well, the things you didn't do so well. Come to a stop at the end of the year, reflect on it, then go again."

A positive team culture shapes and defines the motives that keep team members engaged. Researchers have long backed up the theory that happier team members are more productive and energised.<sup>4</sup>

Cultures that zero in on three positive motives – play, potential and purpose – have a greater chance of improving team performance.<sup>5</sup> Play is the sense of challenge, potential develops when hard work enhances skill and ambition, and purpose is an identification with team goals. When these three factors align, teams have higher overall motivation and increased impetus to succeed.

### One size won't fit all

But not everyone is motivated in the same way. Teams need to cater for individuals and their unique sources of motivation, says Tiffany Quinlan, a human resources professional with more than 25 years' experience. "Everyone's motivator is

<sup>4</sup>Will de Freitas, Happy people work harder, *The Conversation*, 2014.

<sup>5</sup>Lindsay McGregor and Neel Doshi, How company culture shapes employee motivation, *Harvard Business Review*, 2015.



“ I think having outside interests is very important. When you solely focus on one thing for such a long time you get burned out.

*Sharni Williams* ”

different,” Quinlan explains. “Why I go to work might be different to why you go to work, and you need to know what motivates your staff so you can tap into that.

“For example, if I’m a mother of two young children and time is the one thing I crave more than anything, if I’ve done a really great job and you let me go home at 4 o’clock on a Friday afternoon to say thank you, I will give you 110 per cent every day of the week because you get me.”

Leadership and motivation are intrinsically linked within team cultures. Leaders with the right skills can influence motivation levels and push a team to achieve their very best. For some leaders the significance of motivation goes beyond achieving set outcomes and aims for a legacy that lasts a lifetime.

Queensland Reds rugby union coach Brad Thorn, and one of the most decorated players in both Rugby Union and Rugby League, hopes his coaching style lasts beyond game day. “If I coach long term, will it be about the wins and the losses or will it be about the men I impacted?” he says. “The impact will probably be the main thing I think about.”

A powerful motivation program prioritises achievable goals, encourages work-life balance, is customised for individuals and aspires to make a deep impact. This type of program will spur on individuals to achieve outcomes they may never have imagined. Embed this program into a well-rounded and strong culture and entire teams can maintain strong motivation in the face of scrutiny, pressure and challenging moments.



“

You'd like to think there's more to it than just doing a job. You actually care about them and they care about you. That's human beings at their best. If the employee feels like the boss is interested in them and wants them to do well, that worker will really want to work hard. Everyone wants to feel worthwhile.

*Brad Thorn*

”



# Leadership.

## Traits that take teams to the top

Plenty has been written about all kinds of leaders, but here we tease out what the best leaders in sport and business have in common.

**A solid foundation of trust in the leader and their capabilities is the bedrock of a united team. And leadership through trusted action builds stability, compassion and hope in a team.**

Today's workplaces pour strenuous efforts into building teams that are strong and resilient. While this focus is justified, there will always be a need for leaders. This may bring seasoned veterans to mind – those who have been there, done that, and done it well.

But in today's era of rapidly changing technology, young minds and perspectives are equally as valuable. First and foremost comes the ability to lead by example. In the same way a chief executive or a managing director shows a new recruit the ropes, a captain or coach also gets their hands dirty along with their team in the pursuit of victory.

Team members tend to respect people at the helm of an organisation when they know the leaders have experienced the very tasks they're asking the team to perform, says rugby union veteran and Queensland Reds coach Brad Thorn. "If you're going to talk about it, you need to bring it," Thorn says. "You need to live it, so it's respected. People see things through actions."

Seven-time V8 Supercars champion Jamie Whincup backs this up, saying those calling the shots need to show their willingness to be involved. "How can you expect your

teammates to go above and beyond if you're not leading by example?" Whincup says. "Good leadership is leading by example – get in there and do it. But make sure it's clear what's expected of each person."

### Mentoring matters

A willingness to share knowledge is a common characteristic of high-performance leadership. Mentoring programs, even for those at the top of the tree, encourage teams to embrace innovation and explore avenues their competitors wouldn't.<sup>6</sup>

While mentoring programs typically involve an experienced senior member passing on their knowledge and skills to a junior member, reverse-mentoring allows juniors to teach seniors. This two-way street ensures an even coverage of decades-old wisdom and new knowledge across an entire team.

For co-founder and managing director of non-profit organisation Thankyou, Daniel Flynn, mentoring is invaluable. "It is such a key to the success of our journey and even my own leadership journey," Flynn says. "Over one coffee, one lunch, you can pick up something that took someone maybe two decades to learn. And that is unbelievable, both from a technical ability or from a mindset perspective.

"There's an old proverb," continues Flynn, "that goes 'There's wisdom in a multitude of counsellors' and I've actually had that – I've had multiple mentors at a time, or advisers, and it's fascinating because each views the world differently from their experiences and their history."

<sup>6</sup>James H Moore and Zhongming Wang, Mentoring top leadership promotes organizational innovativeness through psychological safety and is moderated by cognitive adaptability, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2017.



Whether it be a mentor or a teammate, individuals often rely on role models to push them through challenges and overcome obstacles. Someone who inspires people to reach their full potential is essential in every team, the founder and director of recruitment firm Mondo Search, Simone Allan, says. “Great leaders are people who walk from the front, empathise, inspire and push,” she says. “Some people don’t get pushed and they get bored.”

## Qualities to keep

Researchers have long invested time and effort interrogating what makes a strong leader. While many point to a sense of vision or purpose, researchers at Gallup say the main four needs teams have from their leaders are: trust, compassion, stability and hope.<sup>7</sup>

While leaders need to prioritise these factors, teams also need to uphold them, says Sharni Williams, co-captain of the Australian Rugby Women’s Sevens team. “I’ve got to be here for them and I’ve got to be Sharni the captain,” Williams says. “I’ve got people’s trust in me so I go out there and lead by example. And I think for us, what we felt was successful was that we could trust everyone in the team.”

A solid foundation of trust in the leader and their capabilities is the bedrock of a united team. And leadership through trusted action then builds stability, compassion or hope in a workforce or a team. Strong leaders who motivate, inspire and teach as much through words as actions will not only help their teams and companies thrive but will also help nurture the next generation of leaders.

<sup>7</sup>What followers want from leaders, *Gallup Business Journal*, 2009.

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