

Cross-fertilization between sport psychology and business coaching

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Many researchers have gained on the issues of a successful leader in a handful way of ways. Referring to my last researches – which were evidenced by literature – I came to the conclusion that it is not enough to born to be a leader, as well as becoming a top manager is impossible itself, with a conclusion, that the way of being successful in business life is between them. Those, who want to have the role of a successful leader, have to learn and improve beyond their innate abilities. One known method of the leadership and personality development is coaching.

Representatives of each management science think that coaching comes from sport – this is also called American School – while the name of the other trend is the so-called father of coaching the German psychodrama method; the Gestalt. In my paper I deal with the American or Anglo–Saxon School in details. I also introduce the connection and relationship between sport psychology and coaching, the similarities and differences, the interoperability of each methodological features and areas. Moreover I discuss both territorial application of the so-called “Wheel of Excellence”. All these are evidenced by own experience and in-depth interviews.

Keywords: Cross – fertilization, business coaching, sport psychology, Wheel of Experience

1. Introduction – Why is the topic actual?

Even the activity of coaching itself is as old as mankind and dates back to the ancient Olympic Games, while the sophisticated version of it just appeared a few decades ago. As I mentioned in the abstract, the origin of coaching shows two directions.

The so-called Anglo-Saxon School originates from the U.S.A and is based on sport. As John Whitmore (*Whitmore 1999*) defined the concept, the most formidable rival on the tennis courts comes not from the other side of the net; it is inside the player. The European School, which nourishes from psychology and psychodrama, based on Gestalt drift, delivers from Germany.

My preconception and hypothesis was, that there should be a common point in them, because both of them operate well in its own circumstances. To justify this hypothesis, I made both theoretical and practical researches, which results would be present below.

As the secondary research showed, both fields are successful in their own ways. In Hungary and in other Central–Eastern European countries as well the European School is in use and is the accepted method. In the following paragraphs I would also like to present how is it possible combine the methods and tools in a successful way.

2. Similarities and differences between sport psychology and business coaching

To justify my preconception I tried to collect the aspect of the cross-fertilization from as many sources as possible. The international literature of the topic is insufficient and it is an absolutely undetected area in Hungary, so I made some complementary primary researches (interviews) to get the proper idea of the possibilities. In the following introduction, I mostly use the results of the interviews.

2.1. The similarities

Similarities can be found in the circumstances, in aspects and also in the used tools. I will introduce these ones shortly below. Afterwards, I would also like to present a method – the Wheel of Excellence –, which is able to describe the cross-fertilization possibilities.

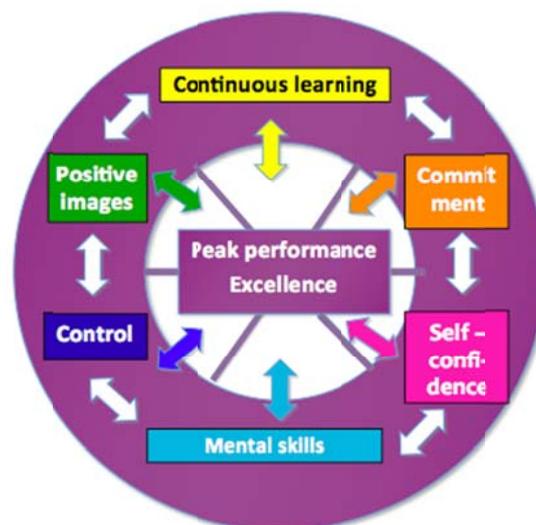
Both sportsmen and business representatives are strongly motivated by performance. They could be described as the ‘United athletes’. (Loehr–Schwartz 2003, p. 102.) The circumstances are different, as is the task too, but the representatives of both fields should focus peak performance. Another common field in the circumstances is the so-called sporty attitude, the endurance and willpower (Ievleva–Terry 2008).

There are also similarities in the aspects of sport psychology and business coaching. These are the importance of self-awareness, flexibility and the development of vision. (Gordon 2007, p. 172.) Between the tools we can also identify some similarities. Similar tools and models will be introduced in the next chapter. Not only the tools, but also some of the the reasons are similar: the use of identification and the verifiable/controllable activities, thoughts and aspects, coping with pressure and stress, the recognition management of negative thoughts and beliefs.

2.2. The wheel of excellence

The Wheel of Excellence (Orlick 1996) is one of those implementations, which have been evolving during the last few years. It is nothing else, but the summary of the similarities between sport psychology and business coaching. With its help the experiences and methods from sport can be used by appropriate efficiency and effectiveness in business coaching, too. The model does not show anything else, just the possible movement for the chance of psychology model of compliance from the world of sport to business life. The Wheel of Excellence has six parts in focus of the peak power, which are presented on the following Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Wheel of Experience



Source: Orlick (1996)

Central to all performance is the capacity to focus. As the hub of the wheel, this is both the metaphorical bull's eye for which all those in pursuit of excellence should aim, and the central characteristic around which all the other components of the wheel revolve and are

designed to enhance (*Ievleva–Terry* 2008). The different parts of the model have their own meanings.

Commitment means the first step to peak performance, which means the beginning with making a choice to succeed, something that is completely within personal control. (*Ievleva–Terry* 2008). Self-confidence is the second element, which is delivered from a Henry Ford saying. Accordingly, we should go through a six step model, which is shown on the following Figure 2. (*Orlick* 2008).

Figure 2. The six step model of self-confidence



Source: *Orlick* (2008)

Representatives in business life are highly educated, while sportsmen are well trained. The difference between good and peak performance will appear because of the different handling of the situation (*Ievleva–Terry* 2008). As Einstein said ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge.’ According to this – as I will introduce in my own experiences – it is a double-edged weapon. Its power is undeniable, but the use of it means appropriate care. (*Ievleva–Stillwell* 1996).

According to Hutchinson Low, any kind of appearance demands divided attention. To keep focused and stay on the proper way could be done with the use of the control, as a similar was in the two fields (*Bloch* 1985). Continuous learning is also important because of the developing process. Feedback and reflections are needed, because high achievers are often hungry for critical feedback. (*Johnes–Spooner* 2006) These are the sources for future development.

2.3. Differences

Not only similarities, but also differences appear between the two fields. These differences don’t mean, that they appear as a barrier in the process of cross-fertilization. They show that some kind of modification is necessary before implementation.

As my in-depth interviews show the mean difference is in the performance indicators. While in sport the feedback comes immediately after performance and they are measurable by exact metrics; in business life feedback comes only after a longer period of time – which even could be counted in months, quarters or years – and sometimes they are not even measurable by numbers.

Another difference can appear in the goals-setting process and in the regulation of the process. While sports are strictly regulated and these regulations are written, in business life rules are not set beforehand and loopholes can be easy to find.

There is also a difference in the general timescale. The carrier perspectives for sportsmen are much shorter than of people working in business life. While in sports it is mostly under a decade, in business life it could be as much as 50 years. The issues of training

and performance are the opposite in the two disciplines. In sport trainings are much longer than the performance itself, while in business life training period is rather short, people find themselves in the middle of right away and performance is in the focus.

Last, but not least, the focus of the two fields complement each other. Psychology is interested in the past and focuses on the personality, while coaching is involved in the present and the future and concentrates on the learning process and the development. This last issue will be one of the main reasons which will represents, that the combination of the two could improve the final results of the process.

3. Experiences

After overviewing the theoretical issues of cross-fertilization between sport psychology and business coaching I would like to introduce the practical side. The chapter could be divided into two parts. First I demonstrate the aspect of professionals, secondly my experiences from my sport- and business coach carrier.

3.1. Cross-fertilization in practice according to professionals

To get to know how interoperability works between the two fields, I made two in-depth interviews.

The first interviewee was a teacher of University of Miskolc Faculty of Arts who is not only a teacher, but also a criminal- and sport psychologist, moreover a practicing coach. She has confirmed me, that the main connection between sport psychology and business coaching is the peak performance.

The second interviewee, who studied psychology at Semmelweis University in Budapest, has coach-qualification, but now works in business life at a telecommunication-company. According to him, the most relevant appearance of the connection is in the entrepreneurship and in experimentation. To be able to draw the whole picture I also participated at several business meetings to get a short look of the aspects of professional coaches. Below I introduce the most important issues.

According to the interviews, I got the conclusion, that the kick-off point is that there exists a clear and two-way relationship between the two fields. According to the interviewees, there are overlaps in the aspect, tools and instruments, but even in the difficulties.

Interoperability between goals and reasons is one of the aspects, which means that the goal setting methods are mutually usable in both fields. Regularity and sporty attitudes were also appointed as key points. In sport, you can get results if you prepare and train yourselves continuously, from time to time. It is also valid for business life, because without stepping back sometimes, without doing self-evaluation and getting reflection from others, without participating regularly in some kind of helping and supporting activity, the arch of development will not bottom up as high as in case of bringing regularity into business life.

The third pillar is the adaptation of sporty attitude into business life. It means that endurance and willpower should play an everyday role also in the life of business leaders. All sportsmen know, that there are no desperate situations, only situations with joyful challenges, which could be solved with observation and a lot of work.

As for the instruments there are several ways of interoperability. First of all mental trainings and relaxation techniques could be useful on both sides, as well as imagination and visualization. In the meantime the latter, is a double-edged weapon, because, if there are not used in a proper way – allow negative thoughts into it –, it can cause more damage than what can be gained. Exploration, action plan development and implementation, even recreation could be the possible ways of cross-fertilization. I will introduce the importance of recreation later.

Of course cross-fertilization works not only in a positive way, but also in a negative one. The trap of it could be to find out, how is it possible and avoidable to make an elephant out of a flea. It means, that in both cases the participant in the helpers' role – coach, physiologist – should try to find a balance between involving into the topic and staying outside of it, which also means that it is not allowed in any way to project the coach's own problems and challenges into the process.

3.2. My own experiences of cross-fertilization

In my sport and business coaching work I just started to apply the elements of the Wheel of Experience in the past months. However it is not a long time and is still quite far from being representative, I think my observations are relevant to the topic.

The success of the process depends already on the start. If the client does the first step, give his vote to participate in coaching, already showed commitment to a previously set goal and started to move towards it. If this first step is done under pressure – for example just because somebody (the boss) told him, that he should participate in it – the own commitment would be lacking during the whole period and for this reason the results would be never as visible as in the first case.

On the other hand we all know, that peak performances are expectations in both fields and require both mental and physical preparations from the client. According to my experiences there is generally no problem with theoretical preparation, because leaders are well educated, sportsmen know the rules of the games and the proper movement elements. The question is how they can perform under pressure. Mentally the solution of it can be done by implementation of rituals and habits. For example in business life focus and self-confidence could come from retie of necktie or get a coffee before important meetings. In sport it is much more easier, like how they get nutrition, start to warm up etc.

The other important issue of mental skills is the importance of recreation and regeneration. While in pursuing sport, our body gives continuous feedback and marks how it feels – like tiredness, pain –, it is not so obvious in business life. Exploitation of the body couldn't be done without sacrifice. After success – finishing a project, getting an appointment – recreation is as important in business life as it is in sport.

Positive images can help to set goals and see them visible. The adaptation of them into business life has an effect, which is similar to the effect of a lighthouse. They are visible far away, give the main direction and the navigation point towards achieving the goals.

In both fields continuous learning is a must. It means that from time to time self-examination and reflection should be done. While in sport, sportsmen get continuous feedback from their results at competitions and trainers, and even have time in off-season period for review; it is not as obvious in business life. The main reason is, that nobody wants to get a mirror in front of him and facing with – sometimes really negative and destroying – feedback. The other reason for the lack of reflection is the time. Leaders and managers have no possibility to do regular self-evaluation and get full feedback. This point is something, which should be transferred without fail into business life.

My work with business coaches – even with the experienced ones – showed that they are really open and interested in new methods and tools, which can be quite inspiring in the transfer process.

4. Conclusion

The basic statement of my essay could be the quotation of Voltaire, that says that the perfection is the enemy of success and good. This short sentence gives us a clear picture, why helping-, supporting and developing methods – like coaching – are effective and profitable. It

says nothing else, just that perfect does not exist in this form, there is always a way how we could be more effective, more successful, doing it in a better way. And according to my surveys the cross-fertilization of sport psychology and business coaching could be something, which bring us forward on this road.

In my opinion there is a common future for the two disciplines. Sooner or later, but they will open towards each other. Because of the opening, changes are expected, which direction is clear, but the magnitude is currently unpredictable. The increased interdisciplinary could also help to improve the performance of both sides. For the opening, network building and contacts are needed. As it is a relatively unknown, untouched area I would like to guide my research in this direction.

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