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“What Can Business Learn from the Olympics?”

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Imagine this:

- your organisation has successfully enticed thousands of people to volunteer weeks of their discretionary or free time to helping it achieve its objectives
- it regularly secures millions of dollars of free media coverage around the world
- your leaders have enormous global political influence
- the world’s top talent competes passionately to work for you – for free!
- public buildings in the nation’s largest city carry your organisation’s logo
- Governments compete to provide the infrastructure for your next global franchise.

There is a business that has successfully done all this – the IOC’s “Olympic Games” enterprise. What can Australian leaders and managers learn from the Olympic business model and its unquestioned success in Sydney 2000, particularly in organisational and people management terms?

How to create a volunteer culture

Many organizations strive to create a “volunteer mindset” or culture – one where people willingly choose to do more than the minimum required to hold onto their jobs. What was it about the Sydney 2000 Olympics that created perhaps the benchmark volunteer culture?

Firstly, the IOC has structured its entertainment offerings so that they have a clear “big deal” focus with a relatively long performance cycle (an Olympics or a Winter Olympics only being held every two years). The over-riding focus on a relatively long term, publicly announced and non-negotiable big event acts to keep people energised and working hard through difficult periods. At a personal level, paying off one’s mortgage or helping one’s children through the HSC are comparable “big events” in many people’s lives that provide meaning and focus through challenging and uncertain times.

Secondly, and probably most importantly, the major Olympic products are wrapped in mythology, symbols and ceremony that lifts them out of the ordinary world of business, of short term financial budgets and operational targets. They are stage-managed as historic events and being involved in them is an opportunity to leave a mark in the pages of history – or at least to rub shoulders with those who will do so. Clearly, this is not just another job, not just “work”.

Anita Roddick at The Body Shop is another leader who has successfully wrapped her products in a mythology that lifts them and the company out of the ordinary. Microsoft and IBM have also been, at one time or another, “mythology rich” companies – to work there meant that you were special and were involved in work that was shaping the world. The Australian Defence Forces in its recruitment advertising also tries to wrap its business in a mythology of excitement, mateship, pride and high future employability.

By contrast, in many organizations, there is little mythology beyond the mythology of “the numbers”, or of the personalities on the executive floor and their political struggles with each other; or perhaps a general mythology of fear that causes people to work ridiculous hours and play value-destroying games in order to avoid losing their jobs or their status in the organisational pecking order.

Harnessing the power of symbolic rewards

The IOC relies heavily on non-financial, symbolic rewards for most of those stakeholders who directly contribute their time and effort (the athletes and the volunteer guides, drivers, etc). While the winning athletes may make big money in their other jobs outside the Olympics because of their achievements in the Games, the IOC and its affiliates offer only symbolic medals, ticker-tape parades and other non-financial rewards designed to build reputations, boost egos, and provide psychological benefits. In this respect, the Olympic organization has cleverly created a set of low cost, high value rewards that are generally underutilised by most other businesses.

In the case of the volunteer support staff, we have heard them say that they volunteered because they wanted to put something back into the community; to help show off their city to the world; to be part of a historic event, a once in a lifetime experience. No-one mentioned a search for monetary reward or career advancement – and yet it is precisely these latter rewards, not the former, that are the dominant form of incentive relied upon to induce high performance in most organizations.

However, it is possible to identify a recent trend in some leading organizations where, instead of higher short-term financial rewards, employees are offered opportunities to maximise their future employability by taking advantage of corporate training and development programs and of outstanding opportunities to work on leading edge projects (the non-Olympic equivalent of competing in a major final with the associated chance of winning gold medal status in the employment marketplace).

In passing we may note that the IOC does use financial rewards and incentives with some stakeholders; e.g. those who provide the funds for its operations and those who vote in the franchise allocation process. However, we can see growing community concern being expressed about the ethical and social desirability of the IOC continuing to be so reliant on financial incentives in some of these areas of its activities.

Engaging the human spirit

The Olympics stirs the passions; it engages something at the core of the human spirit. We are encouraged to cheer those in our midst who are winning; we do not hide our tears when our countrymen and women fall short of expectations. We clap and cheer the athletes from all competing countries. The athletes, in turn, openly acknowledge the boost they get from our visible and audible support for them in the heat of competition.

Compare all this to the lack of appreciation and recognition reported in the workplace in almost every employee survey that is conducted by myself and others. Contrast the Australian crowd’s generosity in applauding the achievements of athletes from other countries with the lack of acknowledgement in the workplace for the successes achieved by people in other Departments.

In the Olympics, the volunteer “support staff” and the crowd members (who play a blurred role that is part customer and part contributor) actually pay with time or money for the opportunity to encourage star performers working to fulfil our performance expectations. In the workplace, by contrast, we typically moan about the level of remuneration given to top executives or to star sales representatives. The differences between the two situations include:

- In the Olympic “workplace”, the supporting cast actually gets a much closer insight into the work and the sacrifices made by the star athletes – the media helps to ensure this. We can admire the talents of the Olympic athlete and because we know the sacrifices they have made, we do not seem to mind them claiming glory and gold if they win.
- Moreover, when our athletes win, they are in a sense winning for us. People like Cathy Freeman and Ian Thorpe in post-Games interviews expressed tremendous feelings of relief at being able to meet the high expectations that the Australian community had placed on them. By contrast, in most workplaces, top executives and star professionals are more likely to place high expectations on their support staff and to be blind to or rejecting of the expectations that the workers have of them.
- In the Olympics, we are all directly involved in the celebration of victory. Everyone in the crowd (both at the Olympic stadium and around the world in front of TVs and radios) can join in the cheering when one of “our team” wins a medal. We all get something of the psychological reward that comes from the achievement. In the workplace, however, the star performer gets their bonus or their trip to Hawaii and the rest of us are largely ignored. We probably only hear that because of increased global competition some of us will lose our jobs and for the rest, well, the performance standards will be even higher next year.

Applying the Olympic lessons

It may at first sight appear that the Olympics is a special case and that other organizations cannot use similar tactics in building their own volunteer culture. However, I have already mentioned several examples of past or present mythology-rich organizations (The Body Shop, etc) that have created a culture where people are or were motivated to go beyond the minimum requirements of the paid job.

Consider also:

- Could a bank not create a mythology built on the long tradition of banking and its roles in helping individuals and businesses grow and realise their dreams? Could banks not make customers, staff and shareholders aware of the individual and corporate and community dreams that they are helping to realise and invite people to be involved in celebrating moments of success? Could it also not invite its community of stakeholders to join with it in supporting or celebrating in some way the dreams being pursued by its customers? After all, the Olympic lesson is that people are keen to identify with and assist people pursuing a worthwhile dream, especially one that is memorable in some sense or which enhances the image of their city or their country, or which embodies values that Australians hold dear.

People are also hungry for opportunities to come together in a sense of community – to know each other as part of an interdependent whole. Surely, this is part of why the “Mexican wave” enjoys such popularity at sporting events, including the Olympics. In “the wave” we can actually see our interconnectedness and ability to act together in a coordinated, joyful way.

- Could a manufacturer not create a mythology-rich community around its products? Harley Davidson has given an excellent lead in how this can be done. For example, a manufacturer can find ways for customers to share their experiences with and ideas for using the product. It can create opportunities for stakeholders to come together from time to time to celebrate what's memorable about their experiences with the product. Or, it could adopt a community cause – one that was related to its particular business and its corporate values – a cause that would wrap the product in a higher purpose and provide a deeper bond between its various stakeholders. This is The Body Shop strategy and it provides a powerful motivation for volunteering effort to The Body Shop's activities.

Any organization can benefit from an examination of the Olympic model and from deep reflection on the lessons that can be learned from it for creating a volunteer culture. At the heart of these lessons is the power that comes from nurturing a sense of historic endeavour and passion that can transform mere work into a source of meaning derived from opportunities to give full expression to important aspects of the human spirit.