WHITEPAPER

The Winning Mindset for Leaders

SPORTING EDGE

Inside the Mind of Champions®

As the pressure, pace and uncertainty increase, your mindset will either become your biggest asset or your biggest enemy.

Jeremy Snape MSc,
Founder Sporting Edge

Foreword

The rules of leadership have changed

In a bygone era, the iconic leader could sit at the top of the corporation directing the well-oiled machine to become ever more efficient. Relying on a track record of success and stability, the pressure came from growing the market share and driving down cost. In 2019 leaders would love this simplicity but instead they sit in the middle of a psychological crisis with high levels of expectation and accountability to deliver results in a period of unprecedented uncertainty and change.

The fact is business is more complex than ever, so rather than expecting the threat to subside we need to bolster our coping resources. With no signs of the turbulence easing, leaders need to act swiftly to keep themselves and their businesses relevant. Rather than staring deeper down and into their businesses, leaders should be looking up and out to see how different industries are coping with the same challenges.

Leaders play a critical role, talking about abstract principles of engagement, innovation and collaboration is not enough and having them written on the reception wall doesn't help. Companies frequently redefine the architectural elements of structure and process yet see over 70% of their transformation efforts falling short because they failed to prioritise the intangible psychological elements. In times of chronic uncertainty, the soft skills have become the hard skills and they now need to become an organisation's primary focus to ensure that any structural changes take effect.

This whitepaper features selected insights from Sporting Edge's research into the Winning Mindset for Leaders and outlines the six strategies leaders need to keep themselves and their businesses ahead of the game.

Rule 01

Don’t blame it, own it

Former Wall Street trader turned neurobiologist Dr John Coates identifies novelty, uncertainty and uncontrollability as the key factors that initiate the stress response in the workplace. He suggests that ‘the stress response can be highest even before the nasty thing happens’ due to our fight and flight response being a hard-wired evolutionary response to prepare us for danger. The problem with the modern workplace is that the sabre-toothed tiger has been replaced by meetings, emails and decisions that threaten our self-esteem, reputation and financial security. Coates suggests that leaders need to (not only) be psychologically resilient enough to cope with the uncertainty themselves, but that they need to understand the impact that the pressures are having on their teams and modify their style and communications accordingly. ‘If middle managers bring in more novelty, uncertainty and uncontrollability into a workplace then they are going to get it wrong’. How much do you allow your stress and frustration to contaminate your team?

Leaders need to understand the changes and challenges in their industry and business and reframe their self-talk from an emotional reaction to a considered response. This ability to embrace the uncertainty and remain personally resilient is crucial as leaders create a calm micro-climate for their teams to operate in. Teams don’t necessarily need to know the consequences their leaders face about future under-performance, they need to operate in a calm, focused environment with clear objectives and the feeling that they are in control of their performance. The fact is that change and transformation are not going away and leaders need to stop making excuses about factors that are outside their control and take responsibility for their mindset and behaviour.

A deeper level of self-confidence is required where leaders are comfortable not knowing all the answers. Dr Jutta Tobias Mortlock from City University London explains that ‘some of the future is not only uncertain but it’s also unknowable so the biggest thing is for leaders to handle their own insecurity in thinking they need to have the perfect plan’.



This is one of the most powerful yet difficult shifts that leaders need to make. Where previously their academic intelligence and personal confidence would instinctively generate the next step, humility and even vulnerability need to be embraced as an essential first step. It's impossible for the leader to know everything, so they need to empower their teams to co-create the strategy and execute it together.

Old school leaders may see this as a sign of weakness but in a constantly shifting context, having broader perspectives is key. The primitive 'freeze' response may have helped our ancestors to evade the scanning gaze of a predator, but standing still isn't an option in today's dynamic market. So we need to override this fear response and pool creative ideas to help us move forward.

> "Some of the future is not only uncertain but it's unknowable, so the biggest thing for leaders is to handle their own insecurity in thinking they need to have the perfect plan."
>
> **– Dr Jutta Tobias Mortlock, City University London**

TOOL KIT

1. Make regular industry trend scanning your professional responsibility.

2. Learn and teach new psychological skills to retain confidence, focus and resilience across your teams.

3. Transform the psychological impact you have on your team by developing high performance language, behaviours and decisions.

Rule 02

Embrace pressure as a privilege

Having played in and worked with some of the world's highest profile sporting teams, I've learnt that they view pressure as a privilege and use this mindset to tackle potential issues head on. As we've heard, worrying about what might happen brings paralysis and distraction so we need to embrace the challenges ahead. Building the positive belief in your team that they can win from any position is the ideal. This instinctive confidence starts by seeing uncertainty as an opportunity to get ahead of your rivals rather than a threat. In sport, the best coaches prepare their teams meticulously for Plan A but they also throw scenarios into their training that get the team to think on their feet. While working with the England Rugby Team, I saw Eddie Jones integrating chaotic sequences into his meticulously planned training sessions to see how the players reacted. Rapidly debriefing these decisions under pressure builds our personal belief and ability to solve complex issues together. Do you take the time to run pressure testing scenarios with your team? This is a great investment of time and you may be surprised at who thinks most creatively and efficiently when you do.

Life is never straightforward or fair, so we need to rise above the victim mindset, think quickly and respond calmly in ambiguity. Teams that have been pressure tested by 'what if' scenarios are more likely to understand the kind of decision-making criteria to follow when chaos ensues. What would your team do if you lost your biggest customer overnight, if your IT platform failed or a customer complaint made the front page of the national newspaper? Throwing these hypothetical derailers onto the table as a regular debate not only gets your team thinking creatively and showing that most dangers can be mitigated but it creates a shared mental model of the guidelines to follow in their everyday work.

The teams that talk about pressure have the best chance of succeeding in it. Creating the psychological safety for people to express their ideas or concerns and make a full contribution is not only liberating for them personally but invaluable for the resilience of the team.

TOOL KIT

1. Share stories of your own mistakes and career setbacks to give people permission to be imperfect.

2. Regularly discuss pressure and threats so your team can relax and refocus on coping rather than worrying.

3. Build trusted relationships by taking the time and effort to listen empathetically to those needing support.

Rule 03

Don't control, enable

As Einstein famously said, a problem can't be solved by the same thinking that created it. As leaders become under pressure more they have a choice. To dig their heels in and to stubbornly try to prove their fragile idea was right or to accept the need to change direction. This pivot from commanding autocracy to a more empowering approach is vital if we are to create the speed and agility needed in our organisations. Many organisations aspire to developing a coaching culture where senior leaders prioritise quality one-to-one time with their direct reports asking open questions and allowing them to learn through trial and error. This utopian ideal is often compromised by the urgency to deliver short-term results. The problem builds when the short-term deadlines never subside and our nervous performers come to rely on our direction instruction.

This issue is articulated perfectly by Baroness Sue Campbell CBE, former Chair of UK Sport, who herself has been one of the UK's leading coaches, when she realised that her style of communication wasn't delivering the benefit to her players that she hoped. By being the directive coach she may have ensured compliance during training but her team lost their ability to think for themselves in matches.



So the message is clear, we need to believe passionately that our long-term success will come from enabling our teams to think for themselves. Increased speed and complexity mean that we may need to relinquish some control but by empowering our teams, we will unlock more creativity and leadership and create a stronger team as a result.

"Questions are an important part of our coaching at Cirque du Soleil as they generate self-awareness and self-appreciation in our performers."

– Bernard Petiot, Vice-President, Casting and Performance, Cirque du Soleil

By adopting the mindset of the world's best coaches we develop the empathy needed to understand the emotional and developmental needs of our teams. Your ability to become a performance detective, looking for clues in the motivation and mood of your teams, will give you all the information you need to maximise their contribution and engagement during turbulent times. Everyone wants to work in an environment where they can express themselves and contribute. Fail to release your control and the fresh ideas will disappear along with your most valuable talent.

> "The best coaches have a fluid style. They know when to empower and ask open questions and when to be autocratic."
>
> **– Stuart Lancaster, Elite Rugby Coach**

TOOL KIT

1. Accept that you can't predict and know everything any more.

2. Invite others outside your normal 'go-to' people to share ideas and contribute in a positive way.

3. Make a focused effort to use coaching questions to unlock true learning across your organisation rather than being too directive.

I thought I was a great coach, but with all my telling, I was actually disabling the athletes from what they could achieve.

Baroness Sue Campbell CBE,
former Chair of UK Sport

Rule 04

Mobilise talent - faster

If the 'old way' was driving efficiency from standardised scale, the 'new way' calls for more short-term experimentation and dynamism. Technology is allowing start-ups to scale quickly and challenge established corporations so knowing how to compete in this rapidly evolving context is critical. For many businesses, leading the transformational shift in strategy from an old successful model to a future-proof one is one of the biggest challenges leaders can face. Mark Spelman of the World Economic Forum is an expert in strategy and explains the tension that leaders need to manage.

Spelman explains that managing timeframes or 'horizons' is a critical skill. While most people know that their business needs to transform over a ten-year period, he emphasises the importance of mobilising people and projects to start creating that future reality in the next one to three years.

So have you spotted the opportunity for your business in horizon three and how much of your time are you spending testing and learning for this future approach in horizon two? May Busch, career coach and former COO of Morgan Stanley explains this well.





"We constantly review our pit-stop performances as a team to make sure we can adapt and improve between every F1 race."

– Mark Gray, Race Team Operations Manager, Formula One

Rather than relying on the one or two 'go-to people' of the past, your new challenge will be to pull on diverse networks of talent to create high performing project teams that can solve new problems. So what are the speed boat projects in your organisation and how will you ensure that the rapid cycle of 'prepare-do-review' maximises the lessons learnt and informs the future strategy?

The right blend of talent is sitting in and around your organisation so your ability to quickly mobilise diverse people and specialisms into dynamic project teams provides an edge.

> "Agile is a mindset. It calls for leaders who can corral the best creative and technical talent from across the organisation into cross-functional teams that can work quickly on important initiatives for the business."
>
> **– Ilaria Gregotti, International Corporate Transformation Expert**

TOOL KIT

1. Translate the strategic intent into a new mindset and behaviours at all levels of the business.

2. Create an exciting quest that empowers your employees to futureproof your business.

3. Bring together diverse project teams to enhance specific areas of the business.

A major factor in differentiating organisations today is their ability to mobilise intelligence in project based teams.

Tammy Erickson,
Professor of Organisational Behaviour,
London Business School

Rule 05

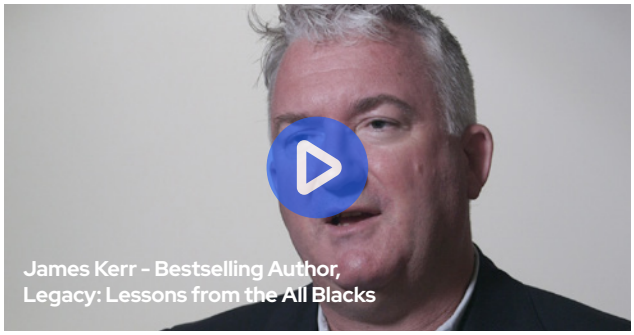
Leverage long-term thinking and purpose

This whitepaper has considered several key elements, from how we cope with pressure through the quality of our relationships to our ability to execute a strategic change. The one constant throughout this is our ability to maintain our impact.

With society's fixation on individual stars and winning at all costs, many organisations have witnessed trust being eroded and ethical boundaries being crossed. Sport has powerful lessons here too with Russia's doping scandal and Australian Cricket's ball tampering hitting the front pages with the short-term and selfish actions of the few, affecting their global sporting community for decades. The shift to more sustainable and purpose driven performance is a welcome one where leaders consider their impact on others as much as they consider their profits. By doing the right thing on a difficult day, leaders' behaviour redefines winning in a way that fosters trust and maintains relationships. People don't sacrifice for a strategy or process, they sacrifice and collaborate for an inspiring cause. So make this a central part of your story this year.

Motivation through extrinsic goals and targets alone can be dangerous. Many global corporations have witnessed people cutting corners and manipulating their position for their own financial reward. The tide has turned, people want to represent an organisation that they feel proud of not ashamed by. Senior leaders play a critical role in not only thinking of their own long-term legacy, but also role modelling the ethics and standards expected of the leaders they develop for the future. What ethical short cuts have you witnessed but not challenged?

James Kerr is the author of bestselling book 'Legacy' and explains the Maori philosophy of Whakapapa that has made the All Blacks the most successful sporting team of all time. Each player sees it as their responsibility to leave the jersey in a better state than they received it. Seeing themselves as custodians of the culture and standards not only increases personal accountability but it sustains their long term success as a team.



We also need to consider strategies to manage our own personal long-term effectiveness. Where the old world celebrated 'busyness' as a badge of honour, the future will value 'impact'. The modern executive faces an ultra-marathon combined with hidden assault courses, so the outdated working norms need challenging with new emphasis placed on focus and energy management.

Sleep, downtime and the ability to switch off are the new competitive advantages against a world where being contactable twenty-four hours a day is contributing to the rise in mental health issues. Technology should be used to enhance our human skills not to erode them. So take back control of your emails, exercise, diet and your sleep and notice the transformation that takes place. Leaders are the energisers of change so ensure your batteries are fully charged for the job.

> "We have a saying at Sandhurst that the standards you walk past are the standards you accept."
>
> **– Lt. Col. Lucy Giles, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst**

TOOL KIT

1. Reconnect with the fundamental client, customer or societal problem you solve and redefine 'winning' to balance profit and purpose in a sustainable way.

2. Reward and celebrate those doing the right things in challenging times and confront or remove those making selfish decisions that jeopardise the reputation of the firm.

3. Focus on energy management to ensure that individuals and teams can maintain their impact throughout the year.

Rule 06

Celebrate learning over intelligence

For decades, we've judged people on a static CV and their ability to jump through academic hoops. While these offer a valuable reference point, the new era of complexity needs better questions not just better answers. It's well documented that some of the most predicted in demand skills for the 2030 workforce aren't even known yet, so relying on our past or current skills and qualifications could see us become irrelevant very quickly. The new talent war is for people with the ability to learn quickly and adapt, to be self-motivated and coachable. I've been privileged to work with some of the world's best athletes and seen that it's their ability to learn and master new skills that sets them apart. In their world their athleticism, speed or strength are their passport into an elite club but that's not what keeps them there, it's their capacity to learn and grow. As their sport changes, so do they, and the real game changers learn and master new approaches so successfully that they redefine their sports in the process.

As our organisations exploit new opportunities, our leaders and teams will need to try, fail and master new skills. As Stanford Professor Carol Dweck's work outlines, those with a growth mindset and belief that their success comes from effort and incremental learning are better equipped for this than those with a belief that their success has come from a fixed or innate ability.

When people are labelled clever or smart they fear taking on new projects or skills in case they make mistakes and find out they didn't have 'it' after all. People with a growth mindset embrace challenges outside their current skill and comfort zone with the confidence that they will learn and grow from the experience. It's this ability to live in a continual state of beta testing that we need to celebrate because everyone across our organisation can improve. So leaders need to make the shift from celebrating the most 'naturally gifted' people to emphasising the role of effort, tenacity, creative thinking and persistence that underpin successful performance because those attributes will pay dividends in the future.

> "If you don't improve in Olympic sport, you're going to get left behind. Last year's best performance is this year's baseline result."
>
> **– Stephen Park, Performance Director, British Cycling**



All of us have a professional responsibility to be better this year than we were last year, so cascading this down into learning and development initiatives that accelerate people's personal and professional development is key. How much time do you dedicate to learning and staying relevant for yourself and your team? Having our diaries full of yesterday's tasks won't help. In a world of constant change, our ability to learn faster than our rivals is an area of competitive advantage.

> "As a team it's easy to celebrate the star player who's doing the flashy things, but we learnt to celebrate the players doing the hard work under the radar."
>
> **– Kate Richardson Walsh OBE, Olympic Gold Medal Winning Hockey Captain, Team GB**

TOOL KIT

1. Expect people to learn and improve and support their future aspirations.

2. Role model continual improvement by booking time to learn new skills yourself.

3. Celebrate and reward effort and tenacity and showcase the progress people are making.

We imagine that there is some fixed characteristic of the brain, but the truth is that as we learn and practice new skills our brains respond and adapt throughout our whole life.

Professor Vin Walsh, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience UCL

About Sporting Edge

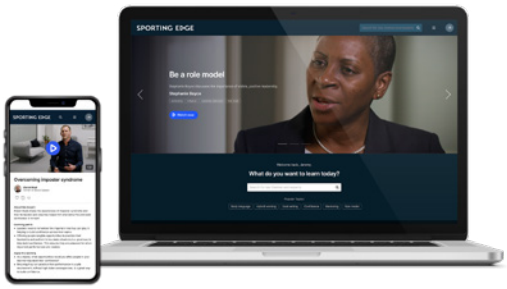
Sporting Edge embeds the Winning Mindset in businesses so that they can achieve greater success. We've spent the last fifteen years supporting and interviewing some of the world's most successful performers, leaders and teams. Their video insights now inspire audiences across the world in our keynotes, webinars and pioneering digital platform The Mindset Toolkit®.



Jeremy Snape MSc **Founder & Managing Director**

Widely regarded as one of the world's most innovative thinkers in the field of performance psychology, Jeremy has the combined experience of being a successful international cricketer and coach with a Master's Degree in Sport Psychology. He works with many elite sports teams and corporate organisations and provides regular insights to the FT, Sky Sports and Wired magazine. Jeremy is an authentic and masterful storyteller drawing on his life in both international sport and business.

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