

Getting to the top, and staying there

Becoming best in class in any sphere of business is a terrific achievement. But sustaining that success is much, much harder to achieve.

Many cite retailer John Lewis and their Partnership model as the flagship for sustaining high levels of performance year after year. Standing back, it's their people strategy which underpins success, including the way they treat their people.

Many business leaders, when asked to describe their business strategy, do so clearly; yet they too often struggle when asked to articulate their people strategy. If one truly believes that people make business succeed, this is at best an oversight, at worst a huge missed opportunity to get all staff to create extra value for the business. Done well, people strategy has the potential to deliver great business results in a long-lasting way, as John Lewis have shown.

Less well known but equally impressive is an example from the world of rugby union. Saracens (for so long a nomadic team without a home of their own) achieved that rarest of birds, winning the European Cup and English Premiership titles in 2016 - only the third club to do this "double", and the first for 12 years.

Back then pundits talked not only of the magnitude of this success, they were hugely optimistic about the longer-term outlook for the club. Some even predicted that Saracens would be the dominant force of domestic and European rugby for several years. Saracens' management was determined to build strong foundations to build consistence and sustain success. And the pundits' predictions are being realised, following further European and domestic trophies in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

The Secret Sauce

These hallmarks provide an insightful checklist for any business trying to deliver a similar outcome:

1. Articulate a clear Vision for the business, invest time to gain buy-in from all staff, and stick to that Vision relentlessly
2. Set out clear values to underpin the delivery of that Vision, and adopt a zero-tolerance policy to deviations from them
3. Instil a mindset that team success overrides everything, and encourage people to be the best they can be individually, in that order
4. Liberate your people from the shackles of micro management, encourage them to play what's in front of them
5. Grow your own talent, supplementing them occasionally with experienced heads to grow their experience fast
6. Be patient, it takes time to build a collaborative culture based on trust.

In Saracens' case:

1. The vision is for the players to create lasting memories together. The club will treat the players unbelievably well in return for exceptional effort at all times
2. Values of work rate, discipline, honesty and humility underpin the delivery of the Vision
3. A "wolf-pack" mentality applies when playing for Saracens, the team result is paramount. At the same time, each player is encouraged to pursue selection for his country (reducing his availability for club games on average for 40% of the season)
4. By developing several leaders on the pitch, the coaches have little involvement of decision making during the game. Players have the licence to adapt and play the way they see fit as each game unfolds

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5. Investment in Saracens' Academy has delivered striking results. In England's squad for their recent tour of South Africa, five of the ten Saracens players included were aged under 25. Experienced recruits supplement their skills and transfer their knowledge en route
6. The goal of doing "the double" was 6 years in the making.

Several organisations are trying to re-create the John Lewis people strategy model for themselves. The biggest is Grant Thornton, UK's 5th largest accounting firm which has embarked on a "Shared Enterprise" model. City law firm Mishcon de Reya has declared a similar intent.

Building a close-knit team with everyone knowing their part in delivering success is the most notable of all of the secret sauce ingredients. Creating a star team (rather than a group of stars) maximises performance with the whole becoming much greater than the sum of the parts.

For Saracens, it delivered best-in-class performance in 2016. By staying focused on that people strategy, sustained success was achieved in 2017-18 and suggests further rich dividends to come.

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