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Breakthrough

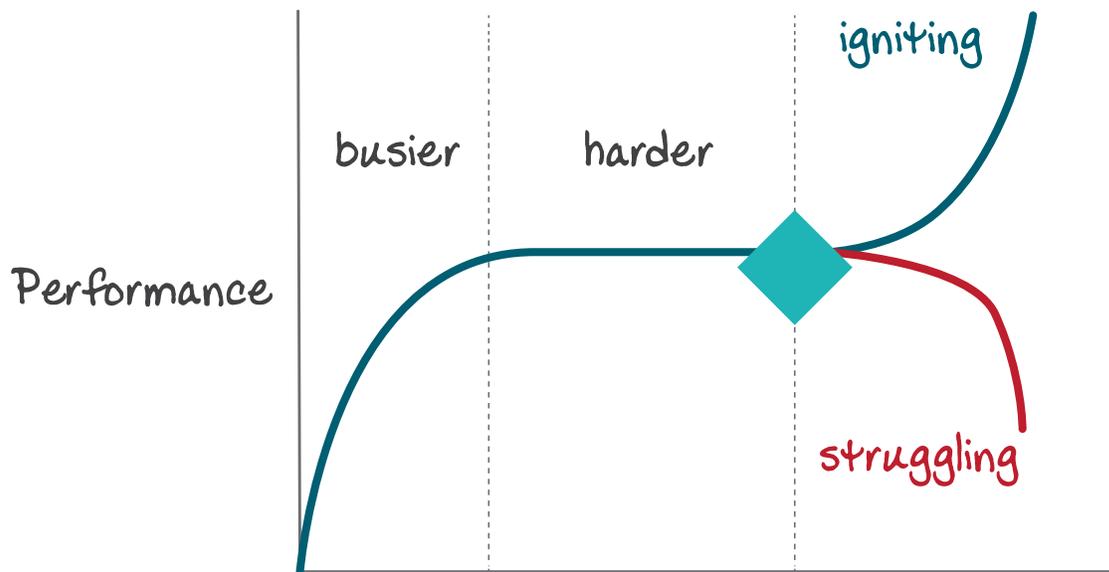
Unlocking sustained performance

Learn & Win

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Sustained Performance



Faster, higher and stronger in some sports is seen as hard, busy and unhealthy. More sports have decided to opt out of this pattern and to instead ignite sustained performance. Sustained performance is a decision to transform and empower your system to a new level of performance.

I have been involved with 10 Olympics in different roles –athlete, coach, leader and scientist – and studied the differences between medallists and non-medallists and the system they are in. From my experience, there are systemic differences that must be learned to create a system for sustained performance that delivers across sport, home and life after sport. This is known as long-term sustained performance.

In his book *A Living Company*, Arie De Geus explored the reasons some companies last longer than the human lifespan. The average lifespan of a company is 12 years. For Fortune

500 companies (the top tier), the average is 40–50 years, and only 27 companies were over 100 years old. De Geus asked why a social system passes away before the people in it. It turns out the alignment with each other, the world and their community matters. Those that focused primarily on short-term benefits, profits (medals) and results eventually vanished.

Sport – like successful business organisations – is a social system. Sustained performance is only seen in healthy social systems. That is how the real medal is won. However, medals are not always won by a healthy system. We see many examples of destructive systems winning medals, but when we look closely, there are many cracks, battles and burn-out among good people. In sustained performance, the medal has higher value than the win and represents the achievement of a healthy system.

A tennis player in a white Adidas outfit is celebrating on a tennis court. She is holding a tennis racket in her right hand and has her left arm raised high. The background is a blurred tennis court with white lines. The image has a teal overlay.

“Sustained performance
is communication not
competition.”

Sustained Performance

In high performance, the medal matters, but the process to win matters more than the medal. High performance at its core is not technical, tactical or strategic. It is not visions and missions. It is communication. That is the beating heart of sustained high performance.

I have interviewed hundreds of people in debriefs across multiple Olympics and World Championship events. Sustained performers see more yet do less! They are tuned and aligned to their social system, learning and empowering each other. They uncover the deeper reasons behind what creates performance. For some, the medal is all that matters and is the only story they want to tell – the victory at the end. Sustained performers have a deeper perspective and deeper message than the medal.

Like short-lived companies, we see patterns in short-term-focused sports. I have seen many unhealthy systems achieve medals. Many medals. But the cost is high with the churn and burn out of good people, low retention, teams that struggle and battle, patch protection, confusion and low innovation. The energy is very heavy. You can feel it.

But the medal happens sometimes, and the system is left unchanged to perform again. The cycle repeats.

Reviews, restructuring, retitling roles and the addiction to old assumptions and beliefs continues. High motion but low progress.

As James Clear wrote in his book *Atomic Habits*, 'we do not rise to the level of our goals, we fall to the level of our systems'. Healthy systems sustain performance. But what is a system? A system is the relationship between people, places and things. It is not 'that out there' but 'us in here'. It is a biological system with values, aspirations and personality. It is the enabler of performance. It is the core of sustained performance and is visible with more harmony, strong stewardship, innovation, clear language and action focus.

A system focused on sustained performance operates differently from others. If the system has simplicity, alignment and wellbeing, the medals catch up.

I will share a frame to help you uncover your sustained performance system. It starts with you as a performance leader.



Performance Leadership

The main component driving sustained performance systems is performance leadership! This is you. No matter what your title.

As Stephen Covey wrote, **'leadership is a decision, not a position'**.

Our job in high performance sport is to be a performance leader in our role – to empower our people to be more, not less. To steward the jersey. To build connections and integrate and align the social system we are in. To transform ourselves and our system into one created for sustained performance.

We know high performance is a social system of performance leaders. Leaders who are fully conscious of the system, its blind spots and the opportunities for sustained performance.

There is no repeat medallist who has done it alone. In 10 Olympic cycles, I have yet to find one. The best performers are performance leaders surrounded by other performance leaders. The result is a high-performing communication system that is empowering and transforming. This moves people from transactional teams to transformational teams and triggers the performance accelerator!

We know you cannot model or influence what you have not got yourself. Sustained performance starts with you. As Aldous Huxley said, 'experience is not what happens to you it is what you do with what happens to you'. Performance leadership is about unlocking the power of expertise and lived experience in you, your team and your organisation.

In sustained performance, the gold standard that matters most is the quality of communication: with yourself, the world around you and the moment. When communication is healthy, victory is deeper and sustained. The influence and ripples of sustained performance last years after any medal.

The great leaders focus on the medal at home, too. Work and home are inseparable. Bringing all the best of your high performance to your home life, where you have no role or permission to lead, is a key to sustained performance.

Sustained performance with family and the people we love takes compassion and care with less 'edge'. Sustained performance requires the highest quality empathy and communication.

Let's look at the three main components that you can implement to create sustained performance in your world.

“Leadership is a decision, not a position.”

“Goals don't win medals,
Performance systems do.”



The Sustained Performance Frame



High performance is complex. Performance experts know they do not need to understand every component and articulate exactly how all the parts work in order to make good decisions!

Performance leaders avoid entering the 'rabbit hole' of searching for complete understanding of the past. A past that is gone. Instead of 'Why did it happen like this?', they ask, 'What evidence will inform the next event?' Sustained performance is focused on creating the future, not explaining the past. The performance frame is always forward facing.

We know communication is the heart of high performance. Communication with ourselves, each other, the world and the moment. For the athlete in the final, the coach on the sideline, the parent in the stands, the physio in the clinic, the support staff and the performance director at the venue and the CEO at the head office.

To diagnose the quality of communication in your performance system, apply the above sustained performance frame. The three key areas that are common in the best systems are simplicity, wellbeing and alignment.

The purpose of this frame is to overlay these keys to sustained performance over your complex system to help you uncover blind spots and opportunities and to inform decision making.

This frame can help you notice where there are long-held assumptions that no longer fit your purpose. We can uncover the three main components of sustained performance across our full system and determine if they are getting better, getting worse or staying the same. As a performance leader, you can then spot the opportunity inside the system you are in and uncover the decisions that matter most to accelerate and sustain performance.

Let's explore the frame.

1. Simplicity

We are biased towards addition. Research published in Nature proves that our first thought is addition until we are prompted to subtract.

Here is your prompt!

Many performance systems I see are tangled with an abundance of ideas and processes that may have contributed to a win in the past but collectively contribute to clutter and confusion. The system is lighter and simpler when in sustained mode.

The problems I see most often in cluttered systems are concealed blind spots, communication challenges, misalignment, fluctuating performance, oscillating relationships, repeated restructures, lengthy reviews and poor decision making. The key performance opportunities are hidden in a congested system. And without a reset, the cycle will continue.

Strategic simplicity is deep, thoughtful and deliberate. Simplicity done well is not easy, but it is a key to sustained performance.

The first step to strategic simplicity is strategic subtraction. Adding conceals, while subtracting reveals.

When we subtract, we see the system. We expose assumptions, non-performance-related activities, bottlenecks and hidden opportunities.

If you have played the game Jenga (in which blocks are removed from a block tower until the loser makes it topple), you will know that adding blocks is very easy. Once the subtraction starts, our attention changes. We start to pay close attention to the system, how balanced it is and where the weaknesses are. We consider the next two to three moves ahead of us, not just the next move.



For many years, I developed innovation projects for Olympic teams, and subtraction was the key innovation that most missed. Many define innovation as 'new' (e.g., equipment or processes), 'marginal gains' or 'visible solutions', but solutions that stick are subtractive, come from inside the system, fit better and move faster.

When we subtract, nothing is truly lost, it is only replaced. By subtracting, we see non-performance-related activity and processes fall away, and new opportunities emerge that have a better fit and impact. Subtraction makes our performance system visible, and once the system is seen, it cannot be unseen. Our decision making becomes more accurate more often. Gaps and opportunities become visible. This is a superpower for sustained performance.

When simplicity is achieved, you have space, and you notice the sustained performance opportunities emerging in your system. It starts with strategic subtraction.

How simple is your system?

2. Alignment

High-performance sport has many winners. But with that comes many ideas of what leads to victory based on their past experience. When you add all these people and their ideas together into one system, you get what I call ‘winners’ bloat’, leading to misaligned roles.

Winners’ bloat is a bloat of ideas and ways of operating from the past or from other systems that were successful previously. I see some hold very tightly to these winning components that have worked for them before. An army of good intent. But in the context of sustained performance, the system must have fit-ness, and not every winning idea fits.

Problems I see most often in systems where roles are misaligned are a lot of churn and burn of good people, more effort put into ‘getting along’, more battles and struggles within the team, more cracks appearing as the big event draws near, and growing effort put into restructures and role/ title repositioning. The opportunities for transformation are buried deep in all this effort to fix what is fundamentally role misalignment.

Testing and improving alignment starts with clear communication. From the research I have done over the past five Olympics, role alignment was visible in the clarity of language. This was deliberately achieved through focused action to clarify language and measures.

Experts have more assumptions than most because of the length of time they have been in the game and the depth of their understanding of ‘how things work around here’. We assume people are clear on the words we use and the words that are used most often in our organisation, but misunderstanding is the heart of misalignment.



We get what we inspect, not what we expect. Sustained performers give their people clarity. Help them to understand reality (language) and what a successful future looks like (measures).

When role alignment is visible through words and actions across the system, the team moves from being transactional to transformational. Alignment is a core need of teams. When it is missing, your team will put energy into trying to create it, and this only amplifies transactional, fear-based problem solving. I see transactional teams react to their misalignment through lack of trust, hierarchies, control, order, positional power, emotional avoidance and jargon.

As John Gribben writes in Deep Simplicity, the teams that perform best and survive longest have fit. In the longest running companies and sustained performance sports, there is ‘fit-ness’ across the team. They fit through tight and clear alignment of language and expectations. The collective effort is accelerated, flow is on-call and collective thinking is transformed into performance action.

When alignment is achieved, you have clarity to uncover the performance opportunities and transform team output.

3. Wellbeing

High-performance sport is hard. But so are many things in life. The price you see people paying with their health is a consequence of a system not built for sustained performance.

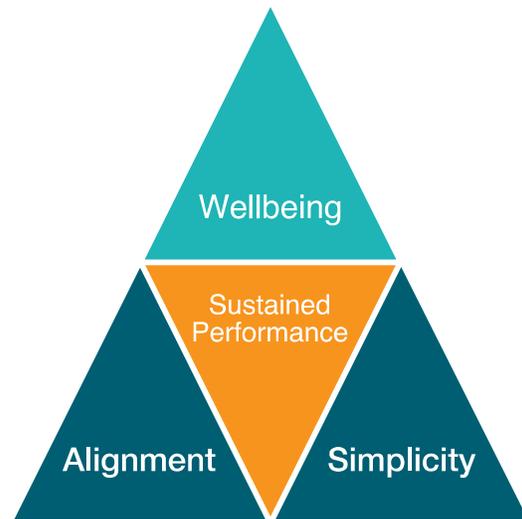
Performance wellbeing is the core of sustained performance. It is more than wellness (healthy habits) or wellbeing (a life well-lived). I define it as performing well in each moment. At work, at home, in the final, after the loss – no matter what the circumstance, we have the power of response.

That power comes from choice and energy. A Gallup poll of 125,000 people in 121 countries found the happiest people were not those without stress but those who had coped with stress. Additional work at Stanford asked people if they found their life meaningful, and those with highly meaningful lives had also experienced the most stressful events. But they had coped.

Meaningful lives come with stress, and sustained performance is about helping people cope and grow stronger as a result of stress. Anti-fragility, as described by Nassim Taleb, is the power of getting stronger with stress. Like a bone gets stronger the more it has to adapt to stress.

Sustained performance comes from coping skilfully. As performance leaders, we influence this by empowering our people to be more than adaptable (flexible) and resilient (unbreakable); they must be anti-fragile (skilfully coping to get stronger). This is the energy of performance wellbeing.

I have seen many performance systems that have wellbeing defined only as healthy people with healthy bodies and minds. These can have a positive influence when they are contributing, but not when they are the only components. Performance wellbeing is systemic. The system has wellbeing that you can see and feel. Performance wellbeing is deeper than personal wellbeing; it is embedded in the social system that enables performance.



It is in how people communicate; it is in the system, selection, processes, decision making and culture of the sport. It is both personal responsibility and systemic responsibility to enable people to perform well in every moment: in sport, away from sport and after sport.

What I see in systems with low wellbeing is a lot of resistance and friction. Conversations that work hard to agree because the system is not well enough to disagree. Divergent conversations are where true innovation and diversity of thinking happen. With high performance wellbeing, the system has energy to disagree, energy to innovate and energy to sustain.

With performance wellbeing, you have the energy to uncover performance opportunities and cope skilfully with every moment.

How well is your system?

“Is your performance system sustaining progress or just motion?”



In Summary

Sustained performance is communication. The root cause of every medal with meaning is the depth and clarity of communication in the system. As leaders, we model sustained performance.

To sustain performance, the system (people, places and things and how they interact) must be pointed forward. Many systems are pointed backward, feeding our human curiosity to find perfect understanding of a past that is gone.

Sustained performers are forward facing and bring current reality upwards to their desired future. They understand the past only enough to make decisions to inform the future.

We can utilise the sustained performance triangle to support decision making.

Simplicity

Adding vs Subtracting

When the system has simplicity, it has space. Space to respond and act accordingly. Complications and clutter come from the outside and are added to an already crowded system. Research proves we attempt to solve problems first by addition. Even among experts. When prompted to subtract, we have the advantage of perspective. Space is a prompt, and it comes from simplifying. Sustained performers subtract. This gives us perspective to see the performance system more accurately, to make non-performance-related activities visible and to strategically reduce what is not contributing to sustained performance.

Alignment

Clarity vs Assuming

As experts in the system, you will have blind spots and assumptions that need to be made visible. The way to do this is to reflect on your language. You will notice jargon, patterns and definitions that are unclear to you and others on your team. The permission to define these is now yours. You may be surprised by how many variations there are for terms you thought were clear.

We get what we inspect, not what we expect. When we give our people clarity of language and measures, we clarify a collective understanding and expectation.

We give our people permission to contribute to a direction that will have clarity, and we unlock a level of transformation in the team we may not have anticipated.

When we move performance from transactional to transformational, we enable sustained performance. We build alignment by clarifying our language.

Wellbeing

Resistance vs Flow

Performance wellbeing is systemic. We give our people agency to own their own wellbeing and to cope skilfully. They are empowered to know they are not alone and that the system sees them and acknowledges them. We cannot see our own limitations if the system we are in is unwell. And we cannot rely on an unwell system to acknowledge us and support us. When performance wellbeing is recognised as systemic, people are empowered to own their part and contribute to the system's wellbeing. We cannot give away what we do not have ourselves. Wellbeing is energy. Friction and resistance sap the energy of the system and the people in it. Notice the energy and uncover, release and subtract the areas of resistance. We build energy throughout our system by addressing the areas of resistance first.

A medal at the deepest and most fulfilling level is symbolic of a healthy system. Have you made the decision to win a medal or to sustain performance? One is the outcome, and the other is the pathway. When we commit to sustained performance, we commit to growing our alignment, simplicity and wellbeing at home and at work. We commit to creating a healthy performance system that is anti-fragile and delivers deeper and more meaningful sustained performance for life.

Ω OMEGA 5:51.5

“Knowledge experts add
Performance experts subtract.”





Whats next?

If you need support with uncovering and aligning what matters most, I can help. I have a range of programmes to help you unlock and unblock for higher sustained performance.

It starts with a chat to explore high performance in your world. This on its own is always helpful, even if we do not end up working together.

I offer Masterclasses; half-day, one-day and two-day workshops; as well as one-on-one mentoring. To put the sustained performance triangle into action if you are ready, reach out.

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Why Richard?

I have been involved with preparation for 10 Olympics across most roles.

I have won international gold medals, coached world champions, created programmes in innovation and learning that have contributed to Olympic medals for three countries and researched the differences between medallists and non-medallists.

My obsession is converting high potential into sustained high performance by unlocking the power of you and your team's experience and expertise. I work internationally helping high-performance leaders and sport experts simplify, align and accelerate.

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